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Title	The Experience of Virtual Communities: Cosmopolitan or Voyeur?
Authors(s)	Komito, Lee
Publication date	2010-11-10
Publication information	O' Donovan, P., Rascaroli, L. (eds.). The Cause of Cosmopolitanism: Dispositions, Models, Transformations
Publisher	Peter Lang
Link to online version	https://www.peterlang.com/view/title/34722
Item record/more information	http://hdl.handle.net/10197/10264
Publisher's statement	This is an Accepted Manuscript that has been published in O' Donovan, P., Rascaroli, L. (eds.). The Cause of Cosmopolitanism: dispositions, models and transformations. The original work can be found at: https://www.peterlang.com/view/title/34722 © Peter Lang. All rights reserved.

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Lee Komito

The Experience of Virtual Communities: Cosmopolitan or Voyeur?

There are many perspectives on being cosmopolitan; even the commonplace sense of the word, with its implication of the sophisticated traveller, who is conversant with and adapts with relative ease to many different cultures, stands in notable opposition to the idea of the provincial, whose perspectives are typically narrower and more limited. This commonplace sense is ultimately derived from the Greek Stoics' assertion that one should not be a citizen of any one state but of the whole world.¹ Often, knowledge of different spheres was the result of physical travel, enabling face-to-face interaction with people in a different society over some period of time. With faster and richer means of electronic communication, and the global diffusion of material culture, such participation would seem to be getting easier, without the requirement of physical travel. In addition, new technologies are enabling the creation of new electronic communities. Increasingly, then, it would appear that one could be 'cosmopolitan' without leaving one's armchair, simply dipping in and out of a variety of cultures, experiences and communities, including electronic communities. Is it possible to consider participation in virtual communities, and typically in electronic communities, in the context of cosmopolitanism? This is the issue which I shall explore in this essay.

The first issue to be aired is the scope of the term 'cosmopolitan' today and, in particular, the impact of globalisation on cosmopolitanism. The two are sometimes linked as when Beck (2007) notes, "The common terminological denominator of our densely populated world is "cosmopolitanisation", which means the erosion of distinct boundaries dividing markets, states, civilizations, cultures, and not least of all the lifeworlds of different peoples. The world has not certainly not become borderless, but the boundaries are becoming blurred and indistinct, becoming permeable to flows of information and capital." Tourism — in an expanded sense, as a set of processes modelled on an intermittent and deracinated exposure to other cultures — increases, as it becomes easy to sample diversity, whether through physical travel, the circulation of material objects and commodities, or electronic access to foreign societies. Whether this will erode or enhance local or national values is arguable.

Norris (2000) for instance, notes suggestions that “Structural developments in world economies and governance may have occurred without fundamentally eroding, indeed perhaps even strengthening, deep-rooted attitudes toward nationalism and the nation-state”. Tourism increases, then, but does not necessarily lead to a sympathetic engagement with fundamentals of foreign cultures. Even so, there will be different aspects of a society which motivate the outsider’s engagement. At the broadest level, does cosmopolitan imply the possibility of attaining an understanding of the beliefs and values of a different society, its norms and procedures, or, by contrast, simply its social etiquette? At the very least, there is an implication of a sympathetic view of the differences which the outsider confronts, but there is some ambiguity as to the level and kind of knowledge the outsider is presumed to gain. It is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve what is the nature of engagement and participation that should define cosmopolitanism as such, but it will take the view that the cosmopolitan experience is more than etiquette, but an appreciation of values and beliefs and is based on “the premise of difference, of alienation, of the strangeness of the Other” (Beck 2007). With increased diffusion of complex information and communication technologies, not only is there the prospect of experience of different communities without having to travel, but also the prospect of experiencing diversity of newly created communities: virtual or electronic communities, as first popularised by Rheingold (1993; 1994) and are now often the subject for analysis (Jones 1995; 1997; 1998). Research has made it clear that an increasing number of people participate in these electronic groups (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2001; Wellman, Quan-Haase et al. 2003; Boase, Horrigan et al. 2006). To what extent does, or can, this experience of virtual communities advance cosmopolitanism?

In order to discuss participation in electronic communities and the relevance of such participation for the cosmopolitanism, one must elaborate the characteristics of such virtual, typically electronic, communities. The departure point, for discussions of such virtual spaces, has to be the traditional face-to-face geographically defined communities from which ‘community’ as concept derives. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes geographically defined communities, but some commonly mentioned features include multiplex, overlapping social ties amongst individuals within a same group (Gluckman 1971), where those ties are based on trust and reciprocity (Polanyi 1957; Mauss 1967; Sahlins 1972), and a common commitment to shared goals, geographically bounded, involving direct contact

amongst individuals who have a long-term membership in the group. Often, interaction is involuntary as well as voluntary, and there are public spaces with unpredictable participation and memberships. Exchanges amongst members often involve mutual assistance, and lead to solidarity.

