

Chapter 3

The online community and the global village

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will be devoted to a discussion on the phenomena of the online community and the global village, as well as to a discussion on definitions and concepts pertaining to these topics. Just as yeast changes flour and water into rising dough, some technologies act as catalysts for change, transforming everything around them. In this way, steam power, electricity and the internal-combustion engine all had a major impact on modern society, creating new opportunities and directions for the general public.

Thanks to the first technological revolution, a similar transformation was brought about in modern society, namely that of the convergence of the online communities.

The principal aim of this chapter is to familiarise readers with the concepts of an “online community” and a “global village”, thereby creating a point of reference for the next two chapters.

In addition, this chapter will be used to address the following sub-problems:

- Does the concept of “social community” need to be re-conceptualised?
- Does technology have an impact on traditional communities?
- How should the online community be conceptualised and defined in the context of the information super highway?
- Can the social aspect of belonging be redefined in the context of a global village?

In order to answer the foregoing questions, the first section of this chapter will be used to present various viewpoints on the concept “social community”, as well as to formalise an appropriate definition.

3.2 Social communities revisited

Human life plays out inside an intricate and delicate web of relations, without which no healthy human development is possible. Humans also need an environment that provides a model of mutual respect, support and empathy for their collective wellbeing. In addition, people need a social structure setting

limits to their behaviour, in accordance with co-operative social values. All this, in turn, plays out inside a physical environment or at a physical location.

At these locations, that is, in these neighbourhoods, towns and cities, there may be homes, schools and businesses, all forming communities within a greater community. It should, however, be noted that a mere location does not necessarily make a community. A location may be a shared environment in which individuals pursue private, profitable and unique objectives and goals, but a location can support a community through familiarity and stability.

Because humans need stability and familiarity, especially during their developmental phases, “location” requires humans to be in the same place for extended periods of time. Even though a natural affinity for community can be seen as the core aspect of life for most people, the greatest inhibitor of such a sense of community is the way in which it is organised.

According to Fernback (1995), the structural process that is associated with community is communication. Without basic communication, there can be no organising action. The words “community” and “communication” can best illustrate this relationship.

Both words stem from the same Latin root word *communis*, which means “common”. By the time it appeared in English, the word “common” had acquired a meaning that was in contradistinction to the meaning of “togetherness”: for example, “common lands” or “the commons” or even “commoners” were contrasted with “the lords” and “nobility” or their “holdings”. Eventually, the word “common” came to mean “ordinary” or “vulgar”. Somewhat in contrast with “common”, the word “community” has retained only favourable connotations and lacks an antithetical counterpart (Williams, 1983).

In this way, the term “community” can be defined as either of the following:

A community is a combination of place, content and people and the interactions and relationships between them (Tillman, 2000).

A community is a group of people with a shared interest, purpose or goal, who gets to know each other better over time (Kim, 2000: 28).

The above definitions of the term “community” correspond with that in the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, namely

A social group of any size, whose members reside in a specific locality, share government and often have a common cultural and historical heritage. Or, a group sharing common characteristics or interests and perceived or perceiving itself as distinct in some respect from the larger society within which it exists (Random House, 1987: 414).

The above definition of the concept “community” and/or “social group” will be used to lay the foundation of the following chapters.

3.2.1 Impact of technology on a traditional community

“Reach out and touch someone”; an advertisement encouraging the use of telecommunications as a medium for bringing communities together. Modern technology can be used to unite communities all over the world, but the impact thereof cannot always be guaranteed to be positive. According to Miller (1996: 10-11), technology could

- create communities out of disorganised neighbourhoods
- unite dispersed people through common interests and/or concerns
- break the isolation of the disabled, the elderly, the sick and the housebound
- bridge the chasm of distance and time
- ultimately help to turn the world into a global village.

On the negative end of the spectrum, however, technology could

- overwhelm local culture and/or ethnicity
- provide evermore enticing reasons for antisocial behaviour
- divide us into ever-smaller niche groups or cliques.

Now that the traditional community has been defined, as well as the impact that technology could have on it, the following section will be used to conceptualise and define the online community.

3.3 Online communities

According to Balasubramanian (2000), the origins of the virtual or online community can be traced back to the Electronic Information Exchange Systems (“EIESs”, for short) implemented in 1976. The EIESs focused on computerised conferencing, enabling people to exercise a collective-intelligence capability (Kitchin, 1998).

