Utility of Online Communities – Ways One Can Benefit From One's Online Life

Ioana Cărtărescu[1]

Abstract

As many of today's social scientists (such as Beck, Giddens, Howard, Vlăsceanu etc) have remarked, the modern age has brought with itself a great series of fast-paced changes in the average man's lifestyle. Nothing is safe or can be taken for granted anymore. Families disintegrate, traditions become obsolete and professional re-qualifications are necessary every few years just to keep up with the younger, tougher competition on the labour market. Forced to constantly changed ones place of residence, ones entourage, work and habits leads to a feeling of loneliness, of not really being a part of modern society and its communities, of being left out to fend for yourself. Luckily, modernity has also brought with itself a never seen before technological boom which instantly permitted not only the improvement of one's biological life, but also provided society with the opportunity to bridge the gap between people. One of the most significant of these innovations is the Internet, a non-geographical space that people, in just a few short years, have colonized and made their own, projected their identities into and created solid and durable communities that, which were less subjected to being torn apart by distance and time. This paper's object is to show how and why being part of an online community is a great way for one to get a stronger feeling of social integration and be part of a somewhat more fair, less prejudiced world.

Keywords
Online communities, internet, new media, communication

The Object of this Paper

I would like to start this paper by clearly stating my intentions, so there is no room for misunderstandings: this is not an ode to the Internet or an attempt to thicken the ranks

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[1]University of Bucharest, Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, ioana.cartarescu@yahoo.com

of the online communities by persuading my readers to join them. This is also not a comparison between the offline and online world, as little use would probably come from such endeavour. Though I may at times compare certain aspects in order to make a point, or to debunk a superstition about Online Communities, online versus offline is not what this article is about, quite contrary. But most importantly, many might find this paper imbalanced, as they will not be able to find any talk about the very popular "dangers" of the Internet, which are the talk of the Media and of alarmed scientists and parents everywhere. Indeed, I have no intention to address that subject as it is my strong opinion that technology can be neither good, nor evil in itself and thus, it presents no inherent threats or benefits. The advantages and dangers are strictly connected to how we choose to use it, whether it is to serve us or to harm us, whether it is to waste our time or to make a great difference in our quality of life. My goal for this paper is to deliver a few observations about the latter, about how we can use and benefit from this technology and the new forms of communication and togetherness that it brings to the table. Based on many years of participative observation and on what I have learned from other participants through interviews and case studies conducted by me for several researches, but also from the qualitative or quantitative research of other social scientists as Nick Yee, Edward Castronova, Luca Rossi, Sherry Turkle, Howard Rheingold and many more, I have learned of impressive ways in which online communities can assist us in our everyday lives and wish to share this knowledge so that it can be of use to the readers (my goal is not purely academic or expositional, but also instrumental). As for the "dangers" of the online community, I am planning to treat them in another paper, dedicated only to them, as the discussion is too long and complex to be treated here (the reason for using quotation marks is my belief that many of them are the result of public hysteria – for example, statistically speaking, a child is much more likely to be molested by a paedophile on the way home from school or while playing outside than to meet one online and be convinced to go meet him alone somewhere else, still, from the way the media presents the topic, it seems like every second person you meet on the Internet is a dangerous predator and no child is safe..). Basically, think of Online Communities as an apple. This paper is similar in essence to the article which tells you that it is good to eat apples, as they have many vitamins, taste good, help keeping one hydrated and so on. A different article might tell you of how apples can be used as projectiles, how they can grow dangerous molds which are bad for your health or how one can get a deranged stomach from eating too many apples. Although both points are more or less valid, one doesn't necessarily find them in the same article.

The Social Context

The modern age we inhabit today has brought with itself a series of fast-paced, dramatic changes in the way people live, interact and relate to themselves and the world around them. In the past, one's whole fate depended on the family of origin and that which he/she entered by marriage. Education was scarce, only available to a rich few, and occupational opportunities were hardly varied and almost never depended on one's

individual choice. It is not hard to understand why many people shared fatalistic views when it came to their lifestyle. Once married (another "collective" choice), one could count on the fact that the partnership was going to be life-long (unless tragedy happened to strike). Also, the values, norms and etiquette one had been socialized into were mostly shared by the whole community, they were probably there before one's birth and there wasn't much of a chance that he/she would live to see them change.

