From Counterculture to Cyberculture:
Virtual Community Discourse and the Dilemma of Modernity

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Abstract

Virtual communities are discussed as expressions of the modern tension between individuality and community, emphasizing the role that counterculture and its values played in shaping the virtual community project. This article analyzes postings to the WELL conferences and the online groups that served as incubators and testing ground for the term "virtual community," revealing how this concept was culturally shaped by the countercultural ideals of WELL users and how the tension between individualism and communitarian ideals was dealt with. The overarching conclusion is that virtual communities act both as solvent and glue in modern society, being similar to the "small group" movement.

Introduction

Rare is the major modern communication technology that has not been received with high hopes for social and political renewal (Czitrom, 1982; Lappin, 1995; Marvin, 1988). Two central visions characterize these expectations. On the one hand is the hope for greater individual autonomy and increased personal agency (Shapiro, 1999). For example, early long-distance social interaction technologies such as mail order catalogues were seen as forms of empowerment for ordinary individuals (Boorstin, 1973). On the other hand, dreams of social harmony and homogenization tend to surround the birth of revolutionary communication technologies, as far back as the telegraph and the telephone in the 19th century (Marvin, 1988; Standage, 1998). A constant theme of discourse in both individualistic and communitarian visions, as noticed by Carey (1988) and Boorstin (1978), is that of announcing the emergence of a Republic of Technology, where social relationships would become less hierarchical, more transparent, and personal, while communities would be stronger and more effective. The mythopoetic origins of these visions recede into the depths of the modern subconscious (Carey, 1988; Czitrom, 1982). They also reflect the double-edged nature of the "great transformation" (Polanyi, 1944) brought about by modernity: the rise of the individual occurring simultaneously with an increasing yearning to rejuvenate community bonds (Taylor, 1989). The tension between individualism and community specific to modern life has affected most aspects of public and private life, including modern communication technology (Nye, 1997).

Although a good part of the story about how culture has shaped the rise of modern communication

technologies has been told, this is still a work in progress. For some technologies-the telephone (Fischer, 1992; Marvin, 1988), the telegraph (Standage, 1998), the power grid (Nye, 1998), and the automobile (Nye, 1998)-we have excellent cultural histories. For others, especially newer communication technologies, much ground remains unexplored. While scholars studying "old technologies" have succeeded in showing which specific social and cultural forces have shaped the emergence of the modern electronic universe, efforts to clarify the social and cultural resources of the collection of devices and connections known collectively as "the Internet" are still in the exploratory phase. With some exceptions (Abbate, 1999; Castells, 2001), current cultural analyses of the Internet tend to be either polemical (Barbrook & Cameron, 1995; Borsook, 2000; Eubanks, 1999; Turner, 1999) or descriptive (Hafner & Lyon, 1996). What is needed is a more solid analytic and sociological framework, which can reveal what cultural and social forces, in what specific historical context, have shaped the discourse surrounding the dual social promises—individualistic and community-oriented—of the Internet.

The present article aims to fill this gap by targeting an important discursive trope surrounding the emergence of the Internet, that of "virtual community." The goal is to identify the cultural origins and social functions of this concept by placing it in socio-historical perspective and by revealing how it deals with the modern tension between individualism and communitarianism. The basic idea advanced here is that the socio-political hopes surrounding virtual community ideals derive their force and shape from the "high modern" (Giddens, 1991) repository of visions provided by the social and cultural movement of the 1960s and 1970s known as "the counterculture." Although this connection has been noted before (Castells, 2001; Hafner, 1997; Seabrook, 1997), this analysis will go deeper than the metaphorical or formal connection found in the current literature. With a few exceptions (e.g., Castells, 1996), the counterculture is mentioned as a "color item," as a peripheral factor that added spice and a certain amount of "fun factor" to what "neophytes" might consider "cold" or "geometrical" technologies (Hafner, 1997). Even Castells' investigation (2001), which has shown that the very idea of "virtual community" is a representative symbol of the countercultural ethos, is too cursory to reveal all the major implications of the connection between the virtual community concept and counterculture. Seabrook (1997) has provided the most extensive and detailed analysis of the phenomenon to date, offering a good cultural, although not always scientifically rigorous, framework for understanding the countercultural roots of the virtual community phenomenon.

Since the topic of "virtual community" is a vast one, the present article is limited to discussing only one of its facets: the way in which it deals with the relationship between individuals and community. It will highlight how the virtual community concept has inherited a number of contradictions by virtue of being shaped socially and culturally by one version of the counterculture, which has embraced technology. This will be accomplished by analyzing the discourse about virtual communities found in the postings and literature generated by the members of the paradigmatic virtual community, the WELL (i.e., Whole Earth Lectronic Link), an early computer conferencing environment. This choice is justified by the fact that the book that first brought the term "virtual community" to the public was written as a reflection on the social processes on the WELL by one of its most articulate members, Howard Rheingold (1993). The WELL is one of the first self-proclaimed virtual communities and an active late countercultural organization. Moreover, it was founded and supported for a number of years by the Whole Earth publishing group, owned by Stewart Brand, a well-known countercultural activist, who was directly or indirectly involved in many

contemporary techno-social initiatives related to virtual community ideals.[1]

The present analysis aims to demonstrate that as an incarnation of the countercultural communal movement, the WELL had to deal with a number of ideological tensions: between self-expression and true community involvement, between ascribed and achieved identities, between intentional sociability and actional efficiency, and between strong and weak social ties. These contradictions left their imprint on the idea of virtual community, or at least on the concept of virtual community that the WELL put in public circulation (Seabrook, 1997).

An important conclusion of this study is that virtual community is a discursive and social subspecies of the counterculture that reflects the fundamental modern tension between individualism and communitarianism. Virtual communities are related to a number of phenomena that also reflect this tension: the small group, weak tie, individually-centered groups (Wuthnow, 1994, 1998), molded by an expressive and instrumental individualistic ethos (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985/1996; Yankelovich, 1981), which have generated social arrangements characterized by "networked individualism" (Wellman, 2001). From this perspective, similar to the small groups movement analyzed by Wuthnow (1994) in *Sharing the Journey*, virtual community is not necessarily the solution to the social challenges of late modern American society, but rather one of its symptoms (Fernback & Thompson, 1995; Lievrouw, 1998; Shapiro, 1999; Sunstein, 2001). Embracing virtual communities can act both as a solvent and glue for modern society, making social commitments more flexible but also facilitating individual adaptation to these flexible social arrangements.

