A culturalist critique of 'online community' in new media studies

Elaine J. Yuan

Communication Department

University of Illinois at Chicago

eyuan@uic.edu

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of the theoretical perspectives and trends in the study of online community. It traces the genealogy of the community concept, addressing the conflicting views of community as a morally valued way of life and as a complex of social relationships in Western sociology. The essay also critiques the network approach to online community for its inadequate conceptualization of culture, which provides particular tradition of meanings for social action. Lastly, under the rubrics of development and modernization, the paper contrasts the conception of online community as social network with what has been observed about the social and political lifeworlds of East Asian societies.

INTRODUCTION

As one of the defining themes in new media studies, the concept of community frames a rich body of work on the new forms of sociability in cyberspace (e.g. Baym, 1998; Fernback, 2007; Jones, 1995, 1998; Katz et al, 2004; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999). Recently, however, discussions of online community have subsided (Fox, 2004). Scholars are now concerned that voluntary, fluid and ephemeral social relationships online do not bear out the deeply embedded human interdependence embodied in the concept of

community, despite its normative appeal (Bakardjieva, 2003; Fernback, 2007; Postill, 2008).

Discussions of online community in new media studies are typically influenced by the liberal and modern tradition in Western sociology that relegates community to the past as an antiquated social formation that paved the way to modern civil society and nation state (Bauman, 2001; Chatterjee, 1993). A review of the genealogy of the community concept helps explain the mismatch between 'community' as a traditional form of sociality and the Internet as a new form of materiality in liberal narratives.

I argue that the community question not only pertains to social structure but also connects material customs with cultural values (Jones, 1995; Wellman, 1999). The pure structural approach to social relations in network analysis is inadequate to explain the formation and process of online community. A culturalist perspective is needed to reckon the interplay of materiality and sociality into the production and reproduction of social order in particular contexts.

As a culturally defined way of life, traditional community ideals play an indispensable role in social organization in East Asia's newly industrialized nations. As a variable of developing social relationships, the community question serves as a point of departure for pondering some fundamental questions: Can progress and reason be defined in a communal rather than an individualistic sense? Is modernity necessarily premised on a complete departure from traditions? Does social development follow ideational logics in addition to material (economics and technology) logics? Such discussions emphasize the importance of cultural

structure, which is both grounded in and independent of the objective social structure, in influencing social action. This culturalist perspective turns the debate over conceptions of online community into a dialogue about the development of online social relationships in different cultures.

COMMUNITY IN NEW MEDIA STUDIES

Originally used in sociology, the definition of community has changed constantly during its long academic history. Aiming to capture a multifaceted, ever-evolving set of social practices, the term varies in denotation as well as connotation when discussed in different theoretical contexts (see e.g. Brint, 2001; Calhoun, 1980; Frazer, 1999).

Much early research on online community involved identifying the key parameters of community life and then looking for their presence online (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). Researchers have observed many cases of intense feelings of solidarity, empathy and support that people generate when interacting in virtual environments (e.g. Baym, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999). These findings relate well to the emotional and normative dimensions of the community concept, and therefore helped legitimize the conception of (digitally) networked communication as a 'community.'

Following this line of argument, the Internet was thought to be a prospective site, a social space, for capturing the community ideal through meaningful online interactions (Johnson, 2001; Jones, 1995, 1998; Rheingold, 1993; Wellman, 1999). Research on online community building and maintenance as well as on its

application in areas such as education, business, and health abound (Johnson, 2001; Jones, 1995, 1998; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005).

However, in the scholarly debates about the characterization of online social relationships, many researchers have expressed increasing uneasiness with the miss-match between empirical findings about online social interaction patterns and what the concept of community symbolizes (Calhoun, 1998; Fernback, 2007; Postill, 2008; Wittel, 2001).

Coming to terms with 'online community'

Sociologists have long contested the notion of community premised on geographical proximity. Yet, as a stable social structure, it is necessarily defined by close social relationships (Frazer, 1999; Wellman, 1979). As such, the concept embodies the idea that human beings are fundamentally related to each other as 'whole persons' through social bonds and value consensus that enable stable relationships among the members (Etzioni, 1996; Frazer, 1999; Selznick, 2002).

