The Technological Expansion of Sociability: Virtual Communities as Imagined Communities

Camelia Grădinaru, PhD, Senior Researcher
Department of Interdisciplinary Research, Social Sciences and Humanities
"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, Romania

Abstract

The reception of Benedict Anderson's ideas was very fruitful in many disciplines, and his work provided key concepts that can now throw a clarifying light in some blurry matters. The expression "imagined community" has known a remarkable proliferation, a situation that led to both the formation of a research direction and to the perpetuation of a cliché. In this respect, my article pointed out some suggestive characteristics of virtual communities, explaining why the imagined community is a valuable subject for the theorists of new media.

The impossibility to know in person all the members of a big community is just one factor that determines its imagined face. Moreover, the set of values and inner presuppositions that guide the members are important bricks in the construction of community. In my opinion, the virtual community is imagined as a multi-layered experience (technological, conversational, relational etc.). The dynamic of a virtual community contains the tension amongst these layers and the degree of its imagined side depends on multiple factors. In order to illustrate these aspects, I gave a brief example by analysing a Romanian virtual community, using the triad common language – temporality – high centers.

In spite of its limitations, the perspectives offered by this concept are still useful for understanding the nature of online communities. Thus, the imagined community is a valuable set of beliefs and practices that underlie and bolster the effective meaning and functioning of the virtual communities.

Keywords: virtual community; imagined community; online communication; cyberspace; online sociability

Introduction

The pervasiveness of new media in almost every sector of our life is already a common place for both the researchers of this field and the ordinary people. Individuals use new ways to communicate, buy, learn, play, govern, or do business. The public sphere is not the only area where things have changed as a result of the tools brought about by new media. The private sphere has also been shaped by different experiences created by the Internet and mobile communication (Bakardjieva 2005; Ishii 2006). Even the household, as the centre of the private world, has known significant transformations (Haythornthwaite,

and Wellman 2002). Thus, the new technologies of information and communication are embedded in our everyday practices and routines, altering the perspectives about space and time, and providing, in McLuhan's terms, new extensions of our senses (McLuhan 1994). Even if there were people who do not use the new media platforms and facilities, and in this respect we still acknowledge the existence of a "digital divide", we also have to notice the shifts that new media produced in the lives of people that make use of them. The digital inequality is not only a technologic matter, but also a complex political and social issue.

The social impact of new media was evident even in the early stages of the computer-mediated communication. Since then, the Internet has been characterized mainly as a social tool and not just a technological one. In new media literature, the change of paradigm from the definitional characteristics to the praxeological perspective proves fruitful for the detection of the most suggestive influence of new media in very diverse sectors of human life. In this context, the analysis of the social aggregations constructed online was an important step in the research of what new media do in society.

The virtual communities represented (and still do) one of the favourites subjects widely discussed. Their relevance is easy to be grasped: their presence disturbed the traditional understanding of community, challenging the mainstream mechanisms of sociability, and also the domesticated norms and rules of the community commitment. The social contract was questioned by these forms of community created through new media settings, evoking what Howard Rheingold thought about their power: „whenever CMC [computer-mediated communication] technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies" (2000, xx). The power to bond people from everywhere, in spite of distances or of the fact that they never met before in face-to-face conditions, is one of the most important new media traits.

In this vein, my paper focuses on the imagined part of online communities, given the fact that they may be very large, heterogeneous, fluid, so that the members may be totally strangers outside of the online "borders". At the core of the development of this analysis stands Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* His view influenced many theorists, so the expression "imagined communities" became facilely used in order to describe virtual communities. Thus, I will delineate the profile of this online imaginary and also I will briefly discuss some of its weaknesses. In spite of its limitations, the perspectives offered by this concept are still useful for understanding the intricate dynamic and nature of online communities. In my opinion, the imagined community is a valuable set of beliefs and practices that underlie and bolster the effective meaning and functioning of the virtual communities. The imaginary supports the existence of a virtual community, giving it shape and organization.

Virtual Sociability: A Glimpse into an Endless Concept

Online forms of sociality revitalized an old sociological discussion about the utility of the term "community", since – as Hillary (1995) emphasized, identifying over 90 meanings – this concept is multi-semantic, volatile and descriptive. Even if the virtual community already complicated the classic descriptions of organic communities (see, for instance, Nisbet's theories or Tönnies's prerequisites), the effervescence of USENET newsgroups, Multi-User Dungeons and MUDs Object-Oriented and of the other forms of virtual communities pointed out the actuality of this subject.

