

Rafał Modzelewski

The University of Białystok

Virtual Togetherness: Sense of Identity and Community in Cyberspace

Abstract. It is an uncontroversial statement to say that we live in an age of the enormous influence of information technology. The Internet in particular has been instrumental in shaping and reshaping modern reality. It harbours millions of communities and social networks, where people interact with each other on a daily basis. What are we to think of them? Do they represent a new Renaissance of social interactions or rather a demise of the traditional community? In the following article I argue that it is something entirely different. The Internet, I propose, should be viewed as a new, different environment for communities to form and thrive. Not only are those communities formed online, they also display a wide range of features, which make them legitimate communities, and not entities impoverished in the social sense. Those communities have a profound effect on the identity of their participants.

Keywords: Cyberculture, online, the Internet, community, identity.

1. Introduction

The growing popularity of virtual communities in the cultural West, defined as European and North American countries along with Australia and New Zealand, is a fact. They have gathered millions of users from around the world in an environment that seems to lack limits in possibilities and dangers alike. Those communities have attracted significant attention, both from the media and scholars, who pose challenging questions about the nature of these entities. Can we really call them communities? Can they facilitate the formation of a healthy identity, or perhaps distort it? Can they hinder our abilities concerning face-to-face interactions? These are only a few among the many questions that seem to make both researchers and the media restless. One thing is clear, the changes and developments online do affect our lives, for better or for worse.

2. Theory and definitions

Howard Rheingold coined the following definition in his *The Virtual Community* (1993:6): "Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." Later, he added: "A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks" (1994: 57-58). In her essay, Jenny Preece defined an online community as "any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn, or to find company. The community can be local, national, international, small or large" (2001: 2). In the following

paper, I will be using the term "virtual community" in accordance with both of those definitions. I would point out, however, that a "virtual community" is not synonymous with "social network". While the former is focused on a specific topic, theme or interests, the later is mostly concerned with gathering friends and an exchange of personal information.

In his *Keywords* (1976: 76), Raymond Williams says the following about the word "community":

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.

Two important factors stressed in the definition of "community" are relationships between their participants and the positive aspects of that form of organization. That however, might be problematic. Is it possible to say that the people living in Jonestown did not form a community? Naturally, for such an exploitive and ultimately destructive environment, in which hundreds of people were manipulated into committing mass suicide by a religious leader, we would rather use the word "cult". Still, the word "cult" is notoriously hard to define in a way that would be objective, and widely accepted. According to Bakardjieva (2003: 291) Williams' definition seems fuzzy and imprecise. She goes on to say that "There is no 'genuine' fact of nature or social history that the word community denotes". For the purpose of this paper I have to adopt and utilize a definition of community that will be used consistently. The definition that seems to be most useful and consistent with the way the word "community" is being used, has been provided by Barry Wellman in "Community: From Neighbourhood to Network" (2005: 53): "Communities are networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity". That definition, therefore, will be used throughout this paper.

The notion of self-identity will be discussed as well. The answer to the question "who am I?", especially in relation to the social and economic environment is different from the Cartesian notion delineated by Stuart Hall (2000: 15) as essentialism – the notion of a fixed, inborn identity, remaining constant throughout one's life. I will be looking at identity as dynamic – changing throughout ones life, and depending on circumstance. In that sense, the key identity changes, even throughout the course of one day, when a person starts the day e.g. as a wife, proceeds to being a mother, then goes on to be a dentist, and upon arrival back home "transforms" into a wife once again. Identity is:

[T]he basic building block of social interaction. All of our interactions, even those with strangers, are shaped by our sense of with whom we are interacting. In face-to-face and telephone interactions there are a wealth of cues of varying reliability to indicate our identity and our intentions. Our clothes, voices, bodies, and gestures signal messages about status, power, and group membership. We rely on our ability to recognize fellow group members in order to know who we can turn to and what we can expect. (Kollock and Smith 1999: 8)

2.1.A virtual community

"There is nothing virtual about virtual reality" says John Murphy (1996). Is that the case? Logical as it may seem to say that "A is A", Linda Carolli (1997) would perhaps disagree. Her claim is that the Inter-webs form "another place" in which certain relationships are formed. She also insists that what is being formed on the Internet is a new phenomenon, which cannot be simply transferred from the "real" world into virtual reality. She also discusses the seemingly contradictory notion of a "community of strangers", an environment in which people interact with one another and form relationships that emulate a community, yet they do not form strong ties and "real" friendships. Sherry Turkle, a prominent researcher of online communities, in her Technology Education Design speech (2011: Web 2) talks about people holding one another in a form of Goldilocks situation, "Not too far, not too close but just right". In the same speech, she calls it "The illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship". That gloomy outlook is strengthened by Kollack and Smith (1999), who provide insight into the two, opposing views of the spaces created in virtual reality. In that view, the "Net" should be understood almost literally, as an entity that "traps and ensnares" its users, while giving the establishment even more power over the individual, through surveillance, manipulation, and control.

