



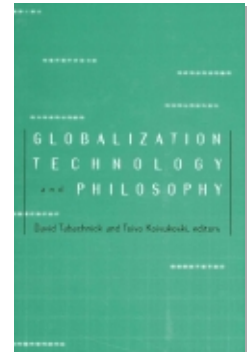
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2

Communication versus Obligation

The Moral Status of Virtual Community

Darin Barney

“We are assured that the world is becoming more and more united, is being formed into brotherly communion, by the shortening of distance, by the transmitting of thoughts through the air. Alas, do not believe in such a union of people.”

—from the homilies of the Elder Zosima, in Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

Among the historical benefits of digital communications media is that they reveal and clarify the essence of technology. To believe, as we often do, that technologies are simply neutral instruments engaged in the production of material objects is to misunderstand a central condition of the modern European and American experience. Technologies are indeed productive, but along with objects they also produce certain

ways of being in the world and, conversely, the absence of certain other ways. That is to say, while technologies as instruments produce objects, technology as practice participates in the production of subjectivity. The word *production* (as opposed to *determination*) should be noted in the preceding sentence, as should the word *participates*. Technology, on its own, does not determine subjectivity wholly or outright, but every technology, in the context of an array of social, political, and economic conditions from which it cannot be separated, participates in producing human subjects in the world. That the essence of technology resides in its practical rather than its instrumental functions was decisively argued by Martin Heidegger at the apogee of technique in the middle of the twentieth century, and has been confirmed by most serious philosophers of technology writing since, including Heidegger's critics.¹ Heidegger's own way of expressing the essential character of technology was to say that technology, regardless of what it yields in its function as instrument, *enframes*.

Communications media reveal the essence of technology as enframing with great clarity, because their role in producing material objects is not always obvious. However, their role in producing and representing human relationships implicates them immediately in the constitutive practices of human subjects. This is especially the case with digital media of interpersonal communication, which, along with a vast array of objective, material effects, also quite clearly reconfigure, produce, and reproduce particular social, political, and economic practices to the relative exclusion of others. It is not always obvious what sorts of concrete objects digital instruments yield; it is readily evident that as technologies they produce "ways of being in the world," and subjects who are ready to be that way, and not ready to be other ways. It is in this light that I wish to consider the technological phenomenon of "virtual community." Digital communications media have many practical implications. In what follows I will argue that among that which is produced by this technology is a practice of community that is emptied of obligation and, so, drained of the moral attribute that distinguishes community from other types of relationships in civil society. In the particular social, political, and economic context in which they are situated (i.e., in liberal-democratic, high-technology capitalism), digital network technologies participate in producing virtual community—which is to say they help to produce community without moral obligation, and to reproduce the voluntarism essential to the contemporary liberal ethos.

Virtual Communities, Communication, and Interests

I should make clear from the outset that the subject of this investigation is the idea of *virtual community*, and not the practices of community or

civic networks. So-called virtual communities exist entirely on-line: they are extrageographical, nonlocalized aggregations of individuals whose interaction is carried out exclusively across computer networks, via their participation in electronic mailing lists, multiple-user domains, chat and bulletin-board services and discussion groups. Here, the network *is* the supposed community and the community is a network. Community or civic networks, on the other hand, arise when network technology is used as an instrument of communication and information distribution by an already existing, geographically localized, off-line community, typically in an effort to enhance social participation and access to community goods or services. The distinction is crucial. The practices of civic networking assume that network technology can be *used by* communities; the idea of virtual community assumes that digital networks can *be* communities. Civic networking does not exhaust the manner in which digital technology confronts communities, and it is not certain these practices ensure a beneficial outcome for communities in this encounter. The scholarship investigating this question and these practices is growing steadily.² Whatever the case, this is not the issue being addressed here. My concern is with the idea of a digitally mediated virtual community.