The EIESs were originally designed to co-ordinate and manage dispersed research communities, thereby foreshadowing related developments, including that of Participative Conferencing Systems, which systems involved embarking upon discussions on certain issues. These discussions could be accessed and searched at a later stage.

As indicated by the above, these early developments were mainly confined to the scientific and research communities. With the integration of modems (modulator/demodulators), however, the levels of participation within these discussion groups intensified.

One of the by-products of these discussion groups was the Bulletin Board System ("BBS", for short). As pointed out by Kitchin (1998), BBSs were important because they were the forerunners to general file-sharing and public-access services, and heralded a new era of greater public participation. It should also be noted that the Usenet is partly based on BBS-related technologies.

Usenet is a worldwide distributed discussion system. It consists of a set of "newsgroups" with names that are classified hierarchically according to subject. "Articles" or "messages" are "posted" to these newsgroups by people on computers with the appropriate software, whereupon these articles are broadcast to other interconnected computer systems via a wide variety of networks. Some newsgroups are "moderated": in these newsgroups, the articles are first sent to a moderator for approval before appearing in the newsgroup (Anon., 2003).

Although the technological advances led to larger and larger numbers of connected users, the intensity of user involvement was largely confined to the volume of communication. In a parallel developmental stage were the computer communities. The leading or core development within this parallel stage was Multi-User Dungeons/Domains ("MUDs", for short). "MUDs" can be defined as "networked, multiparticipant, user-extensible systems, which are commonly found on the Internet". The MUD user interface is textual; the user types all commands and all feedback is displayed as text on the computer monitor. In this way, a simple personal computer can act as a gateway to the Multi-User Domain virtual world.

The MUD software allows for connection of the users on a computer network, and provides each user with access to that specific database. Many hundreds of MUD programs are running on the Internet at present, each with its own unique database of descriptions of localities and objects. Within each of these systems, users can interact in a virtual environment (Reid, 1994).

It would, therefore, be safe to say that MUD has laid the foundation of online communities by affording its users an opportunity to create a virtual identity, as well as to interact and converse with other users.

3.3.1 Defining “online communities”

It should be noted here that, in the literature, the terms “virtual community” and “online community” are used interchangeably. Following, a number of definitions for these concepts:

A group of people (that comes) together on the World Wide Web to communicate, bond and/or perform particular functions. It can operate with or without a membership (Dillard, 2002: 29).

Groups of people (that) communicate with each other via electronic media (Romm, 1997: 261).

The vibrant new village of activity within the larger cultures of computing (Escobar, 2001: 64).

For the purposes of this research study, however, the collective term or definition for a virtual or an online community will be formulated as follows:

A group of people that comes together, forming a new online village, performing the social activities of a community via electronic means.

The following section will be devoted to a closer look at the salient features or characteristics of an online community.

3.3.2 Characteristics of online communities

According to Uzokwelu (2001), the concept of virtual communities is used basically to refer to an online environment in terms of which all kinds of people come together to perform any, some or all of the following activities:

- Exchange information and ideas
- Share common interests
- Entertain each other
- Seek different kinds of help
- Offer support to each other
- Trade goods and services
- Foster relationships.

Next, a closer look at the aspects characterising the activities listed above.

3.3.2.1 Online communities are user-based

Virtual or online communities provide the environment for users to connect and communicate with each other. In this way, communities are, by nature, self-organising (autopoietic); that is, they form spontaneously out of some population as individuals personally assume responsibilities of membership (Ogden, 1998). A community that has few users offers little value in terms of user satisfaction, as opposed to a community with many users. This is mainly owing to the fact that the community will not be attractive to content providers, advertisers or vendors.

3.3.2.2 Online communities are specific

The scopes of virtual communities are narrowed down to specific objectives and must be relevant to the members' distinctive interests. An accounting community would, for example, attract professionals in the accounting industry.

3.3.2.3 Online communities are organised

Participants will more actively engage in electronic collaboration if the interactions were structured in time, space, and scope (Notess, 2004). Online communities, therefore, have organisers/organising bodies who/that generally facilitate the maintenance and growth of the community. The organisers can be commercial, such as companies, banks, portals, and so forth. In addition, online communities have guiding principles that govern their membership and/or their organisers.

3.3.2.4 Online communities are integrated

Virtual communities allow for the integration of content with communication. With the technology available today, almost any content can be converted into an electronic format. This integration, in turn, provides useful information to the users.

