
This volume takes on a salient but elusive topic: it aims to assess the Internet’s impact on our potential for community. The papers in the volume all ask, in one form or another, whether the Internet supports the development of new modes of interaction, exchange, and mediation, or whether it undermines elements of life that are critical to making communities robust and vibrant entities.

The topic of community is broadly construed and ranges from questions of labour relations and commercialism to individual ethics, personal identity, social activism, and collective intelligence. Several chapters take an optimistic view of developments and stress the democratic potential the authors see in the Internet and its uses (real or imagined). Others take an almost dismissively pessimistic view of its function and conclude that it will, like newspapers and television before it, hollow out civic and ethical existence. Half of the chapters are re-printed (and sometimes re-worked) content from books or articles, lending the volume a more dated feel than might be expected. Nonetheless, there are newer papers in the volume that reflect more recent developments and make engaging contributions to work in the field.

There is an important observation to be made regarding how this volume investigates the Internet–community nexus. There are two ways to approach this task. One is to ask what impact the Internet can be observed to be having on actual experience. The other is to ask what impact it could have, if certain aspects of its demonstrated capacities were more fully engaged. The second question was common to the early work on the Internet, and understandably so. With a new medium, the best most people could do was take a stab at its future shape based on the characteristics they could immediately discern. But with time, and with the arrival of more and better studies of use and application, it became possible to tackle the first question and illuminate actual practices, good and bad.

Both of these questions mark valid approaches to the problem at hand, of course, and both are pursued in this volume. The difficulty is that a clear line is not always discernible between them. The dangers involved in walking the line between the “is” and “could be” of Internet use appear, for instance, in the introductory chapter by Feenberg and Bakardjieva. The authors concede that the optimism associated with the early days of Internet studies was overblown, but they still encourage scholars to embrace the dream of community. “[I]n the realm of technology,” they explain, “myth is sometimes future reality.” The Internet is one realm, they tell us, where dreams can “come true” (p. 24).

Compounding this ambiguity regarding methodological orientation is an assumption that plays through several of the chapters, but that again appears prominently in the opening chapter. This is the idea that the Internet is currently in an evolutionary flux, but that it will one day settle down into a more fixed pattern (p. 15). The challenge therefore is to get in and influence that settling-down process in the right direction, making this a critical one-time opportunity. Yet from what we have seen so far, the medium has demonstrated tremendous potential for re-invention, so whether it supports communities or not, it is far from clear that theorizing about a future “stabilized” (p. 14) Internet is even appropriate.

Of the new papers in the volume, those by Darin Barney and Leslie Regan Shade are worth special mention. Barney offers a rich reflection on the role of physicality in community-building, inspired by the Arendtian argument that a common world of things provides an essential building-block of social and political relatedness. With the rise of the Internet we are not just re-configuring our spatial world, Barney argues, we are trying to live without it, and it is not clear that community can make the transition. The chapter by Shade, meanwhile, details the evolution of two women’s-issues websites from home-grown feminist entities to slick commercial products. The blow-by-blow history raises more questions
than it answers, but it starkly illustrates a trend that has been observed by other scholars, such as Lawrence Lessig (2000)—that in the absence of intervening factors we are likely to see steady commercialization of online resources, regardless of their initial commitments.

Among the re-printed papers, the chapters by Turkle and Bimber represent important contributions: Turkle’s because it is a classic statement of her meditations on the role of the medium in opening a new space for identity exploration; and, Bimber’s because it reviews and assesses recent research on politics and the Internet, updated with the help of Diane Johnson.

The editors are to be congratulated for pulling together such a diverse range of scholarship on a significant topic. The volume makes clear that the question of community is still wide open and that much depends on whether users want to pursue communal ends or not. While there is a distinctly exhortatory feel to some of its content, its contributors highlight roadblocks we must reckon with as well as resources we might cultivate, and in doing so, they begin to map this tricky terrain.

One common assumption of the volume, however, is that the digital-age communities we are concerned with cultivating will naturally align with democratic objectives. In other words, the possibility that community life can also have illiberal, essentialist, or exclusionary implications is not given sustained attention. In light of the difficult debates currently raging in political theory over group-based claims of culture and solidarity, this narrow view is striking. Aside from this difficulty, the only other omission to note is in some ways a peculiar one. The volume has nothing to say about the impact of the Internet or digital technology on the community of the excluded—those on the other side of the legendary digital divide(s). For good or ill, exclusion is in many ways the most community-building experience of all. We must be careful, in other words, that a self-referential focus on the wired world does not lead us to miss significant developments that are byproducts of the Internet and the digitization process primarily by virtue of not being included in them.

References

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