

Hybrid Communities to Digital Arts Festivals: From Online Discussions to Offline Gatherings

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to contribute to blurring the gap between virtual communities and communities based on face-to-face embodied interaction; going beyond and trying to deconstruct the obsolete and rigorous online/offline dichotomy. Although today this dichotomy still exists, since the 1990s the concept of virtual community has changed and has been substituted by a much more fluid perception, where informational and physical contacts co-exist and need each other.

Computer networks allow people to create a whole range of new social spaces in which they meet and interact with one another. Through the use of interaction media people have formed thousands of groups to discuss different topics, build collaborations, create knowledge, share mutual interests, play games, and entertain one another. Looking at the landscape of cyberspace we can see that people use different ways to communicate within the Internet; these media can be asynchronous such as email, discussion lists, Usenet, Bulletin board systems (BBSs), and Multi-User Domains (MUDs), or synchronous like chats and virtual environments, or both synchronous and asynchronous like World Wide Web sites. Virtual community represents what can be understood as a form of post-modern community, characterised by the liberation of the individual from social constraints such as identity, ethnicity, social status and geographical space. Online relationships are based more on shared interests and less on shared social characteristics, and as a result online communities are reasonably homogeneous in their attitude and shared interests, and relatively heterogeneous in the social characteristics of its participants.

At the same time, it is important to highlight that in order to reinforce the disembodied and intangible relations built around the Internet discussions, members of the virtual communities feel the need to meet during more embodied and tangible face-to-face gatherings.

In such a context of continuous change and innovation, I am following digital and experimental arts communities, which make use of both cyberspace and physical space as places for interaction, collaboration, and connectivity. Global gatherings such as festivals devoted to art and technology play a critical role in the maintenance and nourishment of these social groups. International events such as Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria), Elektra (Montréal, Canada) or Transmediale (Berlin, Germany) draw people from the four corners of the world; they represent both valuable forums and platforms for artists, intellectuals, and specialists, and a unique chance for the all

participants to migrate from the cyberspace to a physical space, opening up the opportunity to experience the intense dramaturgy of the festival.

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In order to gain a wider overview of the concept of community, I believe that it is crucial to go back and re-discover the genesis and the evolution of this notion, and how it has been conceptualised within the literature among scholars from different disciplines.

Historically the notion of community has been associated with the notion of geographical place. In his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* the German sociologist Tönnies was one of the first authors who conceptualised community and its characteristics. According to the transformations in the organisation of social life that emerged as a consequence of the ascendancy of modernity, Tönnies makes a clear distinction between two types of social groups: *Gemeinschaft* (Community) and *Gesellschaft* (Society). *Gemeinschaft* is characterised by natural will, and an organic sense of community, and *Gesellschaft* is characterised by rational will, and by a sense of individualism rather than communal. Tönnies is very critical towards *Gesellschaft*, in which he sees a form of social organisation based on hyper-individualism, which causes abandonment of collective memory, instinct, and habits.¹

Within the anthropological literature it is worthy of note the notion of community developed by Turner. The anthropologist differentiates between society and community, the two main models for human interrelatedness. Society, or *societas*, is a highly structured and hierarchical system; community, on the other hand, is an unstructured and heterogeneous group of equal individuals, however soon it develops a structure. Turner looks at community within the wider context of the “rites of passage”, and claims that during these rites a particular kind of comradeship emerges as a product of interstructural liminality. This group is a community or comity of comrades, and Turner uses the Latin noun *communitas* to identify such a group, which is characterised by absence of hierarchical structure, transcending any distinctions of status, age and kinship position. Members of *communitas* are linked

together by special bonds that persist during the years, after the rites of passage are over.² Turner claims that existential or spontaneous *communitas* exist not only in preliterate and preindustrial societies, but also in complex modern societies, where the values of *communitas* are present within groups such as the beat generation and the hippies. Members of these groups stress personal relationships rather than social obligations, and emphasise spontaneity and immediacy.³

Many scholars concerned with the emergence of online communities have taken into consideration the concept of imagined communities formulated by Anderson in relation to the appearance of nationalisms. According to Anderson the nation

It is an imagined political community – an imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.⁴

This notion can without a doubt be transferred to the cyberspace, where relationships between participants to online communities are not based on face-to-face interaction; instead these members hold in their minds a mental image of their affinity, and develop a sense of fraternity. Here I would argue that although face-to-face and online communities have their own specificities and peculiarities, they should not be regarded as separate realities. Instead these communities exist in a kind of symbiosis, nourishing and complementing each other.