In contrast, individuals interacting online are often loosely linked by specialized instrumental ties. The boundaries of online communities are fluid and association among members ephemeral (Calhoun, 1998; Chua et al, 2009; Johnson, 2001; Katz et al, 2004; Wellman, 1999). Individualist attributes of the online community, such as voluntary association based on needs, clearly distinguish it from traditional communities with inherent normative structures nurturing organic orders (Katz et al, 2004).

Fernback (2007: 49) observes that 'members of virtual communities speak of mutual respect and caring but demur at the notion of true closeness ...the metaphor of "community" in cyberspace is one of convenient togetherness without real responsibility'. She contends that the concept of online community has become 'increasingly diluted as it evolves into a pastiche of elements that ostensibly "signify" community.'

Community as social network

These observations and remarks indicate growing discomfort with the conventional assumptions of the community concept in new media studies (Fernback, 2007). Scholars contend that the concept is no longer adequate to characterize the social interactions, processes and human sharing occurring in cyberspace. What is needed instead are new approaches unburdened by the sociocultural components or 'structural-functional baggage' of the term (Castells, 2001; Fernback, 2007: 49; Postill, 2008; Wittel, 2001).

The rising prominence of network analysis has lent the study of online community a much-needed new vocabulary. Community has been discussed in such network terms as 'network density,' 'multiplexity' and 'reciprocity' (e.g. Haythornthwaite, 2002; Wellman, 1999). Analytically, network analysis provides a robust empirical approach to social structure as network ties. It turns a merely metaphorical understanding of social embeddedness into a precise tool for investigating patterned relationships among actors in social networks (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994; Salvini, 2010).

In his seminal network analysis of modern-day urban communities in North America, Wellman (1979) contended that community had been liberated from spatiality and can be observed as social networks. He forcefully demonstrated that there existed loosely structured personal networks made up of multiple, specialized ties in place of multi-stranded densely-knit communal relations. The analysis touched on how modern communication technology, especially the telephone, was associated with these changes in community structure. However, like cultural differences, communication technology was treated only as a 'structural circumstance' and its linkage with the structural change of the network was not made a focus of the analysis (Wellman, 1979). Following this network analysis approach, subsequent new media researchers argue that online communities have similar structural characteristics. In fact, the very term 'network' has come to signify an amorphous, transient and fluid social construction (Wittel, 2001).

The network analysis approach focuses on community structure, the objective dimensions of social relations. This structural approach provides solid grounding to description of social reality as snapshots of network patterns regardless their social contexts. As such, however, it often neglects the cultural and intersubjective dimensions of social relations. Elements such as values, beliefs, meaning, and motivation, which are crucial for community formation and integration, are either treated as confounding variables or as dependent on structure. Consequently, network analysts are able to provide little systematic explanation as to precisely how a certain community structure occurs (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994).

Similarly, there has been relatively little discussion in new media studies on how cultural or moral forces help structure the belief and behavior of the social actors engaging in sharing social resources, generating trust and providing sociability online. Instead, the community question for new media studies has become a tautological argument that prominently features the Internet as both cause and effect. On the one hand, the Internet enables sociality without the constraints of locality, thus helping to transform communal relations into loose networks. On the other hand, networks consisting of multiple shifting sets of glocalized ties are the main form of online relationships, and hence are evident of the structural transformation of communities.

Moreover, without much discussion of their specifically normative commitments, network analysts instead impose, a priori, a rational choice view onto the social actors. Networked individuals are no more than utility maximizers pursuing their material interests (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). Online communities are simply fluid aggregates of such networked individuals, incidences of 'networked individualism' (Chua et al, 2009; Wellman et al, 2003; Wellman, 1999). Highly individualistic in nature, this approach strips the term of the sense of collectivity. Instead, community becomes conceptually and empirically both a 'projection and extension of the self' (Fernback 2007; Silverstone, 2003:20).

On a grander level, social networks are backbones of a network society as a new social order. Such a network social structure, highly decentralized and dynamic, is 'a source of dramatic reorganization of power relationships' (Castells, 2007:502; Wellman et al, 2003). Scholars argue that with network technology providing

opportunity structures, the social network as an ideal social structure has significant implications for the revitalization of representative democracy in civil society (Benkler, 2006; Castells, 2007; Garret, 2006; Wellman, et al 2003). Along this line of argument, much research has focused on how the Internet contributes to an emerging virtual public sphere for public deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Papacharissi, 2002). Conceptually, these arguments endorse an individualistic, rationalist, and contractual social order that contrasts to the embedded mutual dependence embodied in the conventional concept of community (Calhoun, 1993; Huang, 1993).

