

**SOCIAL**  
**LIFECYCLES OF**  
**VIRTUAL**  
**COMMUNITIES**

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## INTRODUCTION.

Over the last decade we have found ourselves in the midst of a cultural and technological revolution. It has changed the boundaries of social interaction, and created the virtual or on-line community. New social values in terms of human and computer interactions have changed the way we are now communicating both in business and private relationships. This paper deals with private relationships of individuals and groups of people in the formation and qualities of virtual or on-line communities.

*What are the minimum elements of communication necessary for a group to cocreate a sense of community? What kinds of cultures emerge when you remove from human discourse all cultural artefacts except written words? (Howard Rheingold, 1993(a), pg.1 chapter 6).*

Rheingold, an authority figure on virtual communities, raises a number of issues central to the ideas expressed

in this paper. The main argument of this paper is that as social interaction has changed within society, as we have moved from modern to post-modern ideas, this change has been reflected in the adoption of Internet technology to promote a new form of community, i.e. the virtual or on-line community. This on-line community possesses characteristics which many have argued do not constitute a formal community. Therefore its role in today's society has been brought into question. I will argue that it is exactly because of the qualities which it possesses, that makes it a real and viable form of community.

As we have broken our ties with past modernist ideals of rigidity of role and responsibilities, we have witnessed the change in society which has transformed the perception of ourselves into a more fluid society. In this new society it is the individual who is fully recognised, and whose interaction with other individuals is taking a new form. This has been exemplified through the adoption of new technology, such as the Internet, as the basis of a new communication forum.

**Fig.1.** A New Form Of Communication.  
[John Suler, E-Mail Communication And Relationships,  
[http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/  
psycyber/emailrel.html](http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/emailrel.html) ,pg.1.]

*A continuing theme throughout the history of CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] is the way people adapt technologies designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different, communication needs (Howard Rheingold, 1993(b),pg.5).*

Again Rheingold emphasises an important issue, of the adoption of technology to satisfy communication needs for which it was not originally planned. It will also be shown how this existing technology network has been overtaken from it's original military purpose, and transformed into a communication system which has influenced and ultimately changed the lifestyle of it's users.

This new technological change will be put into context through comparison with past technological change and social transformation. This will be considered from

the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including changes such as the telephone and mass transport systems, and their impact on society and the individual. During the production of this paper I compiled research mainly through this same medium, the Internet. This was an invaluable source of relevant information, as there is much discussion on this topic at the moment. This debate has now evolved through two opposing points of view. One side dismisses the idea of the virtual community, and the other embraces it. As a result of this on-going debate there are many articles and papers available on the Internet which each side uses to try and make sense of this new phenomenon. Research was also carried out via e-mail journal subscriptions, which ran weekly journals with up-to-the minute articles and ideas.

The way I have structured this paper is to firstly examine the impact that past technological innovations had on the society that they were introduced to. Then in the second chapter I have researched different ideas behind what constitutes a community, in order to compare this to the virtual or on-line community. Thirdly the impact which the Internet has had on society and how it has been integrated into our lives is examined. Finally the fourth chapter looks at specific examples of on-line

environments and how we interact with one another in this new territory.

This paper concludes with how we have evolved into a more fluid and individual orientated based society, where through the new communications medium of the Internet, we are now forming new communities in which we are interacting in. An environment built by the user and for the user, and one that is continually being formed and shaped by the combined inputs of those who make up the 'virtual community'.

## ENDNOTES

Howard Rheingold, 1993(a), The Virtual Community: Homesteading On The Electronic Frontier, Reading, M.A., Addison-Wesley, pg.1, chapter 6 of on-line version: <http://www.well.com/user/hlr/vcbook.vcbook6.html> .

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## **CHAPTER No.1. A TECHNOLOGICAL IMPACT**

Time and technology, both are inter-twined within society to the extent that technology is largely looked upon as a product to save us time and to open up new ways of thinking and means of living. The personal computer

and the range of applications that it supports can and does save us time in many different areas, such as communicating by e-mail, organising accounts, creating databases, etc.. As with most cases of time-saving inventions there can be some drawbacks.

Although the story of the Internet is currently being written, we have all been exposed to the technological and practicable implications of both the hardware and software of current computer systems that the majority of us have, either at work or in the home. It is the degree to which we now spend part of our life on-line, i.e. using a computer network system, that I am interested in investigating, as I wish to highlight the social implications of this phenomena. This is especially prevalent within the ever expanding Internet and World Wide Web (WWW).

Throughout history we have had to continually face the consequences with which new technologies have brought, as with every amazing new discovery or invention we have been impressed with the level of complexity that we can possibly achieve. Of equal importance is the fact that we have come to terms with knowing that with the introduction of each new technology and invention we feel

that we have lost something from our past. Many find that the new improved situation brings with it its own drawbacks and negative consequences.

The television is a classic example, with its introduction being accepted by the masses, and was then later blamed for the erosion of family life and moral standards. Physiologist Sherry Turkle suggests that *"Perhaps computers feel so natural because of their similarity to watching T.V., our dominant social experience for the past forty years"* (Sherry Turkle, 1996(a),pg.2.).

An important point which should be raised here, is that all of these technologies deal with the different ways in which communication media throughout history has created different environments, through which people's ideas and thoughts are expressed. This sometimes leads to conflicts arising and anti-social behaviour taking place through this medium. The Internet is no different. And it is the social outcomes of this current technology that I will be investigating here.

