Chapter Seven

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES IN A MASS SOCIETY: RELATIONSHIPS AMIDST ISOLATED AGGREGATES

INTRODUCTION

Marshall McLuhan’s coinage of the term “global village” at a time when all that the world was aware of were the things we now call “traditional mass media” was indeed more prophetic than descriptive of the prevailing situation then. The world of the mid 1960’s, when McLuhan uttered the prophecy of the global village was severally larger than the world of today. The coming of the Internet has shrunk the world beyond what the weirdest science fiction writer of the sixties would have imagined. And this was at an incredible speed. Moving from the industrial age to the information age has taken the world a tiny fraction of how long it took it to move from the agrarian age to the industrial. The celerity of the movement has made it look as if rather than being another stage in the society’s evolutionary process, the coming of the information age is a reaction to the effects of the industrial age. Adopting this perspective, this paper examines the concept of mass society—a fallout of the industrial age, the concept of virtual communities—a fallout of the information age, and the ameliorating influence the latter is having on the former.

MASS SOCIETY

Auguste Comte was credited with making the concept of society as an organism a fundamental postulate in sociological studies. To him, a society is an organism in that it has a structure, and different parts performing

AYO OJEBODE, Lecturer, Department of Communication and Language Arts, University of Ibadan, Ibadan
specialized functions the result of which in diverse ways benefit the whole organism. Quite naturally, therefore, the society undergoes evolution, progressing from a simple to a more complex status (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975; Perry and Perry, 1975). This postulate actually achieved a theoretical status subscribed to with various modifications by noted sociologists after Comte, such as Emile Durkheim, Herbert Spencer and Ferdinand Tönnies among others.

According to the theorists, one of the major dynamics of the society is division of labour. With this in place, society would progress through specific stages as a unified whole. Since the progress is natural and evolutionary, it was assumed that the final consequences would be for the ultimate good. Nonetheless, even in those pre-industrial revolution times when much of these thoughts was articulated, there had been some foreboding that overspecialization would lead to grave ends. One of such apprehensions was that it would limit people’s knowledge of, interest in and relationship with one another. Comte (1915: 293) cited by De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975: 139) says:

If the separation of the social functions develops a useful spirit of detail, on one hand, it tends, on the other, to extinguish or restrict what we call the aggregate or general spirit…. Thus it is that the principle by which alone general society could be developed and extended, threatens, in another view, to decompose it into a multitude of unconnected corporations, which almost seem not to belong to the same species.

In the same vein, Tönnies predicted the movement of societies from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft. Gemeinschaft is roughly translated as a communal or traditional society characterized by shared feelings and interpersonal ties. There, “people are strongly bound to one another through tradition, through kinship, through friendship, or because of some other socially cohesive factor” (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975: 143). Major characteristics of such societies are informality, spontaneity, exceedingly strong and binding primary relationships and reciprocity. Gesellschaft type of society on the other hand is an associational society. It is complex and loose. Tönnies is quoted as saying:

In Gesellschaft…everybody is by himself and isolated, and there exists a condition of tension against all others. Their spheres of activity are sharply separated, so that everyone refuses to everyone else contact with and admittance to

his sphere… (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975: 145).

A major feature of social relationships in Gesellschaft societies is contract—“a rationally agreed upon voluntary social relationship where two parties involved promise to fulfill specific obligations to each other or to forfeit specific commodities if the contract is breached” (De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach, 1975: 144). Unlike in Gemeinschaft, relationship in Gesellschaft is formal and highly organized. It is highly competitive, less trustworthy and less enduring. So also, individuals’ motive is to maximize what they benefit and minimize what they offer in any relationship.

It should be noted that no society has been perfectly Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft. In most are found a combination of the traits of both types. Nonetheless, there has been an easily observable shift from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft among modern societies. As industrial revolution ravaged most parts of Europe starting from the late nineteenth century, cities grew without control, rapid temporal mobility hit the family and other primary social groups. Members of close-knit groups had to change locations in search of jobs or as they were displaced by expanding capitalist industries. The factory system overthrew the home-based, cottage unit of the economy thereby causing disintegration where there had been intimacy and proximity. Invention in science and technology characterized this era. Among the products of the time was radio in the 1900’s followed by television in the 1930’s. However,

the direction of most of the technological development of our time has been towards greater introversion. The automobile, the passenger aeroplane, the movie, the television set, the multi-storey block [apartment building], are all much more introverted than their predecessors. The result is increased alienation and a decline in the sense of festivity, the sense of pleasure in belonging to a community. The one advantage of introverted situation is privacy; but for us the growing introversion goes along with steady decrease in privacy. This means that the psychological conditions of life, whatever the physical conditions, become increasingly like those of life in a prison, where there is no privacy and yet no real community (Frye 1978:448)

So, the coming of the broadcast media at a time the ties that held communities had been stretched to the bank of snap worsened matters. The
individual now had a companion in the media and so was more enabled to let go of whatever of the ties with his primary group that was left.

