# Community and Languagein the Information Age

**Gábor Szécsi**

Institute for Philosophical Research of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Budapest, H-1014, Hungary
Department of Cultural Mediation, Faculty of Adult Education and Human Resources Development, University of Pécs, Pécs, H-7633, Hungary
*Corresponding author: szecsi.gabor@feek.pte.hu

**Abstract** This article argues that the electronically mediated communication contributes to the construction of new, mediated forms of communities which are based on the interaction or operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities. The appearance of these new forms of communities leads to a new conceptualization of the relation between self and community. The aim of this essay, on the one hand, is to show that with the mediatization of communities, our concept of community becomes more complex. On the other hand, in this article I try to prove the assumption that the medium of the mediatization and new conceptualization of community is a specific pictorial language of electronically mediated communication.

**Keywords** Electronically Mediated Communication, Mediated Community, New Conceptualization of Community, Networked Individual, Pictorial Language

## 1.Introduction

Linguistic communication is a creative process which determines our personality and identity through our communication roles forming each other. Moreover, the human mind is indeed a communicative system the structure of which is affected by prevailing technologies of social communication. That is to say, there is a specific inner relation between the communicative structure of our minds and the communication technologies which can be regarded as dominant in certain cultures.

And this inner relation can be shown in all major historical changes in dominant communicative technologies, from the change-over to literacy to the development of the dominance of electronic media (television, the internet and mobile telephone). In this essay, I try to prove the above assumption by the investigation of the effects that are produced on our conceptualization of community by the use of electronic media.

To clarify the nature of this new conceptualization, I take the hypothesis as a starting point that the expansion of electronic communication has transformed our notion of the relation between place and community. With a greater proportion of our communicative acts taking place via electronic media, physical co-presence, the co-located interpersonal relations are diminishing as determinants of the nature of human interactions.

It seems that in the space of electronic media, community should be understood as a mediated network of interactions between individuals who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the communicative actions aiming at the effective exchange of information. In other words, there is an inner relation between the criteria of community and the global and local conditions for an effective method of information exchange. And these global and local conditions transform our notions surrounding the structure and life of community.

The electronically mediated communication, as an inherent part of real life in today's world, contributes to the construction of new, mediated forms of communities which are based on the interaction or operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities. The appearance of these new forms of communities leads to the new conceptualization of the relation between self and community. In the age of electronically mediated communication, the essence of community is a kind of networked individualism in which the networkedindividuals can chose their own communities, rather than are fitted into them with others involuntarily. Therefore the new, mediated form of community implies an individual-center existence and weaker social ties. The new technologies foster communication links outside the individuals' immediate social surrounds.

Accordingly, electronic communication creates a new context in which our notions of culture, community, society, human interactions become more complex. These more complex notions can be regarded as the bases of the idea of the global and local information communities in which the communication attitudes of a person are determined by their impression of their self as permanently available individual whose communicative acts are embedded in a special information net.

The aim of this paper is to show the basis and effects of this process by proving the following propositions:

1. The expansion of electronically mediated

communication leads to the appearance of new mediated forms of communities.

2. With the mediatization of community, our notion of community becomes more complex.

3. The medium of the mediatization and new conceptualization of community is a specific, pictorial language of electronically mediated communication.

4. The complex concept of mediated community can be grasped through the pictorial language of electronically mediated communication, which determines our communal interactions.

## 2. The Mediatization of Communities

The concept of globalization can be regarded as a fruit of the communications revolution of the twentieth century. In other words, this concept is rooted in the process of change that has resulted in an expansion of electronic communication culture abolishing the dominance of literacy. It seems that by using electronic technologies (radio, television, the internet, mobile telephony) and the specific pictorial language of multimedia communication, we can increasingly eliminate the spatial and temporal bonds of the global exchange of information. By deploying new technological dimensions of communication, an opportunity presents itself to simultaneously follow various global processes and events.

In this new communication galaxy, the flow of information becomes quicker and continuous; the universally understandable iconic world, icon-based information and multimedia-based know-how transfer play ongoing roles. The rules of this special iconic language which supersedes cultural boundaries will transform our different societies and cultures into a "global village", to use Marshall McLuhan's term.