The help, support, advice, expertise, time or money provided by the members of an online community proved that the community is still alive in cyberspace. Rheingold describes the online interactions inside WELL as a „gift economy in which people do things for one another out of a spirit of building something between them, rather than a spreadsheet-calculated quid pro quo" (2000, 49). Peter Kollock used Rheingold's ideas and analysed the digital gift in "The economies of online cooperation: gifts and public goods in cyberspace" (1999). The well cohered arguments and delineations (digital good versus public good or the list of motivations for contributing) showed "the striking amount of cooperation that exists in online communities. This is not to say that online cooperation is inevitable or expanding. Nor is it to say that online cooperation and collective action is always a benefit to the larger society. However, the changing economies of online interaction have shifted the costs of providing public goods – sometimes radically – and thus changed the kinds of groups, communities, and institutions that are viable in this new social landscape" (Kollock 1999, 236). The binary individualism – cooperation is only one example of the polarized discourse that virtual community provoked. The easiness to enter or to leave an online group, the paradox of obtaining altruist outputs on weak ties, the phenomenon of online knowledge transfer are just a few instances of the complexity of this concept.

Thus, the virtual community is a protean concept and, in this vein, the question was if it should be theorized as a type of *communitas* (Matei 2011). Because the latter term incorporates a set of contradictory traits (close and distant, temporary and permanent), it may be conceived as a "master term for exploring the ethos of interaction in online environments. […] Communitas is a term that suggests an altogether new and contradictory type of sociability, which implies a will to be together, but also the desire to individualize and distance oneself from others" (Matei 2011, 4). In this respect, *communitas* is a "cultural pattern", coordinated by a set of values. The social glue created by the online interpersonal relationships and conversational exchanges transform the individuals in very different ways. The members develop social bonds, shared spaces and values, and also conjoint discursive practices (specific expressions, jokes or rituals). The meaning of membership is a key element for the long life of community, but this does not exclude the fact that people try to become noticeable and praiseworthy. The social capital of the Internet (Wellman et al. 2001) is increasingly important not only for the online cohesion, but also for the mobilization of networks

in order to solve offline vital issues (political, humanitarian, or social). The online protests are a good illustration of the relevance of the online social capital.

The Imagined "Aura" of the Virtual Communities

The seminal work wrote by Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, first published in 1983, has a positive reception in many disciplines, including new media studies. For Anderson, the nation is an imagined political form, because "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion. [...] In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined" (1991, 6). The impossibility to know in person all the members of a big community is just one factor that determines its imagined face. Moreover, the set of values and inner presuppositions that guide the members are important bricks in the construction of community. Even the general pillars that sustain the society at a given moment have a certain shape within this imaginary (for instance, Anderson pointed out that print capitalism represents a key element of nationalism).

The word "imagined" triggered a lot of interpretations about identity and collectivity. For instance, Phillips (2002, 600) evoked the development of its application from national forms to affinities with Thompson's "ideological community", Durkheim's "collective representations" or Foucault's "discursive ensemble". Norton (2001) examined the correlation among imagined community, language learning and non-participation. Phillips (2002) tried to fill the gap in the quantitative research on self-attachment to imagined communities and also in the analysis of the latter as a valuable source of self-identity.

As a remark meant to emphasize the relevance of the subject for new media, we mention the career made by the expression "technological imaginary" (Flichy 2003) and also the importance of the "imagined audience" (LaRose, Kim, and Wei, 2011; Marwick and boyd 2011). The technological imaginary relates to all the changes that people believe a new medium can produce in social, interpersonal, political, educational, or cultural areas. For Flichy, the technological imaginary has to be conceived as a frame of reference for the actors involved and not as an initial matrix of a new technology.