Not only have definitions of community changed over time, but the social characteristics of geographically defined areas have also been in a state of transition and transformation resulting from processes of industrial development and in turn changing patterns of urban existence. Whereas the traditional proximate community involved multiple functions within the same locality, there has been a trend towards segmentation of functions and the emergence of non-overlapping groups whose members derive from geographically distant locations. The experience of working, living, and playing in the same physical space is less common for many people; individuals spend time in activities outside of their locality and associate with individuals who themselves have no other links in common. There is a consequent shift from complex multi-stranded social ties to single-stranded ties and non-overlapping networks (Mitchell 1969; Gluckman 1971), from social networks of trust to networks of acquaintance. This decrease in overlapping associations and participation in local activities means that the local area has a weaker claim on individuals' loyalty and identity. As segmented and fluid networks extending outside the locality proliferate, the result is a 'faded' or 'washed out' version of community that is better described as a 'neighbourhood'. The traditional solidarity and collective commitment implied in the term 'community' has diminished, and individuals participate in multiple groups or communities, each of which has only a partial claim on an individual's loyalty (described by Day 2006 as communities of 'limited liability'). In many areas, what used to be communities are now in fact only 'neighbourhoods' whose identities themselves are not stable, as individuals participate in multiple face to face and electronic networks. This is the background for the experience of diversity which individuals experience as they participate in different communities and societies.²

In brief, the extension of networks centred on individuals mean that the significance of locality is wholly attenuated. But does such an outcome mean that we are on the verge of a cosmopolitan state of things? Reduced communication costs have made it easier to experience diverse societies, and new technologies have clearly accelerated the process of local disengagement as individuals' communication and

information networks extend beyond the spatial settings in which communities are traditionally embedded. The relative decline in commitment to locality has been offset, to some extent, by the emergence of electronic communities. Communication with remote individuals via new technologies has become common place and often, whether via social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook, electronic discussion lists, or chat rooms, these communications are shared amongst a number of people and a sense of group identity and membership emerges.³ Should participation in such electronic communities be considered as providing the same experience of the kind of cosmopolitan urge that flows from contact across separate traditional communities? Before discussing whether participation in such communities constitutes the diversity of experience characteristics of cosmopolitanism, one must first question whether such electronic groups even deserve the term 'community'. Some would argue that such groups lack one or more crucial elements of community previously described, such as involuntary interaction, multiplex social relations, or emotional commitment, and so would not enable the cosmopolitan experience conceived of as the effect of cross-cultural experiences. If electronic groups are not communities, then the question of exposure to diverse values and beliefs may not arise.

There is no uniformity in online or virtual communities, on the contrary, there is great diversity in the structure and nature of electronic groupings. It is possible to identify a number of different online groups, each with different characteristics: communities of interest, diasporic communities, moral communities, and normative communities (see Komito 1998; 2001 for a fuller discussion). Descriptive tags like these have been used to describe people who, as a result of common interests or experiences, develop a similar framework of shared understandings, in terms of effective norms and values. Communities of interest are groups whose members may share little more than a common specific concern or interest. For instance, with increased specialisation in local work environment, individuals may develop associations with other similar specialists in localities elsewhere within the same organisation, or with individuals based in different organizations or enterprises. Within communities of interest would also fit recreational associations, whether this involves physical activities which are organised via new technologies (for instance, a football club whose matches are advertised on the Internet and via discussion lists or a bridge club whose participants use new technologies to organise their next meeting) or recreational activities that themselves require new technologies (for instance,

online gaming). Then there are professional associations, in which doctors or electricians may meet to discuss issues of common concern or maintain their professional qualifications. Into this category we could also place groups for political action, whether international groups concerned with globalisation or ecology action or local groups concerned with community amenities. What is potentially significant about such groups is that in all of them individuals are seeking to achieve a goal that is of interest to them as individuals and exchange information and advice to further these goals, as well as coordinate their activities. However, these individuals have no necessary commitment to each other (other than to achieve shared goals). The fact that individuals share a common set of interests or activities does lead to some sense of shared identification developing; to some extent, this is similar to the idea of 'community of practice'. Doctors, to take these as an example, will also, by virtue of carrying out the same sorts of tasks and having the same sorts of problems, develop, of course, a shared vocabulary and indeed shared assumptions amounting to a world-view, such that in turn as individuals they come to feel they have a special understanding of each other.

The idea of 'communities of practice' gives us a possible line of approach to the shared perspective that emerges from interaction with others in process of carrying out tasks (Brown and Duguid 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991). Their common experience and values becomes the foundation for an extensible mutual understanding. It is usual to remember that similar, though not shared, experiences can be the basis for common understandings. Doctors share common experiences, both during training and in their professional lives, which create common understandings. Doctors who have been trained in different medical schools and have never met can still find a common vocabulary and common set of experiences and interests: they all have had similar experiences with patients, nurses, and hospitals. These people may have little or no personal interaction with each other, they simply share similar interests or a similar social or economic position vis-à-vis the wider society. Special interest electronic discussion groups, whether they focus on leisure activities or occupational specialist tasks, are obvious examples of electronic communication linking individuals who share common experiences and interests. A shared discourse emerges, and members can make 'small talk' with each other. The similar experiences creates the vocabulary for discussion, whether about problems of medical insurance, problems of diagnosing illness, or attitudes towards medical

emergencies in the middle of the night. Such communities, though in some ways cohesive, have no fixed boundaries, with people entering and leaving such communities on an ad hoc basis. Members of such communities may not even have any history of common interaction. The question is whether, and how, a norm-based community may develop around shared practices (whether leisure or work-related) or shared experiences (such as a medical school); it is defined by its common practices and rules, without any necessity for collective commitment or the development of long-term, involuntary, and multiplex. Such a community can derive from people's 'categorical' similarity (Calhoun 1991); if so, the question that confronts us is how it may acquire or develop norms and values.