The new global-community-consciousness, growing out of the use of electronic media supported by the effects of the information economy, will accelerate the technologically and economically founded process of globalization. Gradually, we will become citizens of the McLuhanesque global village, and as such we can witness the birth of a new universal civilization. Global communication is the most important manifestation of this new civilization based on Western patterns.

The notion of a new kind worldwide flow of information is the denotational base which , then, determines the meaning of the term *globalization*. There are a large number of semantic layers, however, which have settled on this conceptual base. Although nowadays we use the word *globalization* to refer to phenomena where the social sciences have created their own categories (e.g. the division of labour, integration, international cooperation), beyond this, the notion of globalization is inseparably attached to our expectations regarding the effects of electronic media on the creation of the conditions for worldwide communication.

Though the real-time occurrence and proximity created by electronic media have not been followed by the reconciliation of certain cultures, especially not by the economic balancing of different regions of the world, the meaning of the word *globalization* still suggest our faith in the positive developments of global communication and in a knowledge-based social world model. This meaning is rooted in our belief that the worldwide flow of information creates a specific atmosphere of acceptance in which the characteristic approaches that divide nations and cultures do not prevail, but rather common problems that are of concern to all of us move into focus. In this spirit, we feel ourselves to be members of a global community, the borders of which supersede the common human relationships defined and articulated by local communities.

Our conceptualization of community, when transformed by the use of electronic media, is embedded strongly in the associative system of conceptual relations that represent the network of various communicative acts, that is the various situations of information exchange. With such a conceptualization, mediated community is conceived as a network of communicative interactions. I argue that the ways of understanding the interactions between virtual and physical communities move beyond the traditional sociological conceptualization of community-as-interpersonal towards a conceptualization of mediated communities based on the interaction or the operational synthesis of virtual and physical communities.

Just as traditional theories regard community and society as distinct forms, it is also easy to consider physical and virtual communities as mutually exclusive forms of social organization. In this view physical community can exist only by virtue of physical co-location in space, and is based on people's natural association through sameness and residential solidarity. Virtual communities created by electronically mediated communication, however, attempt to break some of the boundaries of geographic location, gender, and ethnicity established in physical communities. In other words, physical communities are based on shared social and physical boundaries, whereas virtual communities are based on shared social practices and interest.

Considering the influence of mediated communication on our conceptualization of community, many theorists believe that we need a synthesis of physical and virtual communities in order to truly inhabit our experiences. For example, Manuel Castells holds that we need a "bridge" between physical and virtual places in order to unify our experience, because virtual communities only deal in fragmented individuals when they are opposed to real life.[1] Others, likeAmitaiEtzioni,James. E. Katz and Ronald. E. Rice emphasize that the best communities are indeed the hybrids of physical and virtual communities. [2] They see ideal communities as virtual communities enhancing physical ones. In this view, in the age of electronically mediated communication, the dividing line between virtual and physical communities becomes increasingly indistinct. Therefore, as Mark Poster shows, mediated individuals

imagine their virtual communities as real. [3] That is, the role of communication as meaningful and value-based in virtual communities also works to construct physical communities as well.

It is obvious that with this new synthesis of virtual and physical communities, electronically mediated communication contributes to a new construction of the self. The mediatization of communities leads to fractured and fragmented selves, because it opens up many other possible communities in which to participate. New communication technologies enable individuals to participate in ulterior systems of value, belief, and desires. As Kenneth J. Gergen notes: "New affective bonds are created outside one's social surrounds. The result is that the centered sense of a bounded self slowly gives way to a "multiphrenia" of partial and conflicted senses of self. Identity becomes fluid, shifting in a chameleon-like way from one social context to another."[4]

