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Virtual communities are communities that exist online. Even before the Internet became widely available, various computer networks provided groups with the means of communicating and interacting through computers. As the Internet has grown, such online forums have flourished and are available to greater numbers of people. As more and more people connect with one another online, research continues into this relatively new form of community to determine what these virtual communities mean to participants now and what they might mean in the future.

Some groups that initially form online evolve to include considerable offline contact. Others interact entirely or almost entirely online. In addition, some virtual communities are extensions of offline communities. Many virtual communities have formed when people connecting to online forums for other purposes (such as information exchange or game playing) begin talking to one another and forming relationships. Over time, such groups often come to consider themselves a community, with relationships that extend beyond the original purpose of the forum. Although researchers do not completely agree on the definition of a virtual community or on how to determine whether an online group constitutes a virtual community, the term has been applied to all these different types of groups.

The Internet currently provides various means of contact for interacting groups, from asynchronous forums such as e-mail listservs to the more synchronous communication provided by various chat forums. Until recently, typed text was the primary means of communication for virtual communities, and it remains the most common form of communication. However, recent advances in computer software and hardware, modem speed, and Internet capabilities have enabled many groups to include graphics, pictures, and sound in their communications.

Early Internet History

The Internet grew out of a 1969 joint project between the U.S. Department of Defense and the academic community called Arpanet (Advanced Research Projects Agency Network), which was originally intended to connect researchers to remote computers, to enable collaboration among researchers, and to develop a robust network of interconnected computers that the government hoped would facilitate communication in the event of a military (especially nuclear) attack. Casual communication between individuals or among groups was not a primary goal for the designers, but from early on people began using the computer network to facilitate interpersonal communication and to connect with others who shared similar interests. By 1973, person-to-person e-mail had become the largest use of the Internet, and it remains one of the largest today.

Some of the earliest virtual communities formed on a computer bulletin board service called Usenet. Usenet developed separately from Arpanet but was connected to it early on. Usenet allows people to post messages

to topically divided newsgroups that can be read by all subscribers to those newsgroups. It quickly became one of the most widely used services on the Internet, with tens of thousands of different newsgroups, each transmitting anywhere from just a few to hundreds of messages per week. By making it possible for people to read and respond to one another's messages, Usenet stimulated the growth of several virtual communities tied to particular newsgroups. Not all newsgroups develop communities. Some serve merely as centers for informational posts, or as archives of jokes or pornography. However, many newsgroups bring together groups of people with common interests and similar lifestyles that may come to communicate through the newsgroup on subjects that go beyond the newsgroup's original theme.

One such virtual community, which communications researcher Nancy Baym (2000) has researched and written about extensively, formed around the newsgroup called <http://rec.arts.tv.soaps> ("r.a.t.s."), which provided a forum for the discussion of television soap operas. Baym describes how discussions among the r.a.t.s. users often strayed from the limited topic of television shows to more personal information about users' lives. Group members developed a strong attachment to the group, and some also made contact individually, developing online and offline friendships.

E-mail listservs have also provided forums through which virtual communities have developed. As with online bulletin board services, with listservs individuals send out messages that other members of the listserv will read and respond to, but these messages arrive in the form of e-mail. Most listserv groups are smaller than the largest of the Usenet newsgroups, and the use of e-mail allows for the imposition of a variety of controls and a degree of privacy. The primary difference between newsgroups on Usenet and listserv groups is that only those who are subscribed to a listserv can view the messages of other subscribers (unless the group chooses to archive them on the World Wide Web, as many do), whereas Usenet messages are easily available to millions of Internet users.

Like Usenet newsgroups, listservs are usually topically organized, and thus they foster communities organized around a common interest or status. For instance, there are listservs for various academic fields, for people suffering from particular chronic illnesses, for hobbyists, and for members of particular groups.

Famous Virtual Communities

Virtual communities can form in a number of different ways. They may originate as online communities and then expand into the offline world, or they may start offline and then go online. Although the following two examples are from the United States, virtual communities have originated in many countries and exist throughout cyberspace.

