A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO ONLINE COMMUNITIES: BELONGING, INTEREST AND IDENTITY IN WEBSITES' AND VIDEOGAMES' COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Borrowing some concepts from the linguistic and semiotic traditions, the paper aims at understanding the nature of online (virtual) communities. First, it distinguishes two basic kinds of communities: communities where members just share something similar (paradigmatic communities) and communities where social relations are established through interactions (syntagmatic communities). On the basis of this distinction, the paper focuses on online communities and analyses the main critical issues concerning them, namely belonging, identity and interest. These issues are then discussed in the last part, where a semiotic approach to online communities is presented: interest is pivotal in order to define the semiosphere of a virtual community, i.e. the social space within the community where interactions are allowed and encouraged; belonging is a key factor for websites' communities, since it helps them becoming real syntagmatic communities; identity is as much important in websites as in videogames communities, since on the basis of the different identities considered, different play communities can be identified.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Robert Nisbet, "the most fundamental and far-reaching of sociology's unit ideas is community" (Nisbet 1966: 47). Yet, it is not easy to define what a community is; though in everyday life the concept of 'community' is widespread, and probably nobody would have any difficulty to list intuitively which communities s/he belongs to, nonetheless this concept is very problematic in scientific reflections, partially because of its strongly interdisciplinary nature. As long ago as 1955 Hillery could list and compare 94 different definitions of 'community', finding only some common elements among them, such as social interaction, area and common ties (Hillery 1955).

In the middle of the Nineties the emerging of the so-called virtual communities strongly re-proposed the discussion about the nature of communities. Far from providing a univocal definition of the concept, virtual communities have raised some other critical issues at the attention of the sociologists.

Taking its cue from the strict relationship existing between communication processes and communities, this paper borrows some concepts from the semiotic and linguistic traditions in order to provide a typology of communities and to try to understand the very nature of them. As it will be shown, the semiotic and linguistic categories that will be applied (in particular the concept of semiosphere and the distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations) are useful to analyze the interactions not only in online communities but, more in general, also in every kind of websites.

2. TYPOLOGIES OF COMMUNITIES

2.1 Between Virtuality and Reality: Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Communities

Generally speaking, a community can be intended as a group of persons who share something more or less decisive for their life, and who are tied by more or less strong relationships. It is worth noticing here that the term 'community' seems to have only favourable connotations (Williams 1983). Two main ways of considering communities can be singled out:
1) communities can be intended as a set of people who have something in common;
2) communities can be intended as groups of people who interact.

The distinction between the two ways of conceiving a community is very well illustrated by an example provided by Aristotle. In his *Politics* (3.1.12), the Greek philosopher tells that, when Babylon was captured by an invading army of Persians, in certain parts of the city the capture itself had not been noticed for three days. This is the reason why Aristotle considers Babylon not a *polis*, but an *ethnos*. In fact, according to Aristotle, what distinguishes the *polis*, i.e. the perfect form of community (see *Politics* 1.1.1), from the *ethnos* is the presence of interactions and communications among the citizens: in a *polis* citizens speak to each other, they interact and communicate, while in an *ethnos* they just have in common the same walls.

In the sense of the *ethnos*, we speak, for instance, of the community of the Italians, of the community of English speaking people, of the community of paediatricians, and so on. The members of such communities usually do not know each other, they do not communicate each with all the others, but they have the perception of belonging to the community, they are aware of being part of it. According to anthropologist Anthony Cohen, such communities are symbolic constructions: rather than being structures, they are entities of meaning, founded on a shared conglomeration of normative codes and values that provide community members with a sense of identity (see Cohen 1985). In a similar way, Benedict Anderson defines the modern nations (the Aristotelian *ethne*) as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1991: 5-6).

Borrowing the linguistic terminology of structuralism (de Saussure 1983, Hjelmslev 1963), we can name the two different typologies of communities 'paradigmatic' and 'syntagmatic' communities. The former are characterized by similarity: members of paradigmatic communities share similar interests or have similar features. The latter, on the contrary, are characterized by differences: they are built up through the interactions among the members, i.e. through the combination of different elements that carry out complementary functions.

2.2 Cultural Communities and Communities of Practice

Corresponding to the two typologies outlined above, two basic types of communities can be singled out: cultural communities (paradigmatic) and communities of practice (syntagmatic).