Fernback (2007) has observed that the political discourse of online communication has been paradoxically imbued with both the language of 'community' and the rhetoric of 'hyper-individualism of Libertarian ideology'. Yet, the general tendency in new media scholarship seems to abolish the concept of community and all its 'utopian' yet 'conservative' assumptions in favor of a progressive individualistic conception of social interaction and social order (Fernback, 2007: 53; Wittel, 2001: 62).

Contextualizing community

Although the network approach recognizes the possibilities of group formation in cyberspace, its underlying theses stress the role of the autonomous individual as key to holding such spaces together (Silverstone, 2003). Not surprisingly, discourses on the transformation of social structure in modern Western sociology bear deep influences on the concurrently evolving, if not

dissolving, notion of community in new media studies. According to the mainstream liberal and modernist account, the development of Western societies from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft has rendered individualistic legal-rational relations the preferred hence dominant way of social organization (Brint, 2001). (New) media technologies are believed to have played a substantial role in such transformations. The online realm, naturally, is an important new site for the analysis of such developments.

The irony for new media researchers is that the call for new and culture-free conceptualizations of online community as 'a means of paradigmatic progress' in the study of online social interactions (Fernback, 2007: 50) is intrinsically tied to this broad sociocultural context in the modern West. Central to this context is the rational-choice focus on the individual and his/her self-interest (Lichbach and Seligman, 2000).

Hereby I propose, concurring with Calhoun (1980), to penetrate beneath the simple category of community to uncover a variable of social relations and understand what community, as a model of social organization, is and does in specific socio-historical contexts. By doing so, I aim to reframe the basic question about community in order to open up new sites for examining the contours of social relations in mediated communication in various contexts.

THE COMMUNITY QUESTION IN NEW MEDIA STUDIES

The notion of “community” took off during the Industrial Revolution, a period of dramatic social changes in Western Europe. While social actions moved away from the traditional nexus of community to the macro-scale of political society, emerging social problems propelled people to reckon consequences of urbanization and industrialization and lament the destruction of traditional social moralities. As a result of concrete change and variation, the term emerged as a sociological category for people to reflect on the moral and political significance of these changes (Calhoun, 1980; Frazer, 1999).

The community question, therefore, not only acutely pertains to the issues of social structure and integration but also connects material customs with the transformation of social values and belief systems (Jones, 1995; Wellman, 1999). However, the concept of community rapidly lost its reflexive edge as it came into widespread usage. In order to proceed with comparative studies of community, we need to trace in social history some of the earlier concerns about difference and change in social life rather than simply attempting to reconstruct an arbitrary and essentialist abstraction (Calhoun, 1980).

Community in Western sociology

In the accounts of the Western liberal tradition, the history has progressed from the deliberate curbing of the restrictive powers of community (Calhoun, 1980; Chatterjee, 1993; Frazer, 1999; Zablocki, 2000). The transition to ‘modern society’ is portrayed as the process of breaking down traditional indigenous authorities (such as the village and family) that threatened individual freedom and replacing them

with the formal equality of all individuals as legal rights before a central state authority (Frazer, 1999). The idea that natural affiliation to a community violates the freedom of choice intrinsic to the subjective will led theorists to identify community as the domain of ascription, and modern associations as the way to freedom and choice (Chatterjee, 1993). Indeed, Western sociology can be interpreted as being founded on a dualistic division between modern and traditional social relations, as illustrated in Weber's ideas of communal and associative relations, Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, and Durkheim's mechanical and organic solidarity (Calhoun 1980; Frazer, 1999).

Chatterjee (1993) disputes the validity of this opposition between community and modern society. He points out that in conceptualizing 'civil society', both Locke and Montesquieu appealed to a notion of community as the ground for the legal notion of subjective rights. However, the relation between rights and community was severed in the subsequent history of the state-civil society relation as a result of the development of capitalism. Because 'community regulated the social unity of laborers with their means of production', the destruction of community was fundamental for capital to take control of labors (129). Lichbach and Seligman (2000: 5) concur that 'it is only in one particular form—market capitalism—that there has emerged an individual conceived of as an autonomous entity'.

