

# *Creating Community with Media: History, Theories and Scientific Investigations*

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Of all the promises and prognoses made about old and new media, perhaps the most compelling has been the possibility of regenerating community through mediated forms of communication. This theme found expression during the development of radio in the 1920s and 1930s and later with television in the 1950s. It was particularly prominent during the introduction of community radio and television in the 1970s; it has reached extraordinary proportions with the more recent emergence of 'virtual communities' on Internet-based services.

This chapter traces the relationship between (new) media and community. The first section sketches three historical periods when the relation between community and media has been central. A brief description of new media is also provided here. The second section explores the transformation of the concept of community from early locality-oriented sociological studies to those conducted from a multidisciplinary examination of Internet-based communication facilities where a geographical 'place' is absent. The third section provides illustrations of three types of studies relating community and media: small-scale electronic media, community information networks, and public discussions and debates via electronic networks. The fourth and last section examines the main methodological approaches and suggests the contours of a research agenda oriented towards further exploration of the interface between community and new media.

## COMMUNITY AND MEDIA: AN ONGOING AFFAIR

An abundance of claims, optimistic and pessimistic, have been made regarding what impact the media – and most recently the Internet – may have on society in general and community in particular. It seems as if each generation has been represented by its pundits on the contribution media may have on the human condition. During the Golden Age of radio, for example, that medium was promised to bring culture into every living room; later, television was destined to transform education (see e.g. Czitrom, 1982; Douglas, 1997; Head, 1972). Both of these media were equally feared as potential tools for political propaganda; television and movies, moreover, were suspected of being able to undermine the very fabric of society, deforming young minds and debasing cultural heritage. 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.<sup>1</sup>

Similar claims also accompanied the introduction of the Internet. This new communication technology, it is said, will eradicate the inequalities and evils in society. Education will improve exponentially; citizens will become concerned and active; commerce, under the stewardship of the 'new economy', will thrive. Some, such as the co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, envision the

Internet as nothing less than ‘the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire’ (Barlow et al., 1995: 40). Rheingold (1993a; 1993b; 2000) is well known for his position that the Internet can help rediscover or reinvigorate community. In his widely cited book *The Virtual Community* (cited, once again, later in this chapter), he voices the general belief that the loss of traditional community values can be regained through communication via the Internet.

Such claims, as Fernback (1999) and others have observed, are more polemical expressions than considered assessments based on empirical evidence. Similarly, Wellman and Gulia (1999: 169) criticize such accounts as ‘presentist and unscholarly’ and historically uninformed. Most of these claims, they point out, fail to acknowledge the long-standing concern of sociologists regarding the impact of various facets of modernization – industrialization, urbanization, transportation – on society.

This section considers the special and ongoing relationship between communication and media across time. Primary attention is given to ‘new media’, and for that reason it is important to dwell, at least briefly, on what is meant by that term. First of all, it must be acknowledged that ‘newness’ is a relative notion with regard to both time and place. What is new today is old tomorrow, and what is new in one cultural context may be unknown or outmoded in another. This relativistic feature of the term has prompted some scholars (e.g. Fauconnier, 1973; Hamelink, 1980) to suggest other identifiers: telematics, and information and communication technologies, are two such rivals. Other unique features of new media have also been addressed, coming to something of a climax in the series of essays published in the maiden issue of *New Media & Society* in 1999. There, ‘what’s new about new media’ was considered by ten leading communications scholars. Although – understandably – no consensus was achieved, it is interesting to note that much of the newness addressed had to do with transformations in the ways individuals are able to relate to media and to determine the place and functions of these media in their everyday lives. New media are, to a large degree, socially constructed phenomena and often deviate substantially from the designer’s original intent.

For the purposes of this chapter, the characteristics of new media outlined by McQuail (1994: 20–6) serve as a useful delineation of the term. New media, he suggests, generally involve decentralization of channels for the distribution of messages; an increase in the capacity available for transferral of messages thanks to satellites, cable and computer networks; an increase in the options available for audience members to become involved in the communication process, often entailing an

interactive form of communication; and an increase in the degree of flexibility for determining the form and content through digitization of messages. Negroponte (1995) considers this last aspect the most fundamental feature, and digitization for him essentially means that the content of one medium can be interchanged with another.

The developments usually associated with new media are many and include such technologies as CD-I and CD-ROM; cable television and computer networks; various computer-mediated communication (CMC) developments such as e-mail, news-groups and discussion lists, and real-time chat services; and Internet-based news services provided by traditional newspapers and broadcasters. Many of these examples are technological in substance and have, by themselves, little to do with the communication process as embedded within specific historical, societal or personal contexts. New media, as considered in this chapter, are seen as developments in communication grounded within such contexts. For this reason, there is value in examining the relation of media, new for their time and place, with concern for community. Although the argument could be made that such examination might legitimately begin as far back as Gutenberg’s invention of movable type or, even further, the Egyptian development of parchment, preference is given to sketching the special relationship between community and media evident since the early 1900s when community studies developed as a serious academic enterprise. The second ‘wave’ of studies concerned with community and media can be traced to the late 1960s and 1970s when small-scale electronic community media emerged on the scene. The third and last period to be sketched is the era of the Internet. Only a few of the striking highlights are mentioned here; more detailed illustrations of studies concerned with community and new media are reserved for the following section.

### **First Wave of Community and Media Studies**

A concerted effort to investigate possible relations between media and community occurred under the auspices of the Chicago School in the 1920s and 1930s. In particular, Park (1922) was interested in the role of the community press regarding identity formation among immigrant groups. In a subsequent study he observed that newspaper reading was more a characteristic among residents in cities than in rural areas (Park, 1929). Also, Park found that different kinds of news were read in the city than in the country: in the city readers had more interest in news from outside the region and in the country readers preferred local news.