A model along these lines is quite different from groups in which individuals have a sense of obligation and emotional commitment to each other, independent of any instrumental association or similar professional experiences. An obvious example of such a group would be one whose members grew up in a given culture and who are now residing abroad, in other words, 'diasporic communities'. Such communities are composed of individuals with common national or ethnic backgrounds (Irish, Pakistani, etc). Individuals may use new technologies to enable participation in their home culture when abroad (listening to radio and television on the Internet and reading online newspapers. These groups may be global, enabling association with other non-local expatriates of the same home culture, and provides solidarity in exile. These groups may also have a local element, where Irish in New York, for instance, may exchange information about New York, providing mutual assistance and encouraging intergenerational transmission of cultural identity, often by facilitating access to home commodities (food, clothing, etc). Participants in diasporic communities engage very strongly with other members of the group, and their discussions often involve rhetoric such as 'feeling at home' or 'feeling normal' when they interact with other similar exiles. Such groups are often not only electronic, but have a physical presence as well, using ritual occasions and ceremonies to deploy commodities (food, clothing, language) that asserts collective identity.

Notwithstanding their diversity, there is one feature often attributed to local physical communities that is usually absent from *all* electronic groups: involuntary interdependence. Geographically based communities often involve a complex set of economic interdependencies based on reciprocity and exchange -- people helping each other, without looking for immediate return, but expecting that reciprocal assistance

would be provided at a future date, if necessary. This generalised reciprocity has long been identified as a feature of non-industrial societies (Sahlins 1972, who follows Polanyi's (1957) discussions of economics embedded in social relations). Generalised reciprocity is supported by the glue of dense social networks; individual violation of norms does not remain private, but becomes part of an individual's public reputation and can be punished by a broad range of sanctions, both social and economic in nature.⁴ But the trust that underpins generalized reciprocity is built on this. Individuals who do not honour this informal rule will lose their reputation, no one in the community will risk trusting them, and so they will be excluded from claiming assistance they might need in the future. Therefore, risk is minimised; people involved in these reciprocal relations may not even like each other, but they still know that a concern with reputation will ensure compliance. Such relations are not unique to non-industrial societies, peasant communities have often been described in similar terms ever since Robert Redfield (Arensberg and Kimball 1940; Redfield 1956; 1960; 1968), as have urban communities and ethnic enclaves (Cohen 1969). Thus, in many localities, economic interdependence has been linked with generalised reciprocity.

The model I am elaborating is one in which the glue that links generalised reciprocity and economic interdependence is trust. At the same time, the link between trust and community may tend to be implicit, rather than explicit. However, participation in electronic communities is often, by the very nature of electronic communication, voluntary; people can simply opt out of a group, at no cost to themselves, by not engaging in communication. Once individuals have the option to cease participation in a group, this makes it much more difficult to enforce norms. When members can avoid obligations simply by leaving, how can the implications for trust and reciprocity be anything other than negative? Voluntary groups can depend only on the benefits that individuals derive from continued membership to encourage appropriate behaviour. There are examples of shared experiences such as illness or collective commitment to a common purpose creating strong group identification, and this helps to ensure reciprocity and adherence to rules (see Kollock 1999 for such examples). However, individuals' continued commitment cannot be compelled and people can simply lose interest or no longer obtain sufficient benefit from membership to warrant continued participation. For this reason, nurturing virtual communities is a delicate process, and rules of thumb for supporting the development of such groups abound.⁵ The problem exists for all voluntary groups, including groups

whose members meet face-to-face, but research suggests that voluntary electronic groups are more vulnerable to dissolution than voluntary face-to-face groups (Watson 1997; see also Kitchin 1998: 86-90; Kolko and Reid 1998).

Possibly, one of the few exceptions to this issue of trust and reciprocity would be electronic groups based on collective identification and shared goals, which often also exhibit mutual assistance and dependence. It is for that reason that such groups can be described as 'moral' communities, in which a core value system in which mutual benefit is emphasised above self-interest. Following Paine (1976), this can be described as incorporative exchanges between individuals, in contrast with transactional exchanges based on negotiation. Incorporative exchanges are based on co-identity and sharing, in which values are sought jointly for all social actors, while transactional exchanges are between parties with differing interests and who share neither a common commitment to joint aims or a common identity. In a similar vein, Bailey (1969; 1971) used the term 'moral community' to describe groups whose members share a moral bond. These are communities whose members are bound together by a strong commitment to each other and common goals. Groups based on ethnic association often exhibit such characteristics, as do religious and political groups whose members are deeply committed to specific aspirations and goals.

As already noted, electronic groups can vary in terms of participant's commitment and engagement, just as face-to-face groups do. There are groups which can be characterised in terms of instrumental participation by individuals. In these groups, social relations may be governed by more or less explicit norms, and there are shared cognitive understandings. This is to say, that people agree how to interact, what topics can be discussed, what comments are appropriate, and such like. This is similar to societies in which people with differing values and beliefs still share a common understanding about how to take a bus or buy a newspaper (see Wallace 1970 for an early distinction between cognitive and affective aspects of culture). By contrast, there are also groups whose members exhibit affective participation, and social relations serve integrative functions, fostering and maintaining a shared commitment, often with mutual dependence and reciprocity. In brief, these could be characterised as normative versus moral communities. The former exhibit individual self-interest rather than collective commitment, shared rules for interaction and communication, shared practices ('communities of practice') with an emphasis on cognitive, not affective links. The latter, on the other hand, exhibit common identity

leading to reciprocity, with group benefit placed above individual self-interest. The goals of such communities can vary, and include religious groups, labour organisations, ethnic groups and even commercial trade groups.