Thanks to these changes, the networked individual is attached to the place and position appointed by his own social ties less and less. Through his multi-channel communicative acts he can become acquainted with more and more communal forms, ways of life, traditions and values in the light of which he can choose more deliberately from among competing local communities. This more deliberate choice becomes a part of the increasingly complex and multi-layered identity of the networked individual. As Joshua Meyrowitz  writes on the multiple, multi-layered, fluid, and endlessly adjustable senses of the media-networked individuals' identity: "Rather than needing to choose between local, place-defined identities and more distant ones, we can have them all, not just in rapid sequence but in overlapping experiences. We can attend a local zoning board meeting, embodying the role of local concerned citizen, as we cruise the internet on a wireless-enabled laptop enacting other, non-local identities.  And we can merge the two as we draw on distant information to inform the local board of how other communities handle similar issues and regulations. All the while, we can remain accessible to friends, family, and colleagues from anywhere via a text-message enabled mobile phone." [5]

New localities are in the making which are particular in many ways, and get are also influenced by global processes and global consciousness. Thus new local communities organized in the space of electronic communication, on the one hand, strengthen local attachments, the local identity and, on the other hand, can be regarded as integrated elements of the virtual communities created by global information exchange. Consequently, the global virtual community serves as a kind of comparison background for local communities organized in the age of electronic media. With globalized communication space, electronic media give the networked individual external perspectives from which to judge and define his own local community. In other words, the twentieth-century expansion of electronic communication technologies, as Meyrowitz writes, "have placed an interconnected global matrix over local experience". [6]

The networked individual determines the characteristics of his own local community in the light of information acquired in the global communication space.The global perspective created by electronic communication has transformed not only community-definitions but as well individual's relation to social rules. In the space of electronic communication, there is a new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the national institutions of political and cultural domination as a consequence of new global perspectives.

One of the most characteristic features of the virtual space of electronic communication is that it lacks the compulsory categorization system and the classificatory forms and norms of a print society. In the media-networked global and local communities, it is difficult to maintain several traditional categorical distinctions that characterized print societies. That is, as electronic communication technologies expand, the dividing line between several political and social categories becomes increasingly indistinct.

The age of electronic communication is the age of opening categorical and classification boundaries. In this new space of communication, the traditional distinctions between private and public, between children and adult experiences, and between male and female spheres collapse and disappear. In the age of electronic media, as Meyrowitz suggests, we are experiencing "both macro-level homogenization of identities and micro-level fragmentation of them". [7]

A new virtual social space is in the making which strengthen the cohesion of competing local communities, and in which, therefore, the influence of traditional social and political institutes declines. The new communication situations created by the use of electronic technologies foster greater emotional attachments, to local communities that we choose from among the competing communities deliberately without social and political restriction.

Thus in this new social space there is a fundamentally new possibility to change the rules of social perception and the conceptualization of the relation between local communities and traditional political institutes of state. Thanks to these changes, the networked individual is attached to the place and position appointed by his own social class less and less. Through his multi-channel communicative acts he can become acquainted with more and more communal forms, ways of life, traditions and values, in the light of which he can choose more deliberately from among the competing local communities. And this more deliberate choice becomes a part of the more and more complex and multi-layered identity of the networked individual.

By using the electronic communication technologies, a networked individual becomes a part of a network of interactions between humans who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the effective exchange of information. In other words,  media-networked individuals become members of a virtual community that is determined both by the global and the local conditions for an effective method of information exchange.

Regarding the conceptualization of this new virtual

community, Nicola Green, for example, argues for a new view of community, in which the significance of locality and interpersonality recedes to the benefit of symbolic processes. [8] As Green points out: "As is the case with internet and 'virtual' communities then, understandings of mobile 'communities' should move beyond the conceptualisation of 'communities-as-interest-groups' (secured via the authentication of the embodied liberal individual and their 'right to privacy'), and indeed beyond a traditional sociological conceptualisation of 'communities-as-interpersonal-and-co-located' (secured via relations based on face-to-face interaction in kinship or social commonality). Rather, we should move towards a conceptualisation of 'communities-as-trust-processes' (secured via the mutual, reciprocal and multiple negotiation of mediated, interpersonal, and organization uncertainty and risk.)" [9]

This new conceptualization moves beyond the traditional definition of community, according to which, as Green writes, community "as an ideal type of relation corresponding to "natural will", is distinguished by an appeal to a totality of cultural history in the collective memory of tradition, is defined through common property, family, custom and fellowship, and is bound by consensus, language and ritual." [10]

The basis of this conceptualization is a complex system of associative conceptual relations that includes our concept of community, and integrates the conceptual representations of human interactions that determine the life of community both in a direct and indirect way.