Virtual Community: Countercultural Roots

The literature that talks about the role of computer-mediated communication in social life is rich in pronouncements about how communication technology will enhance the quality of modern social life. Computer-based communication networks are believed to have positive effects on social interactions, which are most frequently presented in socio-psychological (Hiltz, 1984; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Rheingold, 1993), political (Berman & Weitzer, 1997; Braman, 1994; Doctor, 1991, 1992), or sociological terms (Smith, 1992; Watson, 1997).[2]

Why do these expectations sound appealing? What historical and cultural precedents made the idea of cyber-sociability interesting to the public? A possible explanation for the diffusion of this vision is the fact that the literature discussing it plays on the expectation, sometimes assumed, sometimes explicitly expressed, that computer communication entails a new social covenant, which will solve modern society's conflict between the individual impulse of self-realization and community constraints. This vision, a recurring one in modern intellectual history, was most recently revived as the dream of creating social groups through computer networks that can be seen as virtual or online communities, where both individuality and communal spirit can be preserved or even enhanced. This vision, first articulated by activist-analyst proponents (Barlow, 1994, 1996; Hauben, 1995; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Horn, 1998; Rheingold, 1987, 1993; Rushkof, 1994; Schuler, 1996; Watson, 1997), purportedly describes a new and superior form of human association (Horn, 1998; Rheingold, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993; Rushkof, 1994; Smith, 1992; Watson, 1997). The main appeal of the new social compact is its purported capacity to foster more authentic and deeper social involvement, while being deeply egalitarian, individualistic, less prone to prejudice, and more

emotionally satisfying. These characteristics are better fostered by computer networks because cybermediated communication allows, through its very technical characteristics, more freedom of expression, increased efficiency, and wider access (Hiltz & Turoff, 1978; Rheingold, 1987, 1991).

Although not rejecting the proposition that online communication environments can and do foster social groups that display community characteristics—group-sanctioned identities or jargons, norms, strong personal relationships (Baym, 1998; Jankowski, 2002; McLaughlin, Osborne, & Ellison, 1997; Parks & Floyd, 1996)—the present article starts from the premise that virtual community is a term that has both descriptive and normative (prescriptive) connotations. Those of a descriptive nature cover the obvious reality that people use the Internet for various social purposes, of which reinforcing pre-existing community-oriented social and spiritual resources are probably very important (Baym, 1998; Calhoun, 1998; Castells, 2001; DiMaggio, Hargittai, Neuman, & Robinson, 2001; Doheny-Farina, 1996; Hampton & Wellman, 1999, 2000; Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2002; Katz & Rice, 2002; Neustadtl & Robinson, 2002; Putnam, 2000; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As Calhoun aptly put it, "the Internet mainly makes it easier for us to do some things we were already doing and allows those with the resources to do some things that they already wanted to do" (Calhoun, 1998, p. 382).

In addition to its descriptive nuances, the term virtual community also incorporates prescriptive ones, which suggest that virtual communities are an evolutionary step in the history of sociability, solving the conflict between autonomy and conformity, and that their ontology is quite different from that of older social formations (Barlow, 1994, 1996; Rheingold, 1987, 1990, 1993; Watson, 1997). Following Roszak (1986, 1994), the present article will propose that these prescriptive connotations were attached to the concept during its forging in the intellectual furnace of the 1960s-1970s countercultural revolution, when the main rhetorical resources fueling the virtual community vision were created.

The counterculture was an intensely personal, revolutionary movement, born out of the period of effervescence that characterized the 1960s (Roszak, 1995). Although multifaceted, one of its core components was the communal/anarchist movement, whose goal was to restore a simpler, more egalitarian, and more personal social environment. This was to counter the tendency of modern society toward uniformity, regimentation, and massification (Kanter, 1972; Roszak, 1995; Veysey, 1978).

The countercultural communal movement was the offspring of older, anarchist ideals but with some added nuances (Kanter, 1972). First, it was intensely spiritual and at times religious (Wuthnow, 1976). Second, at least in the early seventies, it was a movement that emphasized individual freedom and was embraced as a means for individual liberation and for rediscovering the lost potentialities of the self (Fairfield, 1972; Yablonsky, 1968). This led to an emphasis on abandoning mainstream family, value, and communication conventions. An "openness ideal" was widely embraced (Wuthnow, 1976), expressed as "open social relationships" (non-possessive marriage or child rearing arrangements) or "open communication" (free and spontaneous expression of feelings, regardless of situation or consequences) (Fairfield, 1972; Yablonsky, 1968). Third, and most importantly, some of the communal experiences had a positive attitude to technology (Roszak, 1994). Technology, rejected or even hated in the classical anarchist movement, was embraced by many countercultural communities as a means for liberation, although, as it will be emphasized below, not by all of them. The logic behind this new approach was that technology becomes

an instrument of evil only when under the control of governmental or business bureaucracies. If properly controlled, through personalization and individual manufacture, technology can be made into a "convivial" (friendly, "humane") instrument of personal and group liberation (Roszak, 1986, 1994, 1995).

In the section that follows we will explore the relationship between the version of the countercultural movement that accepted the role of technology in the social revolution of late 20th century-which henceforth will be called techno-counterculture-and a specific type of technology, that which is dedicated to communication and computing. This will prepare the ground for the central analysis of this article: understanding how the techno-countercultural WELL project created the generative environment for the virtual community idea and how this circumstance has imprinted the concept with characteristics and tensions specific to the counterculture. In the process, it will be shown how the "open communication" ideal, a uniquely countercultural value, participates in creating the ideological tension between individualism and communitarianism that characterizes both the general countercultural and the techno-countercultural (virtual community) projects.