*As the industrial and economic base of urban life declined, downtown social spaces such as the neighbourhood theatre or diner were replaced by malls and cinema complexes in the outlying suburbs. In the*

*recent past, we left our communities to commute to these distant entertainments; increasingly, we want entertainment that commutes right into our homes. In both cases, the neighbourhood is bypassed (Sherry Turkle, 1996(b),pg.2.).*

Turkle emphasises an important point of how commercialism has eroded the grain of community life through simulated out of town entertainment centres. Entertainment which can now be directed into our own homes by-passing the community. What then will the consequence of this be?.

Looking historically at the formation of different communities leads to the most concise definition and detailed description of what actually constitutes a community *per se*. As one cyberspace author tried to make sense of it, Cyberrdewd has written quite extensively on this subject. His main idea was that if we retrace history's steps we will usually find that in the beginning people generally lived in small villages, in which everyone knew everyone else, which would prove the basis of a single large extended family. As these villages then grew in size so did the structure of society within them, as well as increasing in complexity, the original kinship that existed in the small villages was then lost. And so as towns and cities emerged, with their own form of structured hierarchy, people then grew increasingly apart

from their once close ties together and so many felt alienated from each other.

A major turning point in this process was in the form of the Industrial Revolution, whereby there was a mass influx of labour originating from close-knit communities in the countryside to the new enlarging cities. There the new residents, having been forced to leave many family ties behind, were now based around a nuclear family unit. Due to this separation from close family ties and the feeling of alienation within such large numbers of people tends to push people behind closed doors within their own homes (Cyberredwd, 1996, pg.2.). Thus a new form of social contact and human interaction was sought after, and was looked for through work, consumption, television, and ultimately through the Internet. *"We shop, therefore we are"* (Anonymous).

By looking back, at say the influence that was exerted by the formation of new railroads, it is clear that new towns and communities grew alongside this great new invention, which ultimately brought about a new social change. Now the new railroads of today's society comes in the form of the Internet. With this will undoubtedly come social change, which not only occurs along these new

lines, but also away from it as it extends it's sphere of influence over an ever increasing geographical area. This can be likened to the influence the railroads brought which carried for further than it's own physical boundaries (Stephen G. Jones, 1997,pg.8.).

**Fig.1.1** Expanding Physical And Social Boundaries.  
[<http://earthcam.net/> , pg.1]

So far I have identified how previous technological changes have had specific consequences on society, in that their influence has far expanded their initial designed purpose, i.e. mass communication systems. Community life has been shown to have declined due to the introduction of commercialised institutions, and to have redefined the structure of society in a new simulated environment.

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Sherry Turkle, 1996(b), Virtuality And Its Discontents: Searching For Community In Cyberspace, <http://epn.org/prospect/24/24turk.html> , pg.2.

## CHAPTER No.2. DEFINING A COMMUNITY.

*In the 1950's the analysis of various definitions of community was a thriving sociological industry. The piece de resistance was Hillery's analysis of ninety-four definitions in his paper 'Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement'(1955). In the early '70's Bell and Newby wrote that: 'the concept of community has been the concern of sociologists for more than two hundred years, yet a satisfactory definition of it in sociological terms appears as remote as ever'(1973). Others noted that the fact that the term community can be used in several different ways diminishes its usefulness for purposes of scientific communication, 1972. This is because the term 'community' refers to different things, depending upon who is using it and upon the context in which it is used, 1960. (Quentin Jones, 1997,pg.4.).*

Here Jones clearly sets out the difficulty involved in trying to clarify what it is that we mean in using the elusive term, 'community'. When dealing with community I want to try and determine if the Internet provides any of the qualities which we are exposed to in reality, and actively seek out when off-line, such as those proposed by Jones, i.e. friendship, community interaction and public life (Steven G. Jones, 1997(a),pg.9).

What has already been discussed with reference to community on the Internet is that two main streams of

thought are emerging. The first is the reconstruction of a community of days gone past, in which old values and customs could be recreated for the good of everyone. The second main stream of thought is the creation of a continually expanding community where through the vast numbers of people who are now connected together we have now entered a new era where distance, space and time have now been successfully overcome. Jones argues that in bringing us all together on a world stage, interaction can now be instantaneous and irrelevant of physical location (Steven G. Jones, 1997(b),pg.9).

**Fig.2.1.** The Global Community, Set On A Stage.  
[<http://www.fourmilab.ch/cgi-bin/uncgi/Earth> ,pg.1.]

*Community is a collective of kinship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history, and a shared value system, one usually rooted in a common religion. Typically, communities are rather homogenous, and tend to exist*

*in the historical context of a simple division of labour. Most importantly, communities embrace non-rational components of life and of consciousness. Social action is not carried out by means of contract, but by understandings, and life is certainly not fully mediated by technology (Critical Art Ensemble, 1995,pg.5).*

Critical Art Ensemble consists of five artists of various specialisation's, based in the United States and are dedicated to exploring the interstices between art, technology, politics and critical theory (Rob Gawthorp, 1997,pg.52). This is a fairly complex and definitive definition of what constitutes a community, and manages to highlight the sense of human contact that is needed to help sustain community spirit. Relating the idea of community and the experiences of living life on-line does seem quite far fetched in the light of the above statement. This is dealt with in greater detail in the final chapter, which will illustrate connections between on-line and off-line communities.

*The old concept of community is obsolete in many ways and needs to be updated to meet today's challenges. The old or 'traditional' community was often exclusive, inflexible, isolated, unchanging, monolithic, and homogeneous. A new community - one that is fundamentally devoted to demographic problem-solving - needs to be fashioned from the remnants of the old (Douglas Schuler, 1996(a),pg.9).*

Schuler portrays his concept of community as being an inflexible entity which has grown out of what was traditionally the basis of the divide associated with the past class system. And so to create a flexible democratic community, Schuler goes on to say that communities are not just places to be, to engage in conversation, from the mundane to the momentous, they are groups of people seeking to achieve particular goals (Douglas Schuler, 1996(b)).

