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Identity and Leadership in Virtual Communities: Establishing Credibility and Influence

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Preface

The idea of community in computer-mediated communication is self-evident to those who engage it, even among those who acknowledge differences between pixelated and live communities. After all, those of us who have any contact with young people witness, daily, students' "plodding text-walks, heads down, absorbed by their own flying thumbs fluttering above tiny screens" (Lebduska, 2013, p. 41). Life is both lived in the flesh and, as Turkle (1997) already saw at the end of the last century, on the screen. With our contact lists, status updates, and group-gaming sessions, our immersion in the digitized world has only deepened since then. We may, in fact, be as addicted as teenagers who feel that life-events are not valid unless shared with and liked by their Facebook friends (Turkle, 2011). We do not know the long-term societal, psychological, and physical effects of ubiquitous Internet use. Perhaps by the time this anthology of essays is a decade old all of these chapters will seem quaint.

We suspect, however, that will not be the case, since what informs the ideas in this anthology of international authors is less the technologies of networked communities and more the bonds that link them. We also focus on the ways in which some participants craft their identities and leverage them to gain influence. Those are old aspects of human behavior that span many generations of technology, from Socrates' use of rhetoric in Athens Agora, from the transmission of knowledge in written and later printed texts, from the widely republished Gettysburg Address, to JFK's ability to shine on television when Richard Nixon failed, and on to our present stew of social technologies where a new and compelling application seems to bubble to the surface every month.

NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND NEW COMMUNITIES

Today, when one thinks of influence and leadership online, the images evoked may come more from Hollywood than from the Oval Office; for example, the skilled mage in the World of Warcraft who recruits a team to raid and kill a powerful enemy. This leader of the virtual group shares in the glory as everyone "levels up" as better players then trades virtual goods that often can be re-sold for actual-world currency. Team-gaming is, however, only one form of influence a skilled community member can employ. In the streets of Cairo, Tunis, or Istanbul, as Bridgeman in chapter 2, Nadeem in chapter 3, and Gulsen in chapter 1 each shows, for these "assemblages of dissent," the stakes are real, not pixelated violence; the online community becomes the place to organize events in the world of bricks, mortar, teargas, and torture.

Communities that organize online can, however, quickly fracture and fail under pressure. Even widely promoted dissent can end quickly, when such a community does not generate effective real-world leadership and planning. Ramos's chapter 13 considers a stark outcome: the failure of Occupy Wall Street

and its offshoots to thrive after evictions from parks and public spaces. While Occupy used the Internet well, it literally had nowhere to go in the flesh, after the police shut down Occupy's encampments. Ramos considers how starkly that model of community differs from the successes of the Zapatistas against the Mexican government. Thus, a coherent set of demands, coupled with both physical and networked communities, means the difference between success and irrelevance.

SMART BOMBS AND SMART PHONES

A failure of civil disobedience in the US should give readers pause, even as the successful use of Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram in Qatar, as Rajakumar demonstrates in chapter 14, should give us hope that open political discourse can flourish online and real-world change follow. These events are still very much unfolding around the Middle East in a time when Hamas and the Israeli Defense Forces "troll" their enemies' Twitter feeds. Perhaps an Arab Winter will follow its Spring; perhaps Turkey will turn more Islamist or more secular as a result of the "Resistanbul" uprising for which Gulsen's chapter provides an introduction. Whatever the final outcome in that part of the world, to an older generation of computer users, we seem to have entered the surrealist narrative of a Vonnegut novel. Where one might find a banality of modern war in drone-strikes directed by young people sitting in trailers in the middle of Nevada, there are even stranger juxtapositions online. When mortal enemies taunt each other online or plan attacks, they might then, without leaving their chairs, use the same technologies to download music, share baby photos, and shop for socks.

This anthology thus charts, in a generation, a seismic shift in technology. With the convergence of military, consumer, and commercial technologies, we are clearly no longer in the era of Cold War missile silos, bomber bases, and Berlin checkpoints between Soviet and Allied arsenals. If the National Security Agency wishes to find the latest terrorist plot, it need not send an operative to Yemen. It might start with or without a warrant, sifting through Facebook posts or shopping habits at Amazon.com by Yemenis or US citizens. What such surveillance means to a foundation of American democracy remains to be seen, as does the reaction of US citizens. Like many of the technologies discussed in the chapters here, the public reaction to data mining is still evolving as this anthology goes to print.

THE NEW INTERNET: ART AND COMMERCE COLLIDE

Beyond what often may appear an absurdist version of geopolitics, though in close conversation with it, lies the world of political art. This collection of essays includes, in Spiegel's chapter 4, explorations of the graffiti by street artist and muralist "Banksy," whose work questions the underlying assumptions of free-market capitalism regarding workers and the environment. In Keifer-Boyd and her co-authors' chapter 7, performance art in the virtual world of Second Life raises real-world issues about race, gender, sexual orientation, and economic status. Such online spaces were scarcely imaginable when many academics working today began their careers, yet the arts are being transformed by creative individuals such as these. At the same time, as the writers herein discuss at length, the arts struggle to manifest themselves online in the more commercial format of what Essid in chapter 11 calls the "New Internet," where targeted advertising and IP-tracking by service-providers have monetized the experience of going online.