Cultural communities originate from the communal common ground of their members, i.e. on the encyclopaedic knowledge of the communities members belong to. They can be defined as groups of people "with a shared expertise that other communities lack. […] Each type of expertise consists of facts, beliefs, procedures, norms, and assumptions that members of the community assume they can take for granted in other members" (Clark 1996: 102). Everybody usually belongs in the same time to several cultural communities, which may be nested in one another: for instance, one can belong to the community of plastic surgeons, which is nested in the community of surgeons, which is nested in its turn in that of physicians, and so on.

The concept of *community of practice* has been worked out by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger within the cognitive paradigm of the Situated Action Theory (see Suchman 1987, Lave & Wenger 1991). Communities of practice are "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis" (Wenger *et al.* 2002: 4). They are characterized by three essential features: a mutual engagement, a joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire (see Wenger 1998: 73-82). Also in this case, one usually belongs at any given time to several communities of practice (at home, at work, at school, in his/her hobbies), which can be overlapped, interlocked, or mutually exclusive (Wenger 1998).

3. ONLINE COMMUNITIES

3.1 Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and Online Communities

The concept of 'community' is strictly related to that of 'communication', as it is shown by the common root of the words. Community and communication entail each other, being each a necessary condition for the existence of the other. Furthermore, new communication technologies have always given rise to new forms of communities: virtual communities are the new kind of communities that emerged thanks to the computer mediated communication.

Exactly as for the concept of 'community', it is very difficult to give a precise definition of what a virtual community is. A clear evidence of this difficulty is the fact that for a couple of years many web services that host virtual communities have been calling them 'groups' rather than 'communities' (MSN, for instance, announced to all its users the change of the name from 'communities' to 'groups' in June 2002). We can supply a provisional definition of a virtual community as *a group of people to whom interactions and communications via computer play an important role in creating and maintaining significant social relations*.

Two different situations that represent the relationship between social groups and CMC can be singled out: on one side there are groups that have formed thanks to CMC, and on the other there are groups that already existed in the real world and employ CMC as a further means for communication. In the former case through the computer social relations are created among people who had no previous mutual relationships: the community is constituted by employing the same medium. In the latter, already constituted groups, organizations, associations and communities use electronic technologies and virtual environments to foster and increase their communication processes: media facilitates communities (Lechner & Schmid 2000). The expression 'virtual communities' in its original sense referred to communities constituted by CMC.

3.2 Critical Issues in Online Communities

The close connection that exists between CMC and online communities is stressed by one of the earliest and most known definitions of virtual communities, given by Howard Rheingold (1993): "[Virtual communities are] social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".

Other definitions stress other relevant aspects for the emerging of virtual communities, such as the communicative interactions and the spatial dimension (see, for instance, Fernback & Thompson 1995; Baym 1998; Kollock & Smith 1999). Without reporting here other definitions, we just single out the main features which are usually ascribed to virtual communities:

- a shared communication environment;
- interpersonal relationships that emerge and are maintained by means of online interaction;
- a sense of belonging to the group;
- an internal structure of the group;
- a symbolic common space represented by shared norms, values and interests.

However, three concepts are usually acknowledged as constituent factors of communities, and in the same time as critical issues when dealing with online ones: belonging, identity and interest.

3.2.1 Belonging

Dealing with communities, belonging is no doubt a key-concept: first of all, a community is belonged to. Belonging to a community may be more or less intense, more or less aware, more or less voluntary; one community may request a formal subscription, whereas in other communities belonging may depend only on the feeling of their members. For instance, belonging to a family (the basic form of community) is aware but not voluntary; belonging to the European Community may often be not aware; and so on.

The issue of belonging is critical with regard to virtual communities: if community membership is just a matter of subscribing or unsubscribing to a bulletin board or electronic newsgroups, the nature of belonging is clearly challenged in the virtual world. It seems that the critical nature of belonging to online communities may be ascribed to the nature of the social relationships and of the communication flows among their

members: electronic communities rely mainly on weak ties (Granovetter 1973, Wellman 1997), i.e. on not very frequent contacts, on the absence of emotional proximity, and on the lack of a tradition of mutual help. As a consequence, the feeling of belonging to the community would be weak as well; furthermore, the lack of proximity, of physical co-presence and of the sharing of the same territory does not foster this feeling of belonging to the community.

Actually, weak ties have proved to be very useful for their capacity of bridging people (Wellman 1997, Constant et al. 1997); as a matter of fact, there are many examples of online communities where the members' engagement reached very deep and intimate levels. However, the issue of belonging to online communities remains critical.

3.2.2 Identity

Identity plays a key role in virtual communities. But due to the absence of many of the basic cues about personality and social role we are accustomed to in the physical world, "in the disembodied world of the virtual community, identity is also ambiguous" (Donath 1999: 29).