Counterculture, Communication Technology and "Open Communication"

The connection between techno-communitarian activism, especially during the earlier phases of the computer revolution, and the counterculture was noticed quite early by Roszak (1986, 1994). His views are important because he coined the term and made it famous from a semi-activist position through a well-known book: *The making of a counter culture: Reflections on the technocratic society and its youthful opposition* (1995), first published in 1969. One of Roszak's major contributions to the debate about the counterculture is his attempt to define the boundaries of the phenomenon. Although manifesting a certain affinity with the other major movements of the time, especially the civil rights and the anti-war movement, the counterculture is seen by him as a distinct social phenomenon. Roszak points to the fact that the counterculture was a social and cultural project covering the "underground," anarchistic movements of the sixties. Its main aim was to reconstruct the social order through novel human experiences and social relationships (Roszak, 1995).

We now remember these experiences only under the rubric of the "communal" experiment-especially the hippie communes and the transcendental religious movements of the sixties. The role played by technology in shaping the counterculture is far less known. Roszak was one of the few observers who noted that the counterculture had a complex relationship with technology, leading to its splitting into two branches: one techno-rejectionist and the other, as Roszak (1994) calls it, "techno-reversionary." While the former better fits the current stereotype about the sixties, seen as a na?ve "return to nature," the later strand was more complex, in that its members preferred to combine home-spun lifestyles with expressive-individualist values and a good dose of high technology, especially of the electronic kind.

According to Roszak (1994), the main goal of the techno-countercultural or techno-reversionary movement was not to destroy modern life, far less its technological components, as its anarchist predecessors or technophobic contemporaries strived to do. One of the revolutionary aims of the techno-counterculture was to change the social order by "personalizing" a number of technologies, especially those related to communication. This version of the counterculture believed that human experiences and social relationships mediated by specific "convivial technologies" could be more authentic and liberating (Roszak, 1994, 1995;

Rushkof, 1994). According to Roszak (1986), techno-countercultural sociability was not adverse to technology, in general; it only opposed its corporate and governmental uses.

Adopting a "techno-reversionary" attitude, the techno-counterculture promoted a life ideal in which powerful technologies are incorporated into "primitive" lifestyles. Moreover, techno-countercultural ideals have quickly trickled down to the rest of the society, influencing important informal (and later formal) technological organizations. Roszak and other chroniclers of the personal computer revolution have shown, for example, how the San Francisco Bay Area countercultural environment was essential for nurturing the circles of innovation responsible for the emergence of personal and networked computing (Freiberger & Swaine, 1999; Levy, 1985; Roszak, 1994). For example, the Resource One, People's Computer Company, Homebrew Computer Club, the Whole Earth Catalogue, and the Community Memory initiatives-the incubators for the first personal computer or computer conferencing prototypes-were core elements of the techno-countercultural movement. The two earliest luminaries of commercial personal computing, Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak, and the entire ethos of the Apple computing culture, are a direct product of the techno-counterculture (Levy, 2000).

One of techno-counterculture's points of attraction for techno-visionaries, both marginal and mainstream, was the dream diffused through publications such as the Whole Earth Catalogue, of a "new Jeffersonian democracy based, not upon equal distribution of land, but upon equal access to information" (Roszak, 1994, p. 147). According to this scenario, networked "personal" (as opposed to mainframe, institutionally-maintained) computers would play a crucial role in reorganizing the social order. The techno-counterculture's destiny "was to create a global culture of global villages cradled in a healthy natural environment, [where] one pictures the computer terminal as a sort of hearth or campfire around which, by way of their modems and satellite transmitters, the clans gather to exchange gossip and graffiti with their counterparts half a world away" (Roszak, 1994). In essence, for many techno-countercultural activists, "the result of high industrial technology would be something like a tribal democracy where the citizenry might still be dressed in buckskin and go berry picking in the woods. (Roszak, 1994)

In addition to and informing their technophilia, techno-countercultural experiments embraced an "open communication" ideal. The "consciousness reformation" (Wuthnow, 1976) or "expressive revolution" (Bernice, 1981b) that has led to the broader countercultural movement, and by implication to its "techno" variant, was dominated by the belief that to solve the ills of modernity (i.e., anonymity, massification, alienation), "revolutionizing the self" comes before revolutionizing society. In distinction to previous anarchist dreams, which focused on redistribution of external resources and power, the counterculture proposed a more radical project, which envisaged a total reconstruction of human consciousness and interpersonal human relationships as preconditions for any future social revolution (Bernice, 1981b; Veysey, 1978; Watts, 1998). In essence, the counterculture saw social revolution as nearly impossible until the internalized oppressive patterns of culture that shape people's most profound sense of self are destroyed or modified (Braunstein & Doyle, 2002; Nelson, 1987; Watts, 1998). Thus, any "external freedom" project was linked to an internal-psychological openness ideal, as the famous Beatles song proclaimed (Lennon, 1968): "You say you'll change the constitution/ well, you know/ we all want to change your head/ You tell me it's the institution/ well, you know/ You better free your mind instead."

The broader countercultural movement found the best tool for opening up the self and society at large in

"open communication." This is communication that is spontaneous, free, unhindered, and self-expressive (Veysey, 1978). Its goals are to share the joy of discovering and developing the "true" potential of the self. Open communication is communal and individualistic at the same time, reflecting what Veysey (1978) calls the paradox of counterculture, where the individual and community are concomitantly developed. In countercultural groups, personal and group identities can be merged through a process of communication that transcends conventions and is reduced to exchanging expressive "vibes" between individuals (Wuthnow, 1976). These exchanges are aesthetic and emotional in nature. The practical implication is that the more spontaneous and more self-expressive the social interaction, the less constraining and freer the group and the fuller the communal experience. This is a social ideal that focuses on the need for "communicating"—i.e., expressing one's self spontaneously and immediately—as a terminal value (Rokeach, 1979), as an ideal final state.