The concept of *imagined audience* is not an original concept of the new media. The invisible nature of public is also characteristic for different kinds of old media public: "Every participant in a communicative act has an imagined audience. Audiences are not discrete; when we talk, we think we are speaking only to the people in front of us or on the other end of the telephone, but this is in many ways a fantasy" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 115). As personal media, new media deal with complex, indeterminate, and heterogeneous audiences. The context collapse and the ongoing tension between public and private meet the double standards of the user – content producer and spectator. In brief, "the networked audience contains many different social relationships

to be navigated, so users acknowledge concurrent multiple audiences. Just as writers fictionalize the audience within the text in their audience addressed, Twitter users speak directly to their imagined audience" (Marwick and boyd 2011, 130). As Fox affirmed, the members cannot read the minds of others, so they have to make inferences from communication and action (2004, 53). Thus, we observed the productivity of the word "imagined" in the virtual context.

The traits of virtual community made almost obviously the presence of a certain imaginary at work. The anonymous users that build a meaningful and useful new solidarity have to act for a more comprehensive reason than the "consensual hallucination" (Gibson 1984) done by new media. Because of its polysemy, the symbolic constructivist approach has been assumed as a good way of explaining the modalities in which a virtual community functions. The latter can be seen as a cognitive, affective and symbolic construct (Hill Collins 2010; Gradinaru 2011) that is elastic and changing. The opposition between virtual communities and "real" communities and between online and offline communities (Castells 2001, Fernback 2007) has as a powerful root the imaginary component of community. Thus, the limited durability of membership, the lack of temporal and spatial constraints, the limited possibilities to punish someone for deviant behaviour, the possibility to use the anonymity are several arguments for those who assert the absence of authenticity and accountability in online social aggregations. The invisible mechanism that puts things in motion into virtual setting is closely related with its imagined area. Instead of investigating the authenticity or the reality of virtual communities, more useful is to look, as Anderson affirmed, to "the style in which they are imagined" (1991: 6). Even if online communities seem to be artificially constructed in comparison with the traditional communities, the common identity shared by members is enough to assure their functionality. As Nancy Baym considered, one fruitful way through which we can understand the imagination of virtual communities is the "close examination of one of the most primal forces that ties people together – interpersonal interactions. It is in the details of their talk that people develop and maintain the rituals, traditions, norms, values, and senses of group and individual identity that allow them to consider themselves communities" (Baym 2000, 218). The interpersonal relationships and the conversation are essential anchors of community. By formatting a tissue of discussions, different kinds of ties (weak, strong or latent ties) are built and become "real" and effective.

The image that every member has on her or his online community – about their scope, way of existing, norms of communication, special netiquette, essential topics, the particular jargon or the specific modalities of joking – is central in the orientation of the conversations. As Benedict Anderson theorized, every community is caught between concrete social relationships and activities and imagined sets of individuals conceived as similar. In this vein, the virtual community is 'the new imagined community" (Fox 2004), the "metaimagined community, a reflexive (re)interpretation of 19th century nationalism" (Brabazon 2001, 2). Anyhow, the relation between imaginary and virtual communities is almost natural: "the context of CMC […] necessarily emphasizes the act of imagination that is required to summon the image of communion with others who are often faceless, transient, or anonymous" (Foster 1996, 25).

In my opinion, the virtual community is imagined as a multi-layered object (technological, conversational, relational etc.). The dynamic of a virtual community contains the tension amongst these layers and the degree of its imagined side depends on multiple factors, such as the dimension of the community, its age, the clarity of its rules, its specificity. The composition of the virtual community is another important factor: the imagined part may be significantly different if this community is entirely online made, if its activities combine online and offline environments and people know each other or if the virtual community is another form of interaction for a traditional local group constituted before in offline. As Fox noticed, we have to incorporate both the virtual and the physical domain and their interrelations in order to better understand the "communal space". Thus, "virtual communities provide a 'flexible' imagined environment but also present opportunities for identity shifting and even deception because the identifying cues that define one's identity in the physical world – such as gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and so on – are enacted in much more complex ways online" (Fox 2004, 52). The diverse typologies of virtual communities, using multiple criteria (type of users, interests, activities etc.) lead to various degree of imagined virtual sociability.

The construction of the imaginary of a certain community does not include only the users' ideas about its structure, but also the expectances that they have about the atmosphere, the way of interaction, and the dynamic of relations. Thus, the imagined perception of community includes the technology, the content and representation, the history of members, the intertextuality of content, and the communication among users (Fox 2004, 53). The imagined part provides the landmarks for the proper journey in the virtual realm.