Although modern civil society grew out of a market order, many theorists recognized that relationships purely based on economic self-interest were inherently unstable (Madsen, 1993). Durkheim championed the belief that there had

to be a non-contractual basis for social contract. Tocqueville pointed out that religious and political traditions were important for sustaining stability and solidarity in modern society (Bella et al, 1985; Madsen, 1993). For that reason, Chatterjee (1993) concludes, 'it is not so much the state-civil society opposition but rather the capital-community opposition that seems to be the great unsurpassed contradiction in Western social philosophy' (130). As a result, Western sociology has never 'resolved the issue of how to reconcile the modern market with the premodern moral traditions that have somehow made it function' (Lichbach and Seligman, 2000; Madsen, 1993: 188).

Consequently, reestablishing equilibrium between community and individualism has become a prominent concern in Western social-philosophical discourses (Brint, 2001). The new communitarian movement that emerged in the early 1980s, for instance, was a response to views 'that are overly individualistic, insufficiently sensitive to the social sources of selfhood and obligation, too much concerned with rights and too little with duty, too ready to accept an anemic conception of the common good' (Selznick, 2002: 7). In the so-called 'communitarian-liberal debate', communitarians problematize the liberal models of individual, society and state and object to the proposition that the individual should stand in a direct unmediated and often antagonistic relationship with the state and with society (Frazer, 1999: 1; Selznick, 2002).

Starkly opposite the communitarian viewpoint is the argument of institutionalized individualism. It maintains that individualization has become the social structure of post-modern society (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim,

2001). Under fluid social conditions, people have to constantly construct and adjust their self-identity and way of living, thus becoming increasingly indifferent to and doubtful of the common good. People turn to the public power only when they expect to be enabled to satisfy their own interests and then peacefully go about their own ways. Collectivism and communities are deemed as expedient, temporary measures only for resource-deprived individuals. Therefore, an individual's competence in self-reflexivity is the best means for the renewal of society under conditions of radical change (Bauman, 2001).

Materiality and sociality

Discourses and ideologies emerging from the use and study of media technology are necessarily situated in the historically constituted sociocultural consciousness and practices in which these technologies are embedded. From this historical vantage point, we are to understand the failed attempt to 'reify' community as a traditional form of sociality to the 'new' materiality of the Internet in new media studies (Pels, et al, 2002).

In fact, the Internet has always been susceptible to particular narrative construction and, in extreme cases, identified as a political object in its own right. At any rate, the notion of 'affordance' is useful to untangle unwarranted projections of political qualities and purposes onto the material design and physical dimensions of the technological artifact itself (Pels, et al, 2002; Wellman, et al, 2003). While materiality is clearly a condition for sociality, the former is nothing more than the totality of its affordances. This de-reification is crucial in theorizing the interplay

between materiality and sociality in producing social order and reopening 'the question of the material constitution and technical equipment of different forms of social order' (Pels, et al, 2002: 6).

COMMUNITY IN EAST ASIA

The transition from community to modern society constitutes the epic of Western modernization that is firmly grounded on Enlightenment values oriented toward the individual (Khilnani, 2001; King, 2002; Tu, 1996, 2000). The process of globalization has precipitated the incorporation of societies worldwide into this 'capitalist modernity,' with all its social, economic and political implications. However, it is both ineffectual and dangerous to project too easily the results of a historical experience specific to Western countries onto societies that possess their own historical and cultural logics (Chatterjee, 1993; Fukuyama, 1995; Huang, 2008; Khilnani, 2001)

The rise of industrial East Asia signifies that modernization and development can assume a cultural form different from those identified as characteristically Western (Tu, 1996). Such a cultural form indicates that modern society is not intrinsically linked to Western-style capitalism, democracy or individualism (King, 2002; Tu, 1996, 2000). Fukuyama (1995: 12) comments that 'the essence of the Asian alternatives is a society built not around individual rights, but around a deeply engrained moral code that is the basis for strong social structures and community life'. Tu (1996) further identifies the centrality of the state in a market economy, the importance of family values to social solidarity, and the rich interplay between

communal consensus and personal autonomy as the main characteristics of East Asian modern societies.

