

Virtual Community

The term 'virtual community' is used in three broad senses, to refer to: 1) a group of people who associate themselves over time with a computer-mediated environment, with emphasis on the social behavior of the group; 2) the phenomenon of online group formation, typically in light of the historical and theoretical implications of the terms 'virtual' and 'community;' and 3) the technological environment—e.g., listserv, chat room, web-based environment—that facilitates and potentially shapes the formation and activity of online groups. The first sense is most common in social science research, the second in humanities research, and the third in technology-focused research and design.

The possibility of virtual communities was first envisioned in the 1960s by J. C. R. Licklider as a natural outgrowth of computer networking. The concept was popularized by Howard Rheingold writing about his experiences on the WELL bulletin board system in the early 1990s. Scholarship problematizing the concept soon followed. One concern was that 'community' traditionally is based on geographical location, which is often irrelevant in online groups. Another was that traditional notions of community are themselves idealized, and that comparisons between online and offline community create artificial dichotomies (e.g., offline communities are deep-rooted and close-knit, in contrast to online communities, which are superficial and fragmented). Moreover, because the word 'community' is value laden, having positive connotations of cohesion and reciprocal support, it is often used aspirationally to refer to desired outcomes or properties of online groups, regardless of whether community characteristics are objectively present. As a consequence, some researchers avoid using the term 'virtual community' and instead refer to (members of) 'online forums,' 'online groups,' or 'online social spaces.' When the intention is to highlight the connections among individuals who make up a group, the term 'social network' is also sometimes used.

Other researchers have sought to operationalize the concept 'virtual community' in order to evaluate empirically the extent to which online groups are community-like. Commonly-cited criteria for virtual community include: a shared *reason for communicating*, the existence of *norms or protocols*, and *regular interaction* of some *duration* that takes places *over the Internet* through a *common mechanism*. Some researchers add that participants should also feel part of a larger group and develop emotional attachments to others in the group, noting that noninteractive participants ('lurkers') may also experience this subjective sense of community. Despite these efforts to bring greater precision to the use of the term 'virtual community,' it has become conventional in some domains to refer to online groups as communities without further specification.

Virtual communities on the Internet (VCs) can be grouped into five types: interest groups (e.g., soap opera fans), support groups (e.g., health-related), task-related groups ("communities of practice"), geographically-based groups (e.g., "community networks"), and commercial environments (e.g., product websites designed to encourage human-human interaction). Moreover, VCs exhibit variation within each type according to

factors such as creation process, age, life span stage, size, leadership, geographic dispersion, cultural diversity, and variety of communication technologies available.

In addition to classifying VC types, current research is investigating knowledge sharing in VCs and how VCs develop over time. As yet, little research has addressed cross-cultural communication in VCs or VCs in which communication takes place in languages other than English.

--Susan C. Herring

See also Internet in Qualitative Research; Virtual Ethnography; Virtual Interview; Virtual Research

Further Reading

Dubé, L., Bourhis, A., & Jacob, R. (2006). Towards a typology of virtual communities of practice. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Information, Knowledge, and Management, 1*, 69-93.

Preece, J., & Maloney-Krichmar, M. (2003). Online communities. In J. Jacko & A. Sears (Eds.), *Handbook of Human-Computer Interaction* (pp. 596-620). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.