The WELL

One especially vibrant and well-known virtual community originally developed on a computer system that was not connected to the Internet, but was available to users through a local dial-up service. The WELL, made famous in part by the writings of Howard Rheingold, especially his influential book *Virtual Community* (1993), began in 1985 in the San Francisco Bay Area. Like Usenet, the WELL enabled people to post messages in various topical discussion groups. In its early years, the WELL attracted users primarily from groups interested in countercultural movements, personal computers, and the rock band the Grateful Dead. The WELL also gave several free accounts to journalists and other writers, generating a significant amount of publicity and thereby attracting more users.

The WELL became renowned for erudite conversation and vigorous debate. Many group members developed close relationships with one another. Initially, many of the WELL's members were in the Bay Area, and were therefore easily able to meet offline. They began organizing regular group get-togethers where people could meet face-to-face. As would turn out to be the case in many other virtual communities, WELL members (or WELLbeings, as they called themselves) who formed intimate long-term relationships online often wished to meet offline as well.

Articles about the WELL written by WELLbeings pointed out the strong bonds formed between members of the group. Because of their geographic proximity to one another, members were able to provide not just emotional support but also the kinds of support common in traditional communities, such as bringing food to people dealing with illness, or helping one another out with transportation. In virtual communities whose members are far-flung, these traditional types of community support are often not possible.

The WELL has changed significantly over the years, but it is still accessible online and is thus one of the oldest continuing virtual communities. In the beginning, it employed a difficult-to-use interface, which deterred many potential participants from joining and contributed to the preponderance of experienced computer users among members. Today, by contrast, the WELL (currently owned by <http://Salon.com>), is available on the World Wide Web. It is easier to find, use, and navigate than it once was. Several similar virtual communities have also spun off from the WELL, founded by previous WELLbeings. These include the River, a member-owned virtual community, and Electric Minds, founded by WELL participant and author Howard Rheingold.

LambdaMOO

Another famous early virtual community developed through an entirely different kind of online communication

system. LambdaMOO, developed by Pavel Curtis at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), is a type of interactive online forum known as a MOO. MOOs are a variant of a type of computer program known as a MUD (an acronym for multi-user domain or multiuser dungeon; MOO stands for object-oriented MUD). MUDs are computer programs that enable many people to log on simultaneously from remote locations and communicate with one another through typed text. MUDs and MOOs also allow users to create online rooms and objects, described in text, with which users can interact and which create the sense of being in a virtual place. LambdaMOO's main hangout room, for instance, is described as a living room and is based on the living room of the house in which Curtis lived when LambdaMOO was founded.

MOOs provide a more synchronous form of communication than bulletin board systems or e-mail. That is, users are connected simultaneously and communicate in a conversational style, much as they would do in face-to-face situations. MUDs began as online interactive games (hence the *dungeon* in one expansion of the acronym, from the popular role-playing game Dungeons and Dragons). As they developed and as the programs became more flexible, people began finding other uses for MUDs, including as chat rooms, virtual meeting spaces, online classrooms, and so on.

LambdaMOO opened in 1991. It became particularly well known for several well-publicized group conflicts and for its attempts at democratic self-governance. Originally, like many MUDs, LambdaMOO was run by several "wizards," who maintained the program, made decisions about what would be built within the virtual environment, and moderated user conflicts. As LambdaMOO grew, this became impractical, so Curtis and the other wizards turned over administration of the MOO to the users themselves. Shortly thereafter, a now-famous online conflict occurred in which one user harassed and abused several others, taking control of their characters (their representations online, which are usually protected by unique passwords) and causing the characters to perform violent sexual acts (described through text that is visible to all users who were present at the time). Many of the participants described the event as being like a virtual rape.