A different perspective on virtual reality is far more optimistic. It could be seen as an environment which will foster positive relationships, promote modern values, educate, entertain and inform people throughout the world, regardless of race, gender, nationality etc. (Kollack and Smith 1999). The Internet gives as many possibilities as the printing press, which popularized literacy and awareness; the telephone, which linked people through vast distances; and the automobile and airplane, which make the world a smaller, more accessible place (Wellman 1997). The Net has been very successful in bringing people together. One can easily discuss art with a Chinese person, chat about music with an American, and go visit a Dutch person whom he met online. Arnold Brown says that those who associate online communities with the withering of close friendships and strong ties, are making a grave error. "The big mistake that the fearful always make is to equate change with destruction. The social turmoil of the 1970s was heralded by such observers as "the demise of the family". But the family did not die; it just changed - and it is still changing" (2011: 31).

Both sides of the debate present valid points in their assessment of the term communities in relation to online communities. This paper, however, will argue that even if one might say that virtual reality is, in Carolli's words, yet "another place", it is another place for genuine communities, with deep, strong ties to emerge.

2.2.Identity online, the role of the virtual world

Another issue, vital to the understanding of the online world, is the question of identity. Do we preserve our "true" identity, or does the new, frontier environment affect it? Is it possible, as some suggest, that there might be a split in identity, almost as in Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde? In her *Alone Together* speech (2011: Web 2), Turkle ponders the issue of multiple identities that a person is able to hold simultaneously, while being engaged in online activity. In her view, one could be a different person when reading articles, compiling texts and chatting with other people via instant messaging services. Hall and Du Gay, quoted by J. C. Riberio (2009: 295) say that there are three major notions of identity, one of them being the individual properties of a person who is a part of society. Second is the interplay between the institutions of modern society, which leaves a "mark" on the individual. The third states that identity is "essentially dynamic, multiple, malleable and fragmented" (Riberio 2009: 294). Many scholars conceive of a new era, in which identity might be detached from the physical self, and imbued into a cyborg form (Riberio 2009: 295, Hardey 2002: 581, Wilson and

Peterson 2002: 457). Arnold Brown foresees that "Now, and increasingly in the future, technology will let you make and remake your identity at will – virtually" (2001: 34). On a slightly different perspective, Turkle adds that virtual communities, and the Internet as a whole, is the ideal place to "act out" conflicts, and emotional and personal issues (1999: 644). She asserts that it could play an increasingly important role in the development of one's identity.

Given those arguments and perspectives, I have to conclude that it is possible for the identity of a person to be highly influenced by the reality of virtual communities. Identity online, just as in the "real" world, may be dynamic, multiple and prone to changes throughout time and the environment. In that sense, not only are we looking at a new frontier in terms of technology, but also in terms of who we are, and how we perceive ourselves. The Internet has become a "digital Gutenberg" in terms of spreading information and ideas and by connecting people with one another, but also, just like the printing press, it is transforming society before our very eyes.

2.3. Imagined community?

Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* suggests that certain kinds of communities are, as a matter of fact, virtual, or imaginary. What he had in mind, were mainly communities on the level of a country, for instance, a nation. In his words: "All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even those) are imagined" (1983: 18). According to that definition, online communities are imagined as well. I accept that reasoning, as contacts in the virtual world, usually, lack the face-to-face interactions between community members, just as is the case with nations and even smaller communities. However, the Internet allows for the development of communities of even larger range than nations. Kathryn Pentecost in her "Imagined Communities in Cyberspace" writes: "In this twenty-first century era of cyber communication there are many ways to traverse and challenge national boundaries and concepts of national identity" (2011: 46). An obvious example of those ways are international social networks, discussion boards etc.