The onward plunge into a media dependent society was hastened by the World War I. The war brought such feelings of insecurity and fear that could be neutralized only by a consistent dose of highly addictive media intake. The governments of the belligerent nations not only capitalized on their recent historical antecedents but also in fact grossly abused the media. The term “propaganda” emerged during this era though the common citizen did not understand what it meant then (Infante, Rancer and Womack 1990:343). The media came and took the place of primary social groups causing further weakening of their web.

The World War I and the industrial revolution before it left not the tightly knit social groups they met but an aggregate of isolated individuals. The term “mass society” was created to describe the situation. As Infante et al. (1990) put it, the term does not refer to a large number of people in a given culture, but the relationship between the individual and the given social order around them. The Online Dictionary of Social Sciences defines mass society as that

with a mass culture and large-scale, impersonal, social institutions... It is intended to draw attention to the way in which life in complex societies with great specialization and rationalized institutions can become too anonymous and impersonal, and fail to support adequate bonds between the individual and the community.

Broom and Selznick (1958:38) quoted by De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975:152-153) gives a compact description of mass society in these words: Modern society is made up of masses in the sense that there has emerged a vast mass of segregated, isolated individuals interdependent in all sorts of specialized ways yet lacking in any central unifying value or purpose. The weakening of traditional bonds, the growth of rationality, and the division of labor, have created societies made up of individuals who are only loosely bound together. In this sense, the word “mass” suggests something closer to an aggregate than to a tightly knit social group

Perry and Perry (1975) paint a gloomy picture of the individual in the American mass society as an anonymous individual: in the university he is unknown to his lecturer and fellow students; in the church where he wor-

ships he is unknown to the pastor; after graduation and in the large corporation where he works he is known only to the computer that issues his pay cheque; he pays tax to a government with which he has no contact and gives to charity without knowing whom he has benefited.

A society in which members are presented with huge, neatly compartmentalized pigeonholes in which to fit their lives is called a mass society... It is a society characterized by a great deal of anonymity, by a high degree of mobility, by secondary group relationships among people, by increasing specialization of roles and statuses and by a growing indifference to the traditional values and goals of society (Perry and Perry 1975:626) (original emphasis)

At the beginning of the discussions of mass society, the concept appeared to be a mere theoretical supposition of an ideal. However, events have revealed a continuous proclivity towards real mass society. Long ago, Mills (1956) had lamented that “the classic community of publics is being transformed into a society of masses”. Wilson (undated) blames mass society increasingly rampant occurrences such as “high rates of depression, mental illness, suicide, drug addiction, and dysfunctional and abusive relationships”.

Some scholars having seen the manifestation of the forecast mass society have proffered a let out. Loevinger (1978:440) says:

What we urgently need today is a larger concept of community—to see the community which we are part of not merely as a town, city, metropolitan area, or state, but as a country, a unified, civilized, orderly national society.

This is an image that cannot be created by art, but that must grow in the minds and hearts of men.

This is the kind of community De Fleur and Ball-Rokeach (1975:143) call “the Gemeinschaft of minds...where people share a deep commitment to a given set of beliefs that become a basis for a strong social organization”.

VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Notwithstanding what technology and the economy seem to have done to societies, man still remains, for the most part, a gregarious being. The emergence and the swift spread of virtual communities serve to support this assertion. A virtual community is a congregation of like-minded individuals who rarely, if ever at all, meet physically but who maintain a relationship over the Internet. It is a community not bounded by the lines of
a map but knit by shared ideas, beliefs, experiences and circumstances.