Even if Twitter is an asymmetric micro-blogging platform and it was not created in order to develop virtual communities, Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev (2011) showed that it can be a useful basis for a community. For those theorists, Twitter can be conceived as an imagined community, since the people are always aware of other individuals that use Twitter, just as in Anderson's concept. Several key elements characterize Anderson's imagined community: common language, temporality (the presence of the homogenous time), and the decline of high centers. In Twitter's conditions, the dominant temporality is the presentism, while the high centers (celebrities, organizations) still play an important role in the dynamic of communication. The sense of community is alive and the community commitment supports its imaginary.

Tara Brabazon (2001) tried to criticize the easy usage of "imagined community" in cyberspace and to verify the legitimacy of its extensive use. The metaphorical approaches and the seductive character of online rhetoric may conduct to the transformation of this expression into a cliché, although "when theorizing virtual communities from the perspectives of national imaginings, it is clear that these social organizations are on the same discursive bandwidth" (Brabazon 2001, 8).

A quick example

Desprecopii.com (in English, aboutchildren.com) is the most important and the biggest online resource in Romanian language addressed to parents or to those people who aspire to be parents. This platform has 16 years and offers a multitude of services: information, support, advice, specialised counselling etc. I analyzed the topic "First time in community" that comprises 100 responses, from November 19th 2013 to May 28th 2016. I chose this topic because this is the "place" where newcomers write a message, talk a little about their selves, and the senior members write back to them, indicating the most appropriate blogs, forums, topics inside the community. This section that I decided to investigate is also important because, in general, people tend to explain here the reasons for which they are there or intend to participate to the community. Thus, I considered that in this place I could find easily the personal imagined ideas about this community, their expectances and their hopes.

Using the triad common language – temporality – high centers (Gruzd, Wellman, and Takhteyev 2011), I observed that all 100 posts were written in the style of the community: the users presented themselves briefly, and then narrated their personal issue, expressing the wish to participate and to become a part of this "family". The style of posts were similar both for senior members and newcomers, a situation than can be explained by the status of readers / "lurkers" that they have before being a member. What was interesting about the configuration of people that wrote here was its complexity: newcomers, senior members, but also some old members that returned after they left the community for a while engage in relevant discussions, wishing to be again a part of it. They share a common language, including abbreviations (for instance, pbd – probable date of birth). Moreover, I classified their interests in several categories, such as: documentation, advice, support, guidance, but also sharing the own experiences and contributing to the growth of this community.

The images that people "invest" in the community are easily detectable in this stage – first posts of the new members. In this respect, I detected positive images about this community, seen as a warm and helpful network of people. All the newcomers were already convinced that their future questions will be answered and the future support will be accorded. The general atmosphere is one of trust, patience, and confidence. One member said: "I decided to join you because I know that here I will find assistance, advice and the most important thing – support. I hope you will accept me in your community". These opinions are processed by the post of the senior members. For instance: "Welcome to the community. This is a warm and buzzing hive that receives you with love. We expect you at discussions".

From the standpoint of temporality, the community analysed confirms Anderson's opinion about the importance of moving through history together. Within this consolidated community, there is a shared temporal dimension and a particular history, archived in multiple topics, ideas, problems etc. The members are moving on the entire temporal axis, searching for answers in the past, posting in the present, and announcing events for the future.

As for the structure of the community, the preservation of centers (hierarchy of users, for instance) seems to offer stability and trust. The guidance is really good realized by experienced users that know very well the issues and the archives. They function as legitimate filters for a huge amount of information.

In sum, I believe that the posts that I have examined attest the imagined part of this community and also support the major ideas that new media theorists abstract from Anderson's ideas.

Conclusions

The concept of imagined community is a nuanced one, and sometimes it becomes hard to explain it in concrete frames. This article highlighted some of the relevant reflections made in new media studies or in the philosophy of communication. The virtual community seems to be the perfect candidate for this characterization, because in order to be functional many gaps have to be filled (distance, context indeterminacy, anonymity, weak ties etc.). The imaginary may explain those gaps related to the structure or dynamics of the new forms of sociability. In spite of the things that have been clarified thus far, there is still much work to be done. The speed of change requires, for the upcoming decades, consistent applied studies from the scholars in this field.