Through open communication, self-expression, and communal experience, countercultural communities attempt to resolve a fundamental contradiction between the core values of individualism and communitarianism. The goal of self-realization for all community members is premised on what might best be called a mystic egalitarianism: Each act of self-realization discovers a personal truth that is unique and probably incommunicable, making each self-actualized individual profoundly different from every other member of his or her "community" (Watts, 1998). One effect of the ineffability of each personal truth is to put them all beyond the reach of any yardstick of evaluation. Because it is impossible to say for certain that any one personal truth is more or less valid than any other, any attempt to do so would necessarily be arbitrary and oppressive. It follows that the process of communication/expression that intentional communities wish to foster is one in which no exchange participant is privileged over another and communication is freed as much as possible from the fetters of valuation and judgment. Since all utterances are, or at least must at least be presumed to be, of equal value, each has an equal right to be heard (Bernice, 1981a). The other effect of this mystic egalitarianism is that little common ground is available upon which individuals can base the ties that would bind them together in a community. Instead of tradition and a shared belief system, they must make do with tolerance and respect for each other's individuality. The reconciliation of individualism with community ties is thus affected by a lopsided compromise in which the very idea of community is profoundly transformed.

Open communication: From Counterculture to Cyberculture

If the virtual community project is a part of that branch of the counterculture that has embraced technology, as was suggested above and will be fully demonstrated in the section discussing the WELL that follows, the "open communication" ideal will be easily recognizable in the discourses surrounding the virtual community idea. This means that both the virtual community concept and its corresponding discourse will be characterized by the same contradiction between individualism and communitarianism that "open communication" and the techno-counterculture entail.

Most early virtual community literature dedicated to the social effects of personal and networked computing, to computer conferencing, and later on to the Internet, starts from the premise that the revolutionary effects of these technologies are derived from their capacity to foster open communication (Coate, 1992; Rheingold, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1993; Seabrook, 1997; WELL, 1985-2003a, 1985-2003b, 1985-2003c). The customary arguments in support of this idea are two and are interconnected:

1. The non-hierarchical and socially "transparent" structure of computer networks generates an environment of "open communication" where, freed from the social masks of class, gender, and race which model face-to-face interaction, people are more likely to express their authentic emotions and concerns. Taking advantage of the fact that identity in computer-mediated communication environments can be hidden or manipulated, social actors can explore and express unknown facets of their personalities. In the process, emotional involvement can be deepened, and expressive abilities and personal freedom enlarged.

2. Such "open communication environments" are also characterized by the users' ability not only to consume but also to produce information, which eliminates the middlemen in social, political, and cultural life, flattens social hierarchies, and enlarges social freedom and equality. By having more access to information, users of computer-mediated communication will be better able and more motivated to participate in social and political affairs.

At first glance, these arguments seem to spring naturally from the nature of computer-mediated communication technology, which is more flexible and decentralized than the electronic broadcasting/mass press model of communication. However, upon closer examination, one can distinguish the marks of the larger countercultural "meaning system" (Wuthnow, 1976). The first idea, that communication technologies can generate better communities because they erase the social cues that hinder real-life interactions, extracts its visionary force from the countercultural belief that shedding all external signs of social differentiation and disposing of social and communicative conventions and codes (in speech, clothing, or manners) facilitates social equalization and self-realization (Kanter, 1972; Miller, 1991; Veysey, 1978). The second idea, that we can break down the social isolation of modern individuals and rebuild community through the disintermediation effects of communication technology (i.e., the ability not only to consume, but also to produce information) is also a widely known countercultural idea (Roszak, 1994).

For example, Community Memory—an early computer conferencing system and one of the earliest virtual community projects—is described by its creator, Felsenstein (1994), as a product of countercultural ideals and contexts and as an epitome of the idea that communication technology makes users into producers of information. His work is premised on the principle that if one succeeds in establishing a more manageable system of communication, where every participant has equal access to the means of producing communication flows, and gains personal control over them, the social system sustained by these flows will become more "communitarian," i.e., will make people want to connect to other people. As he put it, in a computer conferencing environment: "People do NOT want to be subjected to centralized information. They DO want to be able to explore the social space of their surroundings and to ask the question: 'Who's out there?'" (Felsenstein, 1993).

Felsenstein (1994) recounts how his idea of creating tools for "convivial" electronic communication for the Community Memory project came from his brief stint at the *Barb*, one of the flagship underground publications of the time. Although initially enthusiastic about the capacity of the underground press to speak for whole communities in a democratic manner, he soon became disillusioned, realizing that hierarchical control and centralization were, in the given production and diffusion context, still a reality. Inspired by a more "flexible" freedom ideal, he adopted the "open communication" idea as a design principle; in order to be emancipatory, social communication should be as unmediated as possible.

The WELL as Virtual Community and its Cultural Contradictions

Techno-countercultural ideas and projects did not disappear with the apparent death of the counterculture at the end of the 1970s. In fact, they have slowly become part of the mainstream, which is one of the reasons this brand of counterculture has become a controversial subject of debate in alternative activist circles. The apparition of a central techno-countercultural publication, the *Coevolution Quarterly*, which later became the *Whole Earth Review*, marked an attempt to reconcile technology with social experimentation and led to a serious rift in the American counterculture. Despite this controversy, or maybe because of it, the sociotechnical ideas of the 1960s and early 1970s were incorporated into the computer and networking projects of the 1980s and 1990s. One of these projects was the WELL, which has refined some of the techno-countercultural ideas into what is now known as the "virtual community" project. The WELL is a bulletin board and conferencing system, still functional and accessible through the World Wide Web (http://www.well.org). It was created as an electronic commune by countercultural activists and was initially run and managed by former hippies. Founded by Stewart Brand, publisher of the flagship publication of the techno-countercultural movement mentioned above, the *Whole Earth Review*, the WELL was initially managed by Matthew McClure, a former member of Stephen Gaskin's Tennessee commune, The Farm, followed by Cliff Figallo and John Coate, also Farm "graduates" (Hafner, 1997). The Farm, which still survives and maintains a website (http://www.thefarm.org), was known during the 1960s and 1970s as a communal/anarchist settlement of the first order, being for a while a countercultural pilgrimage destination (Hafner, 1997). WELL users were initially recruited mainly from the countercultural population of the San Francisco Bay area, especially from the followers of the Grateful Dead, a famous American countercultural band.