If we apply the model of cosmopolitanism to electronic communities, then we will be led above all to emphasise their internal diversity. But this model highlights the ambiguity about cosmopolitanism which I highlighted at the outset, namely the uncertain status of a kind of cosmopolitanism that is derived from virtual, rather than direct, contact. Most groups share rules of behaviour and have common interests; participation in such groups is relatively easily achieved. However, two issues arise. First, are such groups sufficiently different to warrant discussion of a cosmopolitan experience? Such electronic groups rarely possess the ‘thick’ interactions that support specific beliefs unique to that group (thick, in this case, refers to Geertz’s use of the phrase ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) to refer to the multiple layers of meanings characteristic of ethnographic descriptions of culture). Members of such electronic groups are more likely to have multiple and diverse networks, and participation in each of these may be superficial. If to be cosmopolitan means simply to be “conversant with many spheres of interest”, then perhaps learning rules of behaviour, norms and etiquette of a different social group provides the basis of an experience of this sort. It is possible to have a cosmopolitan knowledge of many varieties of electronic groups, since many of them are little more than individuals with shared interests who have developed an agreed set of rules. These are, to follow the earlier distinctions, norm-based communities. These communities often have fluid memberships, so it is not only possible to learn the appropriate rules but to ‘arrive’ and ‘depart’ with little notice. This is somewhat similar to arriving into a physical community and observing without participating. In the electronic world, this constitutes ‘lurking’, and new members of a groups are actually advised to ‘lurk’ when they first join; this enables them to learn the rules by observation and they can then avoid being ‘flamed’ for any errors in protocol or procedure.⁶ Lurking, in the electronic world, would seem to be closer to the experience of the voyeur, in which experience of diversity is relatively superficial. New technologies have enabled a vast diversity of new worlds for individuals to dip into; whether this constitutes a cosmopolitan experience must remain a matter of debate.

The exception to such superficial participation is participation in moral communities, in which individuals share a significant emotional and ideological

commitment. Participation in such communities would certainly provide the kind of experience associated with immersion in other cultures. This implies more than a superficial commitment to learning another culture, which may motivate people to continue participation regardless of the inevitable challenge to previous understandings. However, this raises a different issue. It has been suggested that people prefer to associate with like-minded others; at the same time, it may be a simple lack of this possibility that forces individuals to learn to understand, and get along with, people with different views and values (Komito 1998; Lievrouw 1998). To participate in group that reinforce one's existing views is hardly cosmopolitan. The question, then, is whether people will choose to participate in electronic groups that represent truly different views and experiences; and, in turn, on what basis such an experience could be said to yield a cosmopolitan outcome. Even if these participants do cultivate such experiences, once they are confronted with conflict and difference, will they remain participants or will they vote with their feet and simply leave? Or, by contrast, can something like a cosmopolitan urge facilitate continued participation?

New technologies have opened a vast world of electronic communities to individuals, with the prospect of being able to experience cultural differences without travel or discomfort. At the same time, the individual who enters such communities may remain a voyeur. A new model of cosmopolitanism means that we must acknowledge that participating sufficiently to learn values and beliefs of an electronic community is another question. It is arguable that many electronic communities usually do not display the deeply held collective values and beliefs associated with different societies. While there are some electronic communities do involve beliefs and values and, being more than a voyeur, lurking on the fringes on these groups, requires as much commitment and participation as any other community. It is not possible to 'lurk' or act as the voyeur in such moral communities; the difficulty is that committed participants in such communities are not likely to be interested in allowing external observers, preferring only to associate with those who share their values. There seems to be an insoluble dilemma to the prospect of electronic communities providing the cosmopolitan experience. Most are normative communities which are easy to join but are little different from the visitor's everyday experience. Those electronic groups which would provide such a different experience are moral communities; members of these groups are unlikely to be receptive to external

visitors and would probably only accept outsiders if they displayed a major commitment. Describing marginal participants in electronic communities as ‘voyeurs’ is somewhat pejorative, but such a description seems apt, given the limited nature of electronic groups and the absence as of yet of a dedicated model of cosmopolitanism for them. It does seem clear that physical travel to other localities and interaction with people in those localities remains central to the ‘thick’ experience of culture (see Komito 1999 for further discussion of the significance of place). Are electronic communities likely to provide the depth of experience that is central to the cosmopolitan project?

Notes

¹ “Cosmopolitanism.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 15 Jan. 2008 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9026474>>.

² This trend is not, of course, universal. Not all communities are becoming neighbourhoods; in some localities, low mobility, a need for mutual assistance in the locality, continuity of an extended family who reside in locality, or isolation (physical, social, or economic) from the wider society, may help maintain localities as communities, and participation in such groups provides a more intensive experience of diversity and difference.

³ Recent demographic data on these shifts is available at Pew/Internet (<http://www.pewinternet.org>).

⁴ For a discussion of social networks see Banton 1968; Mitchell 1969; Holland and Leinhardt 1979; Berkowitz 1982; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988; Wasserman and Faust 1994; Smith and Kollock 1999.

⁵ See, for instance, a set of rules by Mike Godwin titled “Nine Principles for Making Virtual Communities Work”, first published in 1994 in Wired magazine and available at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.06/vc.principles.html>.