While discussion forums boast far less impressive numbers, still, the Gaia Online forum has over 25 million users, which is a number larger than the entire population of Yemen. Accepting Anderson's definition, it would be hard to imagine, if not downright impossible, to say that every member of those boards knows all of the other members, let alone maintain face-to-face contact. There is, therefore, a flaw in the argument which suggests a dichotomy between a virtual, and a "real world" community, as it suggests that they are fundamentally different in nature, and that the former is imagined, while the latter is "real". Wellman and Gulia 1997: 12-13) argue that:

In fact most contemporary communities in the developed world do not resemble rural or urban villages where all know all and have frequent face-to-face contact. Rather, most kith and kin live farther away than a walk (or short drive) so that telephone contact sustain ties as much as face-to-face get-togetherness. [...] While people now take telephone contact for granted, it was seen as an exotic, depersonalized form of communication only fifty years ago. We suspect that as on-line communication becomes widely used and routinely accepted, the current fascination with it will decline sharply. It will be seen as telephone contact is now, or a letter writing was in Jane Austen's time: a reasonable way to maintain strong and weak ties between people who are unable to have a face-to-face encounter just then.

That is why we can accept that "there is nothing virtual about virtual reality", while agreeing that the World Wide Web is yet "another place", where contact can be maintained, and communities may form. Bakardijeva (2003: 294) suggests that we should refer to a virtual community as "virtual togetherness", as it does not always connote the warm feelings and positive associations mentioned by Williams. She adds, however, that:

The opposite of virtual togetherness (and community) is not 'real' or 'genuine' community, as the current theoretical debate suggests, but the isolated consumption of digitized goods and services within the realm of particularistic existence. The issue then is not which (and whether any) form of togetherness online deserves the 'warmly persuasive' (Williams, 1985: 76) label of community. The challenge to analysts is to understand and appreciate the significance of those various forms of transcending the narrowly private existence and navigating the social world for individual participants, for society at large and for the shaping of the Internet. (Bakardijeva 2003: 294)

This means that it is not the use of the word community in the context of virtual reality which is mistaken, but the critics who conflate emerging cyber-communities with the cold, lifeless, digital world. The concept of virtual togetherness, therefore, will be used synonymously to the concepts of online or virtual communities throughout this paper.

2.4. Are such communities so warm?

In order to demonstrate the resemblance between "offline" and "online" communities I intend to present several characteristics of both modes of social organisation. The similitude of those two worlds is remarkable, and while several divergences might be found, they stem from similar social and psychological dynamics.

Almost anyone, who has ever tried engaging in Internet debates or discussions, surely knows such terms as trolling or flame wars, the former being the provoking of aggression through mockery and cynical comments, the latter being an exchange of offensive *ad hominem*s between a group of people. Yet the list of anti-social behaviours does not stop there. "Specific behaviours include rude, embarrassing, threatening or harassing comments; unwanted sexual comments; and exclusion" claim Werner, Bumpus, Rock and Werner (2010: 608); however, they add that most of the Internet encounters that people engage in are pleasurable.

Cyberbullying is a term that has been widely used to describe negative online interactions among adolescents. It is estimated that 72% of young people (ages from 12 to 17) using the Internet have experienced some form of abuse, a number almost identical (85%) to the number of those who experience violent behaviour at school (Gross and Juvonen 2008: 496). While cyberbullying does not involve physical threats or acts, it may be just as harmful. Christine Suniti Bhat, cites several cases, where bullying online led to the suicides of young people (2008: 53-54).

In addition to highly destructive and cruel bullying, there is an unpleasant phenomenon which requires two sides. Flame wars need at least two consenting participants: if either side of the conflict refrains, the vicious cycle breaks. Not only do they need the involvement of at least two sides, these modes of "discussion" are extremely unproductive, and can be best summed up as a series of *ad hominem* fallacies. In 1990, Mike Godwin, in part humorously, and in part as an experiment in memetics, proposed Godwin's Law. The Law states that: "As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one". While not scientifically tested, the Law is certainly an accurate observation, and is now known as *Reductio ad Hitlerum*, which, in fact, is an associative fallacy and an appeal to emotion. In his "Meme, Counter-meme" article, Godwin

notes that this has evolved to another popular (so called "viral") meme, which is: one should avoid Nazi comparisons in civil discussion. While Godwin's Law of Nazi Analogies is perhaps lacking in terms of having scientific merit, it could be used as a yardstick in measuring the level of hostility or friendliness on a discussion board.