Online identities have an ultimate linguistic nature, being the outcome of language; identities that are built in cyberspace coincide with the assertions that a single makes about him/herself. They tend to be just things to be packed and coded, unpacked and decoded: "We reduce and encode our identities as words on a screen, decode and unpack the identities of others. The way we use these words, the stories (true or false) we tell about ourselves (or about the identity we want people to believe us to be) is what determines our identities in cyberspace" (Rheingold 1993).

In fact, in the virtual world everybody can assume the identity s/he wants, can change and disguise his/her own, can assume more identities at once, can express unexplored parts of themselves, and so on. Online surfers can play at having different genders and different lives, thus making more and more difficult for them to distinguish between the real life and the virtual world: "Such an experience of identity contradicts the Latin root of the word, *idem*, meaning 'the same'. But this contradiction increasingly defines the conditions of our lives beyond the virtual world" (Turkle 1995: 185). The far-reaching consequences of the fragmentation of online identities are well expressed in a well-known cartoon by Peter Steiner, where a dog sitting at a desktop with a computer tells another dog: 'On the Internet nobody knows you're a dog' (*The New Yorker*, 5 July 1993, p. 61).

3.2.3 Interest

Most virtual communities arise originally as discussions about a topic of interest, and get to gather persons or groups who have common ideas and interests. The sharing of a common interest is one of the main features of online communities, and seems to be their answer to the lack of geographical proximity: "If 'communities' are no longer defined by their geographic boundaries, how, then, do we define them? (…) Shared interests and self-identification of belonging to a group are viable alternatives. (…) 'Communities of interest' [are] bound together by choice rather than geography" (Clodius 1997).

The gathering of people around a common topic of interest has also negative aspects: since virtual communities emerge from the free and spontaneous aggregation of persons with unanimous views, they risk to be very homogeneous and self-referential, to have little internal dynamics, and tend to behave like closed groups, where differences are excluded and only similarities are dealt with. In this perspective, some authors talked of 'neo-tribalism', and compared gatherings around a topic of interest, typical of virtual communities, to tribal gatherings around a totem (see Maffesoli 1995, Maldonado 1997). However, the notion of interest remains pivotal with regard to online communities: as a matter of fact, since they do not have any physical boundaries delimiting them, their boundaries are only symbolic, and are represented precisely by the topics of interest people discuss about. We will describe in more detail this claim in the next paragraph.

4.   A SEMIOTIC APPROACH TO VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

4.1 Defining the Semiosphere of Virtual Communities

According to semiotician Yuri Lotman, "every culture begins by dividing the world into 'its own' internal space and 'their' external space"; this is the main function of the boundary, which he defines as "the outer limit of a first-person form" (Lotman 2001: 131). Analogously, virtual communities delimit their semiotic space through the topics of interest, which can be expressed by some keywords that have the function of outlining the relevant field of communication of the community, i.e. of establishing the topics members are allowed to discuss about.

In this perspective, topics of interest and keywords can be seen as two basic elements that delineate what Lotman called the *semiosphere* of a culture (or, in our case, of a community). Lotman coined the term by analogy with the concept of 'biosphere', which was coined in its turn at the end of 19th century by Russian scientist Vladimir Vernadsky. The semiosphere is "the semiotic space necessary for the existence and functioning of languages. […] Outside the semiosphere there can be neither communication, nor language. […] The semiosphere is the result and the condition for the development of culture; we justify our term by analogy with the biosphere, as Vernadsky defined it, namely the totality and the organic whole of living matter and also the condition for the continuation of life" (Lotman 2001: 123-5).

Let us show this concept through an example: Classic Movies (http://groups.msn.com/ClassicMovies[1]) is an online community that gathers together movies fans from all over the world. This is the description of the community given by the founder: "We're a community that celebrates Hollywood from the early days of the silents through the New Hollywood Era of the early 80's. Though we celebrate all old movies, we have a yearly theme: we're half-way through Film Noir! Join us now and learn about cinematic history! When applying, be sure to tell a bit about yourself!"; these are the keywords provided by the founder: "movies, classics, Clark Gable, Marilyn Monroe, silent films, westerns, classic films, classic movies". The description, the general topic of interest, and the keywords can be considered as the elements that outline the semiosphere of the community: beyond these semiotic boundaries, no communicative event is allowed to take place inside the community. In other words, the semiosphere defines the semiotic space where interactions can occur and be meaningful for the life of the community: it acts as a valve that controls the community's opening towards the outside and its internal behaviour.

