

The Potential Role of New Media in the Creation of Communities*

Abstract. This paper focuses on the problem of creation of communities through New Media. After having done a survey of New Media challenges and of some contemporary discussions on the concept of community, I concentrate on the framework for theorising the virtual communities. Some authors adopt a positive and optimistic view about the potential of New Media in creating communities (coined *utopians*), while others have serious doubts (*dystopians*). In this context, I approach a few controversial themes such as *distributed communities*, *diluted communities*, *functional communities*, *normalization* or the idea that the Internet is a valuable resource for *overcoming the fear of public exposure* and *diminishing or erasing the physical distances* among individuals.

Key words: virtual communities, new media, social interactions and networking, cyberspace, community commitment

1. New Media Challenges

New Media is nowadays a resounding, influential, and strong concept which hides/reveals some of the most complex realities such as the multimedia, the electronic commerce and entertainment, the civic participation and political deliberation or the e-learning. The term started to be used in the 60's in the American cultural setting, especially by researchers in the field of information technology and communication. It was included in the international academic vocabulary, and consequently, in the international academic canon, in the 90's, which saw a significant growth in higher education programmes and their correspondent literature. Therefore, we can consider New Media as a recent research domain which needs to be continuously updated and reconceptualised. In spite of the fact that this field involves a global dimension, in practice, studies concentrated mainly on western countries, thus excluding extremely large areas. Therefore, it is only recently that realities related to the East-European area have started to be investigated (see, for example, Spasov, Todorov, 2003) and the sociopolitical context determined by the European Union seems to be in favour of this type of approach to the problem in question.

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As Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone state (Lievrouw, Livingstone, 2002), the germs of the contemporary debate on the new means of communication can be traced back to the early decades of the 20th century, which brought forward the contribution of an economist named Joseph Schumpeter, whose theories concerning economic development had a significant impact on information society research. On the one hand, sociology – owing to the contributions of Daniel Bell or Anthony Giddens – outlined a series of descriptive categories of the *postindustrial society*, and, on the other hand, it analysed the means of changing the perception of time and space in a context dictated by the information technologies. At the same time, sociologists discussed the question of whether these means of communication can be considered or not as surveillance and control tools. In this respect, James Beniger suggested the phrase *the revolution of control* to refer to the shift facilitated by the communication technologies which appeared towards the end of the 19th century. In its turn, social psychology brought forward prolific concepts to account for the changes which were, during the 70's and the 80's, in *statu nascendi*. Therefore, the telepresence, mentioned by Robert Johansen in the context of the advent of the videoconference, anticipates the nowadays Internet structures. Anonymity, considered in the context of the electronic message exchange, has significantly contributed to disinhibiting the participants to communication, thus creating the premises of an informal, authentic interactivity, unconstrained by complementary frameworks. The management of self-presentation, transformed nowadays due to the projecting mechanisms that computers are equipped with, enables a superior control of interaction and of aspects that the user wants to hide or display.

Moreover, mass media researchers, irrespective of the area they originate from, have become more and more sensitive to the new communication channels and technologies which questioned – at least partially – the traditional framework used for studying mass communication. Such channels were the telephone, the videotext, the computer-mediated communication enabled by ARPANET, the photocopying machine, the teleconferences and so on. The American cultural setting privileged the technical and applicative analyses, insisting mainly on the effects of communication and on the ways in which these effects can change the explanatory theories (for instance, Rogers (1999) suggests a theory for broadcasting innovations and brings again into discussion the traditional distinctions that academics make between the researches dedicated to mass communication and the ones dedicated to interpersonal communication). On the European continent, the dominant tradition was the critical and cultural one, and more precisely, the tradition of the political economy. As opposed to the American paradigm, the European authors adopted, as a starting point, a mainly critical, unbiased attitude: they undertook, the same as their colleagues from across the ocean, an analysis of the technical, administrative mechanisms, and took an inside look at New Media. However, the stress was mainly on the outside evaluation of the phenomenon, on judging the social, psychological,

ethical and symbolic effects. The European researchers undoubtedly noticed the advantages and the stakes of the new communication technologies but insisted (maybe, in some cases, excessively) on the disadvantages and the negative changes caused by these technologies. The sources of this tradition are multiple: the Neo-Marxism and the Frankfurt School, Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, Michel Foucault's philosophy, the public sphere theories derived from Jurgen Habermas' writings, the structuration theory elaborated by Anthony Giddens, the concept of hyperreality developed by Jean Baudrillard, the Birmingham School.

A common interest of the two research directions is represented by the question of influence. Towards the end of the 80's, mass communication theorists wondered if and how far their theories could be extended so as to cover the New Media domain, which was in its early state of development at that time. In other words, can we legitimately extend the effect theories (among which we can identify a variety of species, from the magic bullet theory to the spiral of silence or the *agenda setting* (Severin, Tankard, 2004)) so as to provide a reasonable explanation and, at the same time, an evolutionary continuum going from Old Media to New Media? Those who answer this question positively want to maintain in force the effects paradigm, highlighting the explanatory nucleus, extending the perspective and multiplying the levels of analysis and the contexts. Those who answer negatively have, in general, the tendency to adopt a theoretical position that could be labeled as *social shaping*. This position is based on the assumption that the influencing relation works both ways: the individuals, the communities, the district organisations, the citizens' councils, the areas, the governments, and the corporations influence the dynamics of the evolution and development of New Media and are, in their turn, influenced by them. The new means *can* be used to reproduce the dominant ideology and the power relations existent in society, they *can* become – as traditional means – vehicles for conveying messages in a descendant, persuasive manner; at the same time, however, communities *can* determine the fate of these means, they *can* highlight or undermine their importance or they can simply marginalise them. Likewise, the individuals, the communities and the interest groups *can* make use of these means to manage, through their messages, to communicate with other individuals, groups or communities or simply to return, in a reflexive but not less pragmatic manner, to their own community. The theories of social shaping have an obvious advantage in that they do not transform New Media into a god or a postmodern idol, but rather objectively consider them as pure *means*. It is true that these are not just any means, but some means that radically changed the communication medium.