After this disturbing incident, LambdaMOO participants developed several mechanisms for agreeing on procedures and arbitrating conflicts, including a voting system, a review board for building projects, and a mediation system for dealing with interpersonal conflicts. Many participants felt that the virtual rape incident served to bring participants together. In addition, the discussions and decisions following the incident fostered a sense of community among participants. Like the members of the WELL, LambdaMOO participants have sought to meet each other face-to-face. Gatherings often occur in major cities where there are large numbers of users.

As LambdaMOO has become widely known (it has been written up in a number of magazine articles and books), participants have had to deal with frequent waves of newcomers. One way they do so is to make new

users aware of LambdaMOO's history, cultural norms, and behavioral expectations. This is done through a variety of documents available on LambdaMOO itself. One is the opening message displayed when a user logs on, which contains a warning that journalists and researchers should obtain permission from participants before studying or quoting them. LambdaMOO also has a document called "help manners" that instructs users in expected behaviors and the potential consequences of violating group standards of behavior (such as, in extreme cases, having one's participation privileges permanently revoked). Through these documents, LambdaMOO preserves its history and culture as a community.

LambdaMOO is no longer at XeroxPARC, but it is still online. Curtis, meanwhile, went on to found PlaceWare(R), a company that provides online conferencing software for businesses.

What is the WELL?

The WELL is an online gathering place like no other—remarkably uninhibited, intelligent, and iconoclastic. For more than seventeen years, it's been a literate watering hole for thinkers from all walks of life, be they artists, journalists, programmers, educators or activists. These WELL members return to The WELL, often daily, to engage in discussion, swap information, express their convictions and greet their friends in online forums known as WELL Conferences.

The WELL is distinguished by its non-anonymous participants, and by uncommon policies. The service does not sell subscriber data to marketers, nor place ads within passworded areas. This unique gathering place is both greatly valued and directly supported by WELL subscribers.

Where is the WELL?

The WELL is a cluster of electronic villages on the Net, inhabited by people from from all over the world.

Familiarity with one another and a high degree of expressive freedom has resulted in sometimes startling contrasts in atmosphere from Conference to Conference. Each has a distinctly different sense of place and style, and loyal participants. The Books Conference might be a particularly cool coffee house, the Generation X Conference something between a trendy club and a pie fight, and the Legal

Conference an informed but contentious seminar.

The WELL's conversations take place on keyboards around the world, but the servers and staff have always been in northern California. The first WELL computer and modem rack were located in Sausalito. The WELL's office is now in San Francisco but the real action is online, and a few keystrokes away for WELLfolk all over.

Where is The WELL? There's no simple answer to that question, but as Gertrude Stein might have said, "There's a *there* there."

The WELL. <http://www.well.com>

Freenets and Community Networks

In contrast to communities that form initially online, some virtual communities originate in existing offline communities. Government and nonprofit organizations have sought to provide online access to citizens, especially the economically disadvantaged, who may not have Internet access in the home. In the United States, freenets and community networks have sought to foster democracy and increase civic participation within particular municipalities. Many freenets have been oriented in particular toward greater access for the poor and toward democratic social change.

The first such freenet was the Cleveland Freenet, begun in 1984 by Tom Grunder, a doctor. The initial goals of the project were modest. It began at the School of Medicine at Case Western Reserve University as a forum through which patients could contact doctors and obtain answers to medical questions. In 1986, it was expanded to become a more general public network. Like later freenets, for which it became the model, the Cleveland Freenet provided free e-mail accounts, access to community information, and, eventually, access to the Internet. The Cleveland Freenet was shut down in 1999, when Case Western Reserve University decided not to pay for significant and necessary software upgrades.

The first community network started by a government agency was the Public Electronic Network (PEN), in Santa Monica, California, which started in 1989. Like the Cleveland Freenet, PEN began with the modest goal of providing information, particularly in the form of access to government documents. However, community members soon used it more to talk to one another than to talk to city hall. PEN was more successful than many similar projects in connecting people with a variety of different backgrounds and in giving people with few economic resources access to the online world. Among other things, it fostered a homeless activist group,

which used PEN to organize and lobby for better city services for the homeless. PEN still exists and is now accessible via the World Wide Web.