3.3.2.5 Online communities are interactive

One of the best features of online communities is their interactivity. It is possible for members to communicate one to one, one to many and many to many. Both the information and the people participating are constantly in a state of flux. The space requires the ability to add, change or delete information or functionality in response to community changes (Notess, 2004).

The above online community characteristics tend to dictate the pursuit and performance of certain activities within the online community. In the next section, a closer look will be taken at some of these activities.

3.3.3 Online community activities

According to Agre (1998: 82), the life of every community hinges upon a particular institutional logic. The community members do not necessarily follow a rulebook, although they may. The point, rather, is that the commonalities of their lives, objectives and surroundings, together with their collective thinking about their situations and futures, tend to create similar patterns of activity. These include activities utilising particular kinds of media or methods.

Community-building tools or activities may include some of the following:

- E-mail
- Newsgroups
- Chat
- Message boards.

The next section will be devoted to a more detailed discussion on the above tools of community activity.

3.3.3.1 E-mail

The term “electronic mail” (“e-mail”, for short) can be defined as “the exchange of computer-stored messages by telecommunications” (Dreamscape).

For the purposes of this study, however, e-mail technology can be described as “one of the most simple and widely used means of computer communication”. Its core function remains the same as that of the traditional letter, except for the fact that it is routed and delivered electronically by computers and across networks in a matter of seconds. A concern of e-mail is the carrying and deployment of viruses (White, 2001). In the online community, an e-mail list (or listserv) can be seen as a tool that connects the community via e-mail messages.

There is one central address to which a member of the community sends messages for the entire group. The recipients of the mail have the choice to respond either to the sender individually or to the entire list of members within the community. E-mail lists can sometimes be moderated; in other words, a moderator has to approve each message or e-mail before it is sent out to the community e-mail list.

According to Boettcher (1999), the following can be viewed as some of the pros and cons associated with e-mail as a tool for community activity.

Advantages

- It is a “push technology”; in other words, you do not have to remember to go check it – it comes to your e-mail box.
- It is inexpensive for people with high access costs – messages can be composed and read offline.
- You can reach virtually anyone connected to the Internet.

Disadvantages

- Messages are sometimes delivered out of order.
- Archiving is not always used.
- If the messages on a list were archived, they could sometimes be difficult to retrieve.
- “Spammers” can be used to send messages to the list and to gather e-mail addresses for advertising purposes.
- Often, a talkative group can quickly produce a daunting number of messages.

This section identified the importance of e-mail in our modern-day information society. The next section will be used to identify newsgroups and concepts related to this technology.

3.3.3.2 Newsgroups

Newsgroups are to mailing lists what bulletin boards are to newsletters. Rather than clutter your mailbox with messages from mailing lists, you could opt to follow certain topics at your convenience. The messages are kept in files that can be read using a newsreader program. The names of newsgroups follow a specific protocol that serves to identify each newsgroup by name and category. The primary newsgroup categories are as follows (Whittle, 1997: 16):

- COMP (computers)
- TALK (conversation)
- MISC (miscellaneous)
- NEWS (news)
- REC (recreation)
- ALT (alternative topics)
- SCI (science)
- SOC (social).

The focus will now be shifted to identifying some advantages and disadvantages of newsgroups. It should be noted in this regard, however, that the pros and cons of newsgroups are fundamentally the same as those of e-mail, but for the following two aspects:

- Newsgroups technology does not resort under “push technology”.
- With newsreaders, one can download just the titles (“headers”) of messages and, in that way, avoid downloading them in their entirety.

Following, a number of advantages and disadvantages associated with newsgroups technology (University of British Columbia, 2003).

Advantages

- The user does not require a fast connection to the Internet.
- News articles no longer fill up the user’s e-mail inbox.
- Newsgroups can be searched by keyword.
- Most newsreaders are designed to thread-related articles. “Threading” means that the original article and its responses (“RE:”) are kept together, so that the user can follow the entire discussion.
- The user will read the most recent Usenet news, as any news servers automatically delete old articles, even if the user did not read them (one

week or less for most Usenet newsgroups; 30 days for UBC newsgroups).

- Should the newsgroup be moderated, only relevant content would be posted.

