Community in Cyber Space?: The Role of the Internet in Facilitating and Maintaining a Community of Live Music Collecting and Trading

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The interactions based around the taping, trading, and collecting of live music performances have evolved into a phenomenon that may aptly be referred to as a community. What is most remarkable about this is that the vast majority of these activities now take place over the Internet. The emergence of virtual community is addressed by sociological theories that address the increasingly disembedded nature of social structure. This article is a participant observation that specifically examines if trading is indeed a community, and demonstrates how this is facilitated through the proliferation of the Internet and other technologies. The findings reveal a phenomenon that does exhibit many characteristics of a traditional community; though acceptance or rejection of the notion of virtual community is contingent upon which definition of community one uses.

The Internet is fast becoming an omnipresent social phenomenon. Like the telephone and television, it is becoming a standard element in peoples’ daily lives. Reports indicate that in the United States in 2002, nearly 68 percent of all households owned a computer and by 2007 this number could be as high as 75 percent (Rupley, 2003), up from 37 percent in 1997 and 15 percent in 1989 (Newburger, 1999; U.S. Census Bureau, 1991). Perhaps more interesting is that the percentage of adults who regularly use Internet rose from 46 percent in 2000 to 68 percent by June 2005 (Pew Research Center, 2005). With such a presence in our lives, the Internet will have a significant impact on social interaction and social organization: social structures have now emerged that are maintained almost entirely over the Internet. It is for this reason that sociologists are turning their focus to this emergent social institution; many sociological concerns may be addressed.

THE “DISEMBEDDING” OF SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The emergence of social dynamics on the Internet is addressed by sociological theory that predates its popular emergence. Observations regarding the disembedded nature of social structure are a good starting point. A common observation regarding the development of modern (or postmodern) society is that social structure has become increasingly

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far-reaching and pervasive while at the same time becoming more centralized and unified. Some early signs of this appeared with the emergence and subsequent growth of the nation-state in the sixteenth century (Kourvetaris, 1997). Governing organizations started to control and govern larger and larger areas while at the same time maintaining a centralized authority structure. Simmel (1907) explained that the emergence of standardized monetary systems increased the ease and portability of economic transactions, which in turn acted as a catalyst for ever more expansive and integrated social structures. Similarly, Giddens (1984, 1990) said that characteristics of modernity such as the use of “symbolic tokens” and reliance upon “expert systems” have severed the link between time and space, thus “disembedding” social structure. Noting the work of Simmel and Giddens, Kellner (2002) added that this process (what he called “globalization”) was put into motion by technology as well as ever-expanding capitalist trade. Social structure is increasingly less bound by the physical nature of the world. It has been uprooted and has taken flight, reaching farther and faster than ever before: Living in a remote rural area was once quite an isolated experience, but now people in such places are subject to much of the same structure, culture, and messages as people living in New York City.

THE STUDY AT HAND

One way to illustrate the emergence of social structure on the Internet is to consider the question of virtual communities. Many definitions of community define that concept in terms of sustained, active participation, construction, and shared experiences among community members. These social processes seem to be paralleled by activities taking place within virtual communities. An example of the emergence of community on the Internet is represented by the activities of individuals who collect and trade recordings of live music online. These recordings are made by members of the audience and are not intended for the traditional retail music arena. Participants commonly refer to this collective activity as the “trading community.”

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO TRADING

A brief primer for what the trading community is and how it works is in order. Many artists allow people to record their live performances and distribute them in a noncommercial fashion. This process begins with those individuals who purchase recording equipment and bring their equipment into a venue to record a performance, usually on digital audio tape (DAT) recorders, but some are now being recorded directly onto laptop computers. To the uninitiated, these recordings are often referred to as “bootleg” recordings and are generally perceived to be illegal. By definition, “bootlegs” are unauthorized by the artists and are thus a violation of copyright law (Mirapaul, 2003). This conception is often not an accurate one, especially with respect to the subject of this article. Most of the activities addressed here are authorized by the artists and violate no laws.

Once a show is recorded, tapers make copies available to people who, in turn, start to circulate them to others by various methods. Means by which shows circulate include trading via mail, acquiring shows by sending blanks and return postage to a willing trader (known as a “B&P”), direct downloads from websites, and person-to-person file transfers by using a file transfer protocol (FTP). Though web-based downloads and FTP sharing
is growing in popularity, many transactions are still completed via regular mail. From this, a second, much larger, group of people emerged who do not tape the performances themselves, but collect and trade these recordings among each other. These trades are sought out, negotiated, and set up via Internet message boards that are dedicated to music trading. Many people’s collections of music can be quite large. For this reason, many traders publish a list of their collection on the Internet. There are websites that serve as places for people to easily create and maintain their list of shows online for others to view.

The theoretical statements regarding the nature of social structure addressed above makes the existence of virtual communities seem possible. If observations regarding an increasingly disembedded social structure remain valid, then structures such as communities may extend into the non-face-to-face realm of cyber space; and in many ways they may not be very different from non-Internet community networks in their characteristics. This article will specifically examine if indeed the trading community exemplifies the advent of communities within the disembedded environment of the Internet and demonstrate how this was facilitated through the proliferation of the Internet and other related technologies. If communities over the Internet exist then it is evident that distinct and formal social structures and processes have crossed into that realm. To do this, a set of criteria for what determines community should be considered. With this in mind, an examination of how the concept of community is conceptualized in the existing literature is in order so a comparison to the virtual community examined in this article is possible.