Many researchers of this phenomenon undertook the task of studying the relationship between the traditional and the new means of communication, as well as the task of establishing the effects that the latter had on culture as a whole. The question *What's new about New Media?* is very famous (see, for example, Silverstone (1999), or Gitelman, Pingree (2003), but also the debates on this issue that take place on www.whatsnewmedia.org). This question was

raised so as to delimit and clarify this concept, mainly because the terms that are linguistically coined by making implicit references to other terms (such as premodernism, postmodernism, new media) have, generally, the tendency to be vague or are simply prone to multiple interpretations. Moreover, the word *new* is in itself a problematic one as it raises assumptions and questions of the type: new in relation to what? until when? When will New Media become Old Media? Based on what kind of criteria? In distinguishing between Old Media and New Media, the criterion of lastingness and succession is so weak that researchers went far beyond this premise in order to concentrate on the essential characteristics [for a comprehensive introduction to this matter see, for example, Chun, Keenan (2006), or Gurevitch, Coleman (2009)]. As Lev Manovich notes (Manovich, 2001: 19), although the invention of printing represented a great cultural revolution, it particularly affected *a* component of cultural communication, that is, the media distribution, while New Media is affecting *all* communication levels (purchases, handling, storage, distribution) and *all* media categories (texts, images, spatial constructions, etc.). The practices associated with New Media include the *computer mediated communication* (e-mail, chat, communication forums based on avatars, mobile phones), *the new ways of broadcasting and interpreting the media texts characterised by interactivity and the hypertext formats* (World Wide Web, CD-ROM, DVD, platforms for computer games), *the virtual reality, the transforming and shifting of traditional communication means* such as photography, animation, television, and films. These practices caused indeed a technological change at the level of textual development, at the level of generally used conventions and at a cultural level.

2. Definitions

The attempt to come up with one or several definitions of New Media should avoid a series of dangers. A first one is represented by what Lev Manovich calls *technological essentialism*. Exacerbating the technological dimension and the progressist explanation does not result in a surplus of knowledge, states Manovich. What it actually does is to prevent us from correlating the other elements necessary for understanding the New Media phenomenon. A second danger is the temptation to see breakdowns where there are in fact lines indicating continuity: the relation between traditional and new media is sufficiently complicated for us to, for instance, have to pay attention when we have the tendency to rapidly postulate an advance or a radical shift from the past. Manovich himself believes that, despite the spectacular differences, many of the characteristics considered proper to New Media can be identified, through a more careful analysis, in the case of traditional media as well – in cinema, for instance. A third difficulty may spring from the relationship between analogue and digital. Few internet users know that digitising involves, in fact, a loss, not an information gain; likewise, not all observers of the phenomenon are aware that the shift from analogue to digital is

not an instance that we should primarily judge from a metaphysical standpoint. It is rather a functional distinction: digitising is a step forward but that doesn't mean we gave up the analogue. According to the communication situation and the goals undertaken, we can accomplish a series of transitions from analogue to digital and the other way round. In the fourth place, by using a resounding concept derived from W.V. Quine's philosophy, Mark Poster speaks about an *undetermination* of New Media in relation to Old Media. It is sufficiently clear that New Media does not totally or integrally depend on Old Media. On the contrary, it is independent of it. However, this does not mean that certain determination or maybe causal forms do not function at a local level.

With these precautions being taken, Manovich believes that a listing of the specific differences between New Media and Old Media should comprise the following terms: a) *digitising*; b) *interactivity*; c) *hypertextuality*; d) *dispersion*; e) *virtuality*. Other authors add other concepts such as *anonymity*, *convergent* character, *networking* character, while others emphasise the disappearance of the traditional unidirectionality, the temporal compression, the development of a virtual space of knowledge, of a dereferentialised space of communication (Kevin Robins). There have also been mentioned specific differences at the level of economy (the New Media seem more influenced by the economic factor than the Old Media – a challenging but undoubtedly debatable statement) or, as exotic as it may seem, at the level of the pleasure experienced by users (Kerr, Kücklich, Brereton, 2006). A step forward is taken by Sam Lehman-Wilzig and Nava Cohen-Avigdor (2004) who suggest a model based on 6 stages, namely *the birth* (the invention itself), *the penetration*, *the development*, *the maturity*, *the defence*, *the adaptation/convergence/obsolescence*.

In spite of the fact that New Media has become a phrase that possesses the values of a cultural extension, of a general medium for discussion and conceptual placement, one may notice that the attempt to come up with a generally accepted definition is still sensitive to change, being modified in accordance with the categories of users and interests that require it at a particular time. In spite of the differences, one may identify a series of characteristics common to the majority of approaches that could make up an operational definition. In this respect, we undertake to consider the new communication means as a collection of communication tools based on computer technology and on its correspondent networks. At the same time, we adapt the statements made by Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2002 : 7) that include in New Media, apart from the information and communication technologies, the practical communication activities we engage in so as to develop and make use of these tools, the social structures that develop around these devices and practices.

In our opinion, the distinction between the traditional and the new communication means could be combined with the distinction between the *mainstream media* and the *alternative media*. *Mainstream media* would refer to those disciplined media (in a foucauldian sense) that comply with the usual codes of media communication practices, maintaining their products not only

within the limits established by the canons proper to each category, but also within the limits of the discourses that are publicly accepted and supported by the power centres existent in a society. *Alternative* or *underground media* gather all these non-standard practices, which question the power relations in a society and reveal disturbing truths (the famous mystic background of politics, for instance), which do not respect or question the rules of the media game, representing, by content and form, a challenge or a scandal for the recipient who is accustomed to the *mainstream media* formats. The correlation of this new distinction, whose basic criterion is represented by the technological dimension, determines the forming of four classes, which can offer a better understanding of the media phenomenon.

This brief history of New Media allows us to easily become aware of the huge impact that they have and will continue to have on communication and culture in general. Moreover, the new technologies do not only influence the individual, the organisations or the institutions, but are also constantly and continuously reshaped and reformulated by what the users do with them. Therefore, the evolution of this dynamic will be worth watching as it currently constitutes one of the most important factors to consider in domains such as society, education, and culture. The purpose that researchers from various fields undertake in relation to this topic but also the clearer tendency of users to generally refer to these channels and participate in order to inform and educate themselves, to entertain themselves or solve civic, banking, health-related or communication issues, suggest a growing interest in New Media. The complexity of the phenomenon and its recent character determine the existence of a series of unsolved problems, missing connexions and incomplete explanations. It is obvious that New Media requires a new teaching of its basics but the comprehensive studies on this topic cannot limit themselves to an introductory stage as far as the specialised language or the further development of its basic vocabulary are concerned. Moreover, it is necessary to overcome the *technological determinism* that characterised the actions taken in this field of research and to make the transition towards a careful analysis of the interdisciplinarity it involves and mainly towards the social.

