

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://ucloer.eprints-hosting.org/id/eprint/23/>



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?

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 and minority users
 - Online aliases, Facebook rape

Communities of interest

- Email lists and web boards to chat rooms
 - MSN, Facebook, Twitter
- Element of real-life focus
- Range from harmless to controversial
 - Problem of relationship to real life
- Open to abuse
 - Sports team
 - Medical support groups
 - Campaigning or organisation
- May involve F2F meeting
- May unite geographically diverse members

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, etc. 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, etc.
- Large amount of political blogging
 - Works best when in opposition?
- Grass roots political campaigning and 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