THE EMERGENCE OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

A singular definition of community does not exist; there are many (Lyon, 1999). The use of the word “community” in reference to this study may not seem appropriate to many community scholars. Some conceptions insist that community must be bound to a physical territory: Community members must live together in order to have a true community (Poplin, 1979; Wilkinson, 1991). However, due to many of the factors related to technology and globalization addressed above, Wilkinson (1991) acknowledged that territory may no longer be the primary factor in defining community, and may even be playing an increasingly less significant role. Instead, Wilkinson suggested that community should be defined by placing primacy upon the field of interaction. This “interactional” approach maintains that it is the web of social interactions that determines the boundaries of a community and not vice versa. Some scholars have even rejected the territorial requisite altogether (Bender, 1978; Gusfield, 1975). The decreased importance placed on physical proximity within conceptualizations of community lends credence to the idea of disembedded social structure, in turn allowing for the possibility of virtual communities.

INTERNET-BASED GROUPS AS COMMUNITY?

Literature addressing the prospect of community on the Internet is emerging. While the sources focus on different aspects of virtual community, there is a common link among them in that they identify and analyze the distinct social processes that exist within virtual communities and address how they are similar to, or different from, face-to-face communities. Baker and Ward (2002) asserted that communities can be defined as “...a
self-organizing group of individuals whose organizing principle is the perceived need for co-operation so as to satisfy a shared interest or set of interests" (p. 211). They argued that “...there is nothing that necessitates the meaning of ‘community’ be narrowly linked to a specific spatial location”; however, they also noted that the catalyst for virtual communities is different from communities based in geographic space. They suggested that virtual communities must start with a shared interest among their members; it is not enough to just be connected to the Internet for communities to emerge. In the absence of face-to-face contact, some preexisting factor must pull them together. This stands in contrast to geographic communities in that no preexisting interests need be present for a community to take shape; the simple fact of sharing the same space can create those interests. Wellman and Guilia (1999) also addressed the concept of online communities by addressing several relevant issues. They suggest that via the Internet one can observe many of the same elements found in face-to-face communities: people establish both broadly and narrowly supportive relationships, weak and strong ties, adhere to norms of reciprocity, enhance “real life” social ties, and offer a diversity of social contacts. The sum of these elements suggests that Internet communities are possible, and in many ways are not very different from non-Internet community networks in their characteristics. There are some documented cases of virtual communities fitting these observations, bringing together “deteriorialized” people who hold common interests. McLelland (2002) illustrated the large role the Internet has come to play in the Japanese gay male community. Matai and Ball-Rokeach (2002) presented data that suggests the Internet plays a role in reinforcing identities, particularly among Korean Americans. Fox and Roberts (1999) conducted a study of an electronic discussion group among a group of physicians (general practitioners) in the United Kingdom, which revealed a very distinct group structure among the participants. While the theoretical observations and the literature reviewed here may pave the way for conceptualizing Internet groups as communities, Wellman and Guilia (1999) noted that serious empirical studies of Internet communities were still absent from the literature. Additionally, many traditional community theorists have had reservations as to whether Internet communities really represent something that can aptly be viewed and studied as what scholars have come to define as community. Wilkinson (1991) offered a caveat toward nonterritorial conceptions of community. He maintained that there still must be regular and meaningful interactions that foster a common identity and sense of solidarity, and that these elements may still be still bound by physical locality, “In the extreme, there is no doubt that a sense of community can exist with little contact, but there is a question as to the extent to which community itself exists” (p. 25). Wilkinson later went on to quote MacIver: “The mark of a community is that one’s life may be wholly lived within it” (MacIver and Page, 1949, p. 9). Based on these statements about what constitutes a community, it seems that Internet groups may meet some criteria and fall short of others: They may meet Wilkinson’s measures of common identity, solidarity, and regular and meaningful interaction; however, MacIver’s criterion of living “wholly within” the structure presents a more formidable obstacle, though it may not be enough to deny the possibility of territory-free communities. Driskell and Lyon (2002) addressed Internet communities in reference to the various traditional definitions of community within the literature. They concluded that virtual communities will always fall short of the criteria established by “true” communities in several ways. First, they said the common interests that bind virtual communities together
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are much too narrow when compared to face-to-face communities that have a broad array of common ties. Second, they stated that Internet-based relationships lack the intimacy and holism of traditional social interaction. By this they meant that interactions are not “emotional and supportive,” “long term and enduring,” and “associated with regular social interaction.” In short, they do not resemble “Gemeinschaft-like” ties associated with face-to-face communities. There is also more room for a significant psychological detachment and limited social liability in that people can enter and exit a given community with a significant amount of ease. This does not allow for the level of mutual trust often present in traditional communities. Additionally, Baker and Ward (2002) said that real communities possess multidimensional connections including geographic, cultural, and political ties. In the absence of multiple connections, virtual communities must make up for it with an intensity of common interests, though they pointed out that such intensity is difficult to sustain over long periods of time, thus rendering virtual communities susceptible to dissolution.

Parrish (2002) offered a third approach that attempted to strike a middle ground, allowing for the inclusion of virtual communities as real communities. He suggested that “directly applying” classical definitions to contemporary community dynamics may erroneously lead scholars to exclude Internet groups from the study of community. To rectify the gap between pro- and anti-virtual community conceptions, he advanced a definition of community that he believed addresses the essence of community as defined by classical definitions yet does not preclude virtual communities from study. With this in mind he defines community as:

... a group of people who, by virtue of a natural longing for interaction, and shared goals, interests, and fears, feel a sustained bond of connection, cooperation, and support with one another (p. 261).

With this in mind, Parrish was quite articulate in illustrating how virtual communities meet the criteria stated in his definition culled from the classical literature. He addressed how Internet groups do exist to satisfy a longing for interaction, contain strong social bonds, and a sense of moving toward shared goals.