Merton (1949) followed up on this distinction in his study of 'Rovere' and identified two groups of residents: localites and cosmopolitans. Localites were oriented toward the local community, engaged in locally based social activities and primarily attended to the local newspaper as a source for local news. Cosmopolitans, in contrast, had a broader orientation and range of social activities, and consumed media from outside the locality. Merton was suggesting, in other words, that media use and community participation were reflections of individual traits.

Janowitz (1952) took a different approach to the topic of community and media, and stressed the role of community structure with regard to local newspaper use. Like Park, Janowitz was concerned about the role of newspapers in integrating individuals into a community. He felt local newspapers could contribute to consensus within a local community, and he investigated the role of family, social cohesion and community participation on community newspaper readership. Janowitz found that community integration and community involvement are related to greater attention to local newspapers.

These and other contributions to the relation between media and community are reviewed by Stamm (1985) in his study of newspaper use and community ties. On the basis of this review, Stamm develops a model whereby community ties can be seen as either antecedents to or consequences of community media use. He suggests that an individual's tie to place (e.g. length of residence), to structure (e.g. membership of local organizations) and to process (e.g. participation in local activities) are associated with an individual's newspaper readership. Stamm's (1985: 8) model describes newspaper use across time and he postulates that at different points in time community newspaper readership contributes to establishing community ties, and at other times the opposite occurs: community ties contribute to newspaper use. This line of research has recently been extended by Westerik (2001) through construction and testing of a causal model involving these and other variables.

### **Second Wave: Electronic Community Media**

With development of portable video recording technology and cable television distribution systems in the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new thrust of interest developed for geographically defined as well as spatially dispersed groups to employ these communication technologies for community initiatives and actions. Use of these electronic tools of communication was in many ways an extension of print technologies – the stencil machine and offset press technology – introduced a decade earlier

during the 1960s when counter-culture and political groups established their own newspapers, known as the underground or alternative press (Denis and Rivers, 1974).

The media in these contexts were also coined 'community media', and this term referred to a diverse range of mediated forms of communication: electronic media such as radio and television, print media such as newspapers and magazines, and later electronic network initiatives embracing characteristics of both traditional print and electronic media. The manner in which community television is defined is typical of these small-scale initiatives: 'made by local people as distinct from professional broadcasters' (Lewis, 1976: 61). Members of the community, often in alliance with professional station staff, are meant to be responsible for the ideas and production of the resulting programming. Community members are generally involved in all facets of station activities and exercise control over day-to-day and long-range policy matters.

New media such as community radio and television were the focus of studies across Western Europe (e.g. Halloran, 1977; Jankowski, 1988) and North America (e.g. Widlok, 1992). Several reviews sketch how groups utilized such small-scale electronic media for political and cultural purposes (e.g. Downing, 1984; 2000; Girard, 1992; Jallof, 1997). European studies of this 'people's voice', undertaken during the 1970s and 1980s, were collected in an anthology documenting its development and impact (Jankowski et al., 1992). In the introduction to this volume the editors express their affinity with the goals of the *then* new media:

We were ... taken by the dreams of developing or rebuilding a sense of community within new housing estates and aging neighborhoods, and applying these new media to that task. Sometimes these new community oriented media were meant to simply inform their audiences of events. Sometimes they went a step further and attempted to mobilize citizens in efforts to bring about change and improvement. Sometimes emancipatory objectives were embedded in station programming. (1992: 1)

In an assessment of those goals, Prehn (1992) points out that the initiators of community media frequently overestimated the need of people to express themselves via the media. This miscalculation often increased the difficulty of maintaining the necessary level of programming production for an established broadcasting schedule. And this problem led to the formation of a professional organizational structure antithetical to the original community-oriented objectives.

The legacy of this wave of activity relating community and media is mixed. Certainly the aspirations have remained intact, as will be demonstrated in the next section, but the results of the multitude of initiatives to achieve alternative voices

reaching intended audiences are unclear. In an overall assessment of a national experiment with community electronic media in the Netherlands, the researchers suggest that the contribution of community media to community-building processes worked best in those situations where a sense of community was already well established (Hollander, 1982; Stappers et al., 1992). In residential areas short on social capital, it seems as if community media can do little to 'make things better' (see also Jankowski et al., 2001).

### Third Wave: Era of the Internet

It is often difficult to pinpoint precisely when a new epoch has begun, but serious academic concern for the Internet can be traced to publication of a joint theme issue prepared by the *Journal of Communication* and the electronic upstart *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* (JCMC) in 1996. Another indication of the significance and importance of this third wave was the formation of the Association of Internet Researchers and the holding of its first international conference in September 2000. And, almost simultaneously across North America, Europe and Asia, new academic departments and research centres have been and are being established, all claiming niches in this new academic frontier. Some of these initiatives have taken virtual or online communities as objects of study.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of publishing, this new frontier has been no less than a gold rush and, for some, a lucrative gold mine. Major academic journals have recently been launched and others are on the drawing board.<sup>3</sup> The book publications regarding the Internet and aspects of community have quite literally exploded since publication of Benedikt's (1991) *Cyberspace: First Steps*. The series of volumes edited by Jones (1995a; 1997; 1998a; 1999) on cybersociety, virtual culture and Internet research rank as core contributions, as does a recent volume entitled *Communities in Cyberspace* (Smith and Kollock, 1999). The claim to key literature is also merited by a range of other studies on identity formation and the Internet (e.g. Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995).