Although this situation is still more or less a reality in some (and not quite few) parts of the world, in the most developed countries, things started to change. Old structures got replaced, interpersonal ties, even family ones, became unstable and could break at any minute. Social equality movements loudly militated for tolerance and celebrating diversity. People were torn between the need to hold on to something secure and the thrill to explore the new possibilities. But what did actually happen to the inner mechanisms of the individual? Ulrich Beck claims he entered into a modern process called Individualization - breaking from tradition to pursue a life of one's own (*Beck&Beck Gernsheim, 2002*).

Among the first outcomes of this process is that one becomes used to change, to constat uprooting, to geographical relocation, to changing jobs and to breaking off social ties in order to construct new, more rewarding ones. This is on one hand a very good adaptation mechanism for coping with the many fast changes and new demands for competitivity and reinventing one's self of modern life, but it can also lead to a high sense of anxiety and alienation for the individual.

And what is there to do? According to Beck, individualization is "Disembedding without Reembeding" (*Beck&Beck Gernsheim, 2002*). Is the individual doomed to a fragmented, alienated existence, where people and places keep changing around him/her like a kaleidoscope? It turns out that modernity has also provided people with a means to remain in contact and generate new, stable ties, without giving up their new found desire and necessity to roam free. Giddens, more optimistic than Beck, points out that there *can* be reembedding in the modern world, due to its characteristic of separating time, space and place. In his examples, he speaks of global communities and of more performant communication and transportation systems. I will take his ideas one step further and speak of another easy, satisfying and viable way of belonging, which in no way hinders ones freedom or desire to relocate: The Online Communitiy.

Why Online *Communities*?

According to the Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology, the term "community" is elusive and quite hard to define in a satisfactory fashion. If the early definitions of community presented it as a group of people that inhabited the same physical territory, shared the same values and goals, were in many ways self-sufficient (economically, religiously, socially etc) and strictly delimitated from other groups, the more recent definitions emphasize the importance of the members' feeling of belonging, the affective ties and mutual support among the members and the common culture they share, leaving out the strict territorial aspect.

Amitai Etzioni, former president of the American Sociological Association and one of the most prominent leaders of the Communitarian Movement defines communities by two characteristics:

"*(1) a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals, relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another (as opposed to one-on-one relationships); and (2) a measure of commitment to a set of shared histories and identities – in short, a particular culture*" (Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology, 2006)

Using this definition, I argue that online communities are in fact actual communities, because their members share a sense of belonging, have a specific culture, a specific set of norms ("netiquette"), affective ties that bind them together and a sense of shared history. Furthermore, many online communities have even developed a "language" of their own, using words, symbols or abbreviations which people who are not part of them usually do not understand (e.g. lol, pwn, l33t, imba, hit). In fact, I dare say that virtual communities even meet the old territorial criteria, since each of them has a well delimitated space on the internet, called a domain.

Why online communities?

Terminology issues being established, the question remains: what can online communities do to improve modern man's way of life and to help him/her cope with the challenges that this era presents? First of all, I will present some general advantages that these communities have to offer, over the offline ones:

Stability

One does not need to be in physical proximity with the other members of one's virtual community. All that is needed is a computer/laptop with a working internet connection and people can stay in touch from any part of the world. This means that no matter where one decides to move, he/she can take all his/her online friends along, this generating a sense of security and continuity in one's life.

Diversity

By being a member of an Online Community, one gets to meet people from all over the world, of any kind, belonging to any offline culture, people one might not get a chance to meet otherwise, because of geographical limitations (traveling the whole world is much more expensive and time consuming than simply logging on and meeting its people). Also, offline, people are often friends with others in the same field of work (co-workers) or the same geographic location (neighbours) mainly out of reasons of time (it's easier to keep in contact with people you see everyday). But online, the diversity is much larger. And if one needs a piece of advice or some help on a topic that has nothing to do with his/her field of activity or needs information about locations one has never visited, it is much more likely that he/she will get far more useful answers from a more heterogeneous crowd.