*The distribution of people in dispersed social systems is not only spatial but mental. Some people are in a planetary community; some are in a national community; still others are in a community bounded by their limited interests. The bodies of people might be in one spatial area, but not their social worlds. The concept of locale has little meaning in this context. The concept of communality was once proposed to refer to these locale-independent relationships. Now the implications for the community of the independence from locale as shown by these new kinds of relationships are becoming overwhelming (J.Bernard, 1973,pg.183).*

Here Bernard focuses on the issue of physical location in terms of it's lack of importance in the formation of on-line communities. He highlights the degree to which the original concept of community has now been redefined, both in terms of the ability to defy the constraints of physical location, and also the exciting new relationships that this brings.

*Life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity....communication will be more effective and productive, and therefore more enjoyable (Licklider and Taylor, 1968,pg.31).*

Although this extract dates from over 30 years ago, in the year that man landed on the moon, it holds even now, in the situation in which we find ourselves. Both Licklider and Taylor, and Schuler, have suggested that the formation of a group of like-minded people, within a communicative framework, such as the Internet, would constitute a new community. And so within this 'new community', as put forward by Jones, it's members would be bound by common interests in the effort to solve problems and achieve goals (Stephen G. Jones, 1997,pg.10). Although this sounds like an honest attempt to try and define the essence of community, I believe that the situation does not exist within these neatly defined boundaries. And what are the problems that they are trying to solve?. Does it mean that effort not spent solving these 'problems' is wasted?.

Even the large co-operations, such as Microsoft and I.B.M. have jumped on the 'community' bandwagon in an attempt to try and sell their products, which have been billed to

alleviate the sense of isolation of modern-day life, and have promoted their own digital community in terms of chat rooms, news groups and other digital environments. They are in effect taking Schuler's idea of a nostalgic age of gentlemanly social conduct and importing it into a new improved modern setting for a community. But as Rheingold's philosophy states in his book 'Virtual Communities', he clearly identifies that "*Different communities of interpretation, from anthropology to economics, have different criteria for studying whether a group of people is a community*" (Howard Rheingold, 1993(a),pg.9.).

I believe that this sort of framework by no means whatsoever sets the scene for an adequately functioning community to be built upon, as "*anyone with even a basic knowledge of sociology understands that information exchange in no way constitutes a community*" (Critical Art Ensemble, 1995(b),pg.5).

**Fig.2.2.** The Information Exchange: Not An Authentic Connection.

[John Suler, <http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/psychspace.html> ,pg.1.]

This statement bears testament to the fact that a lot of people will be fooled into thinking that they are part of something other than just an individual user engaging in information exchange with others. The Internet just basically makes it possible for a broad spectrum of information exchange between different nodes within the network, surely something more than this is needed if we are to assign it the title of 'community'.

So why should we so readily accept the neatly packaged ideas behind the large co-operations market orientated products, which are advertised with the promise of a true digital community?. With these having been raised on only what we know on the formation of past communities. What is argued here is that a new form of community is emerging, and it is better that the users themselves are taking the active role in forming the shape in this new territory. Where old values and preconceptions are left behind, and new ideas are expressed and followed in the creation of a new setting for human interaction. This is the more promising scenario, as an institution-led formation would not add the qualities that have been

discussed here to the final nature of an on-line community.

A common view regarding activities on the Internet, other than for the purpose of gathering information, and one which is strongly held by the group Critical Art Ensemble (CAE), is that it represents a form of anti-social behaviour. This is mainly due to the physical activity involved in establishing interaction over the Internet, that is staying in your room and rejecting outside human contact, in favour of a virtually based existence. This then suggests a paradox, in that there is a cycle of isolation set up by those wishing to escape it through contact via their computer screens.

*It might have looked to my daughter as if I were alone at my desk the night she caught me chortling online, but from my point of view I was in living contact with old and new friends, strangers and colleagues (Howard Rheingold, 1993(b),pg.2.).*

Rheingold shares his experience of how others outside of this system may not understand why at first glance they seem to be isolated and alone, when in fact they are engaging with other users within a widely spread community. CAE's own philosophy on the matter is that the Internet acts as both a repressive and marketing

apparatus, identifying the need for control of the users, and to increase levels of market consumption for those users to help seek comfort and pleasure. All of this might seem a bit paranoid, but there is evidence to suggest that this might be a possible scenario.

Up until now I have not looked at the physical manifestation of community life. This can be looked upon as not just a collection of buildings, or specific marked-out areas, which can be used only for specific functions, but as any space where two or more people meet to talk and exchange ideas. But even some of our 'traditional' meeting places are diminishing, where direct and unmediated social interaction once took place, and is being continually replaced by consumer orientated institutions. This now takes the form of shopping centres, amusement parks, and other areas of consumption *en-masse*, who try and sell their image of 'fun for all the family', but whose social interaction is almost as fake as some of their institutions. Why would we then seek out such consumer manifestations in electronic form as a means of searching for human contact?.

*Community is more than dependence, more than noticing that different skills keep society alive. Community is the simple truth we discover when we huddle in the darkness keeping ourselves warm by the fact of our*

*closeness rather than emblems of connection. It is beyond electronic symbols, beyond printed images and text, beyond written words, beyond the capacity of speech to reach. Those are symbols, and symbols are a menu, while what we had tasted was a real meal. An affinity for the truth of another, the fact of pattern in a plausible chaos (Richard Thieme, 1998(a),pg.8).*

Here Thieme shares his thoughts with us on his philosophy of what constitutes a community, and again we are confronted with a definition that harks back to an ideal era, where true values were upheld and human physical contact encouraged. Although should he be so dismissive of translating the ideas of what a community should be, into appropriate data to be sustained virtually?.

