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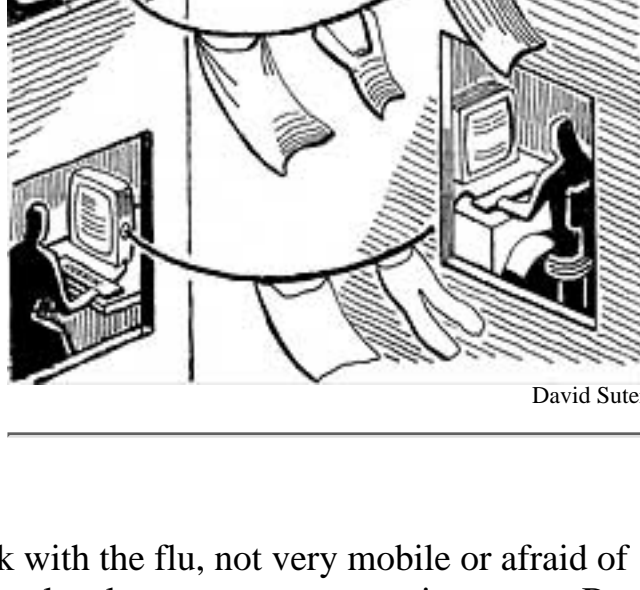
E-Communities Build New Ties, but Ties That Bind

By AMITAI ETZIONI

No subject lends itself to a false dichotomy like that of virtual and real communities. But the two are not opposites, not exclusionary and not necessarily good for the same things.

For instance, the argument that virtual communities cannot do what real communities can, a common position, is analogous to the argument, when Model T cars rolled off assembly lines, that cars cannot do what horses can: become your friends. Both modes of transportation, though, get you there, and cars command some obvious advantages of their own.

The current primitive virtual communities are stronger in several ways than the real thing: if you are lonely or down, you can go online any time, find out which of your buddies is around and visit. (Try to do this at the neighborhood bar on Sunday at 7 a.m.)



David Suter

If there is a snowstorm or you are sick with the flu, not very mobile or afraid of the streets, you may not make it to your local country store or senior center. But you can always log on.

When a car does something you thought only a horse could do, like inspire affection, for instance, it is surprising.

So it is surprising that several important features of real communities are beginning to be provided online, albeit in different ways than offline -- ways that have their own weaknesses and strengths.

One essential characteristic of communities is that they are largely self-policing. Real communities minimize the role of the state, the police and the courts by relying on gossip. You know which store to avoid and who is likely to repair your roof on time because of a subtle system that rates and updates reputations through offline chatter.

Online communities also need to find ways to do this. In auctions, at least one side ends up taking a risk; it is often the buyer but occasionally is the seller.

So each party is keen to know the other's reputation.

eBay, the huge auction site (www.ebay.com), handles this problem through an ingenious system of rating reputations. Similar systems are used by Amazon (www.amazon.com) and Auctions.com (auctions.com), among others.

After auctions or trades, both sellers and buyers are asked to rate one another. As a result, each participant acquires a score that reflects the number of positive and negative comments received. All are posted online.

The Net as backyard fence: providing a place for virtual neighbors to build reputations, trust and intimacy.

seemed reliable.

Recently, I was considering bidding on a political science book by Harold Laski in an online eBay auction. To check out the seller's reputation, I looked at her feedback from other sellers and buyers. She had earned 30 positive comments and had drawn only one complaint. All the comments were listed; a typical positive comment was from a seller (whose own score was a high 1,502) who wrote: "Fast with payment, nice to deal with, AAAAAA++++++". The negative comment did not impress me. The seller

Digging further, I found that the eBay screen name and number appears above every negative or positive comment. Using that information, I could ascertain a complainer's reputation. The system seems to work like a charm: Fewer than 1 percent of eBay auctions involve fraud, said an eBay spokesman, Kevin Purseglove.

There are no comparable statistics for satisfied customers in offline communities, which may not in fact do as well. Offline gossip is more nuanced. You would know, for instance, that someone did not deliver this time because his wife had just discovered that she has breast cancer, so you would give that person another chance. But on the other hand, eBay's system encompasses millions of people, while gossip systems can encompass at most a thousand or so people.