Both the early WELL users and its managers brought with them from their communal/countercultural past a vision of community and communication that emphasized unhindered freedom of expression. For example, the WELL's motto "you own your words" can be seen as a variation of the famous sixties dictum "do your own thing." This made the WELL a place of intense verbal participation, emotional openness, and often intense conflict (Hafner, 1997).

The virtual community vision that emerged on the WELL was animated by generous ideals: freedom of expression and egalitarianism. However, the actual social life of the WELL was characterized by debate and even conflict. The contentious issues that arose were the opposite of the early ideals. Factionalism, power struggles, and accusations of betrayal of ideals led to a major scission in the user base. In 1995, some of the old-time members abandoned the WELL, forming their own, non-profit computer conferencing forum, the River (http://www.river.com). In 1999 the WELL itself was sold to a for-profit organization, Salon.com.

The WELL was founded as a self-conscious virtual community and it has proclaimed itself as such (Rheingold, 1987). Yet, the fact that the virtual community ideal and project, together with the tensions they entail, were the product of an essentially techno-countercultural organization, the WELL, has been largely neglected in the academic literature. This is probably the reason why a discussion about the nature and affiliation with a larger family of social groups of the WELL has been slow to take shape. This section will explain in some detail the role some techno-countercultural visions played in forging the virtual community ideal, as this took shape on the WELL. This will help us better understand the utility and the main shortcoming of the virtual community concept as a sociological tool, as well as the inherent tensions it brings to the larger debate about the role of virtual communities in social life.

The connections between countercultural and virtual community ideals, in the WELL context, are not easy to detect. This is because the rhetorical registers on which the two vocabularies play are quite different. What in the counterculture was a style of interpersonal interaction later on became a "rationalized" socio-technological ideal. Yet, analysis of some illustrative documents produced by the members, managers and chroniclers of the WELL shows that the virtual community rhetoric generated on the WELL is infused with the terms (and inherent contradictions) that characterize the techno-countercultural project, and that the ideal of "open communication" and its ambiguous role in making/unmaking community is also present here.

In a number of programmatic postings to the "virtual community" conference (WELL, 1985-2003c) dedicated to the issue: "Is the WELL a community? How so? Or, why not?" the countercultural ideal of self-actualization and self-expression is clearly stated, although in a conflicted relationship with the other goal of the WELL, community and conviviality. In fact, the theme running throughout more than 500 postings spread over a period of several years is: How can community be defined in such a way that individuality is not suppressed? There is no definitive answer to this question, but the tension is usually resolved in favor of preserving or emphasizing the individualistic term of the equation.

A representative posting proposes a definition for virtual communities that invokes the open communication ideal as a bridge between individuality and community.

> XXX (xxx)[3] *Sun 01 Mar 1992 (11:01 PM)* There are many definitions of community - some of which have been described above - but the one _I_ find most meaningful (and, probably, most difficult) comes from the book 'A Different Drum' by M. Scott Peck. He describes community as a group of people who have _chosen_ to "communicate honestly with each other, and whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure." A group that shares joy and pleasure as well as sorrow and pain. [�] The most succinct thing I can say about it is that true community provides a place for knowing myself (and others) and making helpful changes in my lifestyle/behaviors. (WELL, 1985-2003c)

The terms of this definition are strikingly similar to those used by members of countercultural projects (Wuthnow, 1976). Central in both visions is an emphasis on emotional support and "open communication," beyond "masks of composure," where authenticity and self-expression of feelings replace social conventions. In addition, the WELL user's declared goals for participating in communities of any kind are self-knowledge and self-adjustment, which are central individualist values. Interestingly, and revealing the contradictions of community building in a countercultural context, this user mentions in the second part of the posting that she does not believe that the WELL meets even her relaxed definition of community, the WELL being, in her view, too cliquish and conflict-ridden to be a "real" community. This highlights clearly the difficulty WELL users had in defining and sustaining a common understanding of the WELL as a "community," and their tendency to fall back on the individualistic benefits of this social environment.

Another way of appropriating the concept of community and aligning it to the countercultural environment specific to the WELL was to attach a strong subjective, personal understanding to the term. In one of the more succinct answers to the question "is the WELL a community?", Howard Rheingold posted a comment stating that community is "what matters to me," which provoked the following repartee from a fellow user:

> Howard Rheingold (hlr) *Wed 19 Feb 1992 (03:45 PM)* [�] *I* find a community here for

> myself, and I don't believe that it is necessary for everybody else to agree for my sense of my community to be valid. [�]
>
> YYY (yyy) *Wed 19 Feb 1992 (07:11 PM)* Right--the fact that *you* find a community here does not mean that the WELL itself, alone from your perception, is one. In other words, the medium stands alone. What people do with it is highly individual. (WELL, 1985-2003c)

This exchange, which is only one of the many dedicated to the issue, highlights the inherent tension between individualism and communitarian values that confronted the WELL users when they tried to define their online group. This is also present in John Coate's discussion of the representative ethos found on the WELL and in virtual communities, in general. In a document widely circulated on the WELL and on the Internet, Coate (1992) programmatically affirms that online environments are naturally prepared to embrace individualists of the "electronic frontier" kind, who "are not by nature team-players" and who "work for themselves[,�] possess great awareness and concern about their rights as individuals [and are] outspoken and articulate" (Coate, 1992). Communities, including their online extensions, formed by such strongly individualistic people are subjectively-defined interest groups, the result of formal and self-beneficial agreement:

> I like to say that if you think you are in a community you probably are, and if you don't, you aren't. Online, this sense of community is far less obvious than it would be in a small town or a church community. In fact, it only exists as a commonly-held, ongoing agreement of the participants who make it be true *for them.* Ultimately, all communities are a set of agreements among the people and in any community (and especially these days when many neighbors hardly know each other), one can always have strong or weak involvement with the group. But the online environment lends itself well to a person who wants to interact online, follow rules, observe protocol and etiquette, and still being completely disengaged from any sense of belonging to a community. (Coate, 1992)

Coate's vision is one of communities made for individualists and sustained by their social and intellectual resources. The emphasis is on individual autonomy and self-interest, which, again, redefine community as a subjective entity to be evaluated in terms of "what matters to me."