There is a palpable schism regarding the possibility for real community on the Internet. Regardless of the appropriateness of the terminology used, there is still ample evidence that there is indeed something of sociological import represented here (Wellman and Guilia, 1999); whether one refers to it as a community is a debate that depends on one’s definition of community. Determining if the trading community is indeed a community therefore depends on how community is defined in this article. Based on the review of the literature, community is defined for the purposes of this study as “a group of individuals, who engage in sustained cooperative activities that, in the process, construct a common identity and a negotiated order, possess shared definitions, feel a sense of belonging, and a sense of commitment to the group and its preservation.” The definition is operationalized more specifically below. Some of the criteria addressed above that insist on a shared geographic space or the ability to live wholly within must be left out by default; if one insists on such standards, then any discussion of virtual community is a nonstarter. Since some conceptions addressed above see such physically bound criteria as less important than others, setting them aside for the purposes of this study is supported by the literature.
The intent of this study is to counteract the relative dearth of empirical work on Internet communities. The research question was: Does the practice of collecting and trading live music via the Internet reflect the emergence of community on the Internet? Based on the research reviewed above, community must have several characteristics: regular interaction, a negotiated order, a sense of belonging, shared goals and values, distinct norms, identity, and social status, personal commitment to the group and its preservation, sources of interpersonal support, and a process of socialization. These were the sensitizing concepts that guided this study.

The author collected the data through participant observation. With this in mind the ultimate goal was to gain an understanding of the trading community from the perspective of the participants, developing an appreciation for their symbols, values, and norms. The best way to achieve this goal is for the participant observer to go into the research with a “deliberately unstructured” design (Denzin, 1989). This allows room for the researcher to make social “discoveries” of things that may not have been anticipated. A more rigid research design and hypothesis would not have been appropriate because the (as of then) unknown field could not have been totally accounted for in advance.

Formal field study began in June 2001 and continued into 2003. The basic approach was what has been referred to as “cyber-ethnography” (Fox and Roberts, 1999) or “virtual ethnography” (McLelland, 2002), which asserts that effective observation of virtual spaces can be achieved through textual interaction entirely through the PC. The data were gathered in two ways: first by analyzing trading-oriented websites and Internet message boards. About 12 websites and message boards were included in the sample, some dedicated to specific bands, and some that were general trading sites. It is these websites in question that act as a conduit for the trading community. This sample of websites was the result of a “snowballing” of sources; the nature of the Internet makes it difficult to account for all that is out there on any given topic; old sites disappear and new ones emerge. The sample was yielded through the field observation. New websites were included based on references made by participants on the sites observed initially. Actual participation in the trading community was a significant portion of the field study. During the study, about 100 performances were collected through various types of transactions. Experiences with trading and interaction surrounding that were also treated as data.

The author played the role of participant-as-observer (Babbie, 2000). At the outset, the researcher’s identity was known to only a few. As time went on, the identity of the researcher became more public; the intent was to learn as much as possible (in an unobtrusive manner) before people became aware of the study. The identity of the researcher was later disclosed in an attempt to actively solicit more structured responses from trading community members; these instances never seemed to be very fruitful as members seemed reluctant to participate in, or were apathetic toward, the idea of the study. The overall tone of the research was largely a naturalistic one: collecting data through the observation of and participation in the day-to-day activities of the trading community. Along the way, relevant message board and web site content were archived, emails were saved, and a log of trading activity was maintained. All saved data was anonymous or kept confidential. Any of the quotes used in this article were taken from websites and message boards that are public forums and are known as such by participants. Anything that was said was done so in the frame of mind that it would be a public statement (Fox and Roberts, 1999).
The field research revealed that the interactions based around the taping, trading, and collecting of live performances have evolved into a phenomenon that may aptly be referred to as a community. Like any community, there are distinct values and norms that are sometimes negotiated and renegotiated among its members, participants have statuses and roles attached to their identities, and new members need to be socialized so as to ensure the stability and smooth flow of interaction within the community. Unlike traditional communities, all these elements are reproduced primarily over the Internet. This social network did exist prior to the proliferation of the PC and the Internet, but it was not as widespread or as institutionalized as it is today. In the past, trading relied on face-to-face contacts or ads placed in the back of relevant magazines (Mirapaul, 2003). The character of the trading community prior to the Internet is alluded to on the homepage of a trading-oriented web site:

Remember the days when you had to “luckily meet” a taper or friend of a taper at a show or you had a friend who knew a friend who knew someone who lived next to someone that knew a friend who may know a taper? In those days, “that” was the only way to find your favorite live Jamband music. In those days, multi-generational cassette recordings and half-set shows were common. If you’ve experienced any of that or you are totally new to this scene, you will totally appreciate the Further Network . . . (Further Network, 2002)

Today, many people have access to CD “burning” equipment that is now a standard feature on most PCs. CDR technology allows a more accurate duplication of a recording than the previous (analog) cassette format where subsequent duplications of a tape would lose a bit of sound quality as it circulated around the community. Each step away from the source was referred to as a “generation.” This inhibited the spread of these recordings, as few people would want “high-generation” copies that were long descended from the master source and likely to be of poor sound quality. With CD burning technology this has become irrelevant, allowing faster and further circulation of music. The existence of the trading community prior to the Internet reflects the observations of Baker and Ward (2002) and Stevenson (2002), who suggested that preexisting communities seem to be the most meaningful virtual communities.

STATUS AND IDENTITY

There are several general statuses and roles that people play within the trading community. As with any social network, one’s status will have an impact on how others interact with that individual. Statuses within the trading community can be loosely broken down into five categories: taper, site operator, good trader, bad trader, and newbie. Tapers are the people who have thousands of dollars invested in recording equipment and spend a significant amount of money to purchase tickets and travel to shows regularly. These individuals enjoy an exalted status and people often talk to and about them with gratitude and even deference. This is made apparent in the following statements:

. . . we wouldn’t have music if people like ****** didn’t go through the time, money and energy that he does. . . I have a lot of respect for the tapers . . .
Trust me, I have a lot of respect for the tapers, and I appreciate what they do to an extreme level.