In a certain sense, these keywords act as passwords to the community: who is not interested in movies, classics, Clark Gable, and so on, is not allowed to access the community; or rather, s/he can physically access it, but takes no real part in it, s/he really does not belong to the community. In virtual communities, who speaks of something different than the topic of interest, i.e. who writes 'off topic' messages, is usually glared at and put aside, and his/her messages do not receive any answer. In this perspective, keywords are the keys that open the doors of the community, both in a physical sense, as is the case of the passwords that allow users to access reserved areas of websites or web services, and in a semiotic sense, as with the keywords that outline the semiosphere of a community and disclose the understanding of its semiotic world (see Tardini 2003).

4.2 Paradigmatic and Syntagmatic Online Communities: a Case for Websites

The abovementioned distinction between paradigmatic and syntagmatic communities can be applied to online communities as well. As a matter of fact, if virtual communities are to be seen as social relationships that emerge through online interactions, then they are to be considered syntagmatic communities. But in cyberspace we can easily come across paradigmatic communities as well. Let us present some examples, with a special emphasis on websites.

First of all, online chats, forums and virtual communities are often attended also by people who do not really interact, the well-known 'lurkers'. They are enclosed in the same virtual space and in the same boundaries as those who interact, but they do not interact, thus building a paradigmatic community.

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[1] All URLs were checked on February 28, 2005.

Furthermore, the term 'community' occurs in the virtual world also in another sense: it is often employed to refer to the regular visitors of a website as well as to the habitual users of a web service (see, for instance, the WCM – Website Communication Model in Cantoni & Tardini forthcoming). This kind of online communities is mainly paradigmatic: users normally do not interact with each other, but share the fact that they interact with the same website; moreover, they usually have no perception at all of being part of a community. This is another case of imagined communities, or *ethnos*.

In fact, we are not facing here a black and white landscape, but a multicolor one. Let us present a few cases where paradigmatic communities tend to become syntagmatic ones.

First of all, a website can be seen as an interactive object co-constructed (Eco 1983) by its publishers (writers, designers, engineers etc.) and its users: the first ones develop a sort of language – with basic elements (nodes/lexias, or sub-node items) and link rules – while the second ones choose which paths to activate (doing at the same time the *dispositio* and the *actio*, using the ancient rhetoric terms – Cantoni & Paolini 2001). Both can be seen as two communities developing "boundaries practices", or as one community sharing a common interest, a certain sense of belonging and disclosing – at a certain extent – their own identities to each other. The actual navigation paths can be easily monitored by website publishers (through log files and other means), who may reorganize it according to this kind of implicit feedback as well as following explicit feedback elicited via online forms or received via e-mail.

While interest has to be always shared, in order to keep people visiting a given website, the parameters of belonging and identity can vary according to different variables, and can be promoted by web publishers through many different strategies. One of such strategies consists in communicating how many people are (and/or were) online – something like attending a concert, and being able to see if the auditorium is empty or crowded; moreover, websites sometimes provide both the number of people connected anonymously, and the number of subscribers. Subscribing to dedicated services is, in fact, the action through which one discloses his/her own identity and declares a deeper sense of belonging. It can be done just offering a mailing list, or further online services. In addition, online contests require users to say who they are, hence stepping forward from anonymity. Also when anonymous access is granted (as for most websites) cookies allow for a sort of recognition on the part of the website, something like saying: "Welcome back: I remember you!" From this viewpoint, the fact itself that a person sets her/his browser in order to accept cookies, could be interpreted as accepting to partially disclose her/his identity, and to "belong" to the website itself.

If we move to the realm of search engines (Cantoni & Tardini forthcoming), we can find many "community" aspects there. In directories, for instance, we have communities of editors, like in the Open Directory Project (www.dmoz.org), who keep organizing the ever changing web according to a rational tree structure; or we can see editors, like in www.about.com, revealing their identity to the readers, hence stimulating a direct interaction.

In proper search engines, click popularity represents a clear example of interaction in website building between publishers and the community of users. For instance, sponsored results by Google (those displayed on the right of organic results), are shown as long as users click them. If they do not reach a certain clickthrough rate, they are automatically disabled (perfectly meeting at the same time the needs of users for relevant results, and those of the search engine, for a sustainable business model).

The Alexa service (www.alexa.com) – to remain in an area closed to that of search engines – relies so much on the behaviours of the community of its users, that Alexa itself refers to its users as "the collective Alexa community" and "the community of Alexa Toolbar users" (http://pages.alexa.com/company/technology.html?p=Corp_W_t_40_L1). In fact, Alexa can provide useful information to its users only if they share (anonymously) their actual navigation paths: when one is visiting a website, Alexa tells her/him what are other websites visited by people who visited that one (something like the service offered by Amazon "Customers who bought this book also bought…").