This type of thinking continues throughout the postings to the WELL's virtual community conference, which make allusion to tropes and values borrowed from the counterculture, illuminating how the fundamental contradiction of countercultural communities becomes an inherent contradiction for this archetypal virtual community, as well. For example, community is defined in terms of personal payoff:

> ZZZ (zzzzz) *Wed 19 Feb 1992 (10:31 PM)* If a community is something to have one's life enriched, then the WELL is a community. (WELL, 1985-2003c)

Another user, one of the early managers of the WELL and a former member of The Farm, using countercultural organic imagery, affirms:

> QQQ (qqq) Tue 25 Feb 1992 (09:44 AM) I do not believe that one has to cop to being a "member of a community" for one to actually be a member of a community. Being a member does not obligate one to act in any certain way except to participate in some interaction. One certainly does not have to give up one's autonomy to be a part of a community any more than the fern by the pond has to do anything special to be a part of the pond's ecology. (WELL, 1985-2003c)

He is echoed by a WELL member who embraces an explicit countercultural belief: The main role of self-respecting virtual communities is to cater to their members' need to remain themselves. Rules and norms are the end of any community:

> VVV (vvv) *Tue 25 Feb 1992 (11:01 AM)* My notion of a community has something to do with the idea that it is freely and voluntarily formed, and that once a member, one doesn't need to alter one's behavior much in order to remain a member. That is, the person who consistently rants is no less a member than the constantly nurturing one: both contribute a part of themselves to the mixture that becomes the community. To the extent that rules are imposed (and my own impression, reinforced by brief excursions to other networks is that the WELL is largely free of rules), the community loses its vibrancy. (WELL, 1985-2003c)

The same WELL user further elaborates on the potential such an ideal can have to generate community. His conclusion is that the WELL, and virtual communities in general, are broken mirrors, reflecting not a reality greater than the sum of its parts but the unique individuality of their members' selves:

> VVV (vvv) *Tue 25 Feb 1992 (11:01 AM)* Another point which may or may not be relevant: it seems to me that the WELL functions as a mirror to each of its users. It's clear that the person whose postings consist chiefly of flames, for example, looks at the WELL and denounces something he sees there, but in fact what he sees is his own projection, and his frequent denunciations chiefly reveal his poor self-image. Just as, to cite another example, the person who posts only supportive and nurturing comments may be mainly displaying his own hunger for nurturing. One thing I like about the WELL is the openness with which people reveal how they see themselves in the mirror (even if they don't agree that what they see in the WELL is a mirror). (WELL, 1985-2003c)

These personalized—"community is what the term means to me"—and possessive—"this is *my* community"—definitions, sometimes noticed in the literature dedicated to online groups (Jones, 1997), are additional indicators of tension between individualism and communitarianism broadly defined. This tension is not just covert or implied in the discourse; it was in fact overtly noticed by an "outsider" WELL user, a British science writer who never felt welcomed on the WELL and who rejected the idea that the WELL, or any computer-mediated group, could be a community, precisely because they placed too much emphasis on self-expression and individualism:

> CCC (ccc) *Wed 04 Sep 1991 (08:28 AM)* [�] My overall impression is that the WELL is by no means "the community" it claims to be. There are, apparently, something over 3500 people supposedly involved here. So why is it that only a small handful of them ever post anything? Go into any conference at random, and you'll see the same names time and time again, mercilessly and monotonously trumpeting their views. It's like walking into a small-town bar, where the locals have ways of making it plain that they'd sooner you weren't there. "Try posting something", is the expected sympathetic advice to a newcomer. Well, I tried it, in the Science conference, where a debate about homeopathy is raging. "Prove that it works!" cried the Antis, "show us the references!" Since I've written a book about it, I left a polite posting, complete with references & abstracts. No reaction. The debate continued to storm around me, prejudices healthily intact. I left another message, and another. Still nothing. I began to understand how dog turd on a pavement feels on a hot afternoon. [�] The WELL seems to be all about self-expression, not communication. Expression is a solitary activity - like shouting in the forest, perhaps I should say screaming into the electrovoid. I have a picture in my mind's eye of the WELL - actually, of about fifty little wells - each one sunk deep into rock; each one perfectly insulated from every

other one; and at the bottom of each, a person with a keyboard, furiously and fruitlessly hammering away. (WELL, 1985-2003a)

This posting attracted a long series of repartees and comments, in many instances the members admitting that the WELL fell short of its communitarian ideal. In this, and many other exchanges on the WELL, the individualistic and communitarian visions of the WELL vigorously clash, revealing its fundamental contradiction.

Studying the WELL as a participant observer, Seabrook (1997) adds supplementary details to the picture. He offers an in-depth description of the way in which the countercultural demand for self-expression engulfs the declared ideal of harmony, how community spirit is drowned by self-absorbed competition for attention, and how conviviality is soured by hazing rituals. He suggests that core components of the virtual communitarian discourse, which emphasize a social valuation of the self, create the premises for social groups that are unstable, torn apart by conflict, fragmented, and parochial.

Seabrook (1997) notes that although the virtual community ideal that ostensibly animates the WELL is one of social equality, the participants are divided into insiders and outsiders. Echoing the observation of the British WELL user mentioned above, who complained of exclusionary behavior on the WELL, Seabrook notes that the WELL is a collection of single-issue conferences, each dominated by an exclusive clique and each requiring from its members a continuous effort to prove their originality and "authenticity" of feeling and ideas.

Acceptance is difficult, and as with all exclusive groups, involves an inevitable hazing ritual. In this case, hazing was emotional, his work being mercilessly criticized by older members who did not refrain from ad hominem attacks. For example, a WELL member who had read some articles that Seabrook published in *The New Yorker* commented in response to one of them: "Sounds like he's a chucklehead and will be rightfully driven from the net. In fact, I'd like his e-mail address *right now* myself. I've got this pent-up hostility-oh, 45 years' worth-I'd like to do something with :-)" (Seabrook, 1997). After some exchanges, Seabrook is recognized as "one of ours," his affiliation with *The New Yorker* being probably a major opinion-swaying factor. The end result of this process, however, is admission to what Seabrook recognizes as an elitist group. Ironically, Rheingold acknowledges the existence of these hazing rituals (although he never mentions it in his own book) when, as a WELL member, he gives Seabrook this piece of advice: "It's an initiation ritual, John Seabrook. Stick around and help us dump it on the next guy. ;-)" (Seabrook, 1997, p. 177).