Also, the interdisciplinary character of the topic in question does not derive only from the correlation of the two big domains taken into consideration, the new communication media and the ecology, but also from the references to other fields that each of them has to make. For instance, the idea according to which the New Media have created a new electronic space, therefore continuously recreating the public sphere, enjoys a more and more obvious support. The social relationships moved to the electronic space – the cybercommunity – as a cultural and social practice – being one of the realities that bring about an area of independent, separate discussions, involving the questioning of the responsibility, the interactivity, and the social solidarity (see, for example, Fernback, 2007). The existence of virtual communities also raises the question of online interpersonal relationships in the daily life of Internet

users (particularly that of forum activists and bloggers) as well as the question of finding ways of adapting oneself to the *interface life*, a situation which reinterrogates the validity of a series of dichotomies of the type *real-virtual*, *public-private* (see, for instance, Bakardjieva, 2003). In this context, when dealing with the topic in question, one must take into consideration not only the information and the working methods deriving from the communication sciences, the media theory, but also those belonging to sociology, social psychology, and advertising or even to contemporary art.

3. The Concept of Community – Relevance and Actuality

In our contemporary society, characterised by anomie and individualism, and which seems to be grounded on a post-moralist ethics (Lipovetsky, 1996), the question related to the relevance and the operational nature of the concept of community is therefore justified. Moreover, the history of the word *per se* is not an encouraging one either, the term having several meanings, therefore justifying its versatile character. There has not been established a unique and global definition, one of the reasons being its plurisemantism: therefore, one can distinguish among local community, professional community, community of interests, religious community, electronic community, community of practice, epistemic community, community studies, etc. In this respect, one can mention the effort undertaken by Hillery, who made an inventory of 94 meanings of the term from different fields of research (Hillery, 1955). On the other side, however, one can notice a series of common elements running through all the characteristic attributes of this concept, such as the one related to the gathering of individuals based on an element that they acknowledge as being unifying. Therefore, the researchers of the social phenomenon emphasise that we are not dealing with a classical notion, endowed with definite characteristics, but with a notion which constantly requires its reinterpretation and revalorisation.

This process of reinvestment needs to also overcome a series of problems that the concept gives rise to – in 1955, Hillery emphasised, for instance, the problems concerning the definition, the method (the participatory observation being absolutely necessary) or its theorising (the impossibility to develop satisfactory theoretical models, capable of illustrating the great majority of participatory actions, institutionalisation and community organisation). In 2010, Monique Hirschhorn (Hirschhorn, 2010 : 9-13) mentioned four „diseases” which had impaired the concept and which seemed to have deprived it of its appropriateness as far as its ability to analyse contemporary social facts was concerned: polysemy, ideologising, naturalisation and obsolescence. Therefore, if *polysemy* is already a common ground for characterising the concept of community, as far as the second characteristic is concerned, one can notice that the occurrences of the term are, most of the time, in connection with a series of empirical and politico-ideological connotations and contexts. Comte, Le Play or

Tönnies have also significantly contributed to its crystallising. Moreover, *the ideologising* can also have native characteristics, such as in the case of France where the term has come to have non-scientific uses as well. Also present in the post-war personalist philosophy, the idea of community developed and flourished in 1960, and was initially used to refer to a liberating project which would set the basis of new type of *vivre ensemble*. One of the main causes of *the naturalisation* of the community derives from the total overlap between the concept and the reality it refers to, as a result of losing sight of its importance as a tool for analysis and because of thinking that this can truly illustrate the referent. This error can also be identified in the case of communitarianism, which tends to mistake the existence of community organisations (aiming to build communities) for the communities *per se*. *Obsolescence* is illustrated by the occurrence of a series of new concepts, which seem to be capable of overcoming the weaknesses of the concept of community (such as the long debated and highly disputed opposition between community and society), such as social bond, affiliation, network, etc. In this respect, one can notice the accusation of moral attrition that the term of community is facing, as well as the manner in which terminological competition comes into play. Not less important and problematic – apart from these conceptual shortcomings – are also the relationships between the term of community and one of the most highly disputed and utterly important concepts. Therefore, the relationship between community and society is one of the most highly disputed (one of the most quoted authors being, for instance, Tönnies, who considers community – the feminine element representing intimacy and trust – as a principle in conflict with society – which is seen as an artificial creation – and based on public agreement and opinion). Also, the relationship between community and communitarianism is a difficult one, contemporary researchers being extremely firm in their rejection of the similarity between them (Ivan Sainsaulieu, 2010 : 23-36), an identification which can be included in the category of difficulties created by the ideologising of the community related approaches.

Facing so many overt problems, sociologists are questioning the attitude towards its use: is this concept worth being kept and used in the future or should we stop using it? This question makes us think of the broader problem concerning vocabulary. Therefore, in Rorty's own terms, we might say that the fact of referring oneself to a particular research tradition and to its vocabulary provides, most of the time, two solutions: continue using the same terms, reinterpreted or not, or remove them from the discourse specific to that particular subject, the indifference and consequently, the nonparticipation. In a similar tonality, Hirschhorn says :

„Isn't it more convenient to finally admit that our so-called «technical» vocabulary is in fact vague, indefinite, and that this has not occurred by accident but as a result of the way in which we construct and use our concepts?” (Hirschhorn, 2010 : 12).