⁶ ‘Flaming’ refers to the hostile comments that easily develop between participants on mailing lists. For a discussion of ‘flaming’ see Kiesler and Siegel (1984) as well as the brief entry on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flame_war).

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There are many perspectives on being cosmopolitan; even the commonplace sense of the word, with its implication of the sophisticated traveller, who is conversant with and adapts with relative ease to many different cultures, stands in notable opposition to the idea of the provincial, whose perspectives are typically narrower and more limited. This commonplace sense is ultimately derived from the Greek Stoics'

assertion that one should not be a citizen of any one state but of the whole world.¹ Often, knowledge of different spheres was the result of physical travel, enabling face-to-face interaction with people in a different society over some period of time. With faster and richer means of electronic communication, and the global diffusion of material culture, such participation would seem to be getting easier, without the requirement of physical travel. In addition, new technologies are enabling the creation of new electronic communities. Increasingly, then, it would appear that one could be 'cosmopolitan' without leaving one's armchair, simply dipping in and out of a variety of cultures, experiences and communities, including electronic communities. Is it possible to consider participation in virtual communities, and typically in electronic communities, in the context of cosmopolitanism? This is the issue which I shall explore in this essay.

The first issue to be aired is the scope of the term 'cosmopolitan' today and, in particular, the impact of globalisation on cosmopolitanism. The two are sometimes linked as when Beck (2007) notes, "The common terminological denominator of our densely populated world is "cosmopolitanisation", which means the erosion of distinct boundaries dividing markets, states, civilizations, cultures, and not least of all the lifeworlds of different peoples. The world has not certainly not become borderless, but the boundaries are becoming blurred and indistinct, becoming permeable to flows of information and capital." Tourism — in an expanded sense, as a set of processes modelled on an intermittent and deracinated exposure to other cultures — increases, as it becomes easy to sample diversity, whether through physical travel, the circulation of material objects and commodities, or electronic access to foreign societies. Whether this will erode or enhance local or national values is arguable. Norris (2000) for instance, notes suggestions that "Structural developments in world economies and governance may have occurred without fundamentally eroding, indeed perhaps even strengthening, deep-rooted attitudes toward nationalism and the nation-state". Tourism increases, then, but does not necessarily lead to a sympathetic engagement with fundamentals of foreign cultures. Even so, there will be different aspects of a society which motivate the outsider's engagement. At the broadest level, does cosmopolitan imply the possibility of attaining an understanding of the beliefs and values of a different society, its norms and procedures, or, by contrast, simply its social etiquette? At the very least, there is an implication of a sympathetic view of the differences which the outsider confronts, but there is some ambiguity as to the level

and kind of knowledge the outsider is presumed to gain. It is beyond the scope of this essay to resolve what is the nature of engagement and participation that should define cosmopolitanism as such, but it will take the view that the cosmopolitan experience is more than etiquette, but an appreciation of values and beliefs and is based on “the premise of difference, of alienation, of the strangeness of the Other” (Beck 2007). With increased diffusion of complex information and communication technologies, not only is there the prospect of experience of different communities without having to travel, but also the prospect of experiencing diversity of newly created communities: virtual or electronic communities, as first popularised by Rheingold (1993; 1994) and are now often the subject for analysis (Jones 1995; 1997; 1998). Research has made it clear that an increasing number of people participate in these electronic groups (PEW Internet and American Life Project 2001; Wellman, Quan-Haase et al. 2003; Boase, Horrigan et al. 2006). To what extent does, or can, this experience of virtual communities advance cosmopolitanism?

In order to discuss participation in electronic communities and the relevance of such participation for the cosmopolitanism, one must elaborate the characteristics of such virtual, typically electronic, communities. The departure point, for discussions of such virtual spaces, has to be the traditional face-to-face geographically defined communities from which ‘community’ as concept derives. There is no agreed definition of what constitutes geographically defined communities, but some commonly mentioned features include multiplex, overlapping social ties amongst individuals within a same group (Gluckman 1971), where those ties are based on trust and reciprocity (Polanyi 1957; Mauss 1967; Sahlins 1972), and a common commitment to shared goals, geographically bounded, involving direct contact amongst individuals who have a long-term membership in the group. Often, interaction is involuntary as well as voluntary, and there are public spaces with unpredictable participation and memberships. Exchanges amongst members often involve mutual assistance, and lead to solidarity.

Not only have definitions of community changed over time, but the social characteristics of geographically defined areas have also been in a state of transition and transformation resulting from processes of industrial development and in turn changing patterns of urban existence. Whereas the traditional proximate community involved multiple functions within the same locality, there has been a trend towards segmentation of functions and the emergence of non-overlapping groups whose

members derive from geographically distant locations. The experience of working, living, and playing in the same physical space is less common for many people; individuals spend time in activities outside of their locality and associate with individuals who themselves have no other links in common. There is a consequent shift from complex multi-stranded social ties to single-stranded ties and non-overlapping networks (Mitchell 1969; Gluckman 1971), from social networks of trust to networks of acquaintance. This decrease in overlapping associations and participation in local activities means that the local area has a weaker claim on individuals' loyalty and identity. As segmented and fluid networks extending outside the locality proliferate, the result is a 'faded' or 'washed out' version of community that is better described as a 'neighbourhood'. The traditional solidarity and collective commitment implied in the term 'community' has diminished, and individuals participate in multiple groups or communities, each of which has only a partial claim on an individual's loyalty (described by Day 2006 as communities of 'limited liability'). In many areas, what used to be communities are now in fact only 'neighbourhoods' whose identities themselves are not stable, as individuals participate in multiple face to face and electronic networks. This is the background for the experience of diversity which individuals experience as they participate in different communities and societies.²