*We grieve for the loss of one kind of community, back-engineered from particular technologies, until we awaken to a new kind - just as real; immediate, and meaningful - created by new technologies.....and created, as always, out of our alienation and need. New media distance us from one another, then enable us to connect at a deeper level than ever (Richard Thieme, 1998(b),pg.2).*

Thieme again tries to define the relationship between community and technology, this time taking an alternative viewpoint than before. This is not as surprising as it may seem, as his weekly column, "Islands in the

Clickstream", tries to make sense of the ever changing ebb and flow of popular thought. *"The term community is one of the most elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning"* (Quentin Jones, 1997(b),pg.4.).

Within this chapter I have identified the problems associated with finding a definitive translation of what is meant when we use the term 'community'. Over time it's qualities and characteristics have changed in response to changes in society, with a new form today reflecting the fluidity of our society. This then can be applied to what we experience through the Internet, thus the virtual community has been born.

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## **CHAPTER No.3**

## **A TECHNOLOGIC SOCIETY**

*The term 'Cyberspace' was coined by science fiction writer William Gibson who used it to describe a shared consensual hallucination by which people are able to manipulate data in the 'Matrix'. Modern day cyberspace has no-where near the quality of Gibsonian cyberspace - tremendous technological difficulties would have to be overcome first. Nevertheless, the emotional 'charge' of chat conversation, the evocative quality of many people's nicknames, and the simple graphics already available do have a vivid effect, albeit only a subjective one, on the chatter's imagination (Cyberredwd, 1996,pg.16).*

Cyberredwd, a self confessed Internet junkie, has a definite passion for the emotions experienced in the environment of the Internet and predicts an expanding future where past science fiction now becomes science fact.

Some argue that no suitable environment exists on the Internet to foster such qualities as to sustain a community with qualities like those described in previous pages. Indeed many take the view that the excessive amount of information available on the network is just that, excessive, which holds little or no value for the interpreter. As T.S.Elliot famously wrote, *"Where is the wisdom lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge lost in information?"* (T.S.Elliot, 1963,pg.147).

Since our lifestyle has moved from modernist to postmodernist ideas the level of importance that information plays in our lives has significantly risen.

*In it's most extreme form, the entire form of society is seen as being determined by technology: new technologies transform society at every level, including institutions, social interaction and individuals (Daniel Chandler, 1995,pg.1).*

Here Chandler gives us a clear insight into how culture and technology are so closely intertwined in today's society, an indication of the degree of exposure to information which we face each day. Neil Postman has defined his notion of technological supremacy as;

*The Frankenstein Syndrome: One creates a machine for a particular and limited purpose. But once the machine is built, we discover, always to our surprise - that it has ideas of it's own; that it is quite capable not only of changing our habits, but.....of changing our habits of mind (Neil Postman, 1993,pg.23).*

Although this might sound like a drastic statement, it does in fact highlight the outcomes of an introduction of Internet technology, and serves as a reminder that some outcomes of this technology are not as predictable as we would like to think they are. "Bit by bit, my days dribble away, trickling out of my modem" (Clifford Stoll, 1995,pg.2).

As the historian Lynn White noted, "a new device merely opens a door; it does not compel one to enter" (Lynn White, 1962,pg.28). Sociologist Ruth Finnegan commented that, "the medium itself cannot give rise to social consequences - it must be used" (Ruth Finnegan, 1975, cited by Daniel Chandler), thus indicating that a technology by itself cannot achieve very much, this all depends on the way in which it is used. A point that is also made by Harvey Graff, who as a historian of literacy, insisted that, "neither writing nor printing alone is an 'agent of change'; their impacts are determined by the manner in which human agency exploits them in a specific setting" (Harvey Graff, 1987,pg.19). And so it must be clearly understood that it is not the technology itself that instigates social change, but it is the manner in which it is used that will determine what outcome will be achieved through the new technology.

*My direct observations of on-line behaviour around the world over the past ten years have lead me to conclude that whenever CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as micro-organisms inevitably create colonies (Howard Rheingold, 1993(a),pg.5).*

Rheingold highlights the issue of the technology itself not creating these communities to form, but it is those

who find and use the system that create virtual communities in which to interact in. This is a positive approach to recognising the viability of the on-line community, which looks at it as taking the next logical step, in inhabiting the technology which now surrounds and links the world. In comparing the virtual community to micro-organisms creating new colonies he authenticates this new link as an evolutionary progression. Rheingold goes on to explain his view of this observation;

*I suspect that one of the explanations for this phenomenon is the hunger for community that grows in the breasts of people around the world as more and more informal public spaces disappear from our real lives. I also suspect that these new media attract colonies of enthusiasts because CMC enables people to do things with each other in new ways, and to do altogether new kinds of things, just as telegraphs, telephones, and televisions did (Howard Rheingold, 1993(b),pg.5.).*

Ray Oldenberg, an anthropologist, once wrote about the, "great good place - the local bar, the bistro, the coffee shop - where members of a community can gather for easy company, conversation, and a sense of belonging" (Sherry Turkle, 1996,pg.1). Although all of these places still exist, some people seem to suggest that they do not sustain the sense of community that was once associated with them. And so in an effort to help recreate a

sense of nostalgic community feeling, replica's of these meeting places have now begun to be digitised and recreated within the neighbourhoods in cyberspace. Does it therefore really work to be keep turning back to the old forms of community spirit, when clearly situations and the way of life has changed?.

**Fig.3.1.** A Sports Café Replica, Better Than The Real Thing?  
[Virtual Worlds, <http://www.activeworlds.com/worlds.html> , pg.1.]