In this respect, Hirschhorn argues that the great majority of great concepts specific to the field of sociology are marked by difficulties similar to the concept of community and that this is the main reason why the effort to „enounce” „weak” concepts seems pointless and even naïve – getting rid of this type of concepts is impossible, their use being impossible to be agreed on in this manner. This doesn't mean that the entire communication among experts or that the popularisation of science are not rendered more difficult by this terminological „recycling”, which makes it difficult to identify the way in which a concept is used in a particular context or by a particular author. This is the main reason why a radical change of the status and functioning of concepts seems to become an urgent measure to be taken, the most efficient approach being the one suggested by R. A. Nisbet, whereby these should be treated as „leading principles, i.e. as «projectors which let light fall on one side of the landscape, leaving the other in the dark», as questioning sources, pillars of sociological imagination” (Hirschhorn, 2010: 12). As far as community is concerned, the relevance of this term is mainly rendered by its *content* and, even if one should not forget that this is one of the most important fundamental concepts of sociology, the treatment in the manner suggested by Nisbet should be applied: we need to „accept once and for all that the concept of community has no value as a scientific concept (Busino) and that it is still one of the greatest leading principles of sociology” (Hirschhorn, 2010 : 13). One can also notice, again, the tension existent between „community”, in the manner in which it is illustrated from an empirical perspective, and „community” seen as an ideal, as a norm (as a reshaping of the older dispute between empirical sociology and „pure” sociology). In order to serve the purposes of the present article, we shall adopt Nisbet's idea so as to avoid the sociological „exasperation” hovering around the term of community: we are, therefore, more interested in that density of the social relationship expressed by the community as well as in the manner in which this community (in our case, the virtual community) can contribute to increasing people's theoretical interest in it as well as to creating, in practice, the various social groupings. In other words, what is, during the 21st century, the relationship between the individual and the group, between individualism and community?

4. The Framework for Theorising the Virtual Community

From a historical point of view, one can distinguish among four types of community: classical, modern, dialectical and postmodern (Sainsaulieu, 2010 : 25). The classical community is marked by the existence of a collective agreement and of a norm-based tradition, its prototype being represented, in general, by family, in the same manner as it was seen by Tönnies in *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), where it is considered as the traditional symbol of the community, characterised by blood bonds, by affective and place-related bonds and inside which interpersonal face-to-face relationships are

essential. The modern communities are more individualised, more numerous, broader and more mobile, the existence of specific interests giving rise to a more accurate specialisation. Even from this point on one could notice the germs of the issue deriving from the fact of constantly belonging to another group and from the relationship between community membership and community mobility. In this respect, Simmel criticised the superficiality of urban social relationships, considering that, in modern times, the form as well as the network of social bonds are still the most important aspects as opposed to the community matter. The dialectical community (inspired by the Hegelian-Marxist thinking) focuses on the dynamics of the relationship, introducing the ambivalence about the associative matter, which is, in this case, overlapping between the traditional community and the elective one. The postmodern community seems to be characterised by contradictions – while the possibilities to create and join new social groups seem countless, exaggerated individualisation, the metamorphosis from individuals to monads, the conflicts of power and interests seem to weaken the social bond, rendering inter-human relationships superficial. Furthermore, the complexity of postmodernism is considered by some authors as the setting which facilitated the development of New Media. While the first three stages of community are associated with the ideas of tradition, reason and progress, this stage is characterised by nihilo-hedonism. Being rooted in the modern age of the consumption society, but exaggerated in the postmodern society, the hedonistic morality is defined by Baudrillard as the „morality of pure satisfaction”. Gilles Lipovetsky will thus develop a post-moralist ethics the same as Zygmunt Bauman (2000) will set the basis of a postmodern ethics. Lipovetsky describes the post-moralist society, governed by the narcissist-hedonist values of personal happiness, where pleasures are perfectly legitimate and the subject functions within an „integrated circuit”, enjoying total autonomy. This description of the postmodern subject fully corresponds to the portrait of the contemporary individual, carried out by Baudrillard, who reveals how the classical subject was turned into an *in-divisum*, into an autonomous monad. Lipovetsky points out the role of mass consumption in the transition from a central morality based on the idea of „good” to a morality based on welfare, which gave birth to a civilisation that no longer opacifies our wishes. On the contrary, it maximises them, endowing them with a justifying, incriminating discourse. As Baudrillard and Lipovetsky point out, the individual’s „community” is rather a community consisting of objects rather than of neighbours, the relationship between human being and object being preferred over the traditional relationship human being – human being. To a similar extent, postmodernism can be characterised by a „negative communitarianism”, especially if we take into account Lipovetsky’s approach to the „age of void” or to the one in direct relation to the topic debated by Robert Esposito who, in an extremely provocative manner, supports the idea according to which the essence of community is the nothingness, the absence of a common bond, the space of non-association, which protects us from the others.

Another typology of communities, closer to our goal, takes into account the historical times when the relationship between community and media was central (Jankowski, 2002 : 34-49). Consequently, the first wave of community and media studies resulted in a series of researches related to the role of newspapers in the process of integrating the individuals within various communities or to the role of the press community in the development of an identity within the groups of immigrants. The second wave known as the Electronic Community Media started to take shape after the arrival of the other important technologies following the invention of the printing press, especially the mobile radio and the cable TV, while the third wave, commonly known as the Era of the Internet brought to light new types of social associations, the online communities as well as a new type of culture specific to them (the cyberculture). Having been based on a community network (see, for instance, ARPANET), the internet developed right from the beginning. However, the social aspects that it implies have been left behind for a long time so as to favour the debates related to the technological challenges that it brought about. This is the very reason why current researchers are considering the possibility that the Internet might raise people's interest in the community, not only at a theoretical but also at a more practical level, the question now being whether the community spirit has represented or not a mere „utopia which characterised the beginning of the Era of the Internet” (Galibert, 2007 : 63).

5. Dynamic Evolutions

The many sides and possibilities brought about by the New Media led to a new perspective on society, culture and interpersonal relationships. Certainly, the camp of those who were animated by the new social and technological changes was immediately counterbalanced by the camp of the pessimistic ones, especially as far as the issue of the social contributions of the new technologies was concerned. Even if we cannot hope that the Internet will, for instance, manage to bring together people from all the cultures and social, historical, geographical, and linguistic environments (mainly because there is an extremely obvious obstacle, i.e. having access to and using it; even if it is a tool which claims to be universal, people from all over the world do not use it in the same manner), the advantages that it provides should not be disregarded, one of these advantages being the possibility to create hybrid social forms.

The liberating potential brought about by the New Media had a remarkable influence on the acceleration of the social evolution and the online communities immediately developed into real affinity networks, information and educational networks, networks for producing and broadcasting information, as well as into a series of information and affective exchange networks aimed at people who have never met before, cooperation and consultancy networks. The new „social contract”, which is said to represent the fundamental basis of these relationships, has constantly changing rules and within these types of

communities we are actors, spectators, stage managers, and script writers at the same time, the multitude of social roles that an individual can undertake being, probably, unprecedented.

