How do new communities form?

Madeleine Pastinelli,
Department of Sociology, Laval University

Abstract:
To see how online communities arise, grow and last, we can examine what they have in common — communities as varied as the groups that form in spaces where cybernauts talk about everything and anything, those formed by customers on a firm's commercial website, those that take shape around a hobby (like sewing or stamp-collecting) or around a set of beliefs and values, or those based on the pursuit of a common goal or project. We thus come to realize the importance of a border for delineating the online community. When a community forms, processes of inclusion/exclusion take place through interactions. The observation over a long period of few online communities has shed light on the complex relations between the community as a social phenomenon and the digital arrangements or spaces through which it takes shape. This leads to a discussion of the viability of online communities.

The empirical study of online communities over the long term can shed light on the relatedness of their social and technical dimensions. It can help us see how the feeling of belonging to such a community and the group dynamics last to the point of the community outliving the platform or forum where it first emerged. To talk about "online communities", we must clarify the concept, since the phrase, though now widely used, is not free of problems when adopted in sociology. This phrase has even come under discussion since it is currently thrown about on line, without any definition, to refer to groups that share an identity, practices or a condition (whether or not they interact) as well as to heterogeneous groups made up of millions of users on a single platform (EBay, YouTube, Facebook, etc.), who apparently have little in common other than their use of the same technical installations.[1]

Several critics of the idea of an online community have advanced arguments based on the bonds between community members. Some remind us that the idea of a community implies a sense of belonging, of forming a group or of sharing orientations, but these characteristics are wanting in many digital environments, where what we observe tends to be a crisscrossing of individual networks rather than the formation of groups with a "unity" (WELLMAN 1999, WELLMAN *et al*. 2003, FERNBACK 2007, YUAN 2013). The very existence of groups based on belonging (or affiliations) has been called in question, along with the relevance of tackling problems from this angle — even more so as many platforms have increasingly individualized their contents, a trend that is less favorable to the formation of such groups. Many researchers have even stopped talking about online communities and switched their focus to the uses of online platforms (social networks and other cyberspaces), to their public or audiences, to the relations between individuals. In short, they have turned away from the issue of "online sociability" and from approaches that focus on groups and group affiliations; and they have adopted other angles for their analyses (YUAN 2013, WILSON & PETERSON 2002).

---

[1] This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites were consulted in January 2021.

To conceive of an online community, it is worthwhile recalling Anthony Cohen's (1985) studies in interactionist sociology, which tried to move beyond the problems related to the definition of a community in terms of the force of the bonds uniting its members, the members' adherence to the group or the solidarity or social control that is supposed to characterize their relations. The cases observed are too disparate for any one of these elements to help us understand what makes a community. Cohen has proposed explaining the bonds in a community in terms of a symbolic boundary, which takes the form of the processes of differentiation whereby individuals recognize each other as belonging to the same group and recognize others as not belonging. In other words, we are faced with a community whenever several persons, through their interactions, make the distinction between those who belong and those who do not or, what amounts to the same thing, whenever these persons are able to recognize each other and make others feel that they are not part of the group or not as much a part and that they should keep a low profile and stay in their place. This boundary is, of course, always contextual and is continually renegotiated. As a consequence, membership in a community is both variable and relative: a person is more or less a member than others as a function of seniority, of whether he/she is recognized as a more or less key player (depending, among other things, on the person's contributions and proximity to power-holders), and of the degree of proficiency in using the codes, know-how and other signals shared or valued by the group.

The formation of an online community does not, therefore, presuppose anything about the quality of the bonds between its members, nor about the group's homogeneity or solidarity. It is primarily and mainly based on the fact that its members share a set of references, or credentials, that enable them to recognize each other and to set themselves apart as a group. The history of a community, of its space and the events that have marked it, might be part of this shared set of references. The mere fact of having more seniority in an online group sometimes adds to a member's legitimacy. This shared set of references might take the form of "inside jokes", which only certain members "get". Getting the joke is evidence of a world in common and of its bounds. These references might also take other forms, such as norms for interactions, a common viewpoint or even an idiomatic language related to experiences, interests or practices. Obviously, we should not dismiss the idea that online communities might occasion strong bonds, a genuine solidarity, that some of these communities do assemble people who share values, practices or beliefs, or that some are organized around a group project. However none of these elements is *a priori* necessary for the formation of a community on line. Sharing a set of "references" so as to set up boundaries and play on the processes of inclusion/exclusion is observed in various social and cultural contexts, even when there is no group project or plan and when bonds are evidently loose.