Despite the difficulty of winning acceptance into the group, once accepted, its members feel little commitment to it and little inclination to maintain its coherence. Participation in multiple groups, where one can leverage his or her verbal and intellectual skills, is the norm. Membership in online groups is, concludes Seabrook (1997), not for supporting others but for drawing attention to oneself.

Howard Rheingolds Well: A Trip to Utopia and Back

Another perspective on the central tension between individualism and communitarianism in the virtual community project as it took shape on the WELL can be found in Rheingold's *Virtual Community* (1993). This is a book written by a prominent WELL member, about the WELL, its members, lifestyles, and values,

and was the most important symbolic vehicle of the 1990s through which the virtual community idea was popularized to the mainstream public.

The book was published in two slightly different versions, one in 1993 and the second in 2001 (Rheingold, 1993, 2001). The main difference between the two editions is the addition in 2001 of a long final chapter, in which Rheingold meditates on the evolution of the ideas he first proposed at the beginning of the 1990s, both in the larger societal discussion and in his own work. In 2001 he is much more skeptical, at times even critical, of the virtual community project, retracting some of the claims he made in 1993 about the fundamental mechanisms and socio-ethical implications of online social interactions.

Yet, the ideas and the implicit ideology found in the first edition of the book do not cease to be important. They played a capital role in summarizing and shaping the debate about the role of virtual communities at the end of the 20th century. In fact, as a historical document about the effervescent era of the late 80s-early 90s, Rheingold's book is of greater importance through what it claimed to be true and certain in 1993 than by what it doubted in 2001.

The WELL's community and supportive spirit is presented in Rheingold's first edition of the book in positive and optimistic terms, the book minimizing, both theoretically and narratively, most major tensions or conflicts described by other authors (Hafner, 1997; Seabrook, 1997). Yet, the theoretical contribution of the opus is torn by contradictions specific to the techno-countercultural project. Moreover, these contradictions, which can be gleaned in the penumbra of the main argument about the mechanism by which virtual communities are generated, never became an issue in the book because they are solved through the same lopsided compromise in favor of individualism that we have seen explicitly stated in postings to the WELL's virtual community conference.

Rheingold's initial and openly stated model of online social interaction is strongly influenced by social exchange theory, which explains social action through rational self-interest. This is a theory that tries to explain how individual behavior can create collective action. He takes what is a descriptive and productive sociological idea and makes it into a normative one, however, when he adds that cooperative behaviors *always* emerge online as a product *only* of rational choice: "whenever CMC [computer-mediated communication] technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies" (Rheingold, 1993, p.7). This image makes the growth of virtual community look like the accretion of a coral reef from free-floating, independent organisms, an idea which he probably picked up from a posting on the WELL,[4] and which he combines with his belief that the seed from which social groups emerge online is human beings' inborn rational self-interest. Because people are *only* reason-driven and have an "innate" need to preserve and enhance their autonomous status through cost-benefit analysis, Rheingold concludes: "Every cooperative group of people exists in the face of a competitive world because that group of people recognizes there is something valuable that they can gain only by banding together. Looking for a group's collective goods is a way of looking for the elements that bind isolated individuals into a community" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 13).[5]

Rheingold (1993) simplifies the discussion about communities to a strictly utilitarian perspective, reducing a complex phenomenon to one of its aspects. This may be because the book was addressed to a popular

audience. Yet, Rheingold's utilitarianism seems to have roots that go deeper than the rhetorical constraints of the genre in which he writes. Reducing communication to self-interested "information exchange" also answers the call for a more egalitarian, non-judgmental social order, which is the core value that innerved the social life of the WELL. Embracing this value, Rheingold's book speaks not only or primarily for the author as a specific individual, but for the social environment that made the topic of his book possible.

Rheingold later abandoned some of the hopes expressed in *Virtual Community* about the role virtual communities might play in reinventing social life. In the 2001 version of the book, he introduces a counter-model for explaining how virtual communities are born and thrive. The model is especially skeptical about the capacity of virtual environments to amplify (only) the good in its denizens, be it generosity, emotional support or cooperation. He now believes that online conferencing can equally boost unhealthy attention-seeking behavior and attitudinal negativism, suggesting, although not openly, that on-line interaction can generate a form of destructive individualism.

Rheingold is also far more skeptical about the democratic value of online communities, noting that even if online interaction facilitates participation, which at least in some contexts is probably true, this can be a liability, not an asset, for democracy. Making a distinction that resonates with the old Aristotelian difference between *democracy*—the rule of the many—and *ohlocracy*—the rule of *too* many, Rheingold notes that when deliberation becomes an end in itself, not a means toward an end, a representative, versus a direct, method of decision making might be preferable.

The most important amendment Rheingold makes to his initial model is his abandonment of the idea that mixing self-interest with technology automatically produces community. In the 2001 version he emphasizes that virtual communities are not "natural ecosystems," the freer, the happier. Instead, virtual communities are like cultivated fields, the more careful the farmer, the more flourishing the community. Rheingold also embraces Wellman's path-breaking work on the role of pre-existing social networks in reinforcing and extending computer-mediated networks (Wellman, 2001; Wellman et al., 1996). The true virtue of virtual communities is now their capacity for maintaining the ties between those who are already connected through values, social similarity, or personal ties, regardless of their geographic location.

Rheingold's self-declared "apostasy" marks the end of a mini cultural cycle. His new intellectual position shows that the fundamental and unrecognized contradiction between individualism and communitarianism, initially resolved in favor of the latter, has been at least (and at last) partially recognized. This shift represents an overture toward a more critical and reflexive understanding of the role the virtual community project currently plays, and will play in society—one that emphasizes, rather than denies, its intrinsic dilemmas.