Yet another niche of literature in this area is concerned with the employment of electronic or computer networks in geographically based communities. Sometimes called public education networks (PENs), community information networks or community informatics, the literature around these developments is accumulating rapidly. Several PhD dissertations have been or are nearing completion (e.g. Hampton, 2001; Malina, 2001; Prell, 2001; Silver, 2000). Conferences have been held and books recently released on this facet of community and new media (e.g. Gurstein, 2000; Loader and Keeble, 2001).

In conclusion, much is in flux, and such movement impairs vision and reflection. Still, it seems fair to say that academic concern for community, particularly within Internet environments, is alive and well. Whether such robustness will continue may depend largely on the degree to which conceptual refinement is achieved during the coming years. How far that refinement has yet to go is sketched in the next section.

### CHANGING FORMULATIONS OF COMMUNITY

Community has been called many things. Nisbet (1966: 47) considers it one of the 'most fundamental and far-reaching' concepts of sociology. Fundamental though it may be, sociologists have not succeeded in achieving consensus on what is exactly meant by the term. In an inventory taken during the heyday of sociological concern, Hillery (1955) collected 94 distinct definitions of the concept. This plethora of meanings has led some to doubt its scientific utility. In the entry in an authoritative dictionary of sociology, for example, the authors introduce the concept as 'one of the more elusive and vague in sociology and is by now largely without specific meaning' (Abercrombie et al., 1994: 75).

Community as a popular concept has proven strikingly resilient to such attacks, however, and has gained a new life in academic discourse since discussion of the various forms of virtual communities allegedly emerging in cyberspace. It has caught, once again, the collective imagination, so much so that some Internet scholars lament the 'use and overuse of "community" in the popular and scholarly press' (Dyson, cited in Cherny, 1999: 247). It is safe to say that the concept of community is as central to present-day studies of the Internet as it was during the earlier years of sociology. The main difference seems to be redirection of emphasis from geographic place to a feeling or sense of collectivity.

This section of the chapter traces the development and change of the main formulations of community from the early period of sociology through the decades of the Chicago School and subsequent follow-up studies. More recent theoretical and methodological reorientation, with emphasis on social ties, is considered thereafter. Finally, the discussions and efforts to define community within the context of the Internet are dealt with at some length, and new formulations of community within this environment are highlighted.

### Early Sociological Conceptualizations of Community

Discussions of community within the discipline of sociology frequently begin with the contributions of

Tönnies (1887/1957), particularly his formulations of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. *Gemeinschaft*, usually translated as ‘community’, refers to relationships that are ‘intimate, enduring and based upon a clear understanding of where each person stands in society’ (Bell and Newby, 1972: 24). Found in pre-industrial societies, these relations were felt to be culturally homogeneous and strongly influenced by institutions such as the church and the family. The core of *Gemeinschaft* involves ‘sentimental attachment to the conventions and mores of a beloved place enshrined in a tradition which was handed down over the generations from family to family’ (Newby, 1980: 15).

Tönnies’ term *Gesellschaft* is generally translated as ‘society’ or ‘association’, and refers to ‘large-scale, impersonal, calculative and contractual relationships’ (Newby, 1980: 15) believed to be increasing during the period of industrialization at the turn of the nineteenth century. Actions are taken in light of their potential benefit for the individual. Relations are contractual and functionally specific. Because of the individual orientation, *Gesellschaft* is characterized by a continual state of tension.

These constructions should be seen as ideal types, as Tönnies intended. Further, it is important to realize that, for Tönnies, locality was but one of the factors of community. His term also involved consideration of a relationship meant to characterize the whole of society, of ‘communion’ as well as ‘community’ (Newby, 1980: 16). Nevertheless, emphasis in subsequent sociological studies stressed the locality dimension, as did Wirth’s (1938) exposition on urban life and Redfield’s (1947) elaboration of Tönnies’ duality into a so-called rural–urban continuum. Wirth, for example, is noted for emphasizing that *where* we live has a profound influence upon *how* we live (Newby, 1980: 18). This idea – the centrality of locality – came under increasing challenge thanks to more recent research findings. Gans (1962), for example, took issue much later with the fundamental premise in the work of Wirth and Redfield, and argued that lifestyles are determined not by locality but by other variables, particularly social class and stage in the life cycle (Newby, 1980: 28).

### Social Ties as Indicators of Community

The debate around community has, for some, the characteristics of a dead end. Stacey (1974), for example, feels sociologists should discard the concept of community altogether because of its normative lading and because of the substantial definitional disagreements. Her proposal is to concentrate on the role of institutions within specific localities.

Other proposals have also been made, and one of the most enticing is the argument made regarding social ties in understanding many of the issues

previously assembled under the concept of community. The central approach being taken here is network analysis – examination of the relationships (ties) established between individuals, groups or institutions (nodes). This approach allows researchers to avoid the value-laden term ‘community’. Equally important, the approach opens up investigation across localities: the rural with the urban, the suburban with the metropolitan.

Social network analysis has become the *cause célèbre* in much of the work of Wellman and colleagues (Garton et al., 1999; Wellman, 1997; 1999; Wellman and Berkowitz, 1988; 1997), and most recently in their investigation of the utilization of electronic networks within residential areas (e.g. Wellman and Hampton, 1999; Hampton and Wellman, 2000). In a discussion of what he calls the ‘community question’, Wellman (1999) explains the features and value of social network analysis. The network approach, he asserts, avoids individual-level research perspectives, focusing instead on the relations between the nodes or units of a network. This approach provides an opportunity to consider such features as the density and ‘tightness’ of relations, the degree of heterogeneity among units within a network, and the impact that connections and positions within a network may have on individual or collective action.