Whenever questioning the origins of the Internet, we must ask ourselves what has facilitated this new technology to be so readily acceptable by so many people?. In other words, what conditions have existed within society for those who make up it to embrace such a technology?. The previous chapter dealt with this issue to some degree,

and found that there was a need for a new environment in which human contact and interaction take on new meaning and value. Within this situation then I will unravel the values and context which are contained within this network, in order to highlight what it is that drives so many to be part of a 'global village'.

*Cyberspace consists of transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live (Alexander "Sasha" Chislenko, 1997,pg.8).*

Chislenko highlights a general philosophical approach towards the subject of what happens within the Internet, and raises an important issue of how reality does not restrict or impede what may happen where our 'bodies do not reside'. Within the context of the real world, the majority of people's perceptions depend solely on physical attributes, i.e. spaces, places and so on, and when these artefacts are digitised for their inclusion in the virtual world, then people's perceptions ultimately change. It is these different values which now emerge from this situation which may cause unforeseen problems. It seems that nearly everyone has their own view and opinion on the events which are taking place on such a global scale. Some profess their dismay over the situation, others take the standpoint that it is an exciting time,

full of challenges and rewards. Whatever way you choose to look at it, it seems that basic conditions of human identity and social interaction are now being redefined. What is then commonly asked is, "*Who will we become as such developments run their course?, and, what kind of society and political order will emerge?*" (Langdon Winner, 1995,pg.4.). Both of these questions would prove to be two very interesting areas in which to diverse to, but cannot realistically be covered within the scope of this paper. Firstly the basis of living life on-line will be discussed.

*People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot if idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind (Howard Rheingold, 1993(c),pg.3.).*

**Fig.3.2.** An On-Line Community, Only With Digitised Bodies.

[Where Chat Worlds Collide: Journey To Another World:  
Worlds Away, [http://www.cnet.com/Content/  
Features/Dlife/Chat/side3.html](http://www.cnet.com/Content/Features/Dlife/Chat/side3.html) , pg.1.]

Here again Rheingold emphasises the distinct difference in living life on-line, where 'we leave our bodies behind'. Within Cyberspace it is possible to say with confidence that virtually we have at our disposal everything that we could ever imagine, and more. Then would it not be appropriate to say that this represents the ultimate post-modern society, where the promise of a modern society was for individual material satisfaction, albeit virtual?. On this subject Sherry Turkle, author of 'Virtuality and its Discontents: Searching for Community in Cyberspace', has noted that;

*Not so long ago, stability was socially valued and culturally reinforced. Rigid gender roles, repetitive labour, the expectation of being in one kind of job or remaining in one town over a lifetime, all of these made consistency central to definitions of health. But these stable social worlds have broken down. In our time, health is described in terms of fluidity rather than stability. What matters most now is the ability to adopt and change to new jobs, new career directions, new gender roles, new technologies (Sherry Turkle, 1996,pg.4).*

Turkle has managed to capture the changing role of society and, as previously mentioned, social change can only bring about a change of perceptions which allows the integration

of technology within that society, so timing is everything. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that part of the Internet's success and adoption into society is that it reflects some of the conditions of post-modern society in which it has now inter-twined itself, and so proving that it's timing was perfect.

*We temporarily have access to a tool that could bring conviviality and understanding into our lives and might help revitalise the public sphere. The same tool, improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny. The vision of a citizen-designed, citizen-controlled world-wide communications network is a version of 'the electronic agora' (Howard Rheingold, 1993(d),pg.11.).*

Rheingold sums-up quite effectively the importance which technology, properly controlled, can bring to new forms of community and understands the benefit that this 'citizen-designed' community can bring to both the virtual and real world. Rheingold goes on to outline the dramatic effect the Internet can play in challenging the existing political situation. Whatever happens in this environment should carry over into the real world, meaning these new changes will eventually have an impact on all.

*The political significance of CMC lies in its capacity to challenge the existing political hierarchy's monopoly on powerful communications media, and perhaps thus revitalize citizen-based democracy (Howard Rheingold, 1993(e),pg.10.).*

The Internet has a demarcating effect on it's 'netizens', helping those who are frustrated by a lack of influence and degree of power to amplify their voices and opinions. It puts the person in the position of a producer, rather than a consumer, which should ultimately be for the good of the many, in both the real and virtual community.

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## **CHAPTER No.4. LIFE AND IDENTITY ON-LINE**

Before I come to any significant conclusions concerning the formation of community networks within cyberspace, I must first establish how individuals operate, and how they are perceived within the environments of cyberspace.

This is an important issue due to the fact cyberspace is a new communication medium, and in virtual space, rules and protocols have not yet been fully defined, which may give rise to misinterpretation. What is found on the Internet is that a new range of possibilities now exists in which we can present ourselves on a global stage, to an audience never before made possible. This means that people are using different communication techniques, "to reveal both more and less of who they are, or who they think they are", as put forward by on-line university lecturer, Paul Kelly (Paul Kelly, 1997(a),pg.1). It seems an apt popular quotation then that it is said that, "On the Net, nobody knows you're a dog!" (Anonymous).

One of the most popular forums in which individuals convey their persona, is in the form of a WWW home page, which usually is a single page of information concerning their favourite groups, television programmes, their likes and dislikes and so on. This typical scenario is usually what is experienced within the domain of the WWW, which has established itself as the forum for the publication of 'home pages'.

Other forums contained within the Internet include MUD's; *Multi-User-Domains*, IRC; *Inter Rely Chat*, and MOO's; *MUD's*

*Object Orientated*, all of which allow intercommunication between users on-line, but with a difference. What is being recreated here has a slight slant on reality, in other words it has been described as a 'fantasy world'. Within these virtual environments it can be observed that the users have chosen what may be described as an alternative personality.