A fair chance

I cannot stress this enough, one of the best things that Online Communities provide is anonymity. One doesn't have to disclose any socio-demographic or economic information about his/herself unless one wants to. Therefore, on the Internet, everyone starts out as just People and whatever impression they make on the others from that moment on is based solely on their abilities and personality. Of course, there are factors like the education level which cannot be hidden, but many characteristics upon which people are discriminated against in face-to-face conversation (race, gender, age, physical aspect) are neutralized from the beginning unless one wishes to make them public.

Furthermore, getting into the habit of judging people on what they think rather than how they look can be very useful offline as well. And finding out some of a person's socio-demographic/ economic characteristics *after* one befriended that person can help reduce stereotypes and promote tolerance offline as well (e.g.: one makes many friends online which he/she thinks highly of and then finds out that most of them were African American; if that person was a racist before, there is a chance that his/her opinion might change with the new discovery)

Easier integration

There are so many types of Online Communities that anyone can find one suitable to his/her needs, much quicker than if he/she tried to search offline for people who share ones passions. After all, people don't walk around with plates with their interests displayed in large print, but on the internet, every forum, every topic, every site states clearly what its purpose is and one has nothing more to do than use a search engine to discover many more people like him/herself.

Also, in the offline world, if one tries to connect with co-workers or acquaintances and is rejected or embarrasses one's self, one still has to face them many times after that. The internet provides a safer way of relating, good especially for shy people who don't socialize out of fear of not being accepted. If something goes wrong on the internet, if one doesn't feel he/she fits in or fears that he/she is off to a bad start, one can just either try another community from the very many available and not have to talk to those people ever again or simply change his/her nickname and give it another shot. Either way, nobody knows his/her true identity so the possibilities are endless.

Possibility

Offline, everyone in one's community can tell who that person is and treats him/her accordingly. It is quite difficult for many to try to figure out who they really are without attracting ridicule or disapproval from others. Online however, one can explore every aspect of his/her personality and join a specific community for each. One doesn't have to be consistent, to have one single side to show as a front every day in order to keep others from questioning one's mental sanity. He/she only has to go online and play with

every tendency, with every image of self and see which suits him/her best and then decide which parts to display offline and which to keep as his/her online persona(s)

These are only some of the advantages presented by Online Communities in general. But there are many types of Online communities and each has its own series of quirks that can increase one's quality of life and make one feel more integrated and in touch with one's self and the world around him/her. It would take a very long time to classify all types, as one of the first things man did with the internet was to create forms of community, so I will limit myself to detailing on a few of the most common and significant forms of such communities.

Blogs

Known in the beginning as *weblog* (a term created by Jorn Barger in 1997), the blog started out as a form of on-line public diary. But today, when one refers to this form of online communication, one generally understands a website on which a single writer or multiple (especially in the case of group/corporate blogs) writers post content consistently on topics of their interest (depending on the type of blog) and allow others to comment on what they have posted. There are many type of blogs: personal, corporate, political, journalistic, scientific and so on, but what makes them a community is the fact that each of them gathers around it a series of people who share the writer's interests and who comment together on what has been written. Many of a blog's readers are "regulars", which means they "follow" a blog, read and comment most of the posts, get to know each other and develop a sense of being a part of the said blog. Also, bloggers read each other's blogs and link their favourite ones in their blog roll for everyone to access easily (like a sort of recommendation), creating thus a wide network of blogs, also known as The Blogosphere.

According to the last published on-line Technorati Report, in April 2007 there were 70 million blogs worldwide, double as many as the former year, and 120 thousand new blogs were created every day. It is a well-known fact that companies can use blogs to promote their products, to get feedback from their customers. But what advantages does the average person get from owning a blog or reading blogs?

Empowering

Being the owner of a blog is much like having one's own printing press or publishing house, except there are no expenses involved in the process (anyone can use the free domains for creating content). That means that there is nothing standing between man and the possibility to express his/her opinions out loud, so that anyone can reach them. In a democratic country, this means that one does not have to be a journalist or to write a certain kind of story in order to be published by a newspaper, so other people gain access to his/her opinions. All one has to do is create a blog and invite the people he/she knows to read it. Should they find it interesting, they would link it in their blog roll or tell other people about it and the blog would soon become popular.