In brief, the extension of networks centred on individuals mean that the significance of locality is wholly attenuated. But does such an outcome mean that we are on the verge of a cosmopolitan state of things? Reduced communication costs have made it easier to experience diverse societies, and new technologies have clearly accelerated the process of local disengagement as individuals' communication and information networks extend beyond the spatial settings in which communities are traditionally embedded. The relative decline in commitment to locality has been offset, to some extent, by the emergence of electronic communities. Communication with remote individuals via new technologies has become common place and often, whether via social networking sites such as Bebo and Facebook, electronic discussion lists, or chat rooms, these communications are shared amongst a number of people and a sense of group identity and membership emerges.³ Should participation in such electronic communities be considered as providing the same experience of the kind of cosmopolitan urge that flows from contact across separate traditional communities? Before discussing whether participation in such communities constitutes the diversity

of experience characteristics of cosmopolitanism, one must first question whether such electronic groups even deserve the term 'community'. Some would argue that such groups lack one or more crucial elements of community previously described, such as involuntary interaction, multiplex social relations, or emotional commitment, and so would not enable the cosmopolitan experience conceived of as the effect of cross-cultural experiences. If electronic groups are not communities, then the question of exposure to diverse values and beliefs may not arise.

There is no uniformity in online or virtual communities, on the contrary, there is great diversity in the structure and nature of electronic groupings. It is possible to identify a number of different online groups, each with different characteristics: communities of interest, diasporic communities, moral communities, and normative communities (see Komito 1998; 2001 for a fuller discussion). Descriptive tags like these have been used to describe people who, as a result of common interests or experiences, develop a similar framework of shared understandings, in terms of effective norms and values. Communities of interest are groups whose members may share little more than a common specific concern or interest. For instance, with increased specialisation in local work environment, individuals may develop associations with other similar specialists in localities elsewhere within the same organisation, or with individuals based in different organizations or enterprises. Within communities of interest would also fit recreational associations, whether this involves physical activities which are organised via new technologies (for instance, a football club whose matches are advertised on the Internet and via discussion lists or a bridge club whose participants use new technologies to organise their next meeting) or recreational activities that themselves require new technologies (for instance, online gaming). Then there are professional associations, in which doctors or electricians may meet to discuss issues of common concern or maintain their professional qualifications. Into this category we could also place groups for political action, whether international groups concerned with globalisation or ecology action or local groups concerned with community amenities. What is potentially significant about such groups is that in all of them individuals are seeking to achieve a goal that is of interest to them as individuals and exchange information and advice to further these goals, as well as coordinate their activities. However, these individuals have no necessary commitment to each other (other than to achieve shared goals). The fact that individuals share a common set of interests or activities does lead to some sense

of shared identification developing; to some extent, this is similar to the idea of 'community of practice'. Doctors, to take these as an example, will also, by virtue of carrying out the same sorts of tasks and having the same sorts of problems, develop, of course, a shared vocabulary and indeed shared assumptions amounting to a world-view, such that in turn as individuals they come to feel they have a special understanding of each other.

The idea of 'communities of practice' gives us a possible line of approach to the shared perspective that emerges from interaction with others in process of carrying out tasks (Brown and Duguid 1991; Lave and Wenger 1991). Their common experience and values becomes the foundation for an extensible mutual understanding. It is usual to remember that similar, though not shared, experiences can be the basis for common understandings. Doctors share common experiences, both during training and in their professional lives, which create common understandings. Doctors who have been trained in different medical schools and have never met can still find a common vocabulary and common set of experiences and interests: they all have had similar experiences with patients, nurses, and hospitals. These people may have little or no personal interaction with each other, they simply share similar interests or a similar social or economic position vis-à-vis the wider society. Special interest electronic discussion groups, whether they focus on leisure activities or occupational specialist tasks, are obvious examples of electronic communication linking individuals who share common experiences and interests. A shared discourse emerges, and members can make 'small talk' with each other. The similar experiences creates the vocabulary for discussion, whether about problems of medical insurance, problems of diagnosing illness, or attitudes towards medical emergencies in the middle of the night. Such communities, though in some ways cohesive, have no fixed boundaries, with people entering and leaving such communities on an ad hoc basis. Members of such communities may not even have any history of common interaction. The question is whether, and how, a norm-based community may develop around shared practices (whether leisure or work-related) or shared experiences (such as a medical school); it is defined by its common practices and rules, without any necessity for collective commitment or the development of long-term, involuntary, and multiplex. Such a community can derive from people's 'categorical' similarity (Calhoun 1991); if so, the question that confronts us is how it may acquire or develop norms and values.