Why do abuses in cyberspace occur? If it is true that it is "there is nothing virtual in the virtual world" the reasons for causing harm, bullying and abhorrent behaviour should be similar to face-to-face interactions. It is important to remember that online abusers are just as real as those outside cyberspace. They are not trolls hiding under a bridge as the name suggests. These abuses happen in a certain community, and therefore in a social environment that permits them to happen. That is why here the assumption is that their reason is the *Lucifer Effect*, described by Philip Zimbardo in his book of the same title. In his view, people do evil when the interplay of the environment and personality allows it to happen by adopting a collective identity which de-individualizes and defuses responsibility. Evil being "the exercise of power to intentionally harm, hurt, destroy or commit crimes against humanity" (Zimbardo, 2007), then Internet abuses, as mentioned before, may be extremely harmful to individuals. In addition, the Inter-webs give abusive people an important advantage – a sense of anonymity, hiding behind a screen, an avatar, or a nickname, similar to wearing a mask. Watson, in his study of cultures at war, confirms that by finding that tribes or countries which go to war in uniform, with masks, or painted faces are much more likely to murder and torture their enemies than those who do not hide their identity (Watson 1973: 342-45). While the sense of anonymity online is largely illusive, it still provides a sense of distance from one's verbal victims.

It is important to remember, though, that no community is exempt from violent people, who will act upon their anti-social beliefs. Bullying is omnipresent at schools, where children should, supposedly, be safe. Additionally, those who are most vulnerable to attack, such as children with disabilities or emotional problems, are the ones who are most frequently targeted (Gietz, Good and McIntosh 2011: 48). Exclusion, stalking or verbal abuse can and do happen in "real life" as well. The Internet is "just another place" for abusive people to exploit.

It is crucial to note that it is common practice for friendly and non-aggressive Internet users to use certain mechanisms in order to prevent such abhorrent behaviour. For example, most discussion boards have administrators and moderators, who are able to delete and block abusive comments. A system of "three warnings and you are out" is widespread. Reputation is another mechanism that ensures civility. On some discussion boards, users have the possibility to rate each others' comments. In that way, other members are able to quickly see who is regarded as helpful, and whom they should avoid. If all these methods fail, the administrators or moderators, usually have another tool at their hand, which is IP blocking. To ensure that every member knows how to behave in a non-disruptive manner, Netiquette has been established. It is a set of rules and conventions on online behaviour that is supposed to facilitate productive and pleasurable interactions in cyberspace (Cindio, Gentile et al. 2002).

It is important to remember that the Inter-webs are not uniform. Some environments tend to favour positive interactions, while others facilitate the workings of Internet trolls and bullies. That seems outstandingly similar to the "real" world.

2.5.A world of distraction?

Another matter is the question of how focused we really are when engaging in a particular activity. When we have dinner with friends, or a chat with a spouse, we usually do not post instant messages while simultaneously watching a YouTube video. Face-to-face conversations are usually more focused than that, and if we consider the other person close and important,

we give that person our full, undivided attention. We can certainly replicate that form of interaction online, for example, when using Skype, especially with a webcam. However, most interactions online do not occur in this fashion.

Most interactions online happen on social networks, discussion forums, instant messaging networks, sharing websites, virtual environments etc. In those environments it is difficult, if not downright impossible to pay undivided attention to one person or one pursuit. The PBS documentary film, *Digital Nation*, has an entire segment called "Distracted by Everything". In it, the authors argue that in today's digital world everything can distract us from what we are doing. This affects the way schools work, the way students write their essays, even how ties between people form. The research that they cite suggests that human beings are not capable of performing several tasks simultaneously and well. If such is the case, it might be a strong argument against the notion that strong ties can emerge between people on the Internet. Perhaps, as Turkle (2011) and Carroli (2011) argue, the Internet is not only bringing the world together, but is creating a paradoxical "community of strangers" who are "alone together", unable to connect on a deep level.

2.6. Strong and weak ties

Is developing a deep relationship, or strong ties in other words, even possible when no face-to-face contact is maintained? Can we really claim to have intimacy with another human being without all the social cues that facilitate such contact? Deprived of touch, sight, proximity, gestures, body language and other forms of non-verbal communication while on the Web, we are seemingly destined to live in a world where relationships are determined by letters and digits. Is that enough to breach the void of distance, the lack of personal contact, and initial mistrust?

