A Sense of Community or Networked Individualism?

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Short Paper

Abstract

This paper follows Wellman's (2002) typology and aims at identifying new module of virtual communities. How does sense of community that used to mark virtual community differ from the concept of networked individualism? Who are those with high sense of community and/or networked individualism? Does the type of networked individualism supplant or supplement sense of community in community identity building? This case study indicated networked individualism did not supplant sense of community. In the contrary, they coexist in virtual community. Web 2.0 related social community has gradually gained its popularity in nowadays, this study implies that accessibility of these kinds of community resources is no more depends on sense of belonging and community consensus, in alternative, building instrumental networks, maintaining autonomous relationship with certain community members and shifting roles across networks become the key to mobilize network resources.

Early Development of Virtual Community

The influential book by Howard Rheingold, the Virtual Community (1993) set the tone for the birth of a new form of community, bring people together on-line around shared values and interests, and creating ties of support and friendship that could also extend into face-to-face interaction. Through its interactivity and relatively speed of internet offers users a freedom of expression and personal contact, allowing sharing of ideas and thoughts regardless of geographical and time limitation. It is argued that development of internet group wares, such as newsgroup, BBS, IRC, Mud etc. facilitate glocalized connectivity that affords fluid systems for using ramified networks to access material, cognitive and influential resources, and thus enhance social identity and a sense of belonging of the community.

Early studies, such as Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) classification of types of virtual communities, pointed interactions in virtual community are based on people's desire to meet four basic needs: interest, relationship, fantasy, and transaction. Kollock and Smith (1996) explored how might a group of people in computer communities ever manage to establish or maintain cooperative relations and suggested there are three motivations for providing public goods: anticipated reciprocity, reputation, and a sense of efficacy. They latter added attachment as the fourth possible motivation for contributing public good in the virtual community.

Scholars who are interested in virtual communities further employed ideas from community psychology, in particular from McMillan and Chavis (1986) most influential research of sense of community to study online groups and communities (Rovai, 2002; Blanchard and Markus, 2004). McMillan & Chavis (1986) defined "Sense of Community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together." The conceptual and operationalized definition of sense of community has been generally used to examine virtual communities and online societies. In this stage, researchers distinguished personal identities and lives online and offline, and examined mechanisms of maintaining online communities.

On-line Communities as Real Communities

Recent studies have shown that the uses of the internet are instrumental, and closely connected to the work, family, and everyday life of internet users. For example, in the US, email represents over 85% of internet usage, and most of email volume is related to work purposes, to specific tasks, and to keep in touch with family and friends in real life (Anderson and Tracey, 2001). While chat rooms, news groups, and multi-purpose internet conferences were meaningful for early internet users, their quantitative and qualitative importance has dwindled with the spread of the internet. Even in role-playing and informal chat rooms, real lives seem to shape the interaction on-line. Thus, the pioneer of the studies of identity-building on the internet, Turkle concluded her study by observing that “ the notion of the real fights back. People who live parallel lives on the screen are nevertheless bound by the desires, pain, and mortality of their physical selves (Turkle, 1995). Similarly,

Baym studying the behavior of news group stated “reality seems to be that many, probably most social users of computer mediated communication, create on-line selves consistent with their off-line identities” (Baym, 1998).

Katz, Rice, and Aspden (2001) analyzed the relationship between use of the internet, civic involvement, and social interaction in the US and found higher or equal level of community and political involvement among internet users compared to nonusers. They also found a positive association between internet use and frequency of telephone calls and a great level of social interaction. Internet users were more likely than non-users to meet with friends, and to have a social life away from home, although their networks of social interaction were more spatially dispersed than those of nonusers, one-line activity did not have much impact on time spent with family and friends. One-tenth of internet users met new friends on-line and were active in on-line communities. Similar findings are reported: use of email enhance social life with family and friends, and extends overall social contacts. Wellman and Hampton conducted the “Netville” study in 1998-9 in Canada and found not only the users have much more informal contact with neighbors, maintained more long distance contact with friends and relatives, wired residents have become “glocalized”, they are involved in both local and long-distance relationship. Overall, the Netville experiment show there was a positive feedback effect between on-line and off-line sociability, with internet usage enhancing and maintaining social ties and social involvement for most users.