References to the idea and existence of virtual community and its derivatives abound in popular literature celebrating the emancipating onset of the digital age.³ Among the earliest, and most influential, attempts to articulate this idea and give an account of its manifestation in practice is Howard Rheingold's *The Virtual Community*, in which he recounts his experience as a pioneer of the legendary Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL).⁴ The WELL is a computer-mediated network of multiple discussion groups based in southern California that links participants from across the globe. Participants in these groups debate, exchange ideas and information, commiserate, and engage in small talk across a broad range of subjects—tales of intense relationships, emotional bonding, and strong attachments on the WELL have reached mythological proportions.⁵ Rheingold's initial volume has become a touchstone in debates about the promise and perils of virtual community building. Advocates of virtual communities—including Rheingold himself—consistently point out that flight to digitally mediated relationships such as those enabled by the WELL and similar services is fueled by the neglect and decay of off-line, *real*, public, community, and civic life.⁶ Critics of virtual communities charge that the ready availability of privatized social interaction in cyberspace serves to intensify, rather than alleviate, the decline of community life in off-line places—indeed, it is argued that network communities have arisen as a fatal, final solution to a problem of civic decay that has been accelerated by the penetration of network technology more generally.⁷

In an early approximation, Rheingold defines virtual communities as: “cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace . . . [a] group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.”⁸ Subsequently, he adds: “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.”⁹ In her book on the relationships and identifications at play in network-mediated Multiple-User Domains (MUDs), Sherry Turkle refers to these associations as “virtual communities,” which she defines as “a new kind of community . . . in which we participate with people from all over the world, people with whom we converse daily, people with whom we may have fairly intimate relationships but whom we may never physically meet.”¹⁰ Activist and writer John Coates defines “online community” as combining “a group of people having common interests,” who jointly adhere to the same “Terms of Service for use of an online service.”¹¹ The Canadian government, referring to the “growing reality” of “virtual communities” has determined that “geography will no longer be an obstacle for people with something in common getting together”—implying that a virtual community is a group of commonly interested people who get “together” in some manner other than physically, probably digitally.¹²

There are numerous ways to define virtual community.¹³ My purpose here is not to review them comprehensively, but rather to isolate two elements that figure consistently and centrally in accounts of what constitutes virtual community, and to consider what these constitutive elements in fact define, or fail to define. The first element commonly presented as constitutive of virtual community is interpersonal communication; almost all accounts of this phenomenon are premised on the assumption that the act of communication is not just important to, but is in fact the essence of, community. In this view, the act of communication is an essential and primary facet of community between individuals. Most thoughtful accounts acknowledge that communication is not a sufficient condition of community, but even these maintain that communication is indispensable, and therefore central to community. For example, Fernback admits: “Not all virtual social gatherings are communities.”¹⁴ She lists “personal investment, intimacy and commitment” as ancillary attributes necessary to turn communication into community. Nothing in this acknowledgment detracts from the underlying conviction that communication is essential to community, that community cannot exist *without* communication, and that communication occu-

pies a central, privileged, almost determining position in the range of practices that constitute community. Despite the aforementioned caveat, Fernback herself is careful to assert that “communication is the *core* of community.”¹⁵ Similarly, though he is careful to assert that the two should not be equated, Derek Foster asserts that “communications serves as the *basis* of community. . . . Community, then, is built by a sufficient flow of ‘we-relevant’ information.”¹⁶ Shawn Wilbur lists “the experience of sharing with unseen others a space of communication,” as first among seven definitive attributes of virtual community.¹⁷ Finally, the phrase “virtual community” has entered the inaugural Oxford dictionary of Canadian English as “a group of users who communicate regularly in cyberspace.”¹⁸

The second element typically presented as constitutive in most accounts of virtual community is shared interest. If communication is the essential and constitutive practice of community in virtual communities, then shared interests are the privileged content of that practice. It is tempting to say that interests are the exclusive content of network-mediated communicative practices—as one of the aforementioned advocates of virtual community writes: “[C]ommon interests are the *only* real reason that people get together online to communicate.”¹⁹ This is an overstatement, but only a slight one. There are certainly accounts of people communicating on-line about things other than material self-interest.²⁰ Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, for example, assert that “[e]motional support, companionship, information, making arrangements, and providing a sense of belonging are all non-material social resources that are often possible to provide from the comfort of one’s computer,” and provide a number of examples of such dynamics in operation.²¹ However, as these authors recognize, evidence of these practices remains anecdotal and sparse, while it is well established and generally conceded that interests of one sort or another are the primary driver of network-mediated communication.²² Furthermore, while things such as emotional support, companionship, and membership are certainly nonmaterial, it is not clear that they are disinterested. The interests of people commiserating over a common illness, or seeking respite from loneliness via the Internet may not be strictly material, but they are nevertheless interests that, if unsatisfied, would likely lead to disengagement by the interested party. To use terms that will become crucial below: people engage in virtual community because they wish to, not because they must—that is to say, because they are interested, materially or otherwise, in doing so.