Researchers of this phenomenon have always emphasised the areas in which the electronic community has outrun the classical one. Therefore, the direct, face-to-face relationships, the lastingness of relationships, and the importance of geographical areas and of their proximity – such relevant concepts necessary for defining the community in the classical sense – are now noticeably modified or even avoided. If, for instance, in Nisbet's opinion, the nucleus of the community is represented by the long lasting and sound affective relationships, which used to imply a moral engagement, the virtual communities have nowadays a shorter durability of membership (users can quit a forum, a group discussion or a social networking site anytime in order to join or not another one), which does not imply, however, a diminished intensity of networking. Moreover, no matter how free the types of virtual communication and networking might seem, these do not escape the normative pressure, every community having a series of rules (even if they can be changed). Therefore, there are no time, space or physical proximity constraints to hinder the development of virtual communities (even though the first virtual communities were constituted locally – Blacksburg Electronic Village project (www.bev.net), La Plaza Telecommunity (www.laplaza.org), Austin, Texas (www.ci.austin.tx.us/telecom/intelcom.htm)). They rather grow based on the intellectual, affective, and interest driven connivance. They can also be characterised by fluidity and metaphorism (Quéau, 1995; Kolb, 2008). Moreover, if the first forms of virtual communities were based on writing, nowadays there are also “communities of clones” by means of which people can adopt virtual, realistic or imaginary looks so that the biological metaphor is considered as the most adequate for the way in which the cyberspace and cyberculture evolve :

„every time people have access to telematics, they use it everywhere so as to build virtual communities in the same manner that micro-organisms grow into colonies. I believe that the origin of this phenomenon is the people's wish to compensate for the gradual disappearance of public meeting places from their everyday life” (Rheingold, 1995 : 6).

In his approach, Rheingold, who was one of the first theoreticians to popularise the concept of virtual community, expresses his faith in the ability of the Internet to bring about new ways of interacting, capable of abolishing or diminishing the social fragmentation and the lack of communication in the offline life. Therefore, For Rheingold, cyberspace has a „potential importance” as far as its ability to change people's perspective on reality is concerned, the social relationships and the political freedoms being the first to undertake such changes.

Moreover, other authors have insisted upon this point, and they showed how some civic or governmental organizations used the resources provided by New Media in order to increase the access to documents, to create stronger relationships among their members and to increase civic participation in offline communities. Lori Kendall, to whom „the term virtual community has been applied to groups formed through a variety of online forums, including email listservs, bulletin-board services (BBSs), USENET newsgroups, MUDs and MOOs (Multi-User Dungeons and MUDs Object-Oriented), and other forms of online chat” (Kendall, 2002 : 468), thinks that the prevailing orientation of many virtual communities is towards social change and a bettering of government. Thus, one of the most controversial problems is the relationship between virtual communities and non-virtual communities, and the researchers in the field, apart from taking sides, found the way to reach the fundamental question: „are the virtual communities, in fact, communities with an established identity or are they just pseudocommunities?”.

Barry Wellman points out to the fact that when we speak using opposite terms about virtual and physical communities we don't make sense, because they are different social entities, with their own rules and, most times, the term „community” is deteriorated by an idyllic view, these traditional communities, characterized by a culture of support and membership, being difficult to find nowadays. Wellman replaces the communities with „conviviality networks”, claiming that both collective communities and personal communities function online and offline. Castells prefers to give a dual answer („yes and no”) to the question: „are the virtual communities real communities?”. They are still communities, but :

„not physical communities and they do not obey the communication and interaction models that are typical for those. Nevertheless, they are not «unreal», but they function at another level of reality. They are interpersonal social networks, based, most of the time, on ties that are weak, diversified and specialized, and yet capable to induce reciprocity and support thanks to a prolonged interaction” (Castells, 2001 : 453).

Even though the cyberrelationships and the importance of social interactions inside a network are still hard to measure, despite the persistent efforts to refine the research methodology, many researchers have noticed their effects inside an organization (the increase of employees participation to conversations and decisions) or the possibilities that are opened for the marginalised people. Thus, the common practices inside the communities don't have as objectives only the improvement of communication and the management of identity, but also the triggering of learning mechanisms, the quick dissemination of information that reduces the learning costs (for instance, the forums that become actual dynamic databases, on different themes, from health issues to hobbies), knowledge exchange, cooperation and mutual help.

From an economic point of view, „the communities on the Internet are interesting because they translate the operationalisation and the constant redefinition of a social network in a perspective of strategic action” (Benghozi, 2010 : 152). Even if this type of community seems to lack a structure and a visible hierarchy, its decryption is essential economically, especially when we think about the relationship between the creation of virtual communities and the access to the Internet (including providers, offers, discounts etc.). Thus, even if it seems tough, „in many cases, the concept of community appears only as the marketing support that is necessary at a certain moment, in order to generate relationships and commercial exchanges” (Benghozi, 2010 : 166). It is easy to notice that our initial question – whether the online users form real communities or just „networks with changing configurations that are permanently in a process of recomposition” (Benghozi, 2010 : 167) – remains central. Also, the economic analysis raised serious questions about the risk of *commodification*, understood as „a hegemonic and inescapable process of rationing of communication and of the social world in the virtual communities” (Galibert, 2007 : 63). While some authors talk about a crisis of online communities (structural and contextual), others state that the virtual communities are not mercantile, and the crisis thesis doesn't hold.

6. Community as Capital

When we talk about the potential of New Media in creating communities, we raise, in fact, a lot of questions. One of them concerns the intricate problem of *social capital* (Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton, 2001). These four authors conducted a survey of 39,211 visitors to the National Geographic Society Web Site, in the attempt to offer an answer to the question „How the Internet May Affect Social Capital?”. Their research focused on three items (that are connected, but surely not identical), namely the *network capital*, the *participatory capital* (which had been already studied by Robert Putnam) and the *community commitment*. While network capital refers to the relations with friends, neighbours, relatives, workmates and participatory capital refers to „involvement in politics and voluntary organizations that affords opportunities for people to bond, create joint accomplishments, and aggregate and articulate their demands and desires” (Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton, 2001 : 437), community commitment simply means that „people have a strong attitude toward community – have a motivated, responsible sense of belonging” (Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton, 2001 : 437).

