

# Communities in the information society, real or virtual?

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**This document is part of a collection of presentations with a focus on the Legal and Social Aspects of Electronic Publishing. For full details of this and the rest of the collection see the cover sheet at:**

**<http://humbox.ac.uk/3101/>**

# Overview

- Types of community
- Effects on individuality
  - does online identity change?
- Effects on community
- Is change caused by them?

# Virtual communities

- Term coined by Rheingold (1993)
- Pioneering work on WELL
  - Locally based network
  - Anticipates internet

Largely replaced by term 'Social Network'

But older title raises questions of what community means

It is the same online as offline?

# Thoughts on community

- What is a community?
- Gemeinschaft vs Gesellschaft
  - Does this model change from industrial to information society?
- Habermas and the public sphere
  - Is the internet an ideal democratic space?
- Physical community vs occupational or interest based

# Virtual communitarian activities

- Early interest in virtual identities
  - Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*
- Activity in MUDs and MOOs
- Synchronous, text based media
- Possibility of role play, cyborgs
  - Questions of gender and sexual identity
- Interest from post modernists
- Utopian aspirations for radical change

# Negative aspects

- Doesn't make people more sociable
  - Geeks role-play, but are still geeks
- (Turkle's findings)
- Antisocial behaviour
  - Flaming
  - 'A rape in cyberspace'
- Questions of net addiction
- Does real social interaction decrease?
  - Study results are mixed

# Online socialising

- Chat rooms, online dating, sex, now social networking sites
- Range from harmless to controversial
  - Problem of relationship to real life
- Open to abuse
  - Paedophilia
  - Stalking, real or online
  - Harassment of female users
  - Online aliases, facebook rape

# Communities of interest

- Email lists and web boards to chat rooms MSN

Facebook, twitter

- Element of real life focus
  - sports team
  - Medical support groups
  - Campaigning or organisation
- May involve F2F meeting
- May unite geographically diverse members
- Can be highly disruptive of offline norms
- Fluctuating membership, decentralised activity etc



# Commercial uses

- Business interested in building communities on websites
  - Promotion of interactivity
- Organisations use community ideas internally
  - Intranets etc
  - Feeling of community, loyalty among employees

# Commercial uses

- Captive audience, relationship marketing
  - Seen as available to customers
  - Responsive to ideas and complaints
- Resource for product development
- Apparently social
  - Seen as new way of researching/targeting market
  - Use of Facebook, Twitter, Secondlife by commercial organisations, even universities!

Another way of reaching the market

# Commercial uses

- How cynical are these activities?
- A substitute for real customer care?
- Do customers feel included or used?
  - Do they realise they are being monitored?
- Employee internal communities
  - A substitute of real social space/time
  - Spurious feeling of open caring organisation
  - Is use of facilities really private?

# Political uses

- Precursor to or substitute for real e-democracy?
- Significant use by Obama's election campaign
  - Build a community of supporters, by email, twitter, web

Large amount of political blogging  
Works best when in opposition?

Grass roots political campaigning & organisation  
Difficult for authorities to understand and control

Challenges official media management

# What makes community

- Is it the medium or the message?
- Are Facebook or Twitter VCs in themselves?
  - Initially assumed to be
- Seem more likely to be an enabling technology
- Plenty of ways to use it that are not especially communitarian
- How in the end do Vcs differ from the 'real'
  - Blow back from Secondlife affairs instructive in this case