Furthermore, East Asian experience challenges the common thesis that modernity is 'either a conscious rejection or an unintended departure from tradition' (Tu 1996: 24). While 'real community grounded in intimate, personal contact and concrete issues of integration has vanished and been replaced by a mental construct' in Western consciousness and practices (Katz, et al, 2004: 10), the continuing role of tradition has been an active agent in sustaining an evolving modernity for East Asia.

The lifeworlds of East Asian societies have been deeply influenced by the historically important yet newly reconstituted cultural tradition of Confucian philosophy (Tu, 1996, 2000). Such values as social embeddedness, distributive justice, duty consciousness and group orientation bear close resemblance to the social constructionism and particularism of the liberal communitarian argument in the West (Etzioni, 1996; Frazer, 1999). Communal life in the East Asian context dwells on culturally specific and historically contextualized personal relations, which contrasts to the abstract universal principle in the capitalist conception of the *homo economicus* (Tu, 1996, 2000). The family plays a paramount role in almost every important aspect of social economic life in all East Asian countries. Many prominent modes of interpersonal communication based on educational, territorial and religious ties feature this family-based connectedness (Fukuyama, 1995; Tu, 1996).

Tu (1996: 26) argues that the saliency of this 'noncontractual, extra-legal, and ascriptive networking' in East Asia contrasts with Western-style civil society rooted in voluntary associations (Gold et al, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995). Implicit in this conception of a personal network for social intercourse is the idea of duty. 'The sense that one is obligated to, and responsible for, an ever-expanding network of human relatedness may not be a constraint on one's independence and autonomy' (Tu, 1996: 26). Although a truly functioning public sphere based on communicative rationality may not be present in all of these recently industrialized countries, 'the density of the human network and the complexity of the cultural texture in East Asian societies is an extraordinarily modern example of "organic solidarity", in Emile Durkheim's conception of a necessary condition for modernity' (Tu, 1996: 38).

A critical step toward understanding East Asian societies is to comprehend their basic-level social structures and their shaping of the social and politics (Womack, 1991). In their overviews of modern Chinese sociopolitical thoughts, Huang (2008) and Wang (2008) note that the proper social order, as conceived by the nation's liberal scholars for a modern China, inheres in the idea of *qun*, or community, instead of the property-owning, rights-endowed, and self-interested individual. Womack (1991: 324) contends that it is 'the small and defined ecology of community rather than the indefinitely large ecology of society' that most distinguishes everyday Chinese politics and society from the West. Chatterjee (1993: 225) argues that in the long histories of many Asian countries, the concept of

the nation was made tangible in the concreteness of an imagined network of kinship extending outward from the local structures of community.'

While in Western classical-liberal tradition, individual liberty is juxtaposed against the state, early modern Chinese liberal thinkers conceptualized liberty to mean the release of individual energies for the purpose of state power (Huang, 2008). Differences in historical circumstances led to the disparity between the Western experience of the bourgeoisie's power against the state and the Chinese context in which a state and society seek to strengthen themselves in tandem (Huang, 2008; Wang, 2008). The binary opposition between state and society obscures some exceptional continuities in East Asian societies (Huang, 1993). In fact, the integration of state and society has been a key feature of contemporary Chinese party-state (Womack, 1991). The modernization experience in East Asia goes counter to the tendency to oversimplify the relation between modern society and traditional community. Instead, it turns the distinction between the society and state, and the discontinuity between the tradition and modernity, into a continuum of modernization (Womack, 1991).

Online community in different cultures

However, interest in contextualized and historicalized understandings of the dynamics between new media and society in non-Western nations is rare among Internet researchers. The influence of Asian cultural orientation toward family and communal spirit on the uses of the Internet has received virtually no academic attention (Ess, 2001; Kluver and Yang, 2005). In the rest of this section, I provide

some observations of cultural dynamics embodied in online communication in East Asian contexts and a brief discussion on symbolic interactionism as a theoretical framework for the cultural analysis of new media. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate the importance of critically evaluating fundamental assumptions regarding values, reality and identity in our understanding of online communication (Ess, 2001).

As aforementioned, one prominent and persistent feature of Chinese society is the prevalence of webs of personal relations, or *guanxi* networks (Gold, et al., 2002). Structurally, these “personal networks” bear many similarities with online networks identified in new media studies. Extending outward from the individual in the center, the *guanxi* network is the collectivity of total social relations the person differentially relates to. Open and fluid, *guanxi* networks are not bounded by geographical but by social proximity.