The Turn towards Networked Individualism

The recent and worldwide studies suggest rather than operating at the expense of the real face to face world, the internet is a part of it, with people using all means of communication to connect with friends and relatives. Communities and societies have been changing towards “individualized networks”. In networked communities and societies, boundaries are more permeable, interactions are with diverse others, linkage switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies are flatter and more recursive. Hence, many people and organizations communicate with others in ways that ramify across group boundaries. Rather than relating to one group, they cycle through interactions with a variety of others, at work or in the community. Their work and community networks are diffuse, sparsely knit, with vague,

overlapping, social and spatial boundaries. Wellman (2002) suggested the characteristics of individualized network in online community facilitate personal communities that supply the essentials of community separately to each individual: support, sociability, information, social identities, and a sense of belonging. Each person is a switchboard, between ties and networks. People remain connected, but as individuals, rather than being rooted in the home bases of work unit and household. Each person operates a separate personal community network, and switches rapidly among multiple sub-networks. He argued the rapid development of computer-supported social networks nourishes societal transitions from traditional homogeneous, broadly-embracing groups to fragmented, variegate and personalized social networks. With the development of high speed person-to-person communication supports the dispersal and role-fragmentation of workgroups and household, we are experiencing a shift to a personalized, wireless world affords networked individualism with each person switching between ties and networks.

Wellman developed a tripartite typology of “Group”, “Glocalization” and “Networked Individualism” to elaborate the transition of computer-communication networks. He argued as networked individualism develops, computer systems are being increasingly used to support person-to-person and role-to-role relationships at work, in the community and at home. While former groupware assumes that all participants are known and largely trusted, the networkware is shifting sets of interactors and the search for information and the selective disclosure of one’s own information (Wellman, 2002).

Research Questions and Method

This paper follows Wellman’s typology and aims at identifying new module of virtual communities. How does sense of community that used to mark virtual community differ from the concept of networked individualism? Who are those with high sense of community and/or networked individualism? Does the type of networked individualism supplant or supplement sense of community in community identity building? What implication does this transition address in terms of social relationship and online community?

A recent developed virtual community, Chinese wikipedia was selected as the research site and a web survey of total 381 respondents were conducted. Factors and descriptive analyses were employed to clarify the measurement of network individualism, and explore social and network characteristics of those who have networked individualism.

Results

The result of factor analysis has demonstrated the construct of sense of community differs from that of networked individualism. While attachment, belonging and identity variables are loaded toward sense of community, instrumental networks, autonomous relations and blurred boundary characterize the concept of networked individualism.

Table 1: Factor Analysis of Sense of Community & Networked Individualism

	Component	
	Sense of Community	Networked Individualism
Q1: I can obtain helps from other wikipedians when I have problem. (instrumental interaction)	.127	**.780**
Q2: I active maintain relationship with the wikipedians. (relationship management)	.110	**.856**
Q3. When I return wikipedia, acquaintances still accept me. (relationship management)	.250	**.774**
Q4: I was proud when I told someone I was a wikipedian. (membership)	**.699**	.308
Q5: I concerned how do other wikipedians respond my opinion. (influence)	**.667**	.321
Q6: I will alter my opinion or behavior because of the wikipedians' comments. (influence)	**.783**	.075
Q7: I was an important member in wikipedia. (influence)	**.747**	.124
Q8: Other wikipedians and I share the common brief and goal of wikipedia. (exchange of support among members)	**.565**	.352
Q9. I can pour my troubles to close friends in wikipedia. (shared emotional connections)	.350	**.705**
Q10. When it occurs conflict among wikipedians, I feel sad. (shared emotional connections)	**.627**	.101

1. Rotated Component Matrix. 2. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. 3. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Most of these wikipedians were male (91%), came from China (46%), followed by Taiwan (28%) and Hong Kong (19%). They were relatively young with 45% of them aged from 19 to 24 years old, and 26.8% of 25-30 years old. Eighty percent of these Chinese wikipedians had bachelor or graduate degrees. They usually spent less than 2 hours per week to edit Chinese wikipedia. Those who show high score of sense of community also revealed high in networked individualism construct. In terms of individual and social characteristics, those who enjoyed high sense of community were somewhat similar to those who reported high in networked individualism.