Consider the pace at which ties are formed. In his *Blink. The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* Malcolm Gladwell argues that human beings make instant decisions on a variety of things, including relationships as deep as marriage. That rapid decision-making process is possible due to the subconscious analysing of non-verbal cues in human behaviour (2007: 31-47). Is it possible online? Can we use such mind-boggling interpersonal skills in cyberspace? Wellman and Gulia (1997) point out that the relationship formation process takes much longer online, as the bandwidth of communication is devoid of both verbal and non-verbal communication. They go as far as to quote several opinions that maintain that such forms of communication are insufficient in developing any strong ties whatsoever. That claim contradicts, however, the research that they invoke, which demonstrates that people prefer long lasting online groups to those that last briefly. What is more, they come to the conclusion that "Strong online ties have many characteristics similar to strong offline ties" as they are frequent, voluntary, companionable, reciprocal and supportive (1999: 178). Those guidelines have also been the basis of the research questionnaire conducted for the needs of this paper. Perhaps then, when Michael Hardey (2002: 754) asks if meetings on the Internet are "pure relationships or impoverished meetings" the answer could be both. As Bakardijeva points out, it may not be very productive to fall for certain dichotomies and to assume that only two possibilities exist (2003: 305-10). There are numerous weak ties on the Internet, some lasting no more than a few minutes. On the other hand, some relationships in cyberspace meet all of the criteria of a strong tie. In addition there is a certain gradation between the two dichotomies.

Moreover, there can be positive features even in weak tie relationships on the Internet. Though such ties might not be as deep and profound as long-term friendships, they can still be

supportive and helpful. The large number of self-help communities online seems to support that claim. So there might be some advantages to being "alone together" after all.

2.7. The world of ideas

When the first human being took the skin off a bear's back in order to keep himself warm, it became apparent that a person can achieve in several hours what took thousands of years of evolutionary development. Human civilization began, and no longer would humans adjust to the environment, but rather would shape and reshape it to fit their needs. Just as other humans learned and transmitted the idea that one could wear animal fur to make oneself warm, they learned and transmitted ideas about washing one's hands before a meal, or using indoor plumbing, central heating, and other facilities and practices we now take for granted. That transition of ideas, according to Ramachandran (2010: Web 8), requires the above discussed mirror neurons, and is central to the emergence of human culture. This is a Popperian view in which people exist not only in the physical realm, but also in the knowledge, ideas and know-how they possess.

Those ideas, crucial to the existence of human culture, spreading among people, are called memes. The term "meme" coined by Richard Dawkins in his important and highly-acclaimed book *The Selfish Gene* (1976). In it, he provides the definition of a meme, which is a replicating idea or mode of behaviour. He argues that memes spread and evolve similarly to biological genes; they also use people as "vehicles" for dispersion. However, unlike genes they do not exist physically, yet they function within a culture. The Internet facilitates the spreading and evolving of memes. It offers rapid transmission from one person to another and allows us to find people who share the same idea and to reinforce the belief in that meme. The spreading and finding of like-minded people is crucial for the proliferation of memes. "An epidemiological approach to model the viral propagation of memes" (Wang and Wood 2011), proposes that there are profound similarities between how memes and viruses spread. Richard Thieme (1997: Web 7) agrees, going so far as to say that "Memes are contagious ideas that replicate like viruses from mind to mind. The Internet is like a Petri dish in which memes multiply rapidly. Fed by fascination, incubated in the feverish excitement of devotees transmitting stories". Though metaphorical, there are parallels between the spread of diseases and memes that cannot be ignored.

The Internet is an almost perfect environment for memes, both truthful and wrong. Memes thrive in that environment and spread like wildfire: some of them, like the belief in the crash-landing of an alien spacecraft in Roswell, New Mexico, last for decades. It is crucial to remember that in this cyber-world of ideas, ideas themselves deserve careful analysis and attention.

3. Methodology: qualitative and quantitative data gathering

Gathering information essential in the successful presentation of this paper required both qualitative and quantitative data gathering. Both were essential in understanding the phenomenon of online communities. The latter gave perspective on the size and vivacity of each community, while the former was to provide an in-depth understanding of their dynamics, their relationships, and how they influence participants' view of themselves and each other. The quantitative research was primarily based on the search engines provided by the discussion boards themselves. These offered reliable information concerning the number

of participants, their levels of activity, and location. I have communicated both with the forums' administrators and their active participants, some of whom contacted me via private messages. In addition, a survey has been conducted on each forum, except one (due to the denial of a registration request). In addition, numerous methods of research were utilized, for example, observation, comparison, and analysis of the forum content.

4. Research process

The main source of data were the discussion boards themselves. The quantitative data was gathered on one day (the 30th of September 2011) during which all the data available through the forum statistics and search engines was collected and saved for further analysis. The internet forums that I decided to study were centred around the ideas of the 2012 apocalypse and/or the existence of extraterrestrial UFOs visiting the Earth. While they do not constitute the average of Internet users, these communities are small and focused on a specific set of beliefs which bring them closer together.