Disadvantages

- The user requires a newsgroup reader program, but many Web browsers and e-mail programs come bundled with newsreader software.
- “Spam”, an umbrella term for unsolicited junk mail, such as get-rich-quick schemes and other propaganda, is common in newsgroups.
- It can take up to a few days for newsgroup articles to be disseminated through an entire network.
- Not all newsgroups are available to everyone on the Internet, so the reader may not be able to reach his/her intended audience.
- The user controls access to a newsgroup. Anyone who enjoys access to a newsgroup, however, can read the articles and (unless it be a moderated newsgroup) respond to them or post his/her own articles.

Building on the concept of newsgroups, the following section will be devoted to an investigation into the online-chat phenomenon.

3.3.3.3 Chat

The term “chat” can be defined as “the simultaneous communication by people who are online at the same time and (who are) typing messages to each other” (White, 2001). Chat can be performed in one of the following situations:

- Public rooms (open to anyone).
- Private rooms (where only community members may enter).

Chat can be used in a many-to-many communication mode (in other words, there is a group of people in a room conversing at the same time), but it can also be used for one-to-one meetings and other work-orientated applications. It should, however, be noted that a chat facility should not be seen as merely a casual social tool.

According to Boettcher (1999), the following can be considered as some of the pros and cons associated with chat as a tool for community activity.

Advantages

- Perfectly suited to meetings requiring all the members’ consent.

- Allows for real-time discussions.
- Allows for a guest speaker to answer members' questions.
- Can log the transcript of a meeting to be posted later.

Disadvantages

- Difficult to schedule a chat session if users were scattered around the globe.
- On occasion, inexperienced chatters experience difficulty in keeping up.
- On the Web, access issues sometimes make it difficult to build a chat room that will accommodate everyone in terms of technology used.

Following, a discussion on the concept of message boards.

3.3.3.4 Message boards/Conferencing

The online version of a message board is much like a message board in an office or a university environment. Message boards have gained in popularity and form the most visible nucleus for online communities (White, 2001). Message-board communication can, furthermore, be seen as asynchronous (that is, message-board users do not have to be online at the same time). According to Boettcher (1999) and White (2001), there are two ways in which to organise messages in a message-board system, namely threaded and linear.

Threaded

In terms of a threaded message-board organising system, messages are arranged into “threads” or topics. A message will, therefore, be attached to the message to which it is replying, irrespective of whether it appears in chronological order. Often, one will see only one message per HTML page.

Following, some of the advantages and disadvantages associated with a threaded message-board system (White, 2001; Boettcher, 1999).

Advantages of threaded boards

- Ideal for gathering technical information in instances where people need to be able quickly to find answers to a particular question.
- Keeps topics neatly organised.

Disadvantages of threaded boards

- Threaded boards are oft-times more organised than people, making it difficult to carry on a threaded-board conversation, as real conversations often “drift”.

- Less suited to social communities.
- Often, a new HTML page must be loaded in order to see the next message.

Linear

With a linear message-board system, each posting on a given topic arrives in chronological order, resulting in a more realistic conversation. Often with a linear system, the user can read more than one post per HTML page, which speeds things up when reading. Linear message-board systems are sometimes referred to as “conferencing”.

Following, some of the pros and cons associated with a threaded system (White, 2001; Boettcher, 1999).

Advantages of linear boards

- Perfectly suited to social conversation and in-depth discussions on important issues.
- Allows for entering and fostering of long-standing relations and provides a rich contextual environment for sharing ideas.
- More conducive to displaying conversations the way people actually talk.
- Can display a number of messages on one HTML page.

Disadvantages of linear boards

- Difficult to come to some kind of resolution or agreement.
- Hard to find specific information again if required at a later stage.

The above section was used to identify the tools utilised by online communities in their functioning. Building on these tools, a more detailed analysis of the benefits of an online community will be undertaken next.

3.4 Benefits of an online community

According to Dotson (2001), the following benefits can be derived from an online community:

- Users will visit a website to participate on a discussion board or in a chat room. In this way, they will get to meet other users with the same interests.
- The hosts of a community will be able to communicate with their visitors. The benefit to be derived from this is that users would invariably buy products more readily, should they be familiar with and trust in the hosts.

- Information gleaned from the tools used by the community members may help with the marketing and promotion of products and services.
- If the discussion board or chat room were to become popular, advertising space could be sold on them.
- The host community can network with other communities by having a chat room or discussion board, thus exchanging business ideas, leads and advertising.

