EDITORIAL

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Communities: Virtual vs. Real

Research on virtual communities has been dominated by the question of whether online communities can be designed in ways that allow them to match the accomplishments of off-line communities. The answer, at least according to several leading students of virtual communities, is that human relations in computer-mediated communities cannot be as intimate, strong, and affect-laden as in social communities. Howard Rheingold concludes his book *The Virtual Community* with the words "(we) must pay for our access to each other by forever questioning the reality of our online culture."

Michael Dertouzos, in his new book, *What Will Be,* writes about "the forces of the cave." He notes that the primordial feelings of fear, love, and anger cannot be transmitted online, because the participant knows "intellectually, but more importantly, intuitively, that he can turn off the machine" and avoid the impact of the forces. He adds that for this reason, while MIT is planning to provide virtual classrooms for its students, the students will also be required to come to the campus once in a while—to return to the cave, the real community.

But the question of whether virtual communities match real ones is slanted: Virtual communities must somehow live up to the accomplishments of real ones. Those psychologically inclined might suggest that this one-sided approach reflects an unconscious aim to reassure us that the new Frankenstein we have created will not outsmart us and dominate our real communities. As the recent brouhaha over Deep Blue's chess victory over Gary Kasparov indicates, the computer is still viewed with apprehension by some.

A different view emerges when we recast the question: What virtues of online communities are absent in off-line ones? Computer-mediated and face-to-face communities each have their own advantages as well as their own weaknesses. We should investigate what real communities can do that virtual communities cannot do, and vice versa.

Even with current technical limitations, online communities have several advantages. They let people bond without being in close proximity either spatially or temporally (unlike phone conversations, online communication can be asynchronous). Communities can evolve across national borders and time zones. They can encompass individuals who are homebound because of illness, age, or handicap. They are safer—a major consideration in many cities. Online discussion groups or forums can accommodate many more individuals than off-line meeting rooms can accommodate. And online communities have much stronger memories than off-line communities in matters ranging from the resolutions passed many town meetings ago to names of the founders of the community. Finally, people can explore new relationships or even new identities online—they are not constrained by their physical appearance or off-line identity, as Sherry Turkle of MIT has documented. An embodiment of these features of online communities is the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). With its carefully crafted community guidelines, the WELL boasts a large membership and numerous discussion groups on topics ranging from "Women and Men" to "Science and Technology."

Real communities are better than virtual communities (at least as currently designed) in communicating affect, identifying participants and holding them accountable, and in providing group feedback (for example, cheering a speaker at a "real" town meeting). Which combinations of virtual and real communities are able to overcome the weaknesses of each and combine many of the strengths of both? Several studies show the advantage of mixed person-machine systems over pure interpersonal or computer-mediated systems. For quite a few years, members of the AAAS have combined face-to-face communications at annual and committee meetings with a rich diet of e-mail exchanges. In the future, such communities, whose members have close in-person relations and are all "wired" together as well, may benefit from a high volume of asynchronous communication and strong memory (features of online communities) and also from the accountability and communication of affect allowed by off-line communities.

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