The medium of the new conceptualization is a specific pictorial language, the semantic structure of which offers new opportunities to grasp and understand the complex concept of community.

## 3. Linguistic Convergences in Mediated Communities

One of the most important criteria of the new, more deliberate attachment to the local is the deliberate application of the ways of usage that create new local communities in the age of electronic communication. These new ways of usage are rooted in the communication language of electronic media, which can be regarded as a result of the convergence of oral and written communication. Thus we consider the new linguistic culture of electronic communication as one of the most important conditions of the conceptual and the social convergences experienced in the space of electronic media. It seemed that this new linguistic culture is the basis of both the global perspective created by electronic communication and the cohesion of the new local communities that are strengthened by the deliberate choices made by networked individuals.

In this new linguistic culture, the original social function of language, namely, the building and maintaining of cohesion within human communities, becomes important development. This is because in print societies, language has got far from this original function as a consequence of the appearance of oral-literal "bilingualism" and linguistic asymmetry that is rooted in the social dominance of the standard dialect of literacy. That is, instead of strengthening community cohesion, "bilingualism" and asymmetry disintegrates primary human communities since the use of local dialects is overtly stigmatized in contrast to a socially preferred standard dialect of literacy. This communication culture that forces the whole society and all communities to use one preferred language variety goes against the biologically need of belonging to a primary community.

The original social function of language, however, has survived this linguistic asymmetry developed in print societies. People hold to their everyday use of language, even if they judge their own dialectical varieties incorrect under the pressure of the overt prestige of the standard. Since the members of small local communities generally communicate with one another orally, the linguistic conventions characterizing these communities have survived in the age of standard linguistic varieties too. In these small, local communities the importance of cohesion-strengthening and local values outweighs the significance of external social values that are symbolized by the standard forms of written communication. This phenomenon is experienced especially in small, isolated rural and suburban communities where the prestige of the non-standard variety of usage can be regarded, at the same time, as a symbol of communal identity.

In the space of electronic communication, literacy that generated the asymmetry of linguistic norms of oral and written communication seems to be losing of its power and the prestige of the identity-strengthening ways of usage characterizing small communities and group grows. The expansion of the non-standard varieties of language preferred by the networked individuals is accelerated by the use of electronic media (internet, mobile telephone). This process leading to decline of the prestige of literacy is accelerated by the convergence of the oral and the written communication technologies that affects usage since the new kind of orality created by the use of radio and television or, especially, use of multimedia messaging, the synchronous-complementary transmission of speech, text and pictures in the space of mobile and internet communication.

There are well-perceptible, concrete signs of this convergence of the features of the oral and the written usage. Let us consider the texts that are mediated by the internet or mobile telephone! The texts of many e-mail and SMS message actually belong to the domain of speech and not to the domain of written texts. The grammatical and stylistic characteristics of these messages can be regarded as the marks of a special kind of oral communication. These grammatical and stylistic elements, however, are integrated into the texts mediated by new communication technologies more deliberately than into the oral utterances. By using

these elements, the utterer intends to show that he wishes to accept and apply the norms and the rules of a linguistic community organized by e-mail and SMS communication. That is to say, he uses these grammatical and stylistic elements of linguistic communication to make it unambiguous that he is attached to a community accepting some forms of usage and that this attachment is a consequence of a deliberate choice.

The linguistic forms accepted in this way have a strong impact on everyday usage. The use of the special linguistic forms of the texts mediated by the new communication technologies leaves its mark on written communication and leads to the convergence oforality and literacy. What can be regarded as an outcome of this process, then, is the increasingly indistinct dividing line between then linguistic characteristics of oral and written communication. A new communication language is in the making which integrates the forms of language used in oral utterances and in written texts.