Virtual Community and the Future

In the preceding section, based on contemporaneous accounts of how virtual community discourse emerged on the WELL, we found both explicit and implicit signs of a deep tension between individualist and communitarian ideals, and indications that the perceived solution often emphasized the former, rather than the latter. The most probable source of this tension is the past social and cultural context in which the virtual community idea emerged—that of the countercultural reaction to the ills of modernity. In this last

section, using insights from Wuthnow's (1994) work, we will try to explain where the virtual community ideal might take us as a future-oriented project.

Sociological research dedicated to countercultural communities and to their successor movements suggests that they were responses to the central dilemma of modernity: How can individual autonomy be reconciled with the highly socialized nature of the new human order? (Bellah et al., 1985/1996; Berman, 1970; Roszak, 1995; Wuthnow, 1976).

The counterculture tried to reverse the trend toward massification and anonymization, not by repressing the newly conquered autonomy of modern personalities but by exacerbating it (Berman, 1970; Roszak, 1995). This was and is an ambitious and immensely difficult project, and the various social formations it generated, including the virtual community movement, are still struggling to strike the right balance between commitment and individualism (Fernback & Thompson, 1995).

Yet the past failures of the countercultural movement cannot be transformed into a prophecy for the future of the virtual community project. Modernity is a knot of contradictions, characterized by tensions rather than by Manichean processes (Bell, 1976/1996; Taylor, 1989). Virtual or countercultural communities, despite their penchant for individualism, should not be seen as either/or social formations, but as contradictory groups (Jones, 1998). They resemble, in their complexity, a cognate social phenomenon, Wuthnow's (1994) "small groups." These are voluntary associations dealing with a variety of issues, including: spirituality, addiction, and book reading. Small groups are different from previous forms of voluntary associations in that they are more flexible, very open, and informal. They resemble the virtual community ideal in that they emphasize individualistic values and non-judgmental support of members by each other. Their mission, according to Wuthnow (1994), is to offer their members an occasion "to focus on themselves in the presence of others" (p. 6), and their ethos, which asserts only the weakest of obligations, can be summarized as follows: "Come if you have time. Talk if you feel like it. Respect everyone's opinion. Never criticize. Leave quietly if you become dissatisfied" (p.6).

Wuthnow's assessment of small groups is that they are a symptom of, rather than a solution to, the main contradiction of modernity. This perspective can also be applied to virtual communities. Like many small groups, virtual communities are based on weak ties and voluntary participation, emotional support, open communication, and non-judgmental interaction among members. While helping us to adapt to a new type of sociability—more flexible and individualistic—they further increase the flexibility of our social structures and the amount of individualism in our ethos. If small groups and virtual communities are the glue that holds together a high-modern society, especially the American one, "they are then a social solvent as well," says Wuthnow (1994), adding that the "solvent helps people slip away from previous forms of social organization [and] it facilitates the enormous adjustments required" (p. 25). Virtual communities, like many small groups, are based on discursive interaction, storytelling, and verbal exchanges. This communication helps the members focus on the process and on their journey into unknown futures in the presence of others. The title of Wuthnow's book, *Sharing the Journey*, captures this metaphor, befitting the nature of virtual communities as it is described in this article, where community and companionship is found, but for an individualistic journey.

In brief, the WELL and other self-conscious virtual communities, like small groups, are characterized by a

high level of individualism, yet not entirely devoid of community spirit. Under certain conditions, they can be a step toward social re-connection of those who feel isolated from the larger society. Although the social space that small groups or virtual communities create will fall short of the traditional community ideal, it might create "ties that bind" (Jones, 1998). Even individualistic values, such as freedom and openness, can be construed socially, if used for reviving public discourse and preserving public goods, such as freedom of speech or the right to privacy, which the WELL has so prominently professed and defended (Fernback, 1997).

Summary and Conclusions

This article has put in socio-historical context the concept of virtual community and has revealed some of its discursive implications. Specifically, it showed that the discourse about virtual community relies on a set of contradictory values: individualistic and communitarian. These values are reinforced by a belief in self-expression, self-interest, and open communication, which the founders of virtual communities inherited from their countercultural past. This study does not, however, limit itself to establishing formal relationships between narrative patterns found in the countercultural discourse and in the claims made by virtual community discourse. It also argues that this consonance reflects the fact that virtual community is an attempt to formulate a "new technological deal" between people's social and individualistic impulses in substantive terms as a response to the challenge of modernity. The force that animates this vision is the modern promethean impulse to invent not only our technologies but also ourselves and our communities. This vision proposes a new type of social bond, one that is weaker than traditional arrangements but still capable of nurturing social interaction, in a manner similar to that of the small group movement described by Wuthnow (1994).

The relationship between individuality, self-expression, and communitarianism is probably one of the thorniest issues of our day, and many scholars and activists are still struggling to find the right balance between individualism and communitarianism. This arduous project is even more challenging online, where issues of power, legally-acceptable behavior, and social anomie are increasing, rather than decreasing. These are issues communication scholars are keenly aware of and which they intensely debate. The present article, offering the larger perspective of the modern conflict between individualism and communitarianism, hopes to stimulate and further this debate.

Notes

1. Brand was also involved with the MIT Medialab, whose early countercultural zeitgeist-inspired goal was to redefine the relationship between human creativity and computing. He also is known to have been one of the minor helpers at Douglas Engelbarts 1968 demonstration of a human amplification device, the earliest prototype of a complex virtual interaction environment.
2. For a summary of research see the excellent literature reviews by Baym (1998), Harrison (1999), d Jankowski (2002).
3. Except for those by Howard Rheingoldwho published some of his contributions to the WELL in his books, all other postings discussed here pre the anonymity of the user. The sequence XXX (xxx) designates the place where the real name followed by the "handle (WELL name) would have been in the posting. The letters used in this article are unique for each contributor cited. All postings cited

are from the WELL virtual community conference.

4. In a posting, one of the WELL managers directly compares the WELL with a coral reef, although this analogy was meant to have a historical, rather than a sociological connotation:"The WELL is conversations built up over years sort of like how coral keeps building on itself (WELL, 1985-2003a).

5. This idea is borrowed from Smith (1992), another WELL participant and author of a Masters thesis about the logic of virtual commons.

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