### Virtual Community

As already mentioned, Rheingold is perhaps more responsible than anyone else for generating interest in and enthusiasm for virtual communities. His book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (2000) gives a personal glimpse of what life is like in the nether world of cyberspace. Drawing on many years of personal experience in one of the first virtual communities, the WELL (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), Rheingold elaborates on the range of activities participants engage in while in that virtual environment, a range about as broad as is conceivable:

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can’t kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. (1993b: 3)

Rheingold has been frequently criticized for taking an excessively euphoric and uncritical stance regarding virtual communities (e.g. Fernback and Thompson, 1995b) and for lacking theoretical

sophistication in his approach. Both criticisms have a degree of truth, but both are at the same time misleading and misplaced. Although Rheingold is certainly hopeful about the contribution that virtual communities may make to enriching collective life, he is at the same time uncertain about whether the efforts will succeed and poses questions in this direction. For example, he speculates, 'fragmentation, hierarchization, rigidifying social boundaries, and single-niche colonies of people who share intolerances could become prevalent in the future' (Rheingold, 1993b: 207).

Such foreboding has not impeded interest, however, and Jones has perhaps done more to place the study of online community on the academic agenda than any other individual. Largely through the two edited volumes on what he calls 'cybersociety' (Jones, 1995a; 1998a), but also through his collections on virtual culture (Jones, 1997) and Internet research (Jones, 1999), he has brought together a critical mass of scholars concerned with community in cyberspace.

Jones sets the stage in his introductory essays in the two volumes on cybersociety (Jones, 1995b; 1998b) for the remainder of the contributions. He discusses and problematizes the possibility of community that is based on forms of computer-mediated communication, and critiques the often unquestioned position taken by community sociologists who automatically associate community with locality, with geographic place. Jones, like Bender (1978) and others before him, contends such identification robs the concept of community of its essence and mistakenly gives priority to organizational ease. Jones also draws from the conceptualization of communication as a form of ritual, citing his mentor James Carey: 'Communication under a transmission view is the extension of messages across geography for the purposes of control, the ... case under a ritual view is the sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality' (Carey, 1989: 18; cited in Jones, 1995b: 12).

There is an overwhelming feeling that new communities are being created, along with new forms of communities. The 'new form' these virtual communities may be taking is aptly expressed for Jones in a definition suggested by Stone (1991: 85): 'incontrovertibly social spaces in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both "meet" and "face"... [V]irtual communities [are] passage points for collections of common beliefs and practices that united people who were physically separated' (cited in Jones, 1995b: 19).

A series of theoretical contributions about community in the Jones volumes has been prepared by Fernback (1997; 1999; see also Fernback and Thompson, 1995a; 1995b). Fernback addresses contributions from the early sociologists Tönnies and Simmel, but she also reviews contributions

from Dewey and more recent literature from the 'new communitarians' Etzioni (1993) and Bellah et al. (1985). Unlike some earlier descriptions of community, she stresses the dynamic nature of the concept: 'as society evolves the notion of community evolves concomitantly' (Fernback, 1997). A current strain of the concept is known as virtual community which she defines as 'social relationship forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g. a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest' (Fernback and Thompson, 1995b).

One of the striking and problematic features of virtual communities, according to Fernback and Thompson (1995b), is the fluidity of association individuals may have with such communities. Individuals can become active and prominent quickly, and just as quickly disappear altogether: 'Leaving a virtual community might be as easy as changing the channel on a television set.' Such fluidity may have consequences, they point out, for the stability of virtual communities to a greater degree than is the case for 'real-life' or offline communities. For this reason they are pessimistic about the potential of online communities to contribute to 'the already fragmented landscape of the public sphere'.

In a subsequent work Fernback compares characteristics of virtual communities and American culture. The principles of free speech, individualism, equality and open access are associated with virtual communities, she claims, and are 'the same symbolic interests that define the character of American democracy' (Fernback, 1997: 39). It remains to be demonstrated that the above characteristics attributed to virtual communities are universal, but even should that be the case it remains particularly ethnocentric to identify them with American cultural icons. Such parochialism seems out of place in a discussion of a form of community that, by definition, is not constrained by the geographical boundaries or the cultural manifestations of a particular nation-state.

Van Dijk (1998) takes a different approach to the topic of virtual communities from both Jones and Fernback. He sets, first of all, the task of determining whether such social constructions can compensate for the general sense of loss of community prevailing in society. He then provides a working definition of virtual communities similar to other formulations, noting that they 'are communities which are not tied to a particular place or time, but which still serve common interests in social, cultural and mental reality ranging from general to special interests or activities' (1998: 40). On the basis of a review of some of the available literature on communities, van Dijk distils four characteristics he says are common to all communities: having members, a social organization, language and patterns of interaction, and a culture and common

Table 2.1 *Ideal types of organic and virtual communities*

Characteristic	Organic	Virtual
Composition and activity	Tight group (age) Several activities	Loose affiliation Special activities
Social organization	Tied to place and time	Not tied to place and time
Language and interaction	Verbal and non-verbal	Verbal and paralinguage
Culture and identity	Total singular Homogeneous	Partial plural Heterogeneous

Source: van Dijk, 1998: 45

identity. These characteristics are then used to compare virtual communities with real-life or what he prefers to call 'organic' communities. This exercise leads to a typology of ideal types wherein virtual communities are described as those with relatively loose relations, which are unconcerned with considerations of time and place, which contain a well-developed paralinguage, and which are pluralistic and heterogeneous in composition (see Table 2.1). As is the case with most efforts to construct ideal types, this profile of virtual communities falls short of adequately describing actual cases. Many virtual communities can be characterized by the strong ties among their members, are grounded in time and place, and reflect a homogeneous membership.