However, *guanxi* networks embody very different cultural dynamics. While “the great divide” between the private and public, the personal and impersonal (instrumental), is responsible for the prevalence of segmental ties, online or offline, in the modern West (Fairfield, 2005; Weintraub, 1997), *guanxi* networks diffuse through private/public boundaries with both emotional and utilitarian components (Gold, et al., 2002; Hwang, 1987). Moreover, whereas reciprocity in urban life in the West is dependent upon the dyadic quality, the ability of particular network ties to provide connection to social resources (Bakardjieva, 2003; Wellman, 1979), Chinese cultural norms prescribe exquisite social rules, such as *renqing* (moral obligation to help) and *mianzi* (face), to maintain mutual dependence and group solidarity among

people enmeshed in their networks (Gold, et al., 2002; Hwang, 1987). Under such Chinese norms, single-stranded loose links have a tendency to become multi-stranded over time.

Within this particular cultural context, the affordances of communication technologies, such as the prevalent Internet-capable smart phone, is likely to play a role in upholding such traditional ideals as social harmony and commitment in modern Chinese society. In her study of the mobile phone, for instance, Yuan (2010) argues that mediated sociability in Chinese society is defined not so much by an extension of the self as by contextualized interaction with diffuse personal relations on open mobile social networks.

While mainstream new media studies suggest that the Internet, as a new social space, liberates people from social norms and enables them to cycle through identities for self-exploration and expression (Turkle, 1996), in East Asian cultures, 'relational personalization' often leads to group conformity among individual members through a normative influence mechanism. While online groups are often constructed in a way that allows high visibility of relational clues and mutual relationship monitoring, online users tend to comply with personalized influencing agents (Wang and Shen, 2011: 1). Online linguistic practices are capable of re-creating communicative hierarchies and relational contexts in online environments devoid of conventional relational contexts. Consequently, characteristics of Chinese communication, such as particularism, relational hierarchies, receiver-orientation and high context (Gold, et al., 2002; Yum, 1988), are carried into cyberspace with the help of the Internet.

Yuan (2011) observed that in a popular online female fan community dedicated to romance novels, participants created highly cultural-specific relational labels such as 'qinma (the birth mother),' 'houma (the stepmother),' and 'yima (the aunt, a sister of the mother in Chinese culture) ,' to address the authors of different types of stories and each other in their interactions. Such cultural linguistic subjectification necessarily embedded the community members into prescribed family-oriented identity categories. By the process of interpellation, these categories defined community members' knowledge and understanding of the communicative context in their mundane interactions. Metalanguage, such as 'ff (short for "angry youth"),' discussants with left-leaning political views on social issues, and 'jy (short for "social elites"),' individuals who often express liberal, right-leaning political views, has grown 'organically' out of group interaction to classify viewpoints into identity categories, which in turn prescribe differentiated communicative roles. These labels help the participants understand the conversations and provide contexts that inform their standings of the issues. Much like the ingroup/outgroup distinction, such binding group identities often dictate how the participants respond to a certain issue more than their individual beliefs.

Analysis of online linguistic practices as symbolic representations of cultural and intersubjective dynamics has a natural affinity to symbolic interactionism. In fact, new media researchers have argued that symbolic interactionism is a useful approach to online community (e. g. Baym, 1998; Fernback, 2007). According to this approach, social structure emerges from individual actions as 'a processual composition of interaction– symbolization–interpretation on the part of individuals.

One crucial caveat, though, is the approach's ambiguity toward internalized value orientations and relational contexts, as well as its amnesia to broad sociological issues (Lichbach and Seligman, 2000; Salvini, 2010: 381). To address the issue, we need to emphasize that symbolic discourses crystallize within irreducible cultural structures both grounded in and independent of social structures. These cultural structures frame social reality into distinct categories, which, in turn, provide the groundwork for normative evaluations as well as for guidelines for symbolic action (Emirbayer and Goodwin, 1994). Online community as a social phenomenon analyzed at the meso or micro level in new media studies needs to be contextualized in adequate an conception of cultural influence.