So, let us define an online community as a group of persons who are used to exchanges on line with each other and who, through their interactions, use various references to signal both that they recognize themselves as being part of the same group and that they distinguish themselves from those who are not part of the group. They thus activate processes of inclusion and exclusion. Evidently this does not imply that an online community cannot be formed out of a group that exists independently of the Internet; nor that an online community cannot exist off line in the real world. To be clear: this does not imply that the members of an online community, as defined, all know each other. On the contrary, the reason why the members actualize the set of references they share in order to "perform" their belonging to the group is, quite clearly, that this belonging is not to be taken for granted, that members are not capable of "placing" all those with whom they might interact, nor of knowing who belongs to the community and who does not. This is even more so when the community is too big for each member to know all other members individually. However it also holds in smaller communities insofar as the participation of individuals in the community might be occasional — a person is more or less taken up for short or long periods with online activities, but will then make rare appearances or even be absent, and then later come back on line and actively participate once again. Participation frequently varies as a function of users' schedules, concerns or problems, and the rhythm of their everyday lives.

It is essential to insist on distinguishing an online community as a social phenomenon from the Internet or the platform where it meets. I concede that some cyberspaces (*e.g.*, discussion forums or Facebook groups) lend themselves better than others (on account of their affordances) to the formation of online communities. However it is mistaken to believe that the forum or platform has engendered the community. There are very dense and active communities in certain online spaces but none at all in others that have a very similar technological setup. Instead, interactions there take place between individuals without ever leading to the formation of an online community. The formula for forming a community does not always work.

Besides, once formed, these communities definitely have the possibility of breaking free of the cyberspace that gave birth to them, in exactly the same way as nothing keeps a group who formed at a bowling alley from meeting elsewhere for happy hour or for a barbecue and from continuing as a group long after the closing of the bowling alley where it initially met. Likewise, it is not exceptional for an online community to have come into existence before the online space where it now meets. Given the evolution of technology, such a community might move from one cyberspace to another, deemed to be more practical or suitable. After all, a forum or platform might even take shape around a pre-existing community. We often enough observe divisions within online communities, owing to different viewpoints, power struggles or the community's growth to the point of forming subgroups. Many an online community thus undergoes scission, as part of it is swept up in a swarming process and looks for a cyberspace of its own.[2] In conclusion, when individuals regularly visit a website or forum, they might end up forming an online community as regulars come to recognize each other through their common history and participation in this shared space. However the reverse also very frequently happens: the community, having been formed in another context, is at the origin of the forum that it visits.

Although an online community might form around a project, a group practice (We need but think of guilds formed for role-playing games or of the communities that have sprung up around freeware programs) or a shared interest, belief or life-style, none of these elements is a necessary condition for its formation. In all cases however, an online community exists once individuals are collectively led to recognize that they have something in common, perhaps only the regularity of their visits to the same website over a long enough period, and that they can, through their interactions, make visible this awareness of what unites them and sets them apart from others. Underlying the community is, at the very least and in all cases, a principle of "alterity", a symbolic border between "us" and "them". This otherness principle is sometimes very concrete, as evidenced when the unwanted are censored or pushed out. In other cases however, it tends to amount to "talk" or "discourses" (actually voiced or, sometimes, taken for granted) about the "others" from whom members distinguish themselves. More subtly, it might be evinced in the attitude adopted toward newcomers who are collectively put in their place while waiting to see whether or not they will be integrated.

After about 25 years of a gradual democratization of digital technology, we can now step back and draw a few conclusions about the lastingness of online communities. Let us start by recalling that observers of high tech at the turn of the century used to worry about the loose involvement of people in virtual communities, the unrestricted ease with which relations on line could be made or broken; and they assumed that these virtual communities would necessarily be ephemeral or at least, more so than other sorts of groups. For them, this was a threat to social bonds (BRETON 2000, JAURÉGUIBERRY 2000, WOLTON 2005). This viewpoint, which assumed that commitments and bonds would have been tighter, stronger, more lasting had they been formed in other contexts, has widely come under criticism in studies on local forms of sociability and on online relationships (WELLMAN 1999, CUSSET 2006, CASILLI 2010). As it turns out, contemporary sociability, which has been reconfigured around the individual, is more a matter of choice but less and less rooted in the neighborhood. Sociability is not intrinsically much different on line than in other contexts. As much

---

[2] I have borrowed the idea of swarming from Guillaume Latzko-Toth (1998), who used it to refer to the phenomenon when a community forms by "swarming" (like a bee colony) and to explain the multiplication of chat channels based on Internet Relay Chat.

can be said about the trend in the relations between individuals that cut across their affiliations (SINGLY 2003, ION 2012).