Site operators, or “siteops,” are those who run FTP servers that allow people with a high-speed Internet connection to download shows. This is the point where the wide circulation of recordings really begins. These people are generally the first ones to get a recording and act as “seeds” for the circulation of a show. Similar to tapers, siteops also enjoy an amount of respect and gratitude. The next two statuses, “good trader” and “bad trader,” are similar in that they indicate individuals who are experienced traders and thus are expected to know the norms of the trading community. Whether or not one upholds the norms of trading is the determining factor as to whether one is a good or bad trader. One’s reputation as a good or bad trader travels through the community. Bad traders are often exposed on message boards as such:

Just a general warning for everyone in the trading community about a BAD TRADER. I was ripped off for 31 discs . . . that’s right . . . 31 DISCS by . . .

****** (uses screen name)

His name is ***** from *****, PA. In JANUARY we set up a trade, and I sent out the discs to fulfill the agreement. He made up a never ending list of excuses . . . friends dying, school, too busy right now, etc., and has neglected me my 31 Discs. As you can tell, it is now MID AUGUST . . . and still no shows in my mail box. ***** IS A BAD TRADER!!!!! Do not trade with this guy!! (parenthetical text added)

Conversely, good traders are also recognized on message boards. Some websites that store people’s lists of shows have a mechanism for people to give feedback as to one’s reliability as a trader:

Use this thread to post good traders and the experiences you have had with them.

If they are a member of this site you may also rank them in our trading database simply by searching for their name and viewing their info.

This site also offers another list to post bad traders. If one is a particularly bad trader they may even become notorious and people will avoid trading with them. The last status is that of a “newbie”. This is a person who is new to trading and is still learning about it while at the same time is trying to build a list of shows (through B&Ps) to offer in trade. Special attention is paid to the socialization of newbies as it is viewed as the point at which to ensure the continuation of good trading practices. The value placed on the socialization process is evident all throughout the community and is presented throughout the remainder of the findings.

It is interesting to note the role that economics play in this status system. The high-ranking individuals like the tapers and siteops enjoy that position due in part to a monetary investment. As noted previously, taping requires a large amount of money. Siteops also make an investment in having a high-speed Internet connection and having enough hard drive space to store shows and run a server from their PC. Even traders who enjoy a high status may have realized that status through economic commitment. They may be able
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afford a high-speed connection to download shows and then offer them in trade or B&P, or they may merely take part in more frequent trading that requires money in that more CDRs, mailing supplies, and postage must be purchased: The more active a trader is, the more money they are spending on the activity. Many traders report having spent anywhere from $150 to $2,000 on trading in 2002. It is the more active traders who become known around the message boards and may find easier and timelier access to recordings.

VALUES AND NORMS OF THE COMMUNITY

Upon entering the trading scene it did not take long to discern that there are very specific rules of conduct that underlie almost all interactions. Many communities openly publicize the rules for all participants to see. If one is an experienced trader then there is little doubt they are familiar with these basic rules and they will follow them and expect others to follow them with little prior discussion or clarification of them. It is assumed that all know what is to take place. Though these guidelines can be quite minute and detailed, it is still significant to note how consistently they are adhered to in transactions. The basis for these values and norms center around three basic tenets: noncommercialism, courtesy, and generosity. Each of these will be addressed individually.

Noncommercialism

The noncommercial stance is perhaps the most universal of the three tenets in that all trading groups vehemently oppose individuals profiting from trading in any way. The following statement was found as part of the rules for a site where many trades are initiated:

The agreement of a band to allow taping at its concerts is not without conditions. The most important and generally included condition is that music may only be traded, never sold. This means that you may trade a show only for an equivalent amount of media. In other words, three blank CD’s may be traded for three recorded CD’s of a concert. In no case should you ever participate in a trade that requires more media from either party. If someone asks for more blanks than they are providing back to you-this is a music sale and is not permitted. Please do not patronize anyone performing this practice.

Money should (almost) never be exchanged for recordings, and all trades must be done on a one-to-one basis. The number of CDRs exchanged must be equal. If one is seeking a total of six discs from an individual then that person must receive six in return.

There have been some gray areas with respect to this norm in that occasionally individuals may offer money in exchange for shows at no profit. People reason that this is more efficient and, as long as no profit is made, it does not violate the noncommercial values of trading:

People are agreeing to pay . . . for the supplies. People are not paying to have the show burned. They are paying for supplies. They are buying CDs and an envelope from him, and they are willing to pay whatever they send in.

It is easier and more economical to send $$ instead of discs. I also think it as just as ethical IF of course . . . NO PROFIT IS BEING MADE.
Opponents of this practice cite three basic reasons why this should be prohibited. First, there is no practical way to account for whether or not a profit is actually being made. The following is an interaction where traders are trying to determine if a profit is occurring. The first statement comes from a person exchanging shows for money on the claim that there was no profit; following that is a series of rebuttals in response to this claim of no profit:

At Office Depot:
50 packs of Maxell or Imitation cdr = $34.99
or about .70 a cd x 3 per show.
$2.10 per show for cds.
Add .74 to 1.04 for postage
Add .49 for envelopes
Add .10 for sleeves
And the cost is easily over $3 . . . that’s if I get 50 perfect burns.

But don’t you charge $5?

I HIGHLY doubt that anybody running an enterprise such as you’re doing would be thick enough to pay $35 for a spindle of 50 CD’s when it’s easy to find the same discs for $30 for 100.

If you buy envelopes one at a time, they’ll cost you $0.49, but I’m sure you’re not thick enough to do that, either.