CULTURALIST PERSPECTIVE ON NEW MEDIA RESEARCH

In both popular and academic discourse, the image of cyberspace is often that of a 'second life', independent of mundane social environment and free from the constraints of the material world. It is a 'transcendent' realm of virtual reality that recognizes no socio-economic status or temporal-spatial limits (Andrejevic, 2006; Chua, et al, 2009; Gotved, 2006; Silverstone, 2003: 21). As such, cyberspace is susceptible to the total control of humans. Such impulses of emancipation and domination, the dialectic of the Enlightenment, have become the dominant ideologies emerging from new technologies. In a sense, these ideologies are a logical continuation of 'the Enlightenment progression toward an inside-ness in which all of reality has been subsumed to scientific rationality and then reconstructed in its image' (Andrejevic, 2006: 23).

Out of this ideology has emerged a conception of online community as a social artifact of the Internet era (Fox, 2004). Appropriating Anderson's popular notion of the nation as an imagined community, scholars understand the formation of online communities as a mainly subjective process. They believe that 'without ever knowing more than a screen name and a vague consciousness that they are congregating in a particular online space for similar reasons', and that those millions of anonymous users could build an online community solely predicated on their extended consciousness (Fox, 2004: 52; Baym, 1998; Gotved, 2006).

In his powerful critique of Anderson's account of 'nation-building', Anthony Smith (1991, 2004) argues that the formation of modern nations was never a simple process of subjective 'invention' and 'imagination' but more akin to the process of rediscovering and reinterpreting the pre-modern bases of nationhood in the earlier manifestations of ethnic community. Smith further points out that central to the concepts of 'invention' and 'imagination' is the prevalent modernist idea that the social transformation from stable customs and traditions to a rapidly changing modern era frees human beings to shape and direct their destinies. Smith contends that such a conception, centered in the idea of an autonomous individual, 'ultimately denies the power of the past (of received structures) to determine the products of human agency' (Lichbach and Seligman, 2000; Smith, 1991: 364).

The dominant discourse about online community is situated in rationalist-modernist assumptions. Online social practices are often defined or redefined according to a functional rationality embodied in the autonomous self. Consequently, the concept of community, 'in its various post-modern

reformulations', seems to be replaced analytically by, inevitably solipsistic and narcissistic, notions of performance and technologically enabled omnipotence' (Silverstone, 2003: 23).

However, the material logics of economics and technology do not necessarily account for the complexity and variability of lifeworlds constituting the global community. The example of East Asian experience can help enrich our understanding of human community as culturally specific and historically contextualized way of life and of its promise in constructing a modern social order. The fundamental question posed by the culturalists to the rationalists, as explicated by such examples, is: Is 'the view of the self as a purely and radically autonomous, atomistic, and self-regulating moral agent endowed with rights' shared by 'all societies and peoples throughout human history' or is the rational choice creature merely 'a historically specific being' (Lichbach and Seligman, 2000: 5)?

Such a culturalist approach has significant implications in the study of new media globally. Jones (2005: 234) calls for 'a radical contextualism', which highlights the notion of culture and history in Internet Studies. After all, (new) media are fundamentally integrated into social, political, economic and cultural processes. As the Internet seamlessly assimilates the fabrics of our daily life, the online and the offline converge into a single social realm (Fernback, 2007). Interactions within communities need to be understood as a melding of the physical and the virtual (Fox, 2004).

The Internet, therefore, must be understood as essentially interconnected with the social processes that it simultaneously shapes and is shaped by. On the one

hand, online relationships are influenced by broad social factors such as institutional structures, power, global information, capital flows and other processes that construct our communal practices (Fernback, 2007). On the other hand, social interaction, online and offline, is the common foundation for emerging cultural patterns as well as for the processes of structural change (Gotved, 2006). More work needs to be done to understand how institutions and culture interact to produce variations in Internet use, and on online community in terms of its nature, composition, interactional styles, network structure and social implications in societally specific ways (Chua et al, 2009).

Monberg (2005) points out that Internet research is located in an area characterized by rapid technological development and advance. But the social consequences of technological progress are far more than uniform and linear. It is critical, therefore, to nurture a healthy skepticism toward narrow conceptions of progress and rationality. Media-enabled community may serve as a helpful point of departure in our exploration of the particularities of the technologies and social changes that matter most. If the ideal of the Internet is to facilitate a meaningfully inclusive space encompassing distant others not only geographically, but also culturally, politically, sociologically and historically (Silverstone, 2003), we need to acknowledge both the material logics of economics and technology and the ideational logics of social historical conditions (Chatterjee, 1993: 13).

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