PEN was plagued by increasing numbers of hostile messages from anonymous users, highlighting a significant source of tension in virtual communities: anonymity. Anonymity is much more possible in communities in which all or most communication occurs at a distance through text. It can provide for freer discourse, particularly in cases where people hold widely different amounts of power and status, as when people wish to criticize government officials or ask very personal medical questions of doctors. However, anonymity can also protect and enable abusive users. Successful virtual communities have demonstrated that consistent identity (through which people acquire online reputations and knowledge about each other) and accountability are important in the development of ongoing ties.

A Wired Community: The Blacksburg Electronic Village

As the Internet has become a more important feature of everyday life, some communities have sought to go further than freenets or older forms of community networks, not only providing free access but also improving the network infrastructure within the community. The goals of such wired communities are to bring Internet access into the homes of all community members and, in some cases, to facilitate training in information technology and the growth of computer-related industries within the community. One of the first such projects was the Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) in Blacksburg, Virginia.

The Blacksburg Electronic Village was conceived in 1991 by researchers at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), located in Blacksburg. The original idea was to expand the campus network to provide home access for faculty, students, and staff living in town. Enthusiastic about the Internet's potential to increase civic participation and improve the local economy, the researchers enlisted the assistance of the local telephone company and the town government and began installing the necessary equipment throughout the town, as well as developing a software package for community use. In addition, the BEV instituted a series of Web pages devoted to community information and online discussion groups.

Blacksburg has a population of about 36,000, and currently approximately 90 percent of its citizens are connected. The project continues to attempt to connect people in the surrounding rural area, where connection rates to the Internet are somewhat lower and participation in the BEV is quite low. The BEV appears to have been successful in increasing high-tech development and job opportunities within the town. However, as a virtual community it has been less successful. Based on research conducted by faculty at Virginia Tech, the BEV does not appear to have increased civic participation. Individual participants perceive benefits in being connected to the Internet through the BEV, and several Internet-related businesses have developed in the

town, but the BEV does not seem to have significantly strengthened participants' feelings of community.

Virtual Work Communities

Virtual communities have also formed on a smaller scale to connect people with work-related interests. Many e-mail listservs, for instance, connect academic researchers with similar interests, enabling them to share information and resources. Often these listservs augment existing offline organizations, and listserv participants may meet at annual conferences and meetings.

MUDs and MOOs have also been employed as virtual meeting spaces. One of the first such spaces was MediaMOO, founded in 1992 by Amy Bruckman, then a graduate student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MediaMOO served as a virtual meeting space for students, faculty, and others interested in media research. It was very active through the mid-1990s, hosting numerous small-group meetings, virtual conferences, and lectures. MediaMOO also fostered several groups who went on to found other virtual research and learning environments, such as the Netoric Project and CollegeTown. In part because of the loss of the participants involved in those projects, and in part because of Bruckman's decreased participation (among other factors), MediaMOO ceased functioning as a virtual community in the late 1990s. Currently, researchers at the Georgia Institute of Technology are attempting to revive it.

MediaMOO's early success inspired other groups of academics. BioMOO, founded in 1993 by two biologists at the Weizmann Institute in Israel, offered a meeting space where biologists from all over the world could share information and work on collaborative and educational projects without the expense of travel. The ability to import documents into the MOO environment allowed participants to work together on articles, or to read and discuss recent work. BioMOO generated considerable excitement in its early years, but participation tapered off in the late 1990s. After several years of lack of use, BioMOO was officially shut down in 2001.

One of MediaMOO's spinoffs, the Netoric Project, still serves as a meeting space for writing teachers and others interested in computer-assisted writing instruction. In the early 1990s, people interested in these topics had been communicating online but still felt isolated from one another. Holding regular meetings on MediaMOO gave participants specific times when they knew they could meet up with others and fostered a sense of community. In 1994, the group moved to Connections, a MOO run by Tari Fanderclai, one of the group's founders. In addition to hosting meetings for writing teachers, Connections also recently hosted an online conference and offers virtual classroom space in which classes can hold discussions.