A model along these lines is quite different from groups in which individuals have a sense of obligation and emotional commitment to each other, independent of any instrumental association or similar professional experiences. An obvious example of such a group would be one whose members grew up in a given culture and who are now residing abroad, in other words, 'diasporic communities'. Such communities are composed of individuals with common national or ethnic backgrounds (Irish, Pakistani, etc). Individuals may use new technologies to enable participation in their home culture when abroad (listening to radio and television on the Internet and reading online newspapers. These groups may be global, enabling association with other non-local expatriates of the same home culture, and provides solidarity in exile. These groups may also have a local element, where Irish in New York, for instance, may exchange information about New York, providing mutual assistance and encouraging intergenerational transmission of cultural identity, often by facilitating access to home commodities (food, clothing, etc). Participants in diasporic communities engage very strongly with other members of the group, and their discussions often involve rhetoric such as 'feeling at home' or 'feeling normal' when they interact with other similar exiles. Such groups are often not only electronic, but have a physical presence as well, using ritual occasions and ceremonies to deploy commodities (food, clothing, language) that asserts collective identity.

Notwithstanding their diversity, there is one feature often attributed to local physical communities that is usually absent from *all* electronic groups: involuntary interdependence. Geographically based communities often involve a complex set of economic interdependencies based on reciprocity and exchange -- people helping each other, without looking for immediate return, but expecting that reciprocal assistance would be provided at a future date, if necessary. This generalised reciprocity has long been identified as a feature of non-industrial societies (Sahlins 1972, who follows Polanyi's (1957) discussions of economics embedded in social relations). Generalised reciprocity is supported by the glue of dense social networks; individual violation of norms does not remain private, but becomes part of an individual's public reputation and can be punished by a broad range of sanctions, both social and economic in nature.⁴ But the trust that underpins generalized reciprocity is built on this. Individuals who do not honour this informal rule will lose their reputation, no one in the community will risk trusting them, and so they will be excluded from claiming assistance they might need in the future. Therefore, risk is minimised; people involved

in these reciprocal relations may not even like each other, but they still know that a concern with reputation will ensure compliance. Such relations are not unique to non-industrial societies, peasant communities have often been described in similar terms ever since Robert Redfield (Arensberg and Kimball 1940; Redfield 1956; 1960; 1968), as have urban communities and ethnic enclaves (Cohen 1969). Thus, in many localities, economic interdependence has been linked with generalised reciprocity.

The model I am elaborating is one in which the glue that links generalised reciprocity and economic interdependence is trust. At the same time, the link between trust and community may tend to be implicit, rather than explicit. However, participation in electronic communities is often, by the very nature of electronic communication, voluntary; people can simply opt out of a group, at no cost to themselves, by not engaging in communication. Once individuals have the option to cease participation in a group, this makes it much more difficult to enforce norms. When members can avoid obligations simply by leaving, how can the implications for trust and reciprocity be anything other than negative? Voluntary groups can depend only on the benefits that individuals derive from continued membership to encourage appropriate behaviour. There are examples of shared experiences such as illness or collective commitment to a common purpose creating strong group identification, and this helps to ensure reciprocity and adherence to rules (see Kollock 1999 for such examples). However, individuals' continued commitment cannot be compelled and people can simply lose interest or no longer obtain sufficient benefit from membership to warrant continued participation. For this reason, nurturing virtual communities is a delicate process, and rules of thumb for supporting the development of such groups abound.⁵ The problem exists for all voluntary groups, including groups whose members meet face-to-face, but research suggests that voluntary electronic groups are more vulnerable to dissolution than voluntary face-to-face groups (Watson 1997; see also Kitchin 1998: 86-90; Kolko and Reid 1998).

Possibly, one of the few exceptions to this issue of trust and reciprocity would be electronic groups based on collective identification and shared goals, which often also exhibit mutual assistance and dependence. It is for that reason that such groups can be described as 'moral' communities, in which a core value system in which mutual benefit is emphasised above self-interest. Following Paine (1976), this can be described as incorporative exchanges between individuals, in contrast with transactional exchanges based on negotiation. Incorporative exchanges are based on

co-identity and sharing, in which values are sought jointly for all social actors, while transactional exchanges are between parties with differing interests and who share neither a common commitment to joint aims or a common identity. In a similar vein, Bailey (1969; 1971) used the term 'moral community' to describe groups whose members share a moral bond. These are communities whose members are bound together by a strong commitment to each other and common goals. Groups based on ethnic association often exhibit such characteristics, as do religious and political groups whose members are deeply committed to specific aspirations and goals.

As already noted, electronic groups can vary in terms of participant's commitment and engagement, just as face-to-face groups do. There are groups which can be characterised in terms of instrumental participation by individuals. In these groups, social relations may be governed by more or less explicit norms, and there are shared cognitive understandings. This is to say, that people agree how to interact, what topics can be discussed, what comments are appropriate, and such like. This is similar to societies in which people with differing values and beliefs still share a common understanding about how to take a bus or buy a newspaper (see Wallace 1970 for an early distinction between cognitive and affective aspects of culture). By contrast, there are also groups whose members exhibit affective participation, and social relations serve integrative functions, fostering and maintaining a shared commitment, often with mutual dependence and reciprocity. In brief, these could be characterised as normative versus moral communities. The former exhibit individual self-interest rather than collective commitment, shared rules for interaction and communication, shared practices ('communities of practice') with an emphasis on cognitive, not affective links. The latter, on the other hand, exhibit common identity leading to reciprocity, with group benefit placed above individual self-interest. The goals of such communities can vary, and include religious groups, labour organisations, ethnic groups and even commercial trade groups.