With this typology in hand, van Dijk formulates the central question of his study: 'To what extent can virtual communities replace organic communities and provide forces to countervail the present social processes of fragmentation and individualization?' (1998: 48). Reviewing conclusions based on early CMC research, he asserts that electronic groups will come to resemble their organic counterparts regarding their structure and rules. His overall conclusion is that virtual communities cannot reclaim 'lost' community in society, largely because the cultures and identities created are 'too partial, heterogeneous and fluid to create a strong sense of membership and belonging' (1998: 59). He contends that the quality of discourse is 'poor' and genuine dialogue is missing. At best, virtual communities may supplement organic communities, but are unable to replace them, according to van Dijk.

The above assertions might serve as hypotheses, but it is much too premature to claim them as conclusions. The empirical studies necessary to substantiate such claims have not been conducted. In a review by one of the few persons to have undertaken on extended ethnographic fieldwork of an online community, Baym supports this criticism: 'we do not have the empirical grounds on which to assess how (or if) online community affects offline community' (1998: 38).

Baym (1995; 1998; 1999), in addition to providing rich insight into a Usenet newsgroup devoted to discussion of television soap operas, also elaborates on a theoretical model of online community. She is concerned with understanding how such

communities develop and manifest themselves, and what occurs during the process of being online that leads participants to experience these virtual phenomena as communities. Baym develops what she calls an 'emergent model of online community' (1998: 38). She argues that five already existing features influence the character of an online community: external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and the characteristics of participants. These features impinge on the development of an online community regarding 'group-specific forms of expression, identities, relationships and normative conventions' (1998: 38).

The model Baym develops for online community can be represented schematically as illustrated in Table 2.2. Here, some of her original terms have been renamed, and the categories of temporal and system infrastructure have been combined. The cells within the table could contain summary data of a particular online community, such as the television soap opera newsgroup r.a.t.s. in the case of Baym's study. The model, once applied to a number of online communities, provides opportunity for comparative analysis. Baym notes that the overall purpose of her model is not to be predictive in nature, but to provide a framework for understanding how online communities develop. Although each community may be unique, as she argues, the model nevertheless provides guidelines for comparing online communities.

Another elaboration of the meaning of virtual community comes from the field of linguistics. In a case study of a multi-user dungeon (MUD), Cherny (1999) reviews definitions for speech communities, discourse communities and communities of practice. Following Hymes (1972), Cherny (1999: 13) suggests that a speech community involves sharing rules for speaking and interpreting communicative performance. Members of a speech community use language to delineate the boundaries of the community, to unify its members and to exclude others.

'Discourse community', as elaborated by Gurak (1997: 11), is concerned with the 'use of discourse for purposeful social action in a public arena'. This form of community resembles the 'interpretive community' to which language composition scholars allude. Finally, 'community of practice' refers to relations maintained by persons across time who

Table 2.2 *A model for online communities: characteristics and influences*

Characteristics	Influences			
	Communication	Identity	Relationships	Norms
Content				
Structure				
Objectives				
Participants				

Source: adapted from Baym, 1995; 1998

are involved in a collective set of activities. The 'academic community' could be considered an illustration of such a community of practice. One of the important features of this form of community is that it provides the overall conditions and basis for interpreting and making sense of events and activities. Participants share a general understanding of their activities and of the meaning ascribed to them. Although the distinctions between these terms is not always clear, they collectively suggest new avenues for understanding community from a perspective where use of language is central. The linguistics perspective seems particularly appropriate for computer-mediated communication because of its focus on forms of language and discourse.

Another current development is infusion of the concept 'social capital' into discussions and investigations of virtual communities (e.g. Blanchard and Horan, 1998). Coined by Putnam (1993; 1995; 2000), social capital can be seen as a recent variant of the older tradition of community development, community work and community action initiatives prominent in the United States in the 1960s. Riedel et al. (1998) examined the presence of social capital in a community network in a rural town in Minnesota, focusing on three components: interpersonal trust, social norms and association membership. These components of social capital were also used in another study of a digital community network in The Hague (Jankowski et al., 2001).

#### ILLUSTRATIVE STUDIES OF NEW MEDIA AND COMMUNITY

The various formulations of community presented in the previous section have found reflection in many empirical studies of the media. Here, illustrations are provided for three areas of research: small-scale electronic media, physically based online communities, and public discussion and debate on the Internet. Although research from other areas could have been chosen (e.g. community development and design,<sup>4</sup> culture and language, identity formation<sup>5</sup> and commercially oriented virtual communities<sup>6</sup>), the studies presented here illustrate

some of the current work being conducted around community and (new) media.

#### Small-Scale Electronic Media

A recent compilation of community media research (Jankowski, 2001) contains a section of four chapters devoted to issues and illustrations of the public sphere as related to community radio and television. There, Mitchell (2001) explores how women's community radio may serve as a tool for women's empowerment. With empirical data from women's radio stations and projects across Europe, Mitchell examines how radio can be used to develop a feminist public sphere. Coleman (2001) provides an analysis of phone-in radio programmes in the Irish Republic and considers how these programmes may contribute towards better exchange between disparate groups in that society. He argues that this form of discourse provides opportunity for communication that would otherwise be unlikely or difficult. A contribution by Stein (2001) assesses the role of public access television in political communication in the United States. She examines the political uses of access television within radical media projects and argues that such media host a range of democratic speech absent from the traditional media industries. Finally, Barlow (2001) examines the policies and practices of three community radio stations in Australia regarding key features of that sector of broadcasting. While all of the stations seem to pay homage to the principles of access and participation, he finds that these three stations differ substantially in their practices. Moreover, all of the stations are subject to the strain caused by the concerns of professionalization, popularization and commercialization of community radio.