In a less-than-democratic country, blogs are real bastions in the fight for free speech and Human Rights. Dorina Gutu, Professor PhD in Communication and Public Relations, speaks in her book, *New Media,* of situations like that of Iran, where blogging is seen by the State as a "subversive activity that is severely punished" (Gutu, 2007). Bloggers have been arrested and possibly tortured for posting content which was in disagreement with the official policy. However, the blogosphere in Iran is rising, despite of the opposition encountered and the risk, providing the people there with much needed information and with a place where they can be somewhat more free.

Although China is starting to be a significant part of the blogosphere (according to Technorati, 8% of the world's blogs are written in Chinese), there have been incidents here too, the Chinese government being known to censor blogs with unwanted content. Thus, the Adopt a Chinese Blog Initiative came to be. It is a plea for bloggers in democratic countries to host a threatened or blocked Chinese blog, in order to support Freedom of Speech.

Quick Access to Interactive Education

Although when one hears "educational blog", one primarily thinks of children or young students, PhD Nicole Hoffman stresses in her article, "1% Technology-99% Movement" Blogs in the Field of Adult Education and Learning (2007, *Revista de Informatică Socială*, no. 7, 40-49), the importance for adults to have educational blogs of their own. To have places to discuss how and why they would continue their studies, to exchange impressions about learning at a mature age, and for teachers who train adult students to have places where they can get advice and exchange experience, in order to improve their teaching performance.

Young students can also benefit from educational or science blogs, where they can learn useful information and have specialists answer their questions and comments. They can then also create their own such blogs, in order to share and discuss their knowledge with their peers from all over the world.

Income

Indeed, a successful blog can provide more than just a group of friends and personal satisfaction. The moment one's blog reaches a certain numbers of "hits" (times it has been accessed), certain companies may become interested to use that blog for advertising their products. So the writer will get paid to host advertising on his/her site, just like in the case of a newspaper or a television program. This can help a person complete his/her income by doing nothing more than owning an interesting, popular blog.

Role play Sites

Also known as MUDs (MOOs, MUSHs), role play sites are text based adventures where one creates one or more characters whom one describes in great detail (constructs a

general appearance, a personality, a historical background for the character(s) etc) and uses it/them to interact with other players' (drivers') characters. From their interaction result stories and plots, the drivers can decide their characters like each other or become arch-enemies, but the drivers themselves can also interact in the Out of Character places in the site and form friendships.

This kind of sites were one of the first forms of entertainment to appear along with their internet, due to their simple text-based nature, but also to the gratification they can provide to the people who join them, which goes beyond that of mere play and socialization.

Exploring one's Identity

Sociologist and cyber-psychologist Sherry Turkle says in her book, *Life on Screen Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1993):

> On MUDs, one's body is represented by one's textual description, so the obese can be slender, the beautiful plain, the "nerdy" sophisticated.[…] MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. Identity, after all, refers to the sameness between two qualities, in this case, between a person and his or her persona. But in MUDs, one can be many." She also quotes one player who poses a crucial question: "Why grant such superior status to the self that has the body when the selves that don't have bodies are able to have different kinds of experiences? (Turkle, 1993)

Basically, what they say is that Role play Sites give a person the possibility to explore every corner of his/her personality in interaction with other characters, through the safe mediation of a "puppet". And as identity is formed through interaction, one would also get feedback from the other characters, a feedback which would closely simulate that of actual people, if the driver decided to take on the life of his "puppet". One can "try out" lives like clothes and decide which would suit him/her best, without taking any real chances, since it is not the "real" person, but a character whom he/she is testing, in a safe place where everybody does the same. One can feel free to dream, to explore, to test out reactions in a way that he/she might never dream of offline, since in the offline world one would risk getting judged or blamed or considered mentally unstable if he/she didn't fit the profile that the people around him/her expect of that person (Jamie, 18, role player, declares: *"Every character I play has one small thing in common with me in some way. But none of them are exactly my opposites. I think in a way they embody aspects of my personality I can't show in public. Avery is definitely my vengeful side, Marvolo is the confidence I'm afraid to show... Actually, Marvolo may be the most like me there. Adrian literally embodies my bookish side.."*).