The first attempt at creating virtual communities was in 1948 during the Berlin crisis. Effort was made to wire together telex machines from a dozen different countries. Part of the reason for its failure was that everybody was trying to communicate at the same time in different languages (Rheingold 1996). By late 1960’s, however, the Internet had come into operation, linking a few universities and defense laboratories in the United States (Parks and Floyd 1996), and by 1970, ARPA (Advanced Research Project Agency) was online with new tools for broadening the gamut of cyber networking. Today, it is nearly impossible to give a clean number of existing virtual communities. In 1996, Parks and Floyd put them at over 5,000 and put Internet users generally at 30 to 40 million. In 1992, Usenet alone had over 2.5 million members and over 11,000 sites (Rheingold 1996). Krapels and Moss (1997) said about 23 million employees in the United States had access to and used e-mail services. Some of these no doubt used their e-mails for community discussions.

Virtual communities differ in nature/aims and mode of communication. While some are emotional support groups such as the Internet Relay Chat and the e-mail group that emerged following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 (King 1995); some are strictly professional groups such as Usenet’s rec. autos. tech meant for automobile engineers, or ADAnet meant for sharing professional medical information pertaining to epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, post-polio syndrome, muscular dystrophy among others. Some are meant for people who are kindred in their choice of recreation. An example is Usenet’s r.a.t.s. (rec. arts. tv. soaps) created for the audience of soaps who want to discuss their impression about any soap the group chooses. Some communities are religious (e.g Jews’ keshernet; LDSnet for adherents of Latter Day Saints [Mormons] or Johnson-Lenzes’s Awaken) while some are for the discussion of problems and issues of life (e.g Parenting Conference of WELL [Whole Earth Electronic Link]). Virtual communities communicate via a variety of modes including simple e-mail list, BBS (Bulletin Board System) or community sites.

**RELATIONSHIP LOST VERSUS RELATIONSHIP LIBERATED**

Like the traditional mass media that were its predecessors, the Internet especially the idea of virtual communities has been an object of praise and blame. On the one hand are those who see true relationships as impossible in a virtual environment or those who contend that virtual relationships are a danger to real relationships. On the other hand are those who see virtual life as a window to cross-border, limitless relationships.

**RELATIONSHIP LOST**

One of the major criticisms against virtual communities is that they create exclusion rather than promote belongingness that they so claim to promote. Gurak (1997) cited by Dicken-Garcia (1998) says that the formulation of specialized virtual communities raises the problem of exclusion. In other words, the fact that membership of these communities is based on stated criteria indicates a form of class system and segregation.

Not unrelated to the question of exclusion is the allegation that membership of a virtual community increases the time individual spends gazing at the computer screen and so create isolation. Individuals so glued to the Net cut off the real environment that surrounds them. This Minerl (1999) calls the decline of conversation with everybody wired. In Gurak’s opinion cited by Dicken-Garcia (1998), this culminates in introversion. Nie and Erbing (2000) conducted a study among 4,113 Net users in 2,689 households. They discovered among other things that people who spend five hours or more per week online spend less time with family, friends, and with even television. Eight percent of those who spend such an amount of time online have even reduced the number of social events they attend. Importantly, these impacts are felt as soon as a person gets online.

In addition, it is pointed out that prolonged use of the Net, which marks all members of virtual communities, limits imagination and reduces thinking skills and mental agility. The explanation is that cyber exchanges give a respondent ample time to think and do so slowly before responding. The skills of mental agility which we all learn by practice become unnecessary and consequently ill-developed. Not only this, some cyber exchanges are mere “choose a response”, needing little or no creativity and innovativeness. It is also said that virtual communication lacks those face-to-face cues that keep discussants in control and make them behave responsibly. Without creativity and spontaneity, relationships can hardly grow (Dicken-Garcia 1998).

King (2001), himself a member of a number of virtual communities states that online relationships lack personal disclosure, an essential ingredient in relationship building. He says:

We don’t really know each other, because we don’t tend to share the kind of information that brings people close and
fosters a sense of community. Even in the virtual groups where that is part of the stated purpose for participation...the notes posted represent such a small fraction of the person writing that intimacy and interpersonal bonding occur only if someone unilaterally chooses it.

One of the outworkings of this is the prevalence of separate personas in cyber interaction. "On the Internet, people take on new personalities, typified by less inhibited behavior. That is, some communicate electronically, what they would never say in person" (Dicken-Garcia 1998:22).