Thus, while material interests may not monopolize network-mediated virtual community, shared interests of one sort or another do overwhelmingly characterize it. It is also the case that “relationships [that] develop on the basis of communicated shared interests” are not only

privileged in many accounts of virtual community, but also held up as one of the phenomenon's most compelling attributes.²³ As Internet pioneer J. C. R. Licklider, writing prophetically in the 1960s, put it: "Life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity."²⁴ Wellman and Gulia describe digitally mediated discussion groups—which are customarily presented as paradigmatic virtual communities—as "a technologically supported continuation of a long-term shift to communities organized by shared interests rather than by shared place or shared ancestry."²⁵ It should be noted that these are the statements of people who find no reason to despair of what they describe. It is therefore uncontroversial to conclude that while it may not exhaust the activity of virtual communitarians, communication of shared interest is certainly central to these relationships, and it substantively defines the character of these associations—associations presented as embodying the spirit of community.

To sum up, the defense of virtual community qua community rests on the assumption that the alchemy of communication and shared interests yields a type of human association that can legitimately be called a community. I am prepared to concede that virtual communities exhibit these two qualities in high relief. The question remains as to what is at stake in an account and practice of community constituted by these elements rather than others.

Community and Moral Obligation

My argument is that digital technology participates in producing communities (and a supporting discourse of "community") that are empty of moral obligation, arguably the essential core of this designation as it has been traditionally understood, and the attribute that substantively distinguishes community from other forms of civil association. Arguments about the centrality of common moral obligation to community, and about the threat technological mediation poses to the possibility of such communities, are not new. Nevertheless, the accelerating rise to prominence of discourses and practices of virtual community recommend revisiting and clarifying these arguments. In this section I will outline briefly an account of community as constituted by mutual moral obligation, and consider the relationship of such obligation to communication and interests, in order to define precisely what is absent in virtual communities.

To posit obligation as essential to community is far from controversial. As Neil Postman has pointed out, the etymology of the word itself suggests this meaning: "community" combines *cum* for "together with"

and *munis* for “obligation.”²⁶ In a widely cited contemporary definition, Thomas Bender stipulates: “A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation.”²⁷ Conservative moral and political philosophy typically casts common obligation, especially that derived from an inherited history and tradition, as both a necessity and particular virtue of community.²⁸ Markate Daly describes “fairly wide agreement” among communitarian theorists on the conclusion that “friendship or a sense of obligation, rather than self-interest, holds the members [of communities] together.”²⁹ Even liberals rooted in the thought of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke readily affirm that obligation—albeit prudential obligation embodied in contracts and derived from individuals’ interest in securing benefit, or avoiding painful penalty—defines the essential relationship of a political community.³⁰

Mutual obligation can be considered an essential element of community because it is the nature of an obligation to bind, to hold people together. The English word *obligation* is derived from the Latin *obligare*, the root of which (*ligare*) means “binding.” It is linked to words such as legislation (in which binding obligations are expressed in law) and loyalty (which expresses faithful observance of an obligation). In this view, community is conceived as a sort of association to which one is bound rather than for which one volunteers: volition commits, but it is obligation that binds. To the extent that community can be meaningfully distinguished from other forms of civil association it is obligation, and the character of that obligation, that provides the substance of the distinction.³¹ To say that obligation distinguishes community from other forms of civil association is to say that obligation is the particular excellence or virtue of community. This is not to say that individuals always experience obligation as unambiguously pleasing or interesting; it is to say that the presence and observance of these often displeasing and uninteresting obligations delineates community from other types of civil society relationships. The phrase “civil society” is important here: there have been and are other forms of relationship besides community—one thinks immediately of the family in the private sphere and the state in the political sphere—in which some form of mutual obligation at least potentially prevails as a binding force. What I am suggesting is that one way to specify community theoretically from other forms of non-private, non-political, civil society associations is to identify common obligation as its essential binding force. Numerous commonalities (e.g., identity, locality, language, religion, etc.) make community relationships easier to establish and maintain, as do any number of salutary norms (e.g., fairness, reciprocity, tolerance, etc.). None of these commonalities or norms, however, define

community as against