#### Physically Based Virtual Communities

There are basically two categories of virtual communities: those with a distinct relation to a geographical locality and those having no such binding with a particular space. Freenets, PENS, community information networks and digital cities are some of

the types of physically based virtual communities. Preference is given to the term 'digital community network' to describe virtual communities in this category. Two recent studies of these virtual communities serve as illustrations of the research being conducted in this area.

The first investigation, conducted by Silver (2000), provides a comparative analysis of Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) in Virginia with the Seattle Community Network in the state of Washington. Silver is concerned with differences in the development, design and use of these two digital community networks. Regarding development, Silver notes that the Blacksburg Electronic Village is essentially a prototype of a 'top-down' approach whereby large amounts of capital were invested to construct a state-of-the-art facility. Silver suggests that a small group of actors – persons from local industry, government and the university situated in the town – conceived the initiative, financed it and brought it to operational level. Involvement of community organizations, groups and individual citizens during this process was minimal. Involvement by Blacksburg residents after site construction came to resemble the behaviour of consumers rather than of community members. According to Silver, the 'most common use of the BEV was for commercial purposes: to download coupons, check movie times, or purchase goods online' (2000: 282).

The Seattle Community Network, in contrast, was conceived by a broad assemblage of community organizations and groups from an early phase in its development. These community units engaged in what Silver calls participatory design, and they determined overall policy and structure for the community network. In this respect, the network reflected a 'bottom-up' initiative and was intended to serve as a tool for community development. The Seattle Community Network was promoted through workshops and outreach programmes, was made accessible through public facilities such as libraries and was provided free of charge to Seattle area residents. This community network, according to Silver, came to offer 'a culturally rich, civic-based online platform of resources, materials, and discussion forums with and within which residents of Seattle can share ideas, interact with one another, and build communities' (2000: 294).

The second investigation of digital community networks to be presented here involves 'Netville', a wired suburb located on the outskirts of Toronto. Netville is a complex of approximately 120 homes designed and built in the mid 1990s. A special feature of this suburb, distinguishing it from most others in North America, is that it was equipped from the beginning with a local electronic network capable of providing high-speed Internet access; a computer videophone facility; a variety of music, health and entertainment services; and

neighbourhood discussion forums. These features were widely promoted during the early sale of homes in the estate and a special research consortium was established to monitor technical and social developments.

The social science fieldwork was conducted by Hampton (2001) whose concern was to determine the influence such a state-of-the-art communication infrastructure might have on the social relations that residents maintain with neighbours, friends, relatives and colleagues – within and outside Netville, online and offline.<sup>7</sup> The study was based on a long-standing premise developed and frequently argued by the 'Toronto School' of community studies (e.g. Wellman, 1979; 1999), suggesting that community is not of necessity locality-bound. This position argues that social ties constitute the central feature of community and not locality, and that these ties – be they weak or strong – should be the focus of empirical study of community. It is, in the words of Hampton and Wellman, 'the sociable, supportive, and identity-giving interactions that define community, and not the local space in which they might take place' (2000: 195).

Netville provided opportunity for an extended field study of this premise, linked to the new 'variable' of an electronic network infrastructure with accompanying communication services. As part of this study, Hampton resided in Netville for a period of two years and integrated into the social life of the neighbourhood. He participated in both online and offline activities, the discussion lists and the barbecues, and conducted what Hampton and Wellman (1999) describe as a classical community ethnography. In addition, Hampton and Wellman conducted a survey of the residents regarding their network of social ties.

Findings from this survey suggest that the electronic network supported both weak and strong social ties ranging from those purely functional in nature to those grounded in social and personal issues. In probing for the breadth of social ties among residents, Hampton and Wellman (2000) report that those residents connected to the electronic network significantly differed from residents not connected: they knew more of their neighbours' names, they talked to and visited with them more often. The wired residents, in other words, maintained a broader range of social contacts than their non-wired counterparts. Hampton and Wellman suggest this may have had to do with the presence of the electronic network and particularly because of the neighbourhood e-mail list maintained on the network for residents. The network seemed to have been particularly valuable during periods of social action, i.e. during conflicts with the housing developer and especially during a conflict about an unexpected discontinuance of the network.

## Internet and Public Discussion

The place of public discussion and debate has been a central feature of community media initiatives for decades, and this feature is equally central to many Internet-based facilities. Newsgroups, discussion lists, and specially constructed sites for debating social, political and cultural issues abound on the Internet. Empirical research is beginning to emerge around these phenomena, particularly from the perspective of the concept of public sphere. One of the most extensive studies to date has been carried out by Schneider (1996; 1997) around a Usenet discussion group concerned with abortion. During the period of a year, Schneider collected 46,000 messages posted on the site and examined them along four dimensions considered central to Habermas' (1989) notion of public sphere: *equality* of access to the arena of debate, *diversity* of opinions and topics relevant to a particular debate, *reciprocity* or degree of interaction between persons involved in a debate, and the *quality* or degree to which participants contribute information relevant to the topic.