Freedom of expression, a deified ideal in civilized nations and an assumed blessing, is a culprit in cyber discussions. Until recently when communities designed measures to keep unregistered intruders off, abused freedom of expression on the Net had been a festering sore leading in some cases to the extinction of a whole community. An example is the CommuniTree BBS, a community created in 1978 for interaction over social and spiritual matters. Somehow, some students, mostly males got hold of the community's address and:

within a short time the Tree was jammed with obscene and scatological messages. There was no easy way to monitor them as they arrived, and no easy way to remove them once they were in the system... . Within a few months, the Tree had expired, choked to death with what one participant called 'the consequences of freedom of expression.' (Rheingold 1996: chp. 4)

Gurak, cited by Dicken-Garcia (1998) refers to this as the problem of control of information.

RELATIONSHIP LIBERATED

While many of the critics of virtual communities appear to be spectators or at best commentators in the whole game of virtual relationships, most of those who support the idea of virtual communities are participants in virtual life themselves. Instead of citing studies and clarifying conceptual matters, they share experiences of how being part of a virtual community has benefited them. Samples:

1. Howard Rheingold's: In the summer of 1986, my then-two-year-old daughter picked up a tick. There was this blood-bloated thing sucking on our baby's scalp, and we weren't quite sure how to go about getting it off.

My wife, Judy, called the pediatrician. It was eleven o'clock in the evening. I logged onto the WELL. I got my answer online within minutes from a fellow with the improbable but genuine name of Flash Gordon, M.D. I had removed the tick by the time Judy got the callback from the pediatrician's office. What amazed me wasn't just the speed with which we obtained precisely the information we needed to know, right when we needed to know it. It was also the immense inner sense of security that comes with discovering that real people—most of them parents, some of them nurses, doctors, and midwives—are available, around the clock, if you need them. There is a magic protective circle around the atmosphere of this particular conference. We're talking about our sons and daughters in this forum, not about our computers or our opinions about philosophy, and many of us feel that this tacit understanding sanctifies the virtual space (Rheingold 1996)

2. Jay Allison's: Before this time, my computer screen had never been a place to go for solace. Far from it. But there it was. Those nights sitting up late with my daughter, I'd go to my computer, dial up the WELL, and ramble. I wrote about what was happening that night or that year. I didn't know anyone I was "talking" to. I had never laid eyes on them. At 3:00 a.m. my "real" friends were asleep, so I turned to this foreign, invisible community for support. The WELL was always awake. Any difficulty is harder to bear in isolation. There is nothing to measure against, to lean against. Typing out my journal entries into the computer and over the phone lines, I found fellowship and comfort in this unlikely medium. (Rheingold 1996)

3. Phil Catalfo's [a.k.a Philcat](Jan. 16): We learned early last week that our son Gabriel, 7 (our middle child), has acute lymphocytic leukemia, aka ALL. I will be opening one or more additional topics to discuss the chronology of events, emotions and experiences stirred up by this newly central fact of our lives... . The first thing I want to say, regardless of how it does or doesn't pertain to this particular topic, is that the support and love my family and I, and especially Gabe, have been receiving from the WELL, have been invaluable. This turns out to have a medical impact, which we'll discuss in good time, but I want to say out loud how much it's appreciated: infinitely. (Rheingold 1996)

4. Nancy Pietrafesa [a.k.a Lapeche] responds to Phil Catalfo same day (Jan 16)

Philcat, we're here and we're listening. We share your hope and a small
part of your pain. Hang on.

5. Tina Loney [aka Onezie] responds to Phil Catalfo same day (Jan 16)

Phil, I took the liberty of writing to flash (host of the Health conf) and
telling him to link whichever of the three topics he feels appropriate. I very
much look forward to you telling us all that you can/are able about Gabe.
In the meanwhile, I’m thinking about Gabriel and your entire family. Seems
I remember Gabe has quite a good Catalfo sense of humor, and I hope
you’re able to aid him in keeping that in top form... Virtual hugs are
streaming in his direction.

There is no doubt that relationships can form and are forming online.
There are studies that lay a basis for affirming that such relationships are
not only possible but are in fact to be expected. Parks and Floyd (1996)
conducted a study among members of some Usenet newsgroups and
discovered that over 60% of the sample had formed personal relationship
with somebody first met through the newsgroup. Flaherty, Pearce and Rubin
(1998) in what looks like a uses and gratification study of cyber exchanges
discovered that cyber relationships meet such needs as inclusion, social
interaction, control, affection, pleasure as well as habit and escape. Such
studies as these buttress the theoretical postulation that interpersonal
similarity in attitudes and values are more important than physical proximity
and appearance in relationship building. Lindgren (1973:55) cited
Newscomb’s (1956, 1961, 1963) study of acquaintanceship process in two
sets of seventeen male students. The students, who had all been strangers
before the study, were housed together for sixteen weeks. Through a weekly
survey, Newscomb found that roommates were attracted to each other at
the beginning irrespective of similarity in attitudes and values. As the weeks
went by, mutual liking grew stronger among individuals with similar
attitudes and beliefs. It was attitudes, beliefs and values, not proximity that
produced interpersonal relationship.