It should be pointed out that the benefits to be derived from an online community are practically limitless, and that this section was used merely to touch upon some of these benefits. In the next section, the focus will fall on the driving forces behind such online communities.

3.5 Driving forces behind the online community

According to Schubert and Ginsburg (2000), the following can be considered some of the driving forces that make an online community come together.

3.5.1 Content attractiveness

The key objective from the outset is to assemble content resources that are useful to the members. Content can be gathered from other sources and, in most advanced communities, can be enriched by member participation.

3.5.2 Member loyalty

Communities succeed to the degree to which their members affiliate with them and the communities, in their turn, affiliate with their members.

3.5.3 Member profiles

The more knowledge that is gathered about community members, the better their needs can be met – for content, answers, help and products and services aimed at satisfying their needs and/or addressing their concerns. If done properly, members would not find this information-gathering process intrusive.

3.5.4 Transaction offerings

Transactions – the real commercial value of virtual communities – will emerge only once these communities have aggregated a critical mass of members and developed rich transactional capabilities. The more transactions the members

accumulate, the more buying power they will have with vendors, and the better the pricing offered to them. The latter process describes a dynamic loop, which rapidly expands commensurate with increased member sales.

The foregoing section was used to look at the basic concept of and definition for “online community”. This was followed by a discussion on the background, salient features, benefits and drivers of such communities. Next, a description and analysis of the concept “global village”.

3.6 The global village

As has been pointed out so often already, planet earth has effectively been reduced to a mere village (albeit a global one), operating in cyberspace (Chien, 2000: 36).

The phrase “global village” has been coined by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s in a bid to describe the way in which instantaneous communication made possible by electronic technologies could unite the world on a global scale (Federman, 2002). Riley (2004), however, points out that the phrase has undergone an expansion of meaning since, so that “global village” now refers to “a society that harnesses technology holistically to the benefit of a larger global community”. For the purposes of this study, however, the phrase will be defined as “all the technological advancements within the global community that ensure communication and collaboration benefiting the global community”. In order fully to grasp the key concept of “global village”, however, an analysis of the term “cyberspace” is also required.

The term “cyberspace” can loosely be defined as “the convergence of computers with digital telecommunications and media technologies” (Graham, 2000: 9), thereby creating a new stage of development in modern-day culture and business. As was discussed in section 3.3 of this chapter, people from around the world seem to unite on the basis of shared interests, rather than on the basis of their desire to form groups according to their social standing, skin colour or status. What is more is that, in cyberspace, the physical location of such groups in the real world is quite irrelevant.

According to Whittle (1996), the following pros and cons pertain to a global village.

Advantages

- **Loosening constraints**

Becoming a member of the global village could help individuals to overcome the basic constraints of their physical location. In the past, certain barriers were associated with a fixed location in the physical world, which oft-times greatly impeded the individual's road to empowerment and development, namely time, space, class, age and gender.

- **Improving the social dimension**

The global village could facilitate the realisation of social objectives, such as cultural awareness, intellectual expansion and religious experience.

Disadvantages

- **Domination.** According to Whittle (1996: 247), an ardent desire to control cyberspace, whether by an individual, a group or a government, poses one of the greatest threats to its culture of co-operation and its ability to contribute to social cohesion and civic virtue.
- **Escape from, or at best a diminished sense of, social accountability.** The anonymity provided by the global-village environment could encourage social irresponsibility, especially as far as infringements on or violations of privacy are concerned.
- **The cultivation of new vices.** Given the almost total lack of the normal social checks and balances in the cyberspace environment, it is not uncommon for some users to start behaving in an immoral and even amoral fashion, as is evident in the ever-expanding pornography and gambling industries (to name but two).

As becomes evident from the above, the global village, like any other community, has its up- and downsides. We are, however, not so familiar with cyberspace yet as to accept all of its latent flaws and its inherent "dark side".

3.7 Summary

This chapter was devoted to a discussion on the concept of the Internet society. In so doing, specific aspects pertaining to the social development of society at large and to the convergence of society to an online community came under discussion, culminating in a closer look at the emergence of a global village of participating online individuals. The principal aim of this chapter was to introduce the reader to the idea of a social structure on the

Internet. This was deemed necessary in order to ensure that the reader would understand the social interactions between individuals in a virtual environment. Next, chapter 4, entitled “Peer-to-Peer (P2P) computing”, will be used to build on this social interaction in the global village and online environments.