$0.10 for sleeves? What happened to wrapping the discs up in their source info?

I’ll ask my question again. You are saying that it costs about $3 to do what you’re doing. It seems to me that charging $5 is making a profit.

I am a bookkeeper. I can make numbers do whatever I want them to do. Anyone with half a brain can perform the same tricks. You will never convince me or any of the rest of us that are on to you that you are not profiting from this. I don’t need to hear about your holiday weekend FedEx woes to know you are nothing but a liar and a fraud.

The second concern is a fear that allowing the mere presence of any money exchange in the community may be the first crack in the dam leading to a tolerance that may lead to a more pronounced use of money and profit:

The problem is that by introducing money into the equation, you allow for the possibility of profit. Regardless of how little money you make or how much you lose, it still gives the appearance of unethical behavior.

If we accept what you are doing, we weaken the taboo nature of exchanging money for recordings. It invites other people to follow suit. Your heart might be in the right place, but others’ inevitably will not.

Building upon these stances against the use of money in trading, many also feel that using money may subvert any attempts at properly socializing newbies into the culture of trading as the salience of the anticommercial stance may be weakened.
This battle against money for shows doesn’t just end here. It will take each and every taper and trader out there to educate newbies (and oldbies) on the right and wrong way to attain shows. That’s how I learned the ropes years ago. I’ll continue the trend, as people email me privately through my trading list asking for trades and/or b&ps, and by offering b&ps on the boards; if those of us that have been in this trading community for awhile want to preserve our standards...

The major point he is trying to get across here is that this is NOT how to treat a newbie. This is NOT how you educate them on the ins and outs of the trading community. No matter how desperate a person is for a show or three, they should not expect to have to pay upwards of $50 for it. That is outrageous and disrespectful to all the honorable traders out there.

The third objection is that the use of money may violate most bands’ taping policies:

...how do you justify using money for trading when DMB’s taping policy says it’s not allowed. Can you not even respect the band that much?...Your business has the possibility to make hundreds maybe thousands of dollars. You know what you’re doing is wrong.

This third objection is a bit precarious in that many of these taping policies are vaguely stated. Debates surrounding this controversy are very heated and may last on message boards for long periods of time. These events certainly seem to reflect what can be defined as “community,” as participants are actually negotiating the course and future of the trading scene (Bender, 1978; Wilkinson, 1991).

Courtesy

Within the trading scene there is a very tangible emphasis placed on etiquette, politeness, and respect for norms. This is reflected in the undertone of many of the interactions, whether on a public message board or via email or private messaging; there is a friendly tone of voice that pervades. People say “please” and “thanks” and often make every attempt to make the trade a friendly experience by adding context and conversation. Many remarks even show humility. The following are examples posted on trading message boards:

This was the first TOO (The Others Ones) show I attended and I would love to get it on cd. My list is under www.phishhook.com/lists/****. I have lots to trade, and would greatly appreciate anyone's help with this show! Thanks... (parenthetical text added)

First off ~ I know it’s been said before, but thank you *****. He came through with three B&P's for me in about a week’s time. I usually don’t ask for quite so much, but I have been w/out a comp for a while now and packages are becoming rare rather than a borderline annoyance.

Displays of friendliness are expected and are generally thought to be the way one will ensure finding the shows one is looking for. A perceived lack of respect may result in difficulty finding what one seeks.
There are also more specific expectations that fit the norm of respect in the community. The first and most universal one is to not "rip people off"; this means not returning the show or shows you agreed to send. Related to this is that you must make an effort to provide a timely turnaround on trades and B&Ps, staying in contact with the people you are trading with, and offering accounts for problems in a slow trade. Other expectations pertain to the more technical aspects of the trading scene. First, individuals must be honest about the quality of a particular recording in advance. Related to this is that one is not to trade MP3 sourced music as they present a loss of sound quality. All discs that are burned need to be burned “disc at once” (DAO), which means there are no pauses or breaks between tracks. People should also not use low-quality or generic discs in trading as such discs are believed to be unreliable and should not be used:

Unlike tapes, where the Maxell XL-2 has been the standard for years, there is no brand of CDR which has emerged as the clear-cut favorite among CDR traders. The general consensus among many traders is that Mitsui discs are the best, however, I have used many other brands of CDR’s and never had any problems, including Kodak, TDK, Memorex, Verbatim, and Sony. The CDR’s you want to stay away from are Maxell, and generics (i.e. CompUSA brand).

Additionally, any discs sent should have no writing on them. They are to be labeled with paper. The exception to this norm is the small marks sometimes made on the clear plastic ring in the center of the CDR to identify discs, but this is generally kept to a minimum. A final expectation is that discs should to be properly packaged before mailing; this includes placing the discs in proper sleeves and shipping them in a small bubble-padded envelope. Fiber-padded mailers are frowned upon as they often create lint that may stick to the discs when opening:

Try to avoid buying the mailers that are padded with paper fiber. They’re usually brown and say “To Open, Pull Tab”. The Care Mail KPE-2, which says “Jiffy Padded” and “Contains over 60% Recycled Fibers” is an example of a mailer to avoid.

Some traders feel that these can contaminate the CDs with small particles, especially since the packages seem to easily get statically charged and can rip when opening.

All of these practices are broadly held and maintained by any experienced trader. This is made evident by the ubiquity of these rules within the trading community; they are often stated on trading-related websites and on people’s personal online trading lists. When any of these criteria are not met, it is generally expected that the person in error will cheerfully rectify the situation. Sometimes this means re-sending recordings if need be; sometimes people even voluntarily send extra discs (with music) to make up for any inconvenience. In cases where two parties are unable to resolve a situation it is sometimes taken to the message boards and discussed there. Many of these activities are meant to have an impact on a person’s trading identity. The threat of being labeled a “bad trader” often acts as a motivator to keep transactions friendly and fair.
Generosity

There is an emphasis placed on being generous and “giving back” to the community that provides people with free music. The most commonly expressed reason for this is the strong belief in “spreading the music” (in a noncommercial fashion).