Success and Failure of Virtual Communities

Although some of the earliest virtual communities, such as the WELL and LambdaMOO, are still thriving, others, such as BioMOO and MediaMOO, last for only a few years or less. Several factors can contribute to the demise of a virtual community. For a virtual community to succeed, its members must spend time online. Text-based communication can take more time than offline communication. Participants must be willing to set aside the time necessary for online communication, which often means giving up other activities. The ability of virtual communities to connect people who cannot practically meet face-to-face provides the motivation in some cases for people to make the time to participate.

Another key factor in the continuance of virtual communities is the ownership and maintenance of the virtual space and of the necessary equipment. The continuance of virtual communities can be jeopardized by changes in ownership (as happened to the WELL and LambdaMOO) or by changes in online management (as happened to LambdaMOO and MediaMOO). Virtual communities cost money to maintain but often do not generate significant revenue for equipment owners. In addition, online maintenance chores (including updating software, managing database backups, and moderating participant conflicts) take a significant amount of time; volunteer managers sometimes burn out or move on to other projects, while paid managers may move on to other jobs. Some virtual communities have weathered such transitions, but often with significant loss of longtime participants. Others, such as BioMOO and Medi-aMOO, have died.

Virtual communities also have to contend with changes in technology. The WELL has survived in part by significantly changing its interface and method of access. LambdaMOO, on the other hand, while it has improved and upgraded equipment and software, continues to survive using a type of software many consider outdated, now that graphics-enhanced chat programs are available through the World Wide Web.

Issues, Problems, and Possibilities

Increasing numbers of people from around the world are accessing the Internet, changing its demographics daily. In the United States, although members of ethnic and racial minorities are still not online in as high percentages as their white counterparts, their participation has increased in recent years. Currently, for the first time since the Internet began, approximately fifty percent of Internet users are women. However, in terms of experience and breadth of participation, the Internet is still in some sense male dominated. Many of the virtual communities discussed above have had more male than female participants, and almost all were (and are) predominantly white and middle class.

These demographic issues and the homogeneity of many virtual communities invite the criticism that such

groups might better be termed lifestyle enclaves than communities. Lifestyle enclaves constitute mostly homogeneous groups of people who come together around a shared interest or for the purpose of particular group activities. Relationships in such groups are generally one dimensional, meeting only limited needs of the individuals involved.

However, given the difficulty involved in defining community, many researchers have left aside the question of whether online groups really qualify as communities. Certainly, it is clear that people form both close and distant relationships online, that they provide many forms of support to one another, and that many groups online come to think of themselves as communities, even if outsiders do not consider them to be communities. Of more continuing interest to researchers has been the question of how these online communities affect people's offline lives and whether they affect participation in offline communities. While some early research suggested that Internet use increases depression and decreases people's offline ties, more recent findings have suggested that to the extent those effects hold true at all, they are primarily problems for new users; as people gain experience online, such negative effects disappear. Further, people who are very socially active online appear to be very socially active offline as well.

Virtual communities are still a fairly new phenomenon. Changes in both technology and society are likely to produce new types of connections and new forms of virtual community. Sociologist Barry Wellman (2001) has suggested that we are headed further away from traditional communities and toward what he terms "networked individualism," in which people are members of far-flung and sparsely knit networks rather than densely knit and local community groups. With networked individualism, autonomous individuals are at the center of overlapping networks that offer them membership in various different communities, enabling them to connect with people across group boundaries. While computer networks and the Internet did not start this shift in social life, they continue to play an important part.

- virtual community
- virtual communities

LoriKendall

See also

[Cybersocieties](#)

[Glocalization](#)

[Online Communities, Game-Playing](#)

[Virtual Communities, Building](#)

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