The empirical evidence they put together in 2001 supports an interesting idea: „the effects of the Internet on social contact are supplementary, unlike the predictions of either the utopians or dystopians” (Wellman, Haase, Witte, Hampton, 2001 : 450). The authors that are coined as „utopians” believe that the internet would provide new ways of communicating and new means for people to get together and form communities. The „dystopians” focus strongly on the

alienation effects of the Internet, one of the main themes being the danger for the traditional communities (families, to give the most important example). The New Media tools help people maintain their network(s), help people increase interpersonal connectivity, but this has to be seen in a larger context. People might use Internet at first, but only in order to use the telephone next (or any other traditional means of communication) or to set up a face-to-face meeting. So, for Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton the Internet hadn't reached in 2001 the level of an „ecological change factor” in the case of social capital. But their data showed that even then the participatory capital could have been increased by the use of the new information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton felt the need to discriminate between the network and participatory capital and the community commitment, and their empirical study underlined that distinction. But this is not the single option. Rheingold (1995) also uses some distinctions (*network capital*, *knowledge capital* and *commitment*), but, citing his own experience with the Well, he feels that alongside the increase in network and knowledge capital, the development of communities is possible. His intuition was right, in my opinion, even if there is still the possibility that the two parties don't have the same concept of community.

The problem, thus, divides: on one hand, scholars have to investigate the potential of New Media in creating/consolidating the „real”, traditional communities; on the other hand, they have to study the way in which New Media creates virtual communities, and their effects on the „real communities”. The general panorama is/will be followed by particular analyses, which nevertheless will shed some light upon the subject, seen as a whole. The evolution of politics (Bentivegna, 2002), the problem of the new literacies (Kellner, 2002), the entrepreneurial networks (Baker, 2000) are just a few examples of such analyses.

In the following sections, I shall focus on some answers given to the question concerning the potential of New Media in creating communities. In other words, are the ICTs and the practices associated strong enough to create something that can be labeled „community”? Is the social capital present there in a manner that will allow us to talk about communities? I decided to use the categories developed by Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton, namely *utopians* and *dystopians* in order to coin the scholars who give a positive answer to our question and, by contrast, the scholars who prefer the negative approach.

7. Utopians : Autopoiesis and Distributed Communities

The title of this section was inspired by Phillip H. Gochenour's study (2006). Even though his interpretation/application of systems theory (as developed in the works of Vilem Flusser, Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela) may be controversial, there are three ideas that have to be kept in mind. First, forcing the analogy with the processes going on in the biological realm,

Gochenour states that as long as humans communicate, they form communities. But this process is to be seen from a very naturalistic point of view: it is not through a rational, ethical, decision-making or even legal process that communities are born, but through a process that is to be found everywhere in the living world: *autopoiesis*. Of course, this point of view does not mean that in many cases we cannot indicate the founder of the website, or the stages (some of them might have been rational or ethical) of the evolution of that website. Simply put,

„Community, from this standpoint, is contingent on communication. Obviously, human beings use language to communicate, which is different from other forms of communication, such as chemicals, and this bears further consideration. However, it should be plain that so long as humans are engaging in a process of recurrent communication, they are in a community, and it does not matter whether that communication is carried out through speech, telephone, handwritten letters, or typed words on a screen” (Gochenour, 2006 : 44).

Inside the huge community of Internet users, inside this new environment, a „natural” process of differentiation occurs and new beings are born. They form structures, they try to organize themselves and, the same as in the living world, they survive or not, have a longer or a shorter life. Sometimes, the initial goal set by the creators of a community is modified, in time, by the citizens of that community: a local dating website may turn into a giant social network, or a small community of knowledge may turn into a major information source. Second, and more important to us, Gochenour talks about an important shift :

„in the typical experience of online community [...] Rather than turning to the internet to become members of specifically online communities, they were using it as infrastructure to communicate with a geographically distributed network of friends and family” (2006 : 34).

That means that the early conceptualizations that were centered on MOOs, MUDs, LamdaMOO (Rheingold, 1995 is a much discussed example) and were generally analysed in what Gochenour calls „a Habermasian framework”, have to be re-interpreted. Then, the Internet was pictured like a „place”, like a form of *electronic agora*, like substitute or supplement for the Civil Society where the Internet user would „go” and do this and that. A lot of work has been done to underline (sometimes with too much of an emphasis) the shift from *centralised* communication networks to *decentralised* communication networks. Also, as other scholars have pointed out (Flichy, 2001) the first steps towards cyberspace, networking and the internet were in fact (ideologically) countercultural initiatives, that were opposing locality and decentralised communication to the globality and centralised character of the traditional media. The pioneers were in fact trying to create *alternative media*, and they had chosen also alternative

social roles (from university professors or system engineers to hackers, hippies or activists). Gochenour thinks that nowadays we witness a shift from decentralised to distributed networks. A distributed network has a grid-like structure (and that gives advantages in comparison with the decentralised networks), and all the points in that structure are *nodal subjects*. If you eliminate some nodal points, that does not mean that a part of the structure remains unconnected to the other. The network can always re-arrange things in a convenient manner.

My Facebook profile, for instance, includes friends (the large majority are Romanian citizens) that live across the world, from Romania to Japan and Switzerland. Every nodal subject has a network of his own, and thus we have a *distributed community*. Facebook is a network of networks, and when you enter such a network (when you stop at a nodal point) you are connected to a lot of other nodal points. Surfing Facebook gives you exactly the feeling that Gochenour talks about: you don't just go to a *place*, you enter a huge and developing *network of networks*, a huge distributed community. The relationships among the nodal subjects may be characterized as Wittgenstein-like, since there are a lot of *family resemblances* among people's interests, but very few single, central, core elements (except the fact that all the nodal subjects want to be on Facebook).

Third, Gochenour talks about „movement toward action” and community rights. From his point of view, what started with the creation of communities is fulfilled now. This „movement toward action” can be understood both in online and in offline context: people can associate themselves online, create discussion forums, make statements, take initiatives, create political structures, argue on blogs, set up „in real life” meetings. But the virtual communities can also be seen as a starting point for all the „real” actions that we know: to give just one example, a virtual community could end up as a classical political party. Community rights represent also an important theme, but we don't get enough details from Gochenour so that we could form a very detailed picture. He talks about the *nodal subject*, and about the fact that the *distributed communities* have a better potential to take things further (as in democratic debates, for example) than that of centralized networks and decentralized networks. But that doesn't necessarily contradict the Habermasian framework. On the contrary, I would say. Also, when you enter the talk of rights, you make an anthropological move that may be self understood by some, but certainly not by everyone. Why do we need to make our virtual communities look like real ones? If that seems necessary, than how can we lose the „place” metaphor?