There is literally tens of thousands of dollars that have been poured into this crazy hobby of mine. I tape because I enjoy it, and because I enjoy giving back to a community and sharing music. I do so with the knowledge that I’m never going to see that money back (unless I sell my gear, in which case I’ll see a small percentage of that cash back).

Generosity is often closely tied to one’s trading status and reputation; being a generous trader results in higher status. The biggest way this value manifests itself is the expectation that people are to make it a point to offer B&Ps from time to time. Some people offer them constantly, others less so. Nevertheless, there is a value placed on making the music available and free, particularly to newbies or those without the equipment needed to burn discs or download shows. Another act of generosity is the “freebie offer” where an individual may post opportunities to have shows mailed to them for free. Recipients of B&Ps and freebies are expected to “re-offer” the show if possible. This norm is more strongly expressed in some groups than in others. One particularly organized effort related to the norm of generosity is called “One Sweet World” that coordinates efforts to give out free copies of recordings at concerts:

We are hoping to restart the movement of traders handing out free CD’s in the parking lots of the concerts. . . I know people are all saying that it’s a waste of time and money, but we need to keep spreading the live word of DMB around, and potentially help out a newbie or just give somebody a “really cool CD” that a friend can also copy. The way that people will learn is that you will put an insert (CD cover) in the case when you hand out your CD’s and people will come to this site and learn about trading, how bootlegging sucks, and how they can get their live DMB for free.

(One Sweet World Dot Org 2004)

Aside from upholding the value of spreading music, this passage also indicates there is a distinct motive to use this activity to help socialize newcomers into the trading community. Each recording given away comes with a CD insert with the website’s address on it. The hope is that people will visit the site and be (properly) introduced to trading.

In addition to this there are instances where generosity seems to be motivated in boarder terms such as a “Good Samaritan” attitude toward other traders:

Cuz (sic) sometimes you just have a day where everything goes wrong and life seems to be falling to pieces all around you and everyone you know, especially the boss seems to just go miles outta (sic) their way to piss you off, at times like this I’m really glad that someone took the time and effort to invent rock and roll, in particular metal. It’s just super nice to come home after dealing with the public all damn day listening to them bitch, bitch, bitch, find something loud and obnoxious that would terrify any respectably decent human being and throw it in the old home theatre system and turn it up till all 600 flipping watts are smoking and the windows are vibrating and dogs a mile down the road are howling, god, at times like these its just
damn good to be alive - good thing I live on a farm, eh??? So what does this have to do with you, easy, I’m offering you the chance to enjoy the same experience with:

**Rage against the Machine 5/11/96 1 disk**
Brixton Academy
City London
State England
(details setlist)

deftones 8/27/00 1 disk
Leeds Festival
City Leeds
State England
(details setlist)

How ‘bout those !@#$##@! (sic) apples. Two words of warning, one, if you don’t live on a farm, don’t play these at midnight at 600 DBs, I will not be responsible for your neighbors actions and more seriously, if you accept these, they must be re-offered on this site. Enjoy the hostility. (parenthetical text added)

Some see the music as an essential facet and even a means of emotional support in their lives and want to help others with that goal in mind. Also, attached to this act of generosity is a stated expectation that the recipient must re-offer the recordings to the community.

**THE SOCIALIZATION OF NEWBIES**

In order to keep the trading community stable and reliable, traders make very deliberate efforts to ensure that newbies learn the culture of trading quickly. This socialization process occurs through information posted on websites or by direct interaction via email or message boards. Gotved (2002) observed this same dynamic:

The newbies and regulars have different expectations concerning the topic (mainly if the group is defined by that), with whom to discuss and how to express oneself. The discussions about how to interact are frequently occurring, and norms are established over a period of time. The official Internet netiquette is very often supplemented by local interpretations in the social space- demarcations of the community held more or less in common by the members (p. 410).

The B&P process is generally the newbie’s first experience with the trading community. Unbeknown to many first-time takers on a B&P, there are specific guidelines within trading. Some offer a direct explanation of the process during a B&P. Others refer participants to websites for information. The socialization process often requires patience and kindness on the part of the more experienced trader. As noted above, some state that they are looking at the long-range goal of maintaining the stability of the community and hope that they are creating good traders with their patience. The importance of the community
to socialization is made apparent when making a trade with people who may not be significantly attached to the community. Such trades, usually enacted with newbies or on websites that are new or not well organized, tend to be when and where “bad trading” is likely to take place; this is a strong testament to the role the community plays in the continued practice of good trading.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Collecting and trading shows requires a significant amount of technical knowledge, much of which is related to the use of the PC and the Internet in ways that never become familiar to most people. These are related to proper burning of discs, downloading shows with an FTP application, serving shows via FTP, converting shows from data to audio files, and publishing one’s list online. Being able to do all this means being aware of the requisite software, knowing where to locate it on the Internet, and knowing how to properly download and install it onto one’s computer. Other technical competence stems from the actual hardware and equipment used. There is much discussion of the proper equipment to buy, where to buy it, and how to operate it. Since the practice of trading is an esoteric hobby, one may never actually have much face-to-face contact to find help in this area. The following is an example where someone requested technical support and received a very detailed and thoughtful response from another trader:

I need some enlightenment. I haven’t done any bt’s, but I figure if I learned how to download, rip and burn all on my own with a little research, I should be able to do the bt thing. However, I do not keep any music on my computer.

First, the software. Bit Torrent 3.3
This is the official client. http://bitconjurer.org/BitTorrent/download.html
However, many people are using experimental versions, such as Shad0w’s, ABC, and others.