The gathering of qualitative data was a much longer and time-consuming process. It consisted of several weeks of reading and participating in the researched communities. What is more, on the 1st of September a survey was posted on each forum on a general discussion thread. Data was collected and catalogued until the 30th of September 2011, upon which the survey was finalized. In each and every case, further contact with the survey subjects was required. In total, 20 people decided to fill out the entire survey, while numerous others left comments both positive and negative on the discussion thread. The answers varied in length and in depth. Some users decided to leave only yes/no comments, while others offered much deeper and elaborate insights. During the survey a discussion commenced on one of the forums as to whether users should participate in it or not. It was during that time that it became obvious that some members participate in multiple discussion boards of the same theme, due to the fact that they were already informed about the survey being conducted elsewhere. The number of people who participated in that part of the survey was not sufficient for a reliable, quantitative assessment; however, it offered valuable insights and an opportunity to match their answers with the reality of the forum dynamics.

5. Qualitative analysis

Since the 1st of September 2011 extensive qualitative research has been done on each forum, requiring registration on each discussion board and regular observation of the activity on them. That meant reading discussions, topics, and exchanges between users, in order to find information valuable for the following analysis. Thus, popular trends and memes can be detected. Additionally, the forums' search engines have been utilised so that particular phrases, words and expressions could be found. Naturally, all sensitive data and identification has been removed, so that the users' privacy may be preserved.

5.1. "Us" versus "Them" mentality

After just a few moments spent on each forum it becomes apparent that an "us" and "them" attitude is almost omnipresent. Many users assert that, either by believing in the 2012 Doomsday predictions or in Alien visits to our planet, they possess a higher state of knowledge or superior intelligence to the "average Joe". It is alarmingly easy to find examples in which outsiders, or members of the general public are referred to as "sheeple" or by other equally derogatory terms. Using such terms is in reality a very dangerous phenomenon, which

is quite unlikely to be encountered on, say, a pet lovers community or on a gardening forum. Rather, it is common among fringe groups or subscribers to extreme and/or intolerant political ideologies. While there is absolutely nothing wrong in subscribing to an unorthodox or unpopular world-view, associating it with a sense of moral superiority and the inferiority of others is rather dubious in nature. As Zimbardo points out (2007: 318-321), such an act absolves oneself from moral responsibility towards others, which facilitates negative behaviour and abuse, as one weakens his sense of the humanity of others. This is the same technique used by Hitler when he called the Jewish people "lice", or the Hutu referring to the Tutsi tribe as "cockroaches" in the prelude to the massacre. While it would be ludicrous to accuse the members of these virtual communities of genocidal attitudes, it can hardly be seen as positive to brand dissenters as animals or "zombies".

On the other hand, it would be disingenuous to say that every member of the assessed communities has a negative outlook toward outsiders. Sometimes the "sheeple" term is used as a metaphor, much as is the case in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, and not as a representation of one's view of people outside the community. Some wonder how to "reach" the general public and convince them to change their minds in an intellectual manner, rather than by emotional appeals and offensive language. Others regret being isolated from the people outside their ideological communities.

In summary, it is apparent that the members of the analysed communities isolate themselves from the outside world to a larger extent than more "mainstream" communities. While in principle this is a negative phenomenon, it does not reach destructive proportions. In general, these communities do not shun outsiders; rather, they interact with them in a courteous manner, so long as they themselves are treated with respect. In conclusion, while the "us" versus "them" mentality is clearly present and creates a rather non-ideal environment, it does not reach pathological proportions, and does not hinder interactions with the outsiders in an extreme way.

5.2. Response level

On every community discussion forum, the questionnaire generated considerable interest, especially among active users with a large number of posts. Not everywhere were the responses positive. In some cases (the UFO Casebook) a large majority of the responses comprised direct answers to the questionnaire, and a rather friendly attitude. In other cases (Davidicke.com) a large majority of the responders were negative, cynical, and refused to participate. In each instance, I had to respond to questions and criticism from the participants in order to assure them that my motives were not surreptitious – and in order to generate some interest in taking part in the survey.

The overall level of response was lower than expected. In total, 42 individuals responded to the survey, of which 19 decided to do so by answering the questions in the questionnaire, while the remaining 23 either gave their reasons for not participating, or basically responded negatively to the whole idea of such a survey

Table 1. Who were the responders?