WHAT IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

With the exception of specialized, professional communities, most flour-
ishing virtual communities seem to possess four significant elements: in-
formal ways of communication; some framework for enforcing acceptable
behaviour without jeopardizing members’ freedom of expression; shared
experience and interests, and caring and sharing among members.

Baym (undated) did a content study of the “posts” by and a survey of the
opinions of members of r.a.t.s (rec.arts.tv.soaps), one of the newsgroups of
Usenet. Her aim was to study how humour is generated in online relation-
ships and the effect this has on relationship building. She found that “humour
in r.a.t.s facilitates self-presentation, common understandings, group soli-
darity and identity”. Also, Rheingold (1996) identified informalities such
as idle talk as those things that build relationship in virtual communities. It
is in “idle talk that people learn what kind of person you are, why you
should be trusted or mistrusted, what interests you”. Informal communi-
cation is indispensable if virtual relationships are to thrive. In addition to
humour and idle talk, techniques of informality in online cyber talk include
first names or casual cybernym, the use of the smiley and outright inclu-
sion of comments like “grin”, “bet you laugh”.

Secondly, virtual communities have rules and regulation meant to curb
any abuse of virtual opportunities. These, called netiquette in cyberspeak are
made available to intending members. For instance, among members of the
WELL, an in-built rule has it that no one can be anonymous. Even when
cybernyms are used, they are always linked to the UserID. This certainly gives
a long way in reducing one of the critical shortcomings of virtual communi-
cation. In some communities, part of the rule is that members do something
significant to promote group solidarity. However, care is always taken to
avoid trampling on people’s freedom of speech in the name of regulation.

Third, shared interests and experiences also serve to promote relation-
ships in virtual communities. Baym (undated) found that relationship in
r.a.t.s grows because members share a sense of solidarity, being soap fans
discussing on-going soaps. Rheingold (1996) attributes the growth of
WELL’s parenting community to shared pains, fears and worries in the
course of child raising.

Fourth, caring and sharing among members constitute another factor in
the growth of most virtual communities. Sometimes, an individual goes an
extra mile to help other members as in the case of David Hawkins
(cybernym: dhawk):

Dhawk spent more and more time online, helping the lost,
comforting the afflicted... . David Hawkins drove for
nearly an hour, everyday for most of a week, to visit an
online acquaintance who had undergone minor surgery.
Dhawk helped me find my way around and he visited me
face-to-face early in the game (Rheingold 1996)

Sometimes, it is whole community that demonstrates a sense of solidar-
ity with a troubled individual. David Gans (cybernym: Maddog) was a
radio producer. He had a bitter experience when his station cancelled his slot and so his job. Someone in his community (the WELL’s Deadhead community), suggested he syndicate his programme to other stations. It took the communal pressure of the Deadhead community for him to accept that idea which eventually made him a radio icon (Rheingold 1996).

Another activity that promotes relationship in virtual settings is that online relationships sometimes get offline employing other avenues and channels. Bruckman (1992) cited by Parks and Floyd (1996) discovered that some relationships that started in virtual communities blossomed into romance and marriage. The Parenting community of the WELL has an annual parenting picnic held in summer during which members of the community meet physically. They have another meeting (Picke Family Circus) in winter. Meetings like these cement relationships further.

CONCLUSION

Even in the developing countries where people are relatively more resistant to whatever challenges tradition, the web of geographical community is gradually weakening and the society is becoming increasingly “mass”. On the other hand, the Internet with its attendant virtual relationships is filling everywhere with its presence. In Nigeria, for instance, every major street in most major cities is dotted with cybercafés. While it is impossible to stop the old order from passing on, it is not impossible to make the best use of the new. At the theoretical level, the fact that virtual communities are building enduring interpersonal relationships in spite of the shortcomings of cyber life underscores the need to redefine some of the theoretical assumptions considered germane to relationship building so as to accommodate this growing phenomenon.

REFERENCES


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