If we apply the model of cosmopolitanism to electronic communities, then we will be led above all to emphasise their internal diversity. But this model highlights the ambiguity about cosmopolitanism which I highlighted at the outset, namely the uncertain status of a kind of cosmopolitanism that is derived from virtual, rather than direct, contact. Most groups share rules of behaviour and have common interests; participation in such groups is relatively easily achieved. However, two issues arise. First, are such groups sufficiently different to warrant discussion of a cosmopolitan

experience? Such electronic groups rarely possess the ‘thick’ interactions that support specific beliefs unique to that group (thick, in this case, refers to Geertz’s use of the phrase ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973) to refer to the multiple layers of meanings characteristic of ethnographic descriptions of culture). Members of such electronic groups are more likely to have multiple and diverse networks, and participation in each of these may be superficial. If to be cosmopolitan means simply to be “conversant with many spheres of interest”, then perhaps learning rules of behaviour, norms and etiquette of a different social group provides the basis of an experience of this sort. It is possible to have a cosmopolitan knowledge of many varieties of electronic groups, since many of them are little more than individuals with shared interests who have developed an agreed set of rules. These are, to follow the earlier distinctions, norm-based communities. These communities often have fluid memberships, so it is not only possible to learn the appropriate rules but to ‘arrive’ and ‘depart’ with little notice. This is somewhat similar to arriving into a physical community and observing without participating. In the electronic world, this constitutes ‘lurking’, and new members of a groups are actually advised to ‘lurk’ when they first join; this enables them to learn the rules by observation and they can then avoid being ‘flamed’ for any errors in protocol or procedure.⁶ Lurking, in the electronic world, would seem to be closer to the experience of the voyeur, in which experience of diversity is relatively superficial. New technologies have enabled a vast diversity of new worlds for individuals to dip into; whether this constitutes a cosmopolitan experience must remain a matter of debate.

The exception to such superficial participation is participation in moral communities, in which individuals share a significant emotional and ideological commitment. Participation in such communities would certainly provide the kind of experience associated with immersion in other cultures. This implies more than a superficial commitment to learning another culture, which may motivate people to continue participation regardless of the inevitable challenge to previous understandings. However, this raises a different issue. It has been suggested that people prefer to associate with like-minded others; at the same time, it may be a simple lack of this possibility that forces individuals to learn to understand, and get along with, people with different views and values (Komito 1998; Lievrouw 1998). To participate in group that reinforce one’s existing views is hardly cosmopolitan. The question, then, is whether people will choose to participate in electronic groups

that represent truly different views and experiences; and, in turn, on what basis such an experience could be said to yield a cosmopolitan outcome. Even if these participants do cultivate such experiences, once they are confronted with conflict and difference, will they remain participants or will they vote with their feet and simply leave? Or, by contrast, can something like a cosmopolitan urge facilitate continued participation?

New technologies have opened a vast world of electronic communities to individuals, with the prospect of being able to experience cultural differences without travel or discomfort. At the same time, the individual who enters such communities may remain a voyeur. A new model of cosmopolitanism means that we must acknowledge that participating sufficiently to learn values and beliefs of an electronic community is another question. It is arguable that many electronic communities usually do not display the deeply held collective values and beliefs associated with different societies. While there are some electronic communities do involve beliefs and values and, being more than a voyeur, lurking on the fringes on these groups, requires as much commitment and participation as any other community. It is not possible to 'lurk' or act as the voyeur in such moral communities; the difficulty is that committed participants in such communities are not likely to be interested in allowing external observers, preferring only to associate with those who share their values. There seems to be an insoluble dilemma to the prospect of electronic communities providing the cosmopolitan experience. Most are normative communities which are easy to join but are little different from the visitor's everyday experience. Those electronic groups which would provide such a different experience are moral communities; members of these groups are unlikely to be receptive to external visitors and would probably only accept outsiders if they displayed a major commitment. Describing marginal participants in electronic communities as 'voyeurs' is somewhat pejorative, but such a description seems apt, given the limited nature of electronic groups and the absence as of yet of a dedicated model of cosmopolitanism for them. It does seem clear that physical travel to other localities and interaction with people in those localities remains central to the 'thick' experience of culture (see Komito 1999 for further discussion of the significance of place). Are electronic communities likely to provide the depth of experience that is central to the cosmopolitan project?

Notes

¹ “Cosmopolitanism.” Encyclopædia Britannica. 2008. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 15 Jan. 2008 <<http://search.eb.com/eb/article-9026474>>.

² This trend is not, of course, universal. Not all communities are becoming neighbourhoods; in some localities, low mobility, a need for mutual assistance in the locality, continuity of an extended family who reside in locality, or isolation (physical, social, or economic) from the wider society, may help maintain localities as communities, and participation in such groups provides a more intensive experience of diversity and difference.

³ Recent demographic data on these shifts is available at Pew/Internet (<http://www.pewinternet.org>).

⁴ For a discussion of social networks see Banton 1968; Mitchell 1969; Holland and Leinhardt 1979; Berkowitz 1982; Wellman and Berkowitz 1988; Wasserman and Faust 1994; Smith and Kollock 1999.

⁵ See, for instance, a set of rules by Mike Godwin titled “Nine Principles for Making Virtual Communities Work”, first published in 1994 in Wired magazine and available at <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/2.06/vc.principles.html>.

⁶ ‘Flaming’ refers to the hostile comments that easily develop between participants on mailing lists. For a discussion of ‘flaming’ see Kiesler and Siegel (1984) as well as the brief entry on Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flame_war).

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