Total number of responders.	42
Number of responders who decided to participate.	19
Number of responders who actively declined participation.	23

Before analysing the responses themselves, it might be useful to take a closer look at the very people who decided to respond to the questionnaire. Whether they were long term users who have written copious amounts of material on their forums, or perhaps newcomers and neophytes eager to share their opinions with whomever, all responders were subjected to a background check.

At first glance, it is very difficult to distinguish any meaningful pattern in the types of users who responded to the questionnaire. Apparently, the majority (12 out of 19) of responders were experienced users, with a large number of posts (over 500). Most of them had written several thousand posts and have been participating in the community for several (usually 3-4) years. That division, however, does not tell the whole story. There is a correlation between the number of posts and the seniority of the users and the sincerity of their responses, as well as their willingness to respond. Those users who had a large number of posts and have been participating in the community for a longer period of time were more eager to respond in an exhaustive way. Their answers were also more positive towards the community. Even if they actively declined participation in the poll, they did so courteously and gave non-combative reasons, such as protection of their anonymity. Those, however, who had a much shorter experience in the community, or a significantly lower number of posts, reacted differently.

One type of reaction was a very negative manner of answering the questions. They evidently wanted to dissociate themselves from the community, criticizing it and presenting themselves as more rational than the average community members. In some ways, this might be a valid claim, as such controversial forums and ideologies attract sceptics who often have a very combative attitude, challenging the claims of the community. Examples of such interactions could be found on every forum analysed in this paper. Another form of reaction from that group of users was mockery of the questionnaire, often giving blatantly untrue, exaggerated, or stereotypical answers. I have decided to include them in this analysis because they reflect the negative image of "outsiders" and the type of antagonistic reactions that they display when confronted by "others". The third mode of reacting from that group of users was downright aggression, insinuation, and discouraging others from participating in the poll, which was characterised as a form of infiltrating their forum by some nefarious, unidentified entity.

While a large variety of users responded to the questionnaire, two major groups could be identified: the group of senior users, who responded most positively or at least in a neutral manner; and a second group comprised of sceptics, who either felt no association with the community, or who responded aggressively, utilised irony and mockery, and/or felt threatened by the questionnaire posted on their forum by an "outsider".

5.3.Reasons for not responding

The 23 users who actively declined to participate in the poll obviously had their own reasons for doing so, and decided to voice them. Those reasons might be important in understanding not only their state of mind, but also the general spirit of the forum, and the prevailing ideas.

The reasons given for not participating can be divided into two categories. One is either a concern for privacy and a general dislike of questionnaires. Those users expressed concern for privacy issues, questioning whether their anonymity could be protected effectively. Others verbalized a dislike in participating in questionnaires in general, or questionnaires of that sort. Some even suggested other forms of polling, for example adding a check-box using the forum engine, or using an outside polling service. While this could be

considered legitimate advice, such techniques would have made it impossible to conduct qualitative studies and receive more detailed and in-depth answers, which was the case with the questionnaire. Interest in protecting one's anonymity online should be viewed as a legitimate concern as well. Additionally, some people would prefer their views remain private, regardless of whether they concern the prospect of civilisation ending in a particular year, or the advantages of having a dog as a pet. Such concerns and wishes should be respected.

The second group, however, had entirely different motives for their declining participation in the questionnaire. Their reasons were grounded in a conviction that my motives as a researcher were somewhat suspect. Some suggested I might be part of an effort to gather personal data about them. They did not specify any particular agency or government that I might be representing; nevertheless, the implication seemed obvious that I was regarded as a threat. More often, however, it was implied that the research was aiming at discrediting the forum, the community, or particular users. This suggests that those users either fear or have encountered the above mentioned attitudes, which, when taking into consideration the extremity of their views, might be a valid concern. Criticism and scepticism, however, do not necessarily constitute ridicule and mockery, and certainly cannot be equated with invigilation by an hostile governmental agency. This attitude signifies an issue that was discussed previously, namely, a certain hostility towards the "other" and to "outsiders", combined with a lack of comfort with challenging ideas and criticism.

To illustrate the above discussed points, it might be useful to present and analyse particular examples of declining answers from the users. One user wrote: "why don't you just forget the answers and jump straight to the conclusion you would do anyway" (original spelling and grammar has been preserved in all quotations). This indicates suspicion, as well as a conclusion already reached upon seeing the questionnaire, which is an interesting, as well as an obvious, contradiction. "[Y]our going to create a lot of suspicion with that questionar" asserts another user, showing a suspicion of the "other", "outsiders" who inquire about the nature of their community. Perhaps the most eloquent representation of those concerns was voiced by a member of the 2012 forum:

I'm all-too-familiar with college theses and how they are used to advance one's personal agenda, sometimes for salutary purposes, and other times simply to deride. [...] I often read articles where those who express interest in the year 2012, and all the hype surrounding it, are regarded as nutcases, which is absurd, of course, but the pejorative flows like insecticide on a wasp's nest anyway.