The quintessential definition of virtual communities has been provided by Rheingold, in which he describes these social groups as ‘social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace’.⁵ Today, fifteen years after its first formulation, this notion has to be re-adapted according to the ongoing evolution of both media and society.

Within the field of critical cyberculture studies Fung claims that online communities in a certain way reproduce real life; in order to survive these communities need to anchor and refer some of their features within ‘real’ daily life. In

this sense it is impossible to disengage cyberspace from the real embodied space when the online setting is mostly modelled from real-world settings. Giving that real life can also be changed, distorted, or merged with cyberlife, studies of online communities should examine whether the remote and virtual interest of subjects realised in online space is linked to the everyday sense and complexity of human nature.⁶ Cyberspace does not represent an alternative to social reality, and then should not be understood as a separate realm, but rather as part of our existing reality. There is a complex constant process of interaction between our experiences of the 'virtual' and the 'real', what is becoming clear is the need of an epistemological framework able to speak about this complex online/offline interplay.

Baym holds a similar position, and argues that it is unquestionable that online relationships do develop in ways that are to some extent different from face-to-face relationships. She refers to language for instance, written or spoken, which is privileged over visual cues, and claims that geographical proximity is no longer considered a limiting element. Relationships of any kind are inevitably still built on mutual attraction, created through common interests, easiness of interaction, and running into one another in the same public spaces, even if those spaces are now virtual and intangible rather than material. Most of the researchers interested in studying online settings do not really look at cyberspace as a separate, detached place that stands in opposition to the real world. Baym stresses this point and claims:

How online spaces are constructed and the activities that people do online are intimately interwoven with the construction the offline world and the activities and structures in which we participate, whether we are using the Internet or not. Offline contexts always permeate and influence online situations, and online situations and experiences always feed back into offline experiences.⁷

The emergence and the construction of cyberspace, and consequently the appearance of new forms of virtual social ties between people make it necessary to rethink the classical notion of society, especially the notion of 'city', historically marked as a complex place of social interaction, which has also been considered as the place where these ties emerge, are nourished and reproduced. This idea has

been reviewed, reconfigured and readapted to the contemporary context where the emergence of cyberspace has become ubiquitous. The Greek *polis* regarded as the prototype of the classical city and its vital elements, e.g. the *agora*, as a public space for different urban functions, appear translated into new types of virtual and non-virtual realities. The agora, usually located at the very centre of the town site, was the gathering place and the focal point of community life in the ancient Greek city-state. Its functions were diverse ranging from serving as a meeting place for political assemblies, and outdoor market, to venue for festal processions and athletic displays.

The parallel between the critical role played by the Net in the twenty-first century and the function of the agora in the life of the Greek polis has frequently been used in several studies of cyberspace to emphasise its main characteristics of electronic social space and point of exchange. Mitchell observes that the worldwide computer network represents the electronic or virtual agora which, giving its distinct structure and organisation, drastically redefines the standard notions of gathering place, community and urban life.⁸ Geographer Crang similarly defines the public space of the virtual city as an electronic agora that consists of the same elements as the agora of the classical Greek city. This new form of intangible space is the point where conventional orderings and rules break down and collapse.⁹ In representing cyberspace as the new virtual agora, Ostwald argues that 'the urban' itself has become virtualised, simulating the social function of the agora as a potential 'site of cultural seepage', a place to where people can escape to find comfort in a virtual environment.¹⁰ Here, once more, the border between the virtual and the real has become blurred, making the distinction almost imperceptible.