One might also not be able to try out a certain identity feature in real life without having to make irreversible decisions that could affect not only himself/herself but the ones around him/her as well. For example, the process of gender-bending is highly

common on these sites and it provides a good insight on what it's like to be "on the other side", without actually having to take any drastic measures to make it happen.

These kind of games help release frustration and let go of the obsolete notion of the unitary self, they help one become comfortable with playing many roles and being in many ways, ways which have nothing to do with one's actual background or physical characteristics, but have a lot to do with the life one desires and the courage to play with one's identity, to mold it into something suitable for the moment, thus encouraging the process of individualization, of choosing one's way of life rather than taking it for granted. And even if one never plays out offline the identities one constructs for himself/herself online, many people find a great sense of reality in their Online Community. There, they ARE their characters, all their characters, satisfying thus needs that for many reasons they might not be able to satisfy in the offline world. Basically, the online and offline become complementary. A quote from a player that can be found in Sherry Turkle's book says:

> I split my mind. I'm getting better at it. I can see myself as being two or three or more. And I just turn on one part of my mind and then another when I go from window to window. I'm in some kind of argument in one window and trying to come on to a girl in a MUD in another, and another window might be running a spreadsheet program or some other technical thing for school….And then I'll get a real-time message, and I guess that's RL. It's just one more window.(Turkle, 1993, p.13)

MMORPGs

A more recent form of virtual communities is Massive Multiplayer Online Role playing Games. They are games designed to support millions of players who interact with each other and perform tasks together in order to complete quests in the game. These "synthetic worlds", as economist Edward Castronova likes to put it are designed in such a way that co-operation is imperative between players and the world is almost a complete one. It has its own economy (analysed closely by Castronova), its own lore, official and unofficial rules and norms to be followed and, in time, even develops a language of its own. Players who take part in the same game are a community in itself, but there are also many smaller, tighter communities on each particular server, known in most games as "guilds", in which players join together under a name and symbol in order to help each other with the game tasks, achieve common goals and socialize more freely.

At the time when Edward Castronova wrote his book, *Synthetic Worlds The Business and Culture of Online Games* (2005), the number of players in all MMORPGs was, according to him around 10 million. Today, only one of this kind of games (World of Warcraft) has reached over that number. And many would be tempted to believe that most of those who play these games are children or teenagers. The research conducted by Nicholas Yee (research scientist at the Palo Alto Research Center and creator of the Daedalus Project) between 1999 and the present has shown that the average age of the MMORPG player is around 26. Also, only 25% of the players are teenagers, while 50% of

them work full-time, 36% are married and 22% have children of their own. What drives all these people, who could easily make up a country, to spend their time playing computer games?

A clear, fair and predictable system of rewards

In the offline world, one can, on many occasions, find himself/herself struggling to complete all his/her daily tasks, at work, at home or in the social circle as best as possible, only to find that the remuneration for all one's hard work is low, the effort, unappreciated and that there will always be some who do less and get more. That can obviously lead to a just and pronounced feeling of frustration. In a MMORPG however, one can be certain that effort, skill and dedication are all that it takes to reach the top, to gain respect and to achieve the desired goals. In these games, the valued goods are gear (armour, weapons, mounts etc), game currency and social prestige. All of those can be obtained by a dedicated and hard-working player who is willing to co-operate with others, to be friendly and to do what it takes to reach certain goals. One doesn't even have to be particularly gifted at the game either, it is enough that he/she is willing to play for a long time and learn from his/her mistakes. There is no way to "lose" the game (only single battles which can be retried at later times) or to "finish" it so all a player can do is become better and better at it through practice and his/her own effort, which always gets rewarded. Of course, doing a bad job has its repercussions as well, but at least one knows that he/she has no one but himself/herself to blame. The frustration is thus relieved and players can go back to their offline lives and struggle with the daily quest for wealth and social recognition once more, confident that somewhere out there, there is a place where what they do really does correlate with the response they get and where they can be great, they can be champions, no matter who they are and where they came from.

A different kind of bond crafting:

Among other things that caught his eye while studying the dynamics of MMORPGs, Yee was intrigued by the way friendships are born and trust is established in the game.