The appearance of the new language of communication can be regarded as a consequence of networked individuals' deliberate choice to want to join in the global information exchange successfully and to express conceptual relations and emotions as a member of a small community by using the new linguistic forms. One of the most characteristic features of this culture is that the advent of multimedia communication has resulted in a strong interaction between picture and language in the process of, on the one hand, oral (for example television) and, on the other hand, written (for instance the Internet) messaging. Thanks to the appearance of this specific, pictorial language, the process of the convergence and synthesis of the linguistic features of oral and written forms of communication is accelerated.

As multimedia technology expands, the dividing line between the linguistic characteristics of oral and written communication becomes increasingly indistinct. This means that though the syntactic features and structure of this new language of communication remind us of the linguistic world of oral communication, the new language seems to be more complex in terms of its semantic characteristics.

This new communication culture is referred to as "secondary orality" by Walter J. Ong in his classic work, Orality andLiteracy. [11] The new kind of orality, accordingly, is not succeeded by, but rather completes, the cultures of literacy. As Ong writes: "…with telephone, radio, television and various kinds of sound tape, electronic technology has brought us into the age of 'secondary orality'. This new orality has striking resemblances to the old in its participatory mystique, its fostering of a communal sense, its concentration on the present moment and even is use of formulas. But it is essentially a more deliberate and self-conscious orality, based permanently on the use of writing and print, which are essential for the manufacture and operation of the equipment and for its use as well."[12]

Accordingly, the multimedia integration of verbal and pictorial elements, or the convergence of the linguistic features of oral and written communication, contributes to the transformation of the structure of the mind and the content of thought by establishing a new communication culture, "a more deliberate and self-conscious" kind of orality.

Consequently, by using the term "pictorial language", I am referring not only to the integration of verbal and pictorial components of information exchange, but to the linguistic medium of the specific synthesis of the features of conceptual and pictorial thought. The pictorial character of the language of electronically mediated communication is rooted in the fact that this language includes expressions which refer to complex conceptual relations which to have no conceptual analysis. In other words, a new metaphorical language is in the making, the function of which is to "show" the world rather than to analyze it.

By using this language, we want to "make perceptible" the complexity of conceptual relations to which we refer. The main intention being to embed some conceptual relations in the system of more complex conceptual representations by using words that are suitable for making the complexity of newly-revealed conceptual relations intelligible.

This kind of usage leads, on the one hand, to the appearance of new terms in language and, on the other hand, to the novel use of available linguistic elements. In the latter process, the meanings of some words multiply with more and more conceptual relations.

This is why the usage of the word "community" entails the intention of understanding of the overall or global criteria of the term in the age of electronic media. These criteria can be attributed to the specific features of communicational space which is globalized by the use of television, the Internet, and mobile telephones. In other words, there is an inner relation between these criteria and the global conditions for an effective method of information exchange. These global conditions (i.e., a common information basis, collective trust relations, etc.) transform our notions surrounding the structure and life of community.

Focusing on the inner relation between the new conceptualization of the criteria of community and our notions regarding the global conditions for an effective method of information exchange, we can suggest, for example, the following definition: community is a network of interactions between individuals who uniformly accept and apply some rules for the communicative acts aiming at the effective exchange of information.

Of course, our complex notion of community urges us to form many other definitions. And it is obvious that these definitions approach the community-organizing role of information in different way. They have, however, one thing in common: they all must be founded on the analysis of the conceptual and linguistic changes that transform the structure of our minds in the mediated communities of the electronic era.Because these linguistic changes can be regarded as bases of the mediatization of communities and the adopting of the idea of a global community building language in the new media space. But what kind of language would best serve as a global language in the network of

mediated communities? AmitaiEtzioni, for example, argues for adopting English as a shared, secondary global language in the information age. [13] As Etzioni points out: "a key element of building a global community atop local communities requires that the various nations involved choose the same second language." [14] This second language, of course, does not replace the particularistic, identity constituting primary languages of local and national communities, rather it is best considered as an additional language. Nevertheless an opposition can be experienced to adopting such an additional language in many nations. According to Etzioni, "this opposition often conflates preventing English penetration into the primary language with resisting it as second language".[15] Whereas this opposition, as Etzioni writes, " delays overcoming the "babel" effects at great cost to the transparency of global laws, the promotion of shared understandings, and the efficiency of economic transactions".[16]