Watson claims that, as a consequence of the proliferation of communication via computer, new modes of apprehending community have emerged. In Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) physical space has been replaced by a technology, a medium of communication. Consequently, it is claimed, the concept of community should be re-defined in terms of shared relationships between people rather than in terms of shared space.¹¹ Wellman and Gulia, for example, argue that online relationships are based more on shared interests and less on shared social characteristics. As a consequence online communities result relatively homogeneous

in terms of interests and attitudes, and relatively heterogeneous in terms of social characteristics such as age, social status, gender, and ethnicity. The homogeneity of interests entails that participants can foster high levels of empathetic understanding and reciprocal support. Furthermore, by supporting such online contact, the Net may even encourage more frequent face-to-face meetings between those who might otherwise forget about each other.¹²

Jones stresses that cyberspace is a socially constructed space, one that represents a new kind of space that is not physical, and for this reason challenges the traditional notion of community that emphasises the geographical proximity. In his view community is no longer a place; it consists of social networks and social interaction. In defining online community the author uses the concept of social networks primarily because such definition is mainly based on social interaction, shifting the focus away from place.¹³ These new social groups represent a form of post-modern community characterised by the liberation of the individual from social constraints such as identity and geographical space. It should be noted that within these groups participants promote a sense of brotherhood among each other, and in order to fortify the disembodied and abstract relations, and to help participants to stay in touch, members of virtual communities feel the need to meet, sporadically or on a regular basis, during physical face-to-face gatherings.

In the article 'The Anthropology of Online Communities', anthropologists Wilson and Peterson claim that in analysing on line groups the main problem is that there is no agreement among scholars in considering these groups as real or imagined communities. The difficulty derives from the ephemeral nature of the media, the Internet, the definition of community itself, and from rapidly obsolescing technologies. The authors suggest that a rigid distinction between online and offline communities is not helpful. Instead, they claim, it is more useful to see communities as a continuum that exists regardless of the ways in which community members interrelate.¹⁴ In the same vein, Wellman and Gulia criticise those researchers who treat the Internet as an isolated social phenomenon, without taking into account how interactions on the Net coexist together with other aspects of people's lives. The Net

then is not a separate reality, but is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact.¹⁵

In the introduction to the special thematic section of the *Journal of Computer-Mediated-Communication* dedicated to Online Communities, authors Preece and Maloney-Krichmar claim that among researchers interested in studying CMC it is progressively accepted to consider online communities as the result of a blend between online and offline elements, presenting some physical components. These groups can start as a face-to-face communities and then move to the digital media within the realm of cyberspace. Alternatively, members of an online community decide to meet during scheduled face-to-face settings.¹⁶ Thus, one dimension does not necessarily exclude the other.

In my PhD research I am looking at digital arts festivals as events that create and promote social connectivity. My fieldwork is carried out both offline and online, in the sense that through an ethnographic approach I observe festivals dedicated to contemporary art and digital culture. Concurrently I follow and actively contribute to online discussions of two mailing lists, Rhizome and <nettime>, in which participants discuss and share information about digital art, festivals, and net culture in general. These online communities nurture both digital art festivals and the digital art movement, and offer their participants the opportunity to critically share knowledge and keep experimental culture alive.

Established in 1996, Rhizome has played a fundamental role in the history, promotion and development of the link between art, Internet and new technologies. Rhizome, which since 2003 is affiliated with the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, is a web site, a digital art archive, and an open forum for issues related to the creation, support and critique of emerging artistic practices engaged with technology. The <nettime> group was founded in 1995, and since then it represents a valuable international forum for discourses about all aspects of net culture and new media, from art to politics. The contents of the forums are all archived in the web site, and freely accessible. Leading figures in the net culture's scene like authors Bruce Sterling and Peter Lunenfeld, or Geert Loving, the writer and founder of <nettime>, and Felix Stalder who is both an academic and the current <nettime> moderator, are

among the authors who regularly post texts on <nettime>. In addition I have created a blog aiming to further gather information, suggestions, and contributions from those involved in the digital culture scene.