Communities of users of a website or web service are turning out to be a very powerful tool for online marketing. *Community marketing* is the promotion of a brand, business, product or service, through the creation, the support and the fostering of social ties among the persons interested in the product / brand, i.e. through the creation of a community of clients. Online communities are so suitable for this kind of marketing that some companies, instead of creating a website for the presentation of their brand or product, developed a community-site devoted to Customer Relationship Management (CRM), where a strong tie with their active or potential clients can be created (see, for instance, www.harley-davidson.com and www.owners.ferrari.com). In such community-sites companies can interact with their clients and make their clients interact with each other. In other words, the effort of companies that invest in community marketing is

376

to create a syntagmatic community out of the paradigmatic community of their clients: from the imagined community of all the owners of a Ferrari it is possible to make a syntagmatic community of owners who interact with one another, share information, experiences, and so on.

In the virtual world even the level of paradigmatic communities is interesting, since companies can monitor the behaviour of their clients who access their websites and can easily have feedback from them by interacting via e-mail, web forms, and so on. However, creating a syntagmatic community out of all a company's clients can improve the feeling of belonging to the group, thus making the brand more successful and the clients more faithful and attached to the brand.

4.3 The Case of Videogames: Identities and Communities

Online videogames have provided – and still provide – a very rich ground for studies on virtual communities: communities of online players have been being explored since the early studies on virtual communities, in particular in MUDs, and are nowadays among the most significant and representative online communities. In this section we will refer only to videogames that involve multiple players in a networked environment.

The issue of identity is pivotal in videogames contexts. According to James Paul Gee, the relationship existing between the player and the play gives rise to three different identities: 1) the *real person*, i.e. the player's real world identity, which does not vanish when playing, but, on the contrary, affects the choices and the decisions that are made during the play; 2) the *virtual character*, i.e. the identity the player assumes as a virtual character in the game's virtual world, which is usually represented by an avatar; 3) the *projective identity*, an intermediate identity that is a sort of bridge between the real person and the virtual character. As a matter of fact, the real person projects his/her real world identity on the virtual one, and on the other side the virtual identity lets emerge in the real person desires and aspirations concerning the virtual character (Gee 2004: 54-8).

At the levels of the real person's and the virtual character's identities, two different virtual communities can be outlined:

1) the *playing community*, i.e. the community of the virtual characters, who interact in the game's world with other characters to build cities, fight with *npcs* (*non playing characters*, i.e. characters played by the system/computer), kill monsters and common enemies or kill each other, and so on.

2) the *players' community*, i.e. the community of the real persons who interact with other persons who are interested in the same game; these communities are very popular and active, and are functional to the game itself, since they can shape and modify the game's environment, by building new objects, new spaces, new game levels, which can be integrated in the virtual world of the game (see Newman 2004).

Bolter and Grusin explain the two different social spaces created by computer games taking *Doom* – one of the most well-known videogames – as an example: "With *Doom* you can play with one or more networked partners, with whom you share the work of eliminating monsters, and, if you get in the way of the other players' weapons, you too can be eliminated. *Doom* defines community as a community of killers, the high-tech version of a tribe of Paleolithic hunters. Like MUDs and MOOs, *Doom* is socially shared in another sense. It allows experienced users to build new architectural 'levels', in which the game of destruction can continue. There is an entire community of such users on the Internet who construct and share the vast environment that Doom has become" (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 102-3).

Both the 'community of killers' and the community of experienced players are proper communities of practice. However, playing communities can be intended as paradigmatic as well, if the whole virtual environment is taken into consideration, with all the players connected to the game in a given moment.

5. CONCLUSION

Communicative interactions are the core of communities; however, the term 'community' is often used to indicate groups of people who do not have any interaction among them, but share some similar feature, such as the language, the profession, the nationality, the visits to a website, and so on. The distinction between syntagmatic and paradigmatic communities fits well online communities as well, where interactions are mediated by ICTs.

Dealing with online communities in terms of their semiosphere (with the related notion of interest) and in

terms of paradigmatic or syntagmatic relations among their members (with the related notions of belonging and identity) can provide useful hints for communities and websites designers; for instance, the definition of the semiosphere of a community impacts on its features: the more restricted and impervious is the semiosphere, the more close, homogeneous and self-referential will be the community; on the contrary, the more open and permeable the semiosphere, the more open and accessible the community. Equally, defining well the identities of a website's visitors and the kind of community they build can help websites' designers in improving the interactions taking place through the website, thus enhancing the quality of its communication.

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