Table2-1: Socio-characteristics of VC by Age*

	Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
	Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Age					
≦18	9	12	8	28	57
	10.6%	15.2%	14.5%	18.3%	15.3%
19～24	38	32	25	73	168
	44.7%	40.5%	45.5%	47.7%	45.2%
25～30	22	26	14	40	102
	25.9%	32.9%	25.5%	26.1%	27.4%
≧31	16	9	8	12	45
	18.8%	11.4%	14.5%	7.8%	12.1%
Total	85	79	55	153	372
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*SOC= Sense of Community, NI= Network Individualism

Table2-2: Socio-characteristics of VC by Education

	Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
	Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Education					
≦High school	11	15	9	34	69
	13.1%	19.0%	16.4%	22.4%	18.6%
Bachelor	55	44	29	87	215
	65.5%	55.7%	52.7%	57.2%	58.1%
≧Master	18	20	17	31	86
	21.4%	25.3%	30.9%	20.4%	23.2%
Total	84	79	55	152	370
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table2-3: Socio-characteristics of VC by Country

	Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
	Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Country					
China	21	33	26	89	169
	24.7%	42.3%	47.3%	58.6%	45.7%
Hong Kong／Macau	20	18	14	17	69
(China)	23.5%	23.1%	25.5%	11.2%	18.6%
Taiwan	37	22	12	32	103
	43.5%	28.2%	21.8%	21.1%	27.8%
Others	7	5	3	14	29
	8.2%	6.4%	5.5%	9.2%	7.8%
Total	85	78	55	152	370
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Table2-4: Socio-characteristics of VC by "Editing time per week"

	Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
	Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Editing time per week					
None	16	11	7	23	57
	18.8%	13.9%	13.2%	15.1%	15.4%
< 2hr	54	46	30	78	208
	63.5%	58.2%	56.6%	51.3%	56.4%
2hr ≦, > 6hr	8	13	13	29	63
	9.4%	16.5%	24.5%	19.1%	17.1%
6hr ≦	7	9	3	22	41
	8.2%	11.4%	5.7%	14.5%	11.1%
Total	85	79	53	152	369
	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

The major difference between those who had sense of community and networked individualism came from the propensity of mobilizing social resources. Those who had high networked individualism report acquaint more wikipedia's administrators, experts and specialized wikipedians compared to others. In addition, they show higher degree of mobilizing resources and requesting helps from these social networks to solve their problems.

Table3: Socio-characteristics of VC by social source

		Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
		Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Acquaint Wikipedia's administrator	No	68	45	42	79	234
		80.0%	58.4%	77.8%	52.0%	63.6%
	Yes	17	32	12	73	134
		20.0%	41.6%	22.2%	48.0%	36.4%
Request help from Wikipedia's	No	7	9	5	18	39
		38.9%	27.3%	41.7%	24.7%	28.7%

		Socio-characteristics of VC				Total
		Low SOC, Low NI	Low SOC, High NI	High SOC, Low NI	High SOC, High NI	
Administrator that you know	Yes	11	24	7	55	97
		61.1%	72.7%	58.3%	75.3%	71.3%
Acquaint Wikipedia's expert or master	No	82	61	49	111	303
		96.5%	77.2%	90.7%	73.0%	81.9%
	Yes	3	18	5	41	67
		3.5%	22.8%	9.3%	27.0%	18.1%
Request help from Wikipedia's expert or master that you know	No	2	12	2	14	30
		66.7%	66.7%	40.0%	34.1%	44.8%
	Yes	1	6	3	27	37
		33.3%	33.3%	60.0%	65.9%	55.2%
Acquaint specialized Wikipedians	No	75	60	47	101	283
		89.3%	76.9%	88.7%	66.4%	77.1%
	Yes	9	18	6	51	84
		10.7%	23.1%	11.3%	33.6%	22.9%
Request help from specialized Wikipedians that you know	No	5	9	5	13	32
		55.6%	50.0%	83.3%	25.5%	38.1%
	Yes	4	9	1	38	52
		44.4%	50.0%	16.7%	74.5%	61.9%

In sum, this case study indicated networked individualism did not supplant sense of community. In the contrary, they coexist in virtual community. Web 2.0 related social community has gradually gained its popularity in nowadays, this study implies that accessibility of these kinds of community resources is no more depends on sense of belonging and community consensus, in alternative, building instrumental networks, maintaining autonomous relationship with certain community members and shifting roles across networks become the key to mobilize network resources.

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