Those then using these environments have the opportunity to express themselves in a manner which might not be acceptable within the WWW, or in real life for that matter. Many see this as allowing those within these environments to act out their fantasies which would otherwise be discouraged, or seen as totally unacceptable in a civilised society.

Different sociologists have found that people within these environments take very seriously their on-line personalities, and do tend to 'live out' the full range of emotions which their character portrays on-line. This scenario raises a number of questions with regards to our identity.

The main question should be, what constitutes our identity, both on-line and off-line?. What is it that

makes us an individual, and influences our actions in many different situations?. It has been argued that since we all react differently in various social situations, then this has lead onto the idea put forward by Czech writer Milan Kundera, and others, that we are each in possession of many selves (Milan Kundera, 1998,pg.3). This may lead us to a better understanding of why there are many various and different personality types which exist in different environments within cyberspace.

**Fig.4.1.** "Everywhere I Go In Cyberspace I Find...Me!" (Anon.).  
[John Suler, The Final Showdown Between In-Person And Cyberspace Relationships,  
<http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psyber/showdown.html> , pg.1]

Having previously discussed how people project their persona onto different environments, there has been a lot of discussion on the psychoanalysis of this phenomena, Sherry Turkle, Allucquere Rosanne Stone, et al, so I shall not dwell to long on this subject, only to question the fact that some believe that the Internet has become a "free for all in which anyone can wantonly impose their

*psychological complex's at the expense of others" (Paul Kelly, 1997(b),pg.1).*

Kelly, also asks as to *"where the line should be drawn in terms of identity experimentation?" (Paul Kelly, 1997(c),pg.4).* On-line behaviour is probably one of the most hotly debated subjects on the Internet, and forms one of the main aspects of this paper, in making connections between real and virtual communities.

Looking again from the approach of a psychological angle, we must address questions like those proposed by Paul Kelly, in his paper, *"Human Identity Part 2: What do you do?"*. *"What do I do? What do I produce? What is my role in society and what is the meaning of that role?" (Paul Kelly, 1997(d),pg.1).* In asking these questions, Kelly has forced us to examine what is the conception of ourselves in the most basic sense. In this case, Kelly wishes us to confirm the changing roles which exist within the Internet, which is mainly that of the erosion of the distinction between consumer and producer. For what can be frequently seen within the Internet is that it provides us with not only a chance to redefine ourselves, but also to re-define the roles in which we engage in,

either as a producer or a consumer. Again these are ideas central to post-modernism.

Kelly's main idea was with the connection between the social roles which were in place in the past, which defined a person with whatever task or duty he had to perform, which defined his social status. But with the modernisation of society this strict hierarchical structure soon dissipated away, and new definitions were given to the identity of a person, both socially and functionally. The main change in perception has shifted away from society as a whole, down in scale to the individual.

Some of those who argue that through the increasing and expanding nature of the Internet we are in fact distancing ourselves from the qualities of simplicity and sense of social unity of a homogenous society, which reflects the ideals of a modernist society. With a common line of argument being the fact that if we are all confined to our homes, staring at a computer screen punching away at our keyboards, then how does this constitute an active and growing sense of community?. Unless the computer-mediated community can be shown to be a real community.

For a start, we no longer live in a homogenous modern society. We are no longer bound to our fellow man through the commonality of the nature of the labour force. Over this past century, we have become a multicultural and heterogeneous post-modern society. We have all become individuals, which have become different, and interesting, having lost the general and common links which have bound society together for centuries. And so within reality there has tended to be a growing feeling of discontent, through the distancing of ourselves from our neighbours, with whom we now share little in common. This new technology has enabled us to choose which reality in which to spend time in, and by choosing which reality to co-exist in is a reflection on who we are, and how we want to be perceived.

*People in a highly connected yet deeply fragmented society can no longer rely on a central canon for guidance. They are forced into the modern existential blackness of creating their own cultures, beliefs, markets, and identities from a sticky mess of interdependent pieces. The industrial icon of a grand central or a hidden 'I am' becomes hollow. Distributed, headless, emergent wholeness becomes the social ideal (Kevin Kelly, 1997, cited by Paul Kelly,pg.4).*

Here Kelly, the executive editor of the popular 'Wired Magazine', gives us a clear indication of the situation in which society is now based. Where we now form our own culture and identity based around our individual self.

One of the main concerns that has been previously highlighted is the quality of communication which takes place on-line, in that it provides a limited sensory experience for those interacting with each other in this particular medium. The quality of communication with which we are used to dealing with in real life has not yet been approached in the digital world. Most of the forums for communication are only text-based and this is where the system has received the majority of it's criticism, with typical comments of how do you know the tone of voice?, and how can you perceive facial expression or body language?. The main point being made here is the likelihood of misunderstanding which might occur through text-only based discourse, and therefore it's subsequent lack of quality.

*Using images in words in the search for an image of a world of images beyond words, life as we might live it inside a grid of virtual communication, our thoughts like electrons travelling on interlacing wires (Richard Thieme, 1999,pg.1.).*

Here Thieme defines the way in which communication through the use of simple text and graphical images does enable those using the Internet to engage in fully interactive communication. In response to his weekly column where this topic was discussed one of the column's readers responded with the following;

*While it is true that words might be augmented by pictures, language has been perfected over thousands of years. Language itself is multi-modal and I doubt we shall ever be able to convey images faster than we can in language. You can take me on your little image-filled joy-ride in words far more easily than any other way (Michael Goldhamer, 1999, cited by Richard Thieme,pg.1.).*

Although Goldhamer's claims might seem a little excessive, he does make a relevant point about the significant role of the written word in the way we communicate ideas and experiences with each other. This simple fact should not be overlooked in our attempt to create a totally new communicative environment through a sophisticated graphical interface. We do exist in a visually literate world, where images create a universal language and has penetrated into all cultures and walks of life. Therefore regarding text-only based communication systems, there is evidence which implies that this medium in no way reduces the impact of descriptive text on the reader. While in today's world, where visual communication is accepted universally, the image combined with text has been shown to constitute a new vocabulary in which to express ourselves and our ideas on a world-wide platform. And so a new communications forum is set. Although not everyone will be satisfied with this, *"there is this*

*overwhelming hunger for more than mere text" (Frank Weinreich, 1997,pg.2.).*

Although the majority of chat environments still rely on only a text based system, there are new systems emerging on-line to create a new multimedia environment, with the combining of audio-video conferencing paving the way for future development.