Click on the Link to get to BT’s webpage. But take note, this page has a few things that you will not need. You do not need Red Hat (in any form), or Mandrake 9.1. Downloading either of those will be superfluous. All you need for now is BT. More software needs will be explained as the need arises.

The program file you will have downloaded for BT will look like this: bittorrent-3.3.exe. Double click that to install BT. When you do this, a confirmation box will pop up that says BT has successfully installed. You will not see an icon on your computer for BT. There will not be a program to open. There’s not a graphical user interface, in the sense that other programs have one. The only time you will see BT is when you’re downloading or uploading something. I believe this is what’s called a “frontend.”

Torrents

When you have this installed, you can start downloading shows! Here are a few Torrent sites to get you started:

(followed by a list of URL addresses for appropriate websites)
Generally, most of what people learn is learned through asking for help on message boards dedicated to technical issues or reading through one of the many websites that offer in-depth instructions and FAQ pages to guide people through these processes:

...this board has eased my fears about uses of technology. Most Internet Communities I’ve visited are just full of meaningless bickering. And most technology in general is very frivolous and unnecessary. But here I see technology contribute to meaningful human contact and make interaction more efficient without sacrificing the quality of the interaction. So thanks all of you for helping to quell my sporadic apocalyptic nightmares.

In this respect, those who have only a limited knowledge of computer technology generally must turn to the trading community for help. This forces participants to engage it more deeply, which may result in a deeper identification with the trading community and commitment to its norms and values. This process very much supports Rheingold’s (1993) observations about “gift economies” on the Internet where information is made widely available and people are able to get the support they need to function within that community.

DISCUSSION

IS IT A COMMUNITY?

The trading community models social dynamics that previously were only made possible by geographic proximity and face-to-face interaction. Based on the interactional conceptions of community addressed earlier, one can see how the trading community may indeed be something that can be considered a community. The criteria of regular interaction, a negotiated order, a sense of belonging, shared goals and values, distinct norms, identity and social status, personal commitment to the group and its preservation, sources of interpersonal support, and a process of socialization are certainly present in the evidence of the distinct and reflexive culture revealed in the findings.

The field research demonstrates that people participate in the trading community on a regular basis. This is demonstrated in terms of the amount of trading one does and the money people spend to keep trading. There is also a distinct set of norms and underlying values, and these norms are acknowledged and shared among most participants. This is made apparent by exchanges on message boards, the fact that so many people clearly state a similar set of norms on their online trading lists, and also consistently reference the same web sources for certain rules. These norms are sometimes discussed and negotiated with the intent of clarifying or altering them. The field data also reveal a definite structure in terms of various statuses and roles within the trading community, including stratification in terms of the amount of prestige a participant possess (sometimes related to material wealth). Additionally, participants regularly see themselves as belonging to something larger than themselves; it is more than just a means to get free music. The members are committed to others in the community was made especially apparent in several ways: First, in the examples of the acts of generosity in terms of freebie offers and B&Ps; second, in terms of the financial investments of tapers and siteops that allow others to benefit (with no financial return); and lastly in the concern they display for the preservation and continuance of the trading community in the fact that they take the
time to socialize new members, make efforts to ensure that people are upholding the communities’ norms, and offer technical support to those in need of it. These examples of commitment reveal that members of the community hold fairly strong ties toward trading. To further support the case for the trading community as a virtual community, one need only recall the findings of Baker and Ward (2002) and Stevenson (2002), which state that virtual communities seem more viable when they stem from a preexisting geographic network. As noted, the trading community did exist prior to its arrival on the Internet; the Internet is an aid to the community rather than the community in and of itself.

More Than “Just The Internet”

Discussions regarding the emergence of social structure on the Internet may seem to be a banal pursuit. However, the phenomenon addressed by this research goes further and is more significant than general conceptualizations of social structure in cyber space. What distinguishes the trading community is the fact that the organization of the community is intended to facilitate a very tangible element. There is an actual physical distribution process supported by a distinct community and corresponding culture that is maintained almost entirely in the absence of face-to-face interaction. People send materials to others with no real assurance that they will receive their requested shows in return and would have no tangible recourse if they do get “ripped off.” Tied to this is the fact that the participants are materially invested in the community through the purchase of computer hardware, blank CDRs, storage, shipping material, and postage. The social investment represented in socialization efforts also reveals a significant attachment to the community. To have any semblance of a social system requires a certain amount of trust and faith in the community (Giddens, 1982 and 1990). This trust is represented in people’s commitment to and faith in the trading process.

While this study demonstrates many ways in which the trading community does indeed reflect the characteristics embodied by more traditional communities, this conclusion is not an unqualified one. Based on some criteria, the trading community may fall short of truly being deemed a community. These shortcomings center around criteria that are rudimentarily tied to physical space: lives cannot be lived wholly within it, most of the individual relationships did not exist before arising on the Internet, the participants do not spend the majority of their time there, and they may not be as socially attached to it as they are to the physical communities immediately surrounding them. These criteria make it difficult to conclude that virtual communities are “true” communities. However, to imply that people are automatically experiencing stronger or more holistic “gemeinschaft-like” ties in territorially based communities is tenuous at best. It is not difficult to conceive of people having more meaningful ties online than they do in the physical world; one may know many things about people they interact with online, but may not know the names of the people living on their block. Interactions with these people can very well be quite weak and shallow. The assertions made by Mass Society Theory support this notion by suggesting that individual attachments to local communities are weakening, thus placing a greater emphasis on those interactions not bound by geographic proximity (Kornhauser 1959).¹

The data clearly reveal something significant, regardless of nomenclature. Though the trading community does not convincingly fit the more traditional definitions of
community, what is noteworthy “is that the participants behave as if they are part of a community” (Fox and Roberts, 1999, p. 664). As mentioned earlier in this article, the determination of community relies heavily on one’s definition of it. To accept the existence of virtual community one must let go of the rigid geographically based definitions. Similarly, if one is to reject the notion of virtual community then he or she must downplay the more recent and equally convincing conceptions of community that place primacy on interaction rather than physical space. It seems apparent that perhaps the only way to strike a common ground would be to regularly make a distinction between geographically bound communities and virtual communities. Placing a categorical qualification upon virtual communities does not necessarily exclude the notion that they both represent a similar phenomenon and can appropriately be addressed by the same literature.