In the relatively short time span of nine months I attended five of the major electronic and new media arts festivals, namely Mutek and Elektra (Montréal, Canada, May 08), Ars Electronica (Linz, Austria, September 08), and Transmediale and ClubTransmediale (Berlin, Germany, January 09). These festivals made me aware that there are people who regularly meet over the year in different locations around the world, to experience in a single time and space frame what can be seen as a ritual with its own rhythms and characteristics. In such a context the relation between online and offline communities becomes tangible. Here, at these events, people who were previously in contact through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) meet face-to-face, and at the same time they keep updating their blogs and web sites, communicating in real time with other people located in different parts of the world, sharing their experiences and spreading the news through their networks. The planet could be seen as simultaneously connected through wires and through people: here both the physical and the virtual are intrinsically tied together, forming a new hybrid space.

This new space, which is to be found at the intersection between the material and the immaterial, is linked with the notion of *liminal* space – Latin for threshold, as formulated by the anthropologist Turner. According to him some ritual performances occur in physically detached places, away from the flow of the everyday routine; in this sense ritual action is out of the ordinary. Following Van Gennep's rites of passage model, Turner argues that a ritual exemplifies the transition of an individual from one state to another. Between the states the ritual subjects are set to spend some time in an interstructural or liminal situation; liminality is a state of being in between phases. During this phase of transition the liminal subjects are, in Turner's words, 'betwixt and between'. The subjects all treated equally, and constitute a community without status and hierarchies, the *communitas*. Turner herewith extends the liminal concept to modern societies in his study of liminoid phenomena. The term liminoid refers to experiences that have characteristics of liminal experiences, but if the liminal

predominates in tribal societies, the *liminoid* – liminal-like, flourishes in modern industrialised societies, that are characterised by the emergence of technical innovations. The liminoid is a break from society, is play, is leisure, and allows people to express themselves through free and spontaneous experimentations and performances.¹⁷ It is arguably in this space, a grey indefinite area that virtual and non-virtual realities merge together.

In this paper I have predominantly reviewed a relevant segment of the existing literature about communities, both within the traditional studies from various disciplines, and from the more contemporary literature on communities that emerge from cyberspace. Discussions around the blurred boundaries between the online and the offline continue to be on the agenda of many researchers, and although some progress has been achieved, the path is still long. New issues will arguably arise, new technologies and new modes of interaction will be created. We will moreover have to continue to reflect critically on these constant changes and contribute to their discourse. This perpetuation is enclosed and encouraged in the following quote from the philosopher and theorist of digital culture Pierre Lévy, with which I would like to end this paper:

The contemporary multiplication of spaces makes us nomads again...we leap from network to network...spaces metamorphose and bifurcate beneath our feet, forcing us to undergo a process of heterogenesis.¹⁸

Endnotes

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- 2 V Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell University Press, London, 1967.
- 3 V Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Aldine Transaction, Chicago, 1969.
- 4 B Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 5.
- 5 H Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading of the Electronic Frontier*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1994, p.5.
- 6 A Fung, *Bridging Cyberlife and Real Life: A Study of Online Communities in Hong Kong*, in *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, edited by D Silver and A Massanari, New York University Press, New York, 2006, pp. 129-139.
- 7 N K Baym, *Finding the Quality in Qualitative Research*, in *Critical Cyberculture Studies*, edited by D Silver and A Massanari, New York University Press, New York, 2006, pp.79-87.
- 8 W Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Place and the Infoban*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA, 1995.
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- 12 B Wellman, M Gulia, *Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone: Virtual Communities as Communities*, in *Communities in Cyberspace*, edited by P Kollock and M E Smith, Routledge, New York, 1999.

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- 17 V Turner, *Celebration, Studies in Festivity and Ritual*, Victor Turner Editor, Washington DC, 1982
- 18 P Lévy, *Becoming Virtual: Reality and the Digital Age*, Plenum, New York, 1988, p.31

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