Virtual communities cannot provide nearly as much subtle and encompassing knowledge of members as a real community. But they can include many more people. One's strong suit is depth, the other's is breadth.

Like reputation, trust is also important both online and off. For transactions to flow seamlessly, people must trust one another. In real communities, people's default is to do so. They are taught from childhood to presume that members of the community are good people. It is considered inappropriate to distrust any member, unless there is cause.

Most virtual communities start from the opposite assumption: I do not know you, other than your online alias, so how can I trust you?

But three developments allow e-trust to flourish. For low-value transactions (often up to \$250) auction communities provide free insurance that covers any goods or payments that are not delivered.

For larger amounts, i-Escrow (i-escrow.com) serves as an electronic form of trust for many sites, including GO.com (www.go.com), GimmeaBid.com (gimmeabid.com) and Mac4Sale (www.mac4sale.com). After an auction ends, the buyer deposits the money owed with i-Escrow. The seller is then told to ship the goods. Once the buyer verifies that the merchandise has been received, i-Escrow sends the money to the seller.

When quality makes a difference -- such as when buying stamps or Pokémon cards -- quality can be determined by an appraiser, like those at the International Society of Appraisers (www.isa-appraisers.org). The seller can then post the information or send appraisal printouts to interested buyers. Or a buyer using i-Escrow can refer an item to appraisers before releasing payment. All that may sound a bit complex, but not for those who live by the mouse. And it does generate a trustworthy e-system.

Real communities foster intimacy as well as trust, as people get to know one another and form close, warm bonds. It is often argued that such closeness cannot be forged in cyberspace because people cherish their anonymity and hide their true selves behind handles and false presentations about who they are.

Actually, cyberspace has developed the tools that allow not only the fostering of intimacy in one-on-one relationships (such as e-dating) but also among members of groups. It is best to think about these tools as building blocks. Some virtual communities are based on only a few, while others accumulate a lot of them.

If a community is to be intimate, I hate to tell you, it must exclude some people. Real communities keep people out with high entrance fees (condominiums, golf clubs) and various admission criteria (e.g., no pets or children allowed).

Communities can do that kind of thing as long as they do not violate laws concerning racial discrimination and a few other forms of bias. By keeping membership homogeneous and small -- and if possible, stable -- offline communities foster intimacy.

Numerous virtual communities work in similar ways, although they are much more upfront about their procedures than real ones. ECircles (www.ecircles.com), for instance, makes it easy for anyone to set up a closed community. Both Yahoo (www.yahoo.com) and Excite (www.excite.com) run thousands of clubs. Some are not merely closed but invisible -- they are unlisted.

Others post the names of the administrators who handle requests for admission. And Size is often limited; Excite's clubs, for example, can have no more than 2,000 members. The newest wrinkle is that Excite lets groups of up to 10 members have an audible conversation online, in real time.

Much greater intimacy can be engendered if members of an e-community voluntarily surrender their anonymity and the community verifies identities. Some time ago, I joined one of the 80 little-known H-nets run by the National Endowment for the Humanities. These are closed to the public and consist of groups of professors specializing in, say, French history and culture or, in my case, communitarian thinking. Participants must apply to be included, and many list their real names on the screen. Several H-nets -- the one for people studying the Hapsburg empire, for example -- vet these identities.

As a result, you can combine what you already know about Scholar X from University Y with what you hear from her on H-net. Soon you feel as though you know one and all, as if you were in some kind of never-ending face-to-face meeting. You learn that Scholar A, whose writing you have long admired, is rather slow-witted and that Scholar B, whom you have always suspected of not knowing what he is writing about, is rather sociable. Instead of small packets of personal information of dubious validity, you get a rather broad and reliable band, which is of great value for creating intimacy, maybe too much for your taste.

It being that e-communities can reach the highest levels of intimacy only if all the building blocks are in place: the number of participants is kept relatively small, admission is controlled to foster affinity, and people drop their Internet masks. But even if one or two of these elements are missing, online communities can still allow people to build reputations and trust and foster intimacy, much like offline groups. However, they do so in different ways and, above all, can reach many more people, day or night, rain or shine.

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