**Fig.4.2.** A Virtual World Beyond Just Text, An Example Of A Multimedia Environment.  
[Where Chat Worlds Collide: Journey To Another World: World Chat, <http://www.cnet.com/Content/Features/Dlife/Chat/sidel.html> , pg.1]\_

Firstly, with regards to the limited sensory experience of a text-only based communication environment there are some significant disadvantages and some unexpected advantages compared to face to face encounters.

The main disadvantage which has just been discussed, is that of the lack of visual clues to express emotion, such as being happy, unhappy, sad, perplexed, etc., which adds

that human element in communicating with others. In response to this form of disability, a technical one that is, there has been an effort to overcome this barrier. As a result the language used has mutated to form a sense of emotion through the use of existing text characters, commonly known as 'emoticons'. The origins of emoticons predate the Internet, having been originally used by the electronic bulletin board users of the 1980's. A typical list of standard emoticons consists of;

: )	smile	: (	unhappy/frown
;-)	wink	: (((	very unhappy
: ))	laugh	:-/ or :-	perplexed
: )))	very happy	:~(	sad and crying

(Cyberrdewd, 1996,pg.9).

These are usually inserted at the point in a sentence where the emotion would be normally expressed;

*Thanks for listening to my rant. :-)*  
*I have warned you not to stray*  
*over that fine line:-)*

*Gotta go :-(*  
*This is really upsetting :-(*

*Know what I mean? ;-)*  
*We'll show him a thing or two. ;-)*

(John Suler, 1998,pg.6.)

Within the domain of multimedia environments there is an opportunity to express part of your identity through a visual graphic image, known as 'avatars'. These are used in virtual chat rooms to reflect some aspect of the user's personality and lifestyle, to show their mood, a specific interest, a social role, one's attitudes and values, or for an alternative personality.

**Fig.4.3.** Kristina, An Alternative Personality Avatar.  
[Avatars 98, <http://www.ccon.org/conf98/index.html> ,  
pg.1.]

An illustrative example of one type of avatar is the primary one, some user's may have a list of avatars exceeding 100 or so!, used by psychologist John Suler, and that is a grey owl (see figure 4.4.). The description Suler gives on this issue helps to highlight the way in which it is possible to portray your personality through such a static graphic image.

*Grey Owl - 'AsKi' is my primary or 'home' avatar. I spend the large majority of my time wearing this icon. I specifically chose this picture for several reasons. It is non-threatening. I did not hide the fact that I was doing research on the Palace in addition to socializing there, so I wanted to appear as benign as possible. The fact that it is a small prop adds to its innocuous quality, as well as makes it very portable and easy to fit into even a crowded room. An owl also is observant, non-intrusive, and 'wise'- characteristics that I hoped would positively flavour people's reactions to me (and that I'd like to claim as my qualities) (John Suler, 1996(a),pg.1).*

**Fig.4.4.** AsKi, The Primary Avatar Of Psychologist John Suler.

[Thats Me All Over, An Analysis Of A Personal Avatar Collection, <http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/avcollection.html> , pg.1.]

Jim Bumgardner, is a computer software writer and creator of the 'Palace', a virtual multimedia environment which supports a virtual community who all actively use avatars. He has succeeded, in some respects, to create an environment which visually adds more quality, than just a text-only based environment, and which addresses some

psychological aspects of human interaction and communication.

*Early attempts by myself to create real world constraints, such as limiting a person's movement to the floor area of the room, were quickly removed, because they were perceived by myself and the other users as unnecessary obstacles. There is no attempt to mimic real world physics in the Palace. As far as I am concerned, physics basically presents obstacles, and I wanted to create a world with few obstacles (Jim Bumgardner, 1992(a), cited by John Suler,pg.3).*

**Fig.4.5.** A Lecture Full Of Avatars.

[John Suler, Meetings Of The Palace User Group,  
<http://www.rider.edu/users/suler/psycyber/pugmeet.html>  
,pg.1]

And so this sets the scene, from what was previously discussed with regards to human psychology, of a world in which physical boundaries are removed and where

personality and one's inner-self can be safely explored and human interaction (albeit virtual) can form a sense of community among the system's user's. This form of environment has been described by Bumgardner, as allowing spontaneous generation to occur, where it is up to those within that environment to control and shape this 'virtual' space, where rules and restrictions of the real world are shrugged off, and can be re-written to satisfy the needs of the new group of people (Jim Bumgardner, 1992(b), cited by John Suler,pg.4).

One of the main drawbacks of this system of forming new community groups is one that appears in any type of environment, be it real or virtual, i.e. problems with people with an anti-social agenda. Although this may seem like stating the obvious, there is a fundamental difference in the way in which we react in both types of situations. Within the real world we have some degree over the company in which we keep, and so can typically avoid the aggravation of having to deal with this sort of personality type. While within a virtual environment, there is a degree of uncontrollability of who will enter into the communication forum, and so we are faced with a situation which will be something that we will not be accustomed to. This may be an unfortunate side-effect

of the unrestricted access which is promoted by this communication medium, which is made all the worse by the inherent degree of choosing to remain anonymous.