8. Utopians : Functional Communities

There is a definite consensus among people when asked about Internet-related communication situations and the virtual communities that they enter: you can always find something useful by joining them. People decide to be a

part of these communities in order to satisfy their needs, desires, whims, to get information, to find out the latest trends etc. Women create virtual communities (ranging from simple forums to complex online communities that can finally give birth to their offline counterparts) in order to discuss about their children, exchange supportive messages, talk about health issues, talk about education methods, engage in gender topics. Men set up virtual communities of sports fans, car owners/lovers, bike riders, gamers etc. This gender-focused example is nothing but a token of what people can use the Internet for, but we can always give gender-neutral examples (classmates communities on Facebook).

This *functional* dimension can be commercial oriented, entertainment oriented, business oriented, career and self improvement oriented, health oriented, knowledge oriented, politically oriented and so on and so forth. People gain something by participating. These communities do have a meaning, and that is a very practical one. These communities ultimately work. But, again, are they real communities?

If we are to think about Sainsaulieu's categories (2010), we would say that we are talking about *postmodern communities*. One individual can adhere to multiple communities, a lot of groups are formed, everything is indeed very dynamic. But are the ties strong enough so that we could use the word *community*? Many scholars have argued that in the case of New Media we have *weak ties*, and that the real phenomenon is *network individualism* (which is also postmodern, no one seems to disagree with that!). While the utopians see network individualism rather as a menace than as a strong trait, the dystopians see it as a central feature of virtual life. The analysis of the functional dimension, dystopians could say, reveals the fact that people decide to enter the virtual communities only for individual (see selfish) reasons. And that they *use* them mainly when they need them.

Utopians could counterattack by saying that not all the members in a community have the „network individualism” kind of behaviour. Some may do it, but not all of them. Also, utopians can point to the fact that online communities have helped the existing/real/offline groups organize themselves and, in many cases, new offline communities were born. As Rheingold (1995:12) put it, sometimes not only community is possible, but also *communion*, and thus „virtual communities perform the solidifying functions of traditional, pre-industrial community” (Fernback, 2007 : 51). More, individualistic behaviours can, in time, give way to real participation, solidarity and strong ties: some driver that entered an online community in order to get discounts from fellow members that sell car parts may turn into an active member that attends all the car shows in which his club/community is involved. Last but not least, functionally speaking, virtual communities can *support* the offline communities, they can be a tool to preserve or improve the offline communities (the case with local online newspapers, for instance).

9. Utopians : Debates, Participation and Democracy

This theme deserves a special analysis and I included here mainly for logical reasons, but its complexity does not allow me to develop it. As we can see in Jankowski (2002) or Bentivegna (2002), there are scholars that keep their cool when talking about the New Media potential to take things further politically. They have this attitude because studies have pointed out several difficulties. First, the quantity of relevant messages in the cases of Internet debates is still very limited. People talk a lot, chat, but few really valuable things are to be found. Second, in many cases the empirical data shows that a lot of messages are transmitted by a small number of people (and this can be the case also for relevant messages). Third, as any other communication tool, the Internet can be and is used for propaganda, many debates are faked, some forums are ideologically biased (which would not be a problem if things are revealed from the beginning).

But all these problems, utopians say, have to be seen on the background of the good things that happen on the web. Not all the empirical data is encouraging right now, but, they say, the simple idea that people search for something new, that they want to overcome the limits of the representative democracy, that they organize themselves locally and, sometimes, globally is good news. The lack of confidence in today's politics can be transformed in the desire to change some aspects of the political life by creating pressure on the Internet.

10. Dystopians : Overcoming Fear, Losing Distance

One interesting argument about the limits of virtual communities comes from what we could call „the fear factor”. A lot of people do not have an active public life because of their fear of public exposure. The Internet seems to be the right solution, since it offers the protection that these people need: they can be members of virtual communities, they can be active there and they can have their say without their usual anxieties. But, dystopians would argue, doesn't this mean that their isolation grows? Instead of going out in the open (real) space of debate, those who experience the fear of public exposure get more and more isolated if they develop the Internet addiction. To paraphrase a well-known theory, they follow the *spiral of isolation*.

Overcoming fear by New Media tools doesn't make them more active citizens, in fact they are not citizens at all since they are alone all this time. The illusion they're in can get worse if they start searching for the social meaning of their life only in/through New Media tools.

The supporters of ICTs seldom talk about the fact that the new technologies not only help us with our fear of public exposure, but they also „erase” or overcome the physical distance between individuals. The dystopians reply that this may be true, but it doesn't mean that it is a good thing. As many

authors proved (Benedikt, 1991; Jones, 1995; Doheny-Farina, 1996), understanding the virtual space and, more important, the relation between physical and virtual space is a very intricate matter. Doheny-Farina, for instance, does not believe that we can create virtual communities that would leave out the physical communities. Our virtual communities could never exist without the real ones (van Dijk also supports this view in his study). At first, it was very easy to notice that because the local character of the system made that virtual community strictly dependent. In time, the shift towards *glocality* made things more unclear.

More, as Esposito and others have argued, changing the perception of space and distances could alter the substance of human interactions in society. K. Robins (*apud* Fernback, 2007 : 65) states that „cyberspace, with its myriad of little consensual communities, is a place where you will go in order to find confirmation and endorsement of your identity. And social and political life can never be about confirmation and endorsement – it needs distances”. Overcoming the distances is not a dream come true, but a nightmare for the society; the early excitement¹ has to be tempered. Robins thinks that the idea that geographic distance is tyrannical must be critically examined. There can be many situations in which distance can be a burden, but trying to eliminate it totally is simply giving in to an illusion. This illusion is dangerous, because the „electronic” closeness and intimacy that people seek and the sentimental nature of online community can lead to views that are anti-political, anti-social and anti-democratic. For instance, the sentimentalism feeds our nostalgic view about perfect communities, making us incapable of noticing that, in fact, countless times we are not part of a „true” community, but of simple network, not developing real forms of solidarity, but playing the game of network individualism.