CONCLUSION

DISEMBEDDED STRUCTURES

The research indicates that distinct social processes such as communities on the internet are possible and do exist. The rise of the Internet is indeed an extension of the increased tendency toward disembedded social structures. As Simmel (1907/1978) suggested nearly a century ago, the developments within modern society have led to ever-expanding and integrated social systems. With the case of the trading community, what was once a rather small and slow-moving activity has grown quite large and moves at an ever-increasing pace. People have come to devote a great deal of time and money to this activity, and the social structure emerging from these efforts is unmistakable. The role the Internet and other related technologies (digital recording equipment, CDRs, and related software applications) played in the proliferation and maintenance of the trading community is unequivocal. If social structure and even communities are emerging on the Internet, then it is also apparent that time and space no longer bind society, it has indeed become disembedded. This demonstrates that not only do the theoretical observations made by Simmel remain relevant, but also the related contributions of Giddens, Wilkinson, and others establish a more contemporary intersubjectivity for the notion of disembedded communities.

CULTURAL DOMINATION AND RESISTANCE

When the theorists addressed above suggested that social structure has become disembedded and pervasive, they also noted that it brings a tendency toward centralization and objectification, thus giving individual human agents less opportunity to actively negotiate their own culture and community. Georg Simmel (1921) asserted that individual creativity and culture (what he called individual culture) is increasingly constrained by the emergence and growth of a reified mass culture (what he called objective culture) (Etzkorn, 1968, p. 2). Similar to Simmel, Giddens warned of “structuration” and the “juggernaut of modernity” (Giddens, 1990; Ritzer, 1996), and Kellner (1990 and 2002) wrote of cultural domination and “globalization from above.”

While this study supports observations about disembedded structure (or time-space distanciation), it also suggests that increased centralization may not always accompany it.
COMMUNITY IN CYBER SPACE

The Internet may be a mechanism that makes society more centralized and expansive, but it also provides a means for people to resist a centralized culture and actively create and define things on their own. Simmel (1921) said that even in the face of objective culture, people still struggle to build and construct meanings of their own. Kellner (2002) noted that the process of globalization is dialectic: while globalization from above may increase dominance and hegemony, “globalization from below” helps us to resist it. He said this was made particularly apparent given the large role the Internet played in organizing the various antiglobalization protests of recent years. Congruently, the activity of trading has been noted as a means for people to gain some control and originality in a rationalized and commercial recording industry (Neumann and Simpson, 1997). It is a form of resistance, facilitated by the Internet and related technologies.

It is important to note, however, that the cultural resistance represented by the trading community may ultimately succumb to the threat of a more centralized objective culture. Over recent months, many artists who have a fan base within the trading community have recognized a possible untapped market (Wack, 2003). There is a growing trend of acts recording and selling their shows themselves; some of the first acts to do this were the String Cheese Incident, Phish, and The Dead (formerly the Grateful Dead). Artists sell these shows as CDs or as downloads for prices not much lower than a traditional retail release (Wack, 2003). It is conceivable that this trend can undercut the trading community. Fans who may not be aware of the trading community may just opt for the convenience and ease of buying these shows, not realizing that quality recordings can also be acquired for free. Some artists take orders for such recordings at the venue during the night of the show: striking while the concert experience is fresh, people will pay for these shows before they ever get the chance to learn how to get them for free. Many such artist-produced recordings are subject to copyright law and may not be traded and distributed to other people.

The long-term effect of this may be that in a consumerist culture, people will come to associate live music more as a retail interaction than a noncommercial community endeavor, thus eroding the flow of new people to which traders can transmit their culture. This dynamic may also take hold in other forms of Internet activity not addressed here. The freedom and decentralized nature of the Internet could become more regulated and centralized. One need only look at the history of radio in the United States to see how a once unregulated anarchistic phenomenon is now a very centralized and regulated institution (Walker, 2001). If this turns out to be the case for the Internet as well then Simmel’s statements about objective culture also remain valid.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE

While some scholars are ready to embrace the notion of virtual community, others insist that true community via the Internet is not possible. A deserving point of further inquiry would be to actually make direct comparisons between virtual and territorial communities in reference to the various criteria addressed in this article. The suggestion that one category of communities (territorial) is more significant or more deserving of the moniker “community” than another category of communities (virtual) is a claim that needs to be vetted by future research.

The social implications of the Internet have a significance that reaches far beyond the practice of trading live recordings. People can buy almost any consumer product
online, earn an MBA via “the web,” and people now meet their spouses online. While the Internet serves as a conduit for centralization and dominance, it still provides an avenue for creativity, community, and resistance. How we perceive our basic sense of community and interaction is no longer bound by physical proximity. The full ramifications of this have yet to be understood. Whatever course this new institution takes, its relevance to social inquiry is unmistakable. There is seemingly endless potential for research, and much is to be learned from it. The proliferation of the Internet must be accompanied by a proliferation of sociological analyses of it. Current studies are just the beginning.

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Note

1 While Mass Society Theory asserts that these nongeographic ties are negative, the example of this study suggests they can be positive.

References