Schneider operationalized each of these dimensions so that a quantitative analysis could be conducted on the entire number of postings during the period of study.<sup>8</sup> He found, overall, that contributions to the newsgroup were diverse in substance and that participants exhibited an acceptable degree of reciprocity. Although access to the discussion was theoretically open, actual involvement in the debate – a feature also relevant for the equality dimension of public sphere in this study – was strikingly low. Of the nearly 3000 contributors to the discussion during the year period, fewer than 0.5 per cent were responsible for more than 40 per cent of all postings. Put differently, some 5 per cent of the participants posted almost 80 per cent of the contributions. Finally, regarding the dimension quality, Schneider found that the most frequent contributors to the discussion were the least likely to post messages 'on topic', i.e. related to the issue of abortion. This feature, he suggests, exacerbated the inequality reflected in the discussion.

The findings from this study pose serious concerns regarding the contribution of Internet-based discussions to public debate. Although the potential of such discussions may be great, as Schneider and others (e.g. Jankowski and van Selm, 2000) continue to repeat, the actual degree of involvement is minuscule, and much of what is contributed is not relevant to the topic.

### RESEARCHING NEW MEDIA AND COMMUNITY: METHODS AND QUESTIONS

No one research methodology or agenda of questions dominates work currently being undertaken

around new media and community. As illustrated in the previous section, investigations are emerging from a variety of disciplines employing diverse tools of study and directed at different areas of concern. As pluralist as the field is, some overriding preferences for methods and questions can be discerned and are elaborated in this section.

## Research Methods

Regarding research methods, about a decade ago an overview of the place of qualitative methods in studying community media was prepared (Jankowski, 1991). Then it appeared as if this approach was increasing in importance within the field of mass communication studies in general and within the more specialized concern of small-scale media in particular. The 'qualitative turn', it seemed, had arrived.

Now, looking at studies concerned with new media and community, it appears, once again, that qualitative or interpretive studies are prominent. Several of the empirical studies mentioned or presented earlier in this chapter feature characteristics of classical community study fieldwork (e.g. Baym, 1999; Malina, 2001; Silver, 2000). Others (e.g. Cherny, 1999; Jankowski and van Selm, 2000) develop a form of textual or discourse analysis. Yet others (Harrison and Stephen, 1999; Harrison et al., 2001) integrate the conventional concerns of academic research with those regarding design and development of community information networks.

Quantitative approaches are also represented in current work. Schneider's (1997) study of public debate on a Usenet newsgroup represents a sophisticated quantitative analysis of a very large body of messages. Hampton (2001) employs survey research and network analysis within the context of a sociological field study. More generally, the degree of interest in online survey research is substantial. The first major text on this method has appeared (Dillman, 2000) and there has been a range of journal articles (e.g. Coomber, 1997; Mehta and Sivadas, 1995; Swoboda et al., 1997). It is only a matter of time before these data collection tools become applied to studies of new media and community.

Innovations in methods and methodologies are also being developed. For example, an ongoing study (Ahern et al., 2000) combines an experimental design with structured and open interview instrumentation to explore the nature of public discussion and debate on the Internet. In another study, this one of Campaign 2000 in the United States, innovative software and new strategies for website analysis are being developed (Schneider and Larsen, 2000).<sup>9</sup>

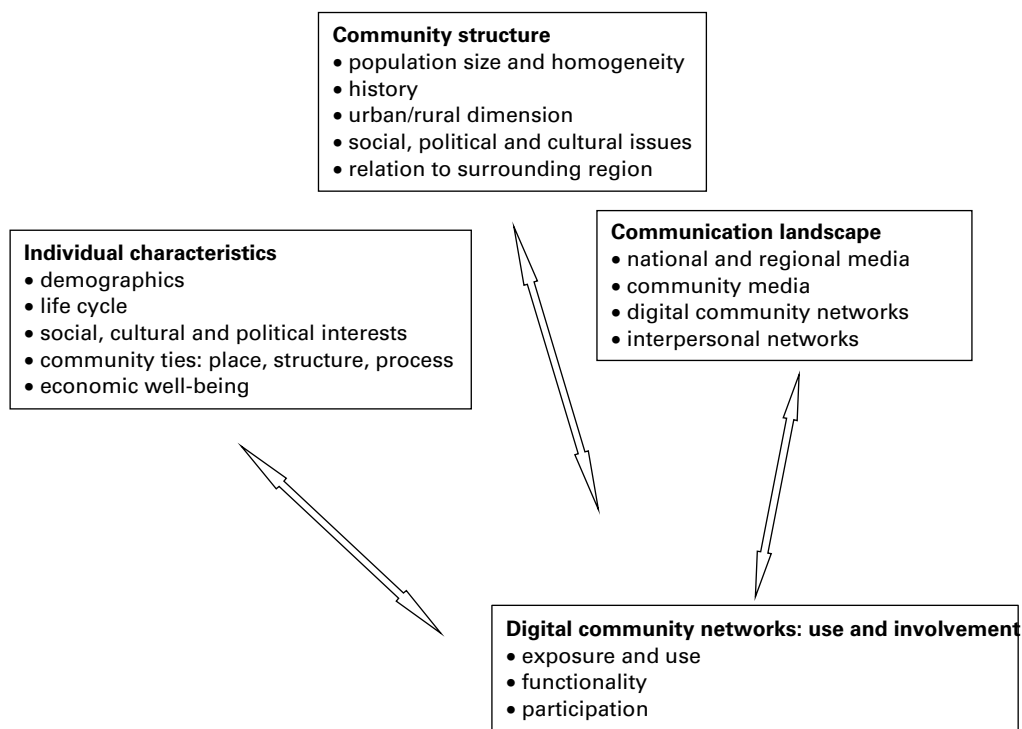


Figure 2.1 *Components of community communication and digital community networks* (Jankowski et al., 2001)

Many of the current and proposed investigations are constructed as case studies (e.g. Jankowski et al., 2001). This type of study has been subjected to severe criticism. In discussing community study as a method of research (similar to the case study method) Bell and Newby (1972: 17) summarize some of the commonly voiced reservations: excessive reliance on a single observer, lack of systematic data collection, insufficient distinction between researcher and object of study. Baym (1999: 18–21) eschews much of what presently passes for ethnography, but for different reasons. Following criticisms of ethnography developed by Nightingale (1996) and Press (1996), Baym notes that much of what passes for this form of inquiry in the study of audiences is limited to brief forays in the field coupled with individual and group interviews. She suggests, as a minimum standard, that multiple forms of data collection be undertaken during an extensive period of fieldwork.