11. Dystopians : Diluted Communities

In Fernback (2007 : 61), a male interviewee states that „for the deeper questions of life, most of them are not answered online”. Even granting that what happens through New Media leads to the formation of some sort of communities, that’s not enough. Fernback (2007 : 62-63) thinks that there is even more to it :

„the community metaphor placed on virtual social relations is inadequate and inappropriate. The metaphor is one of fellowship, respect and tolerance, but

¹ Rheingold wrote in 1987 that the virtual communities are better than the traditional ones because they allow you to find very quickly the people that you look for (with the same ideas, interests, hobbies, problems, political options etc.), in offline communities people having to lose a lot of time in order to reach that goal. Mathew McClure (Flichy, 2001 : 93) takes the excitement one step further comparing the Well with the French Cafes and Saloons during the Enlightenment, where a prominent intellectual atmosphere was dominant.

those qualities describe only a fraction of our cultural understood ideas about community. [...] The 'community as communicative process' metaphor is alive and well in cyberspace. But that metaphor is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility".

The community metaphor has its limits and it doesn't matter if we talk about online or offline communities. Oppressiveness might be a problem both offline and online. Indeed, many Internet users have abusive behaviours, and there were cases in which people left their online communities because they felt attacked, humiliated or marginalised. The tension between *public* and *private* aspects of life is present here and the dystopians focus on the fact that seldom (maybe in the majority of cases) our search for social intimacy using New Media tools is both nostalgic and delusive. For Fernback, it is a fact that :

„users of online technology have created meaningful constructs of social interaction in the online arena [...] [But] for now, the deepest significance of community remains in the everyday, non-mediated, physical interactions we have with one another" (2007: 63).

What happens online is relevant social interaction, but for Fernback and others the use of word „community" seems abusive. At best, what we have is a *diluted* form of community, in which only a few characteristics of the „old", traditional community are present (and these ones are hailed by the utopians). The *fluidity* and the *flexibility* of Internet use allow people to enter/leave a virtual community at every moment. The consequences of leaving a virtual community (with some relevant exceptions, though, if we think about corporate communication) are not as meaningful as the consequences of leaving your physical community. This possibility of swinging back and forth, of walking in or walking out in a totally arbitrary way is proof enough for the dystopians. Something important happens on the network, but then again, it may turn out to be *individualism*.

Fernback (2007 : 64) states that :

„the nostalgic community metaphor verges on the tyrannical because, as an institution, community has no limits or checks; it is eternally sought and persistently encouraged. Although the interviewees herein use the term community to describe their online social interactions, they do so inconsistently and without the meaningful commitment characterizing *Gemeinschaft*-like social structures. But while *Gemeinschaft* ideals might remain rhetorically paramount, perhaps place is not as important as commitment in social organization".

He thinks that it is both scientifically profitable and empirically consistent to make a shift from the study of communities to the study of *commitment* (how it is formed, how it is manifested in the case of online and

offline relationships etc.). This shift would enable us to learn more about the changes in the social landscape and the meaningful constructs in human interactions. *Virtual community* had its place, but :

„if scholars continue to paint internet studies with the broad brush of community, they dilute the potential of the research to understand how communities are constituted, how they operate, how they are integrated into offline social life, or what they provide” (2007: 66).

12. Hegelians : Normalization

Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton (2001 : 436) synthesize their study telling that „evidence suggests that the Internet is becoming normalized as it is incorporated into the routine practices of everyday life”. Talking about *social* (e-mail) and *asocial* (Web surfing, reading the news) activities online, they think that :

„when the Internet engages people primarily in asocial activities, then even more than television, its immersiveness can turn people away from community, organizational and political involvement, and domestic life. By contrast, when people use the Internet to communicate and coordinate with friends, relatives, and organizations – near and far – then it is a tool for building and maintaining social capital. Our research has shown that there are no single Internet effects” (2001: 451).

I have to add that this seems to be the situation with every *tool* or, more generally, human invention or innovation that people use: if you have already participated to online community activities and you want to increase your participation, the Internet can help you do that, but if you want to get more isolated socially but in the same time connected to what happens in the world, the Internet can help you do that, too.

There is enough New Media potential for the creation of the communities (virtual and offline) and (maybe) for the endorsement of traditional communities. In fact, there is an „ongoing affair” (Jankowski, 2002 : 34) between media and communities. This affair has been an epistemic object during what Jankowski calls *First Wave*, *Second Wave* and *Third Wave* (above mentioned), and every time you could have easily found both heavy critics and loud supporters of newspapers, radio or television. Jankowski (2002 : 34) notices that „most of such claims, initially, had little grounding in evidence, and when systematic and extensive studies were eventually conducted the results were, at best, mixed”.

In this affair, Jankowski (2002 : 44) adds, the relevant factors are the *individual characteristics* (demographics, life cycle, social, cultural and political interests, community ties, economic well-being), the *digital community networks*

(exposure and use, functionality, participation), the *communication landscape* (national and regional media, community media, digital community networks, interpersonal networks) and the *community structure* (population size and homogeneity, history, urban/rural dimension, social, political and cultural issues, relation to surrounding region). This explains, at least partially, why things get complicated.

As Neil Postman once put it, the changes brought by the Internet may have an *ecological* character: they deeply transform the medium they enter. So, if the press, radio and television changed (at least) some aspects of the social landscape, it is expected that the Internet will continue to do that also. But this has to be seen on the background that Wellman, Haase, Witte and Hampton presented earlier. The Internet will change *some* practices of our everyday life, but that doesn't mean *everything* will be changed. On the contrary, the online practices can and will support an influence from our offline life: we must never forget that the relation works bothways and, if Esposito, van Dijk and Doheny-Farina are right, we have to keep in mind the simple fact that online communities do not exist without the offline communities.

It is safer, thus, to say that this process of incorporation will continue, with all the consequences that can be derived from that. I do not support a radical position such as technological determinism, and I rather think that we should continue, from the methodological point of view, our (participatory) observations. Of course, normalization is not identical with disciplination. The fluidity and the freedom associated with the Internet use will remain core values, and this will make future scientific research even more interesting as we try to answer the constant question: what shall we use this *tool* for next?

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