Examination of the declining answers, along with examples of the responses presented in here, reveals a great deal about the general atmosphere of the forums. It suggests that, while some users were willing and honest enough to take part in the poll, others, especially less experienced members, viewed the questionnaire as a threat. That animosity, as discussed previously, demonstrates a general dislike of those outside the community, whether seen as "unwilling to see the truth" or as hostile agents of antagonistic interests. However, it is only fair to note that any fringe group is prone to harsh ridicule from outsiders, and negative reactions are often well justified.

6. Quantitative analysis

Table 2 below presents the number and types of responses obtained for each question.

Table 2. The responses in numbers

Question/Answer	Yes	Undecided	No
Do you feel that your relationship with other participants of this forum is intimate and special?	4	3	12
Do you feel a desire for the companionship of other participants of this forum?	6	3	10
Are you interested in being on this forum as frequently as reasonably possible?	13	2	4
Do you feel a sense of mutuality in your relationship with other participants of this forum?	13	5	1
Do you know and support the needs of your discussion partners on this forum?	6	5	6
Do you have the sense or evidence that intimacy is bolstered by shared social characteristics such as gender/socio-economic status/lifestyle etc?	5	3	11
Would you say that the ideas central to this forum play a significant role in forming your identity?	4	0	15
Would you call yourself a UFO believer/2012 Doomsday believer? If not, is there any other name that you would use in association with the central ideas of this forum?	12	3	4
Do you think that you identify with this group more than with the society/nation you are a member of?	6	2	11
	Under 1 year	1-3 years	Over 3 years
For how long have you been an active participant of this forum?	7	4	8

Unfortunately, due to smaller participation than expected, the raw data is rather noisy. Still, patterns do emerge. For instance, though a few people feel some special relationship with other participants of their communities and desire their companionship, the vast majority wish to spend as much time as possible within them. This seems to be a blatant contradiction since the whole point of those communities is companionship with other members. It does, however, correspond with the results of questions 5 and 6. Less than a third express a desire for intimacy or the awareness of the needs of other members of the community. I would attribute that result to a general lack of interest in intimacy and close-tie relationships, rather than a shortcoming of virtual communities as such. It is not the case that every social community in the "real" world is warm, intimate, and supportive, as opposed to the cold and harsh environment of the Internet.

Another curious result is the denial of any relevance of the ideas of the community to one's identity. How could that be the case? Even calling oneself a mother (a biological fact)

or a bricklayer (a professional duty) denotes a certain identity. How could one call oneself a UFO believer or a doomsday foreteller, and yet deny its relevance to one's identity? It is my conviction that this is only possible through a lack of understanding of that connection, rather than an admission of reality.

7. Conclusions

The Internet, contrary to popular perception, is not a homogeneous entity. It is a decentralised, varied and practically anarchic environment (in the Greek sense of the word). It relies on servers, cables, and antennae, which goes without saying, yet it is predominantly a world of evolutionarily spreading ideas – memes. It is an entirely imagined community, perhaps more so than nation states, because the Internet has a much larger population that does not operate on a face-to-face basis. This is not a damning statement, though. It goes to show that the World Wide Web is very similar to the "real" world, comprised of a plethora of imagined communities. In other aspects, the need for intimacy, warmth, the presence of an "Us and Them" mentality, the Internet and the offline world are surprisingly alike. The key characteristic that differentiates those realms is that while memes are a **part** of offline culture, they are a predominant building block of cyberspace. Also, the possibilities for distraction and social anonymity are much greater in cyberspace, as we can hide behind the screen without revealing too much of ourselves; at least, that is our perception.

The theoretical discussion alongside the study conducted for this paper serves as a basis for my support for the claim that "there is nothing virtual about virtual reality". The possibilities for strong ties, intimate relationships, and influencing one's identity exist, even if not acknowledged by the subjects of the study. It may seem that we have replicated our culture, or rather many cultures online, and we are unaware of how similar they are to what we have in the "real" world. Flashing screens, digits, and icons may cloud our judgment, but not the reality that the virtual is synonymous to real.

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