Bibliography

1. Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* New York: Verso.
2. Bakardjieva, Maria. 2005. *Internet Society: The Internet Everyday Life*. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
3. Baym, Nancy. 2000. *Tune In, Log on: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community*. Thousand Oaks, London, New Delhi: Sage Publications.
4. Brabazon, Tara. 2001. "How imagined are virtual communities? *Mots pluriels* 18, http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/MotsPluriels/MP1801tb2.html
5. Castells, Manuel. 2001. *L'Ère de l'information*, vol. I, *La société en réseaux.* Paris : Fayard.
6. Fernback, Jan. 2007. „Beyond the diluted community concept: a symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations", in *New Media and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1, pp. 49-69.
7. Flichy, Patrice. 2003. *L'Innovation technique. Récents développments en sciences sociales.* Paris: La Découverte.

8. Ferrarotti, Franco. "On the way to «Creative Empathy»: the concept of truth as a social community enterprise in GB Vico's «New Science»." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 2 (2010): 10-25.

9. Foster, Derek. 1996. "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village". In *Internet Culture*, edited by David Porter, 23-37. New York: Routledge.

10. Fox, Steve. 2004. "The New Imagined Community: Identifying and Exploring a Bidirectional Continuum Integrating Virtual and Physical Communities through the Community Embodiment Model (CEM)". *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 28 (1): 47-62.

11. Gibson, William. 1984. *Neuromancer.* New York: Mass Market Paperback.

12. Gradinaru, Camelia. 2011. "Virtual Communities – A New Sense of Social Intersection". *Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, vol. 13, no. 1 (21): 21-35.

13. Gruzd, Anatoliy, Wellman, Barry, and Takhteyev, Yuri. 2011. "Imagining Twitter as an Imagined Community". *American Behavioral Scientist* 55 (10): 1294-1318.

14. Haythornthwaite, Caroline and Wellman, Barry. 2002. "The Internet in Everyday Life. An Introduction". In *The Internet in Everyday Life*, edited by Barry Wellman and Caroline Haythornthwaite, 3-41. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

15. Hill Collins, P. 2010. "The New Politics of Community". *American Sociological Review* 75 (1): 7-30.

16. Musaraj, Arta, and Argita Malltezi. "Communication Technologies and the public service: Is it the case of citizens inclusion in the public service standard in Albania?." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 5 (2012): 26-42.

17. Hillary, George. 1955. "Definitions of Community: Areas of Agreement". *Rural Sociology* 20: 111-123.

18. Ishii, Kenichi. 2006. "Implications of Mobility: The Uses of Personal Communication Media in Everyday Life". *Journal of Communication* 56: 346-365.

19. Kollock, Peter. 1999. "The economies of online cooperation: gifts and public goods in cyberspace". In *Communities in Cyberspace*, edited by Peter Kollock and Marc Smith, 220-239. London: Routledge.

20. Vasmatics, Gabor. "The revolution of communication and its effect on our life." *Academicus International Scientific Journal* 1 (2010): 100-108.

21. LaRose, Robert, Kim, Junghyun, and Wei, Peng. 2011. "Social Networking: Addictive, Compulsive, Problematic, or Just Another Media Habit?". In *A Networked Self. Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, edited by Zizi Papacharissi, 59-81. New York and London: Routledge.

22. Marwick, A. E. and boyd, danah. 2011. "I tweet honestly, I tweet passionately: Twitter users, context collapse, and the imagined audience". *New media & society* 13(1): 114-133.

23. Matei, Sorin Adam. 2011. "Introduction". In *Virtual Sociability: From Community to Communitas*, edited by Sorin Adam Matei and Brian C. Britt, 1-8. Indianapolis: Ideagora.

24. McLuhan, Marshall. 1994. *Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man.* New York: MIT Press.

25. Norton, Bonny. 2001. "Non-participation, imagined communities, and the language classroom". In *Learner contributions to language learning: New directions in research*, edited by M. Breen, 159-171. Harlow: Pearson Education.

26. Rheingold, Howard. 2000. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier.* The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London.

27. Phillips, T. 2002. "Imagined communities and self-identity: an exploratory quantitative analysis". *Sociology* 36 (3): 597-617.

28. Wellman, Barry; Haase, Anabel Quan; Witte, James; Hampton, Keith. 2001. "Does the Internet Increase, Decrease, or Supplement Social Capital?". *American Behavioral Scientist* 45 (3): 436-455.