Besides the anonymity which makes players feel more at ease while talking to each other, Yee stresses the importance of the fact that players have a higher chance of getting along, since they are in a way already "pre-selected":

> Most importantly, players are pre-selected to be compatible with each other, because MMORPGs are a very specific form of entertainment (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus).

Also, unlike the offline world, where one has to get past the first impression (often based on physical appearance or stereotypes) and then to wait a long time for situations to present themselves where one can prove that he/she is trustworthy, so an intimate friendship bond can form, in the game, people meet each other in situations where they

have to co-operate and to watch each other's back. A player's "life", at every moment, depends in a high degree on the other players' performance and after "surviving" through a situation of crisis with one's teammates, one feels a certain bond towards them. One also has common stories to share about those moments, a little bit like people in the army, except on a smaller scale:

> These environments also encourage people to form trusting bonds with each other by repeatedly placing players in spontaneous and stressful crises that require players to work together in order to survive (http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/)

Artistic forums

Every day, more and more artists decide to show off their work on one of the thousands of sites or forums dedicated to literature, photography, painting, street-art or any other form of artistic expression that one can think of. Sites like Deviant Art or Poetry.com made it possible for millions of people to connect with others of the same interests as them, but also to reach a suitable public. This brings me to the benefit of this kind of communities for both the artists who display their work and the public they reach.

Freedom of artistic expression

In the offline world, it is not easy to make it as an artist. One has to have money to get one's work printed and distributed or to rent workshops and exhibition spaces, depending on the preferred form of art. An artist also has to know people in the right circles who are willing to introduce him/her to the artistic community and then he/she has to create the kind of art that appeases the critics and the elite that influences the public opinion in that particular domain. Basically, up until now, successfully creating art that actually reached a wide public was a privilege of a select few. But with the birth of the internet and of the specialized forums and sites dedicated to any form of art in existence, an artist doesn't have anything that stands between him/herself and the large public. That is great for the artist, because out of the millions of people that browse these sites, there is a high probability that if he/she is talented, there will be many to appreciate his/her work and he/she can also get feedback from the public and from other (maybe more experienced) artists, in order to improve his/her work, in the end, having a shot at recognition and at actually becoming famous offline as well as online. But it is also good for the public, because so far, whatever reached the public was what the cultural elite was willing to promote. But now, anyone can discover his/her own favourite artists, even if no one else has heard of them and they can actually be a part of the creation process, helping the artists with advice and encouragement. Practically, I don't believe there is one person who can browse one of these sites and not find some piece of art suitable to his/her liking. These communities have brought with themselves a democratization of art and made it possible for anyone to either express him/herself artistically in his/her own, personal way or to take part in the creation of other people's art, contributing with one's own experience and views. The public is no longer a mere

spectator and the artist is no longer alone on stage. Art has become interactive and accessible to everyone.

Conclusion

All throughout history, people have looked with fright and suspicion upon technological advancement with potential for social change. The camera, the cinema, the train were all at some point the „tools of the devil", created to bring about chaos and mayhem. And events like train wrecks, scandalous movies or compromising pictures which ruined lives showed that there was some truth in those beliefs. However, people soon discovered the massive benefits that accompanied them and began to take full advantage of all that was good about these inventions. Today, modern societies use things like fast transportation, multimedia and speed in communication do define themselves as being modern and one could hardly find modern people who refuse to travel by nothing but foot or carriage, who have no pictures in their homes or who don't have at least one movie they like. But, as any beginning, there has to be a struggle before the benefits of innovations can be fully enjoyed. And pointing out those benefits can only shorten the time until that happens and until people accept that a certain piece of technology which leads to new kinds of interaction and new ways of being together is here to stay, despite fears, down sides or protests and that as long as it exists and is in full expansion, all that one can do is to make the best out of it, to find the surest way to make the new technology serve him and draw all the advantages one can in order to improve one's life.

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Ioana Cărtărescu graduated from the Department of Sociology and Social Work within the University of Bucharest in 2009 and is presently attending the courses of a Master of Research in Sociology, at the same Department. Her domain of interest is the New Media, with focus on Online Communities, the objects of her research being forms of communities such as blogs, massive multi-player online games, role play sites, forums, social networking sites and online artistic communities.