Although, on line or off, not all communities are made to last, several have passed the test of time and survived crises, whether due to conflict or to the disappearance of the platform or forum where the group had formed. An example is the online community studied during my doctoral work at the end of the 1990s (PASTINELLI 2007). It had formed on an IRC channel but then moved several times as, at the turn of the century, its members gradually stopped using IRC. After a phase of interconnection via MySpace and of experiments with chat rooms, a Facebook group with the same name as the IRC channel was set up in 2008. This group now has about a hundred members, all of them regulars from the IRC channel twenty years earlier. Recently, some of them were exchanging on line news and views about sheltering in place during the pandemic, in much the same way as they had shared their concerns and fears in December 1999 about the Y2K bug and in September 2011 following the attack on New York, and just as they have ordinarily shared their moods during each of the countless storms that, during the past two decades, has snowed Quebec under. Against all odds — given that the members of this online community initially had nothing in common apart from being adults in Quebec who used an IRC channel but were scattered throughout the province and had quite different socioeconomic profiles — this community still exists. True, it has evolved over time. Some members have disappeared, other persons have come to fill the ranks. The group dynamics and the positions of members have changed, as happens (needless to say) in any sort of community. For its members however, it is still the same community, the "channel gang" in group talk.

This example is not at all alone. Among other examples with which I am familiar, I might mention a community of "couturiers" in a forum on the platform Pattern Review. It, too, is nearly twenty years old, having remained on the platform where it formed but also having set up a group on Facebook. Another example is the online community Mudcat Café, a discussion group that, devoted to folk music and the blues, still exists both as a group on Facebook and, above all, on its own, very lively, website. Regulars have a place in the history of this group, which has lasted since 1996. I have no doubt but that other, older communities exist among freeware activists or among people who were connected much earlier than couturiers or folk musicians.

Contrary to presentiments about the ephemerality of relations between anonymous persons on the Internet, digital technology seems to have the possibility of rooting relationships in the long term. Despite groups switching from one medium to another, technology itself tends, thanks to the automatic or proffered retrieval of lists of contacts between platforms, to foster continuity in relationships that, otherwise, would probably have come unraveled to the point of the community disappearing.

References

BRETON P. (2000) *Le culte de l'Internet. Une menace pour le lien social*? (Paris: La Découverte).

CASILLI A. (2010) *Les liaisons numériques. Vers une nouvelle sociabilité*? (Paris: Seuil).

COHEN A.P. (1985) *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London & New York: Tavistock Publications).

CUSSET Y. (2006) "Les évolutions du lien social, un état des lieux", *Horizons stratégiques*, 2, pp. 21-36, available at https://www.cairn.info/revue-horizons-strategiques-2006-2-page-21.htm.

FERNBACK J. (2007) "Beyond the diluted community concept: A symbolic interactionist perspective on online social relations", *New Media & Society* 9(1), pp. 49–69.

ION J. (2012) *S'engager dans une société d'individus* (Paris: Armand Colin).

JAURÉGUIBERRY F. (2000) "Le Moi, le Soi et Internet", *Sociologie et société*, 32 (2), pp. 135-151.

LATZKO-TOTH G. (1998) *À la rencontre des tribus IRC. Le cas d'une communauté d'usagers québécois de l'Internet Relay Chat*, master's thesis in communications, Quebec University in Montreal.

PASTINELLI M. (2007) *Des souris, des hommes et des femmes au village global. Parole, pratiques identitaires et lien social dans un espace de bavardage électronique* (Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval).

SINGLY F. (2003) *Les Uns avec les autres. Quand l'individualisme crée du lien* (Paris: Armand Colin).

WELLMAN B. (1999) *Networks in the global village: Life in contemporary communities* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).

WELLMAN B., QUAN-HAASE A., BOASE J., CHEN W., HAMPTON K., DIAZ I. & MIYATA K. (2003) "The social affordances of the Internet for networked individualism", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 8(3), DOI 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2003.tb00216.x.

WILSON S.M. & PETERSON L.C. (2002) "The Anthropology of Online Communities", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31, pp. 449-467.

WOLTON D. (2005) *Il faut sauver la communication* (Paris: Flammarion).

YUAN E.J. (2013) "A culturalist critique of online community in new media studies", *New Media & Society*, 15(5), pp. 665-679.