*Anonymity has a disinhibiting effect that cuts two ways. Sometimes people use it to act out some unpleasant need or emotion, often by abusing other people. Or it allows them to be honest and open about some personal issue that they could not discuss in a face-to-face encounter (John Suler, 1996(b),pg.7).*

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## CONCLUSION

*Where else can you go to and find specialists for almost any problem you may have, organized in thousands of newsgroups? And you don't even have to pay for advice, help and comfort. So it seems to be natural to describe the Net as a community, for it functions similarly. The only real difference seems to be the virtuality of the room in which all this happens (Frank Weinreich, 1997,pg.1.).*

Frank Weinreich is a freelance author and Ph.D student of philosophy. Many believe that society has put too much emphasis on the belief that technology is the solution to some of the problems which are experienced within a fast-paced post-modern society. In this particular case the 'technology' is in the form of an information network, popularly referred to as the 'Internet' or 'Cyberspace'. Users on this network have the opportunity to form new community groups, and can experience a sense of 'community' that is not fully embraced by those in real life.

In attempting to define a meaning behind 'community', there are a number of interpretations in which some have similar meaning and value. This includes the community

as being described as belonging to a specific geographic area, with a common value system and with emotional support. I have argued that the ethos of community life is reflected in the society in which it is set, and for us in the modernised western world, our society has become a reflection of our fast-paced lifestyle. There has been a changing emphasis from different social groups being formed to that of the single individual, each with his/her own unique needs and personal aspirations.

Since the creation of the Internet, as firstly an military communication network, it's technology has been put to good use as the communication back-bone of a far wider reaching phenomena. This has enabled geographical location and time differences to be overcome and has allowed for the spontaneous creation and adoption of 'virtual-communities'. These have proven themselves to be an effective forum from which many can find qualities, such as friendship and sympathetic listeners, which otherwise seem increasingly difficult in today's society.

**Fig.5.** In Today's Society We Are All Becoming  
Cybersouls.  
[<http://www.open.ac.uk/bbc/digitalplanet/> , pg.1.]

The increasing reduction in global distances and the instances of people travelling further afield than ever before has helped shatter the historical moulds which once shaped our past communities, and has forced us to rethink the ideals behind the once closed communities. These communities' boundaries which were once defined by actual physical distances, have now been overcome through advances in transport and travel. This has forced a new way in thinking, in the light of a new type of community forming.

The formation of a new set of rules, or the rewriting of social protocols that has evolved on the Internet has had an important impact. This may have left some users baffled, and having to learn an alternative form of language, to be fully engaged in the communication network. Mostly this has just been in response to attempts to convey expression and meaning in the environment of a text-only based system.

"Norms were established, challenged, changed, re-established, re-challenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution" (Howard Rheingold, 1993,pg.2.). Many peoples conception of a pre-wired Internet, where the software automatically generated environments in which we are able to interact, is a main misconception of those who believe that on-line communities do not exist. But in reality it is the evolving nature and ad-hoc way in which different conditions have been tried and tested for on-line user groups which has created suitable environments. So that by trial and error an acceptable situation has been found, in the formation of these new environments. This proves that these environments should be taken as seriously as the community groups that form within them.

Through interaction in cyberspace, you have the ability to express yourself and explore your identity in ways which would not be appropriate if exercised within the real world. This can be expressed through anonymity, or by assuming creative and imaginative identities. This is a great opportunity to express yourself freely and to interact in a way which you would not embrace in a face-to-face situation.

As well as the opportunity to freely express oneself within these new communities, the Internet also has a democratic effect on its citizens, or 'netizens'. This democratic quality has come about through the fact that everyone who logs onto the network has the same opportunities, the quality of hardware withstanding, as the next person. Although many argue that its access is limited to those who are white, male, middle-class, young, English-speaking, with access to the equipment.

*Everyone - regardless of status, wealth, race, gender, etc. - starts off on a level playing field. Some people call this the 'net democracy'. What determines your influence on others is your skill in communicating (including writing skills), your persistence, the quality of your ideas, and sometimes your technical know-how (John Suler, 1996,pg.2).*

Here Suler makes the assumption that we are dealing with exclusively a white, middle class society. When dealing with the formation of on-line communities we are confronted with many possibilities of contacting hundreds, or even thousands of like minded people, made possible by the ever increasing number of connections which make up this global network.

*I confidentially predict that real-time digital communities will come to play a greater and greater role in peoples lives as the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds. The question is, what form will these communities take, and what computer-mediated environment will people interact in and through. It may well be that eventually entire digital nations will form, along the lines of John Perry Barlow's 'Declaration of Cyberspace Independence', but in a far more fragmented sense. Rather than a single huge cyber-nation, I would expect tens or even hundreds of thousands of tiny ones, each one focused around and influenced by a specific topic, common interest, and program format (Cyberdewd, 1996,pg.14.).*

Historians and sociologists, have found that although communication technology is an important influencing factor in instigating social change, it is not the only factor in a complex chain of possible issues. As sociologist, Jonathan Benthall argues, "social change involves an interaction of social, cultural and economic forces as well as scientific and technological influences" (Jonathan Benthall, 1976,pg.146).

Throughout this paper I have looked at how on-line communities have formed, and some of the reasons behind this. Having done this, and looked at what defines a 'community' in detail, it has been argued that virtual communities are viable forms of community. As a reflection of the society in which we live, the space in

which we communicate, and ultimately the medium we use, has changed. In today's world our fluid lifestyles are mirrored in a fluid medium, that is within virtual communities in cyberspace.

## ENDNOTES

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