In my view, as a global process, the appearance of pictorial characteristics of primary communal languages can contribute to the adoption of an additional global language, because this process, as we have seen, creates the foundations of the convergences of different usages and languages. The global expansion of the pictorial language of electronic communication can be regarded as the basis of the idea of a global information community in which the communication attitudes of a person are determined by his impression of his self as a permanently available person whose communicative acts are embedded in a global information net. In other words, it is by accelerating and mediating linguistic changes leading to a complex notion of global community that electronically mediated communication becomes a source of, as Meyrowitz writes, the "fusion of local and global identities" [17] and, thus, the adoption of the idea of a secondary global language in local and national communities.

## 4. Conclusions

This essay holds that a new world of communication is in the making. The global linguistic changes traceable to the use of electronic communications technologies lead to a linguistic galaxy which can contribute to the development of higher level of human cohesion. Through the appearance of this linguistic galaxy, a new, mediated kind of community comes into existence which can offer a solution to the balance of power between the dual system of globalization and localization, and also to the fragmentation and segmentation of the globalizing world. In other words, with the worldwide expansion of the new communication culture, a global-community- consciousness can be born that could arrange the values of the global and local worlds into a harmonic unified whole.

## REFERENCES

[1]   See Manuel Castells, The Information Age Vol. I: Rise of the Network Society. Blackwell, Malden, MA: 2000.

[2]   See AmitaiEtzioni, The Monochrome Society, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2001;James E. Katz, Ronald E. Rice, Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement and Interaction, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2002;James E. Katz, "Social Structure, New Communication Technology and Citizen Journalism", in KristófNyíri ed., Engagement and Exposure: Mobile Communication and the Ethics of Social Networking, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2009, pp. 123-128.

[3]   Mark Poster, What's the Matter with the Internet? University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN: 2001.

[4]   Kenneth J. Gergen, "Self and Community in the New Floating Worlds", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Mobile Democracy: Essays on Society, Self and Politics, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2003, p. 111.

[5]   Joshua Meyrowitz, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses of Place and Identity in the Global Village", in: KristófNyíri ed., Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2005, p. 28.

[6]   Joshua Meyrowitz, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses of Place and Identity in the Global Village", in: KristófNyíri ed., Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2005, p. 23.

[7]   Joshua Meyrowitz, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses of Place and Identity in the Global Village", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Sense of Place: The Global and the Local inMobile Communication, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2005, p. 29.

[8]   Nicola Green, "Community Redefined: Privacy and Accountability", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community, PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2003, pp. 43-56.

[9]   Nicola Green, "Community Redefined: Privacy and Accountability", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community,PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2003, p. 55.

[10]  Nicola Green, "Community Rdefined: Privacy and Accountability", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Mobile Communication: Essays on Cognition and Community,PassagenVerlag, Vienna, 2003, p. 53.

[11]  Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Methuen, London, 1982.

[12]  Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word, Methuen, London, 1982, pp. 135-136.

[13]  AmitaiEtzioni, "A Global, Community Building Language?", International Studies Perspectives, vol.. 9,no. 2, pp. 113-127, 2008.

[14]  AmitaiEtzioni, "A Global, Community Building Language?" International Studies Perspectives, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, p. 124.

[15]  AmitaiEtzioni, "A Global, Community Building Language?", International Studies Perspectives, vol. 9,no.2, 2008., p.124

[16]  AmitaiEtzioni, "A Global, Community Building Language?",

International Studies Perspectives, vol. 9, no. 2, 2008, p. 124

[17]  See Joshua Meyrowitz, "The Rise of Glocality: New Senses

of Place and Identity in the Global Village", in: KristófNyíri, ed., Sense of Place: The Global and the Local in Mobile Communication, PassagenVerlag,  Vienna, 2005, p. 30.