In addition to Baym's suggestions, it should be mentioned that much refinement has been achieved in both qualitative data collection and analysis procedures since Bell and Newby itemized the above reservations. For example, the systematic analysis procedures elaborated by Miles and Huberman (1994) and the utilization of computer programs to

aid qualitative analysis and development of grounded theory (e.g. Hijmans and Peeters, 2000) are illustrative of these advances. These can be – but still all too seldom are – applied to community media studies. Even with such technical perfections, it remains essential to do more than simply increase the number of case studies. Core questions formulated within a theoretical framework are also necessary, as argued below.

### Research Agenda

In addition to developments in methods, advances are also being made in determining the key questions for community and media. For example, an overview is provided of the proposed research concerns shared by contributors to a recent volume on community media (Jankowski, 2001). For one specific area a model has been constructed within which research questions can be addressed. Hollander (2000) draws on the earlier work of Stamm (1985) and proposes a causal relation between community structure, characteristics of individual community residents, the media landscape and community media use. He suggests that different causal relations may be dominant for different configurations of the

variables related to each of the above factors. The model by Hollander has been further modified for application to investigations of digital community networks and thereby proposes a framework for formulation of a range of research interests (see Figure 2.1). The overriding research question for this model is: *to what degree and in what manner do aspects of community structure, individual characteristics and media landscape relate to the use of and involvement in digital community networks by local residents?*

Although not embedded within a model, the research questions formulated by Wellman and Gulia (1999) represent the most extensive agenda prepared to date on virtual communities. They pose seven clusters of questions regarding the nature of online relationships and their relation to offline relationships and to community involvement.

A more compact list of questions has been formulated by Baym (1999: 210–16) in the conclusion of her study of an online community of television soap fans, discussed earlier. She suggests four central questions for further research:

- What forces shape online identities?
- How do online communities evolve over time?
- How does online participation connect to offline life?
- How do online communities influence offline communities?

The questions are similar to those posed by Wellman and Gulia, but include concern for the evolution of online communities across time. But, like Wellman and Gulia, Baym does not extend this formulation of questions to the level of a model integrating findings from each of the separate questions and thereby lending direction for further empirical study.

As Wellman and Gulia observe: 'It is time to replace anecdote with evidence ... The answers have not yet been found. Indeed, the questions are just starting to be formulated' (1999: 185). In addition to formulating relevant questions as initiated by these scholars, the time has also come to generate theoretically based models similar to those constructed for emerging online communities (Baym, 1995; 1998) and for digital community networks (Jankowski et al., 2001) that are relevant to other realms of new media and community. Research questions embedded within such models will then provide the needed direction and grounding missing from much of the current wave of case studies concerned with community and new media.

## NOTES

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1 See e.g. Gunter and Harrison (1998) for an overview of media violence studies.

2 Examples include the Center for the Study of Online Community at the University of California at Los Angeles, the Centre for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto, and the Electronic Learning Communities research programme at Georgia Institute of Technology. See also the Resource Center for Cyberculture Studies, presently located at the University of Maryland (<http://otal.umd.edu/~rccs/>).

3 An incomplete list of academic journals concerned with new media includes: *The Information Society*; *Information, Communication & Society*; *New Media & Society*; *Television and New Media*; *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*; and *Journal of Online Behavior*.

4 A primer for issues related to the construction of community information networks is Schuler's (1996) practically oriented volume. Harrison et al. (2001) explore design and research interventionist strategies for development of digital community networks.

5 Space does not permit consideration of studies about multi-user dungeons (MUDs) and their contribution to collective and individual identity. The literature in this area is substantial, but the following authors provide a good introduction to this genre: Bromberg (1996), Cherny (1999), Dibbell (1993), Donath (1999), Reid (1994; 1999), Stone (1991), and – especially – Turkle (1995).

6 Many e-commerce operations (e.g. Amazon.com, Participate.com) and Internet service providers (e.g. AOL) have latched onto the notion of community building in order to enhance consumerism and commercial gain. This development is also not addressed in this chapter. Cherny (1999: 253–4) considers it briefly and authors (e.g. Hagel and Armstrong, 1997) affiliated with business schools have noted some aspects of this interface.

7 A number of draft manuscripts, journal articles and book chapters have appeared on the Netville project (Hampton, 2000; Hampton and Wellman, 1999; 2000; Wellman and Hampton, 1999). The most complete publication is Hampton's (2001) PhD dissertation.

8 The theoretical perspective and method of analysis is described in detail by Schneider (1997) in his dissertation, available online: <http://www.sunyit.edu/~steve/>. A brief review of the four dimensions of public sphere and Schneider's findings may be found in Jankowski and van Selm (2000).

9 For further information on the research project focusing on Campaign 2000, see <http://www.NetElection.org>.

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