The latest generation of Internet users may not be able to imagine a not-too-distant past when an older form of Internet access enabled anonymity and freedom from marketers, often at the price of flame-wars and “trolling” by malicious geeks. Facebook’s digital tsunami swept many older communities before it, though many who remembered BBS systems and USENET resisted or subverted the social-media giant’s insistence that only real identities be linked to profiles. Other users, less concerned with anonymity and more with the vitality of their established networks of online friends, made difficult transitions to new online spaces. The communities Essid and Hickey explore, The Sandbox of chapter 11 that has made the transition to social media and moderated blogs, and Firedoglake of chapter 12 that has evolved from a small moderated blog to a large, multi-authored one, have lost some of the old sense of playfulness along the way. As Hickey examines changes in community, playful diversion from arguments among like-minded people can help to mend fissures, but when disagreement strikes at the heart of the community’s origins, some of the old community ties may break irrevocably.

TRANSHUMANIST PLAY

As the Internet evolves, so has our sense of play, both serious and casual, by the games we play, games that become ever more responsive to player input. Readers will find that Bezio in chapter 13 analyzes in depth how a player’s sense of ethics informs decisions made when interacting with the in-game, non-player characters of *Dragon Age II*. Given the possible directions that artificial intelligence and human enhancement could take in coming decades, Bezio’s work may guide future discussions of ethics for transhuman people and humanistic machines. Bridgeman’s chapter 2 and Richard’s chapter 10 extend this discussion, showing us the need to make such transhuman communities gender-inclusive. Gender and other markers of our flesh may persist, whatever Raymond Kurzweil might predict about a future of disembodied and immortal former humans, their uploaded intellects like ghosts in the global data-net. Even if an avatar wears a different gender from its creator, or none at all, we already live in a time when one’s avatar can be profitably branded, as Mowbray discusses in chapter 5. Ours is simultaneously an era when women in academia cannot escape cultural and professional expectations placed upon them by their peers; female academics must cultivate a certain type of Facebook profile to avoid censure from some colleagues, as Spangler shows in chapter 8.

Where Spangler’s work suggests more studies about a thriving online community, Mowbray’s chapter also prompts future research about communities in decline. The two chapters in this collection that focus on Second Life do not consider the very real decline in size and influence of that virtual world between 2008 and 2013. Second Life generated a great deal of hyperbole as the next generation of Web use not so long ago, yet it has declined in size, profitability, and academic use from a combination of high prices, poor customer service, sudden changes in terms of service, lagging technology, and user fatigue. All of these have resulted in a once-revolutionary and widely discussed virtual world never quite living up to its disruptive potential (Essid, 2011). Certainly, follow-up studies to Mowbray’s and Keifer-Boyd’s will have to consider what users do with their friends lists, intellectual property, performance art, and avatarian brands when the platform of choice loses prominence or vanishes. Several notable and briefly popular virtual worlds, such as Sims Online, Glitch, and Metaplace have all gone into the recycling bin of cyber-history. Where did their communities go? To diaspora worlds online? Into oblivion?

The editors find Hodges’ chapter 6 particularly instructive here. In the story of one faculty member’s struggle to reach the horizon of ubiquitous computing that transforms teaching, the editors see a perfectly cautionary tale for a utopian dream lost. The very real hurdles educators face all stymie good

pedagogy: lack of support for cutting-edge applications, snobbery about operating systems, departmental and other administrative fiefdoms, inflexible attitudes about budgeting. Though Hodges' focus is on her personal and intellectual adjustments for teaching with technology, the impact is bigger. Outside of campus borders, a transformation unfolds in how we connect to each other. If wearable computing and other technologies right out of science fiction become common, how will those of us, weaned on what Cynthia Selfe (qtd. in chapter 6) calls "alphabetic texts" make the leap?

THE NEXT BIG THINGS?

You hold a text still firmly rooted in that tradition, one honored since the age of Gutenberg. The impulses that drive us to make and maintain contact with others, as well as the need to be popular and influential, are older still. As editors, we feel that the authors herein continue a lively discussion as all of us move forward into an era of ubiquitous computing and networked communities in the Academy and, most certainly, outside it. As was the case for the first generation of texts about personal computing technology and education in the late 1980s and early 90s, the editors find it instructive to end with several large questions that unite the diverse range of issues raised by our authors. These questions include but are not limited to:

- How will global geopolitics shift when billions come online via relatively cheap smart phones and tablets?
- Can governments control or suppress online communities that go global?
- What sorts of new communities may emerge if users decide that the big social networking sites are too big?
- What happens to communities that decline or vanish? Where do old friends and friendships go?
- If the current form of Internet use follows Tim Wu's (2010) cycle of consolidation common among earlier telecommunications, what will happen to voices of dissent? To the online commons?
- Will the gaming communities online make ever-greater space for women, people of color, and older gamers?
- How is the very nature of community changing, resisting any one definition whether that be person-to-person, or avatar-to-avatar?
- How do the various online communities affect the way we see and engage each other in person, in groups?
- What will be the fate of anonymous and pseudonymous users in the next generation of online communities? With increased surveillance by governments and pressure by corporations to track user preferences, will such concealment even be possible?

We invite readers to take a look outside their office windows, in the breaks between classes, to see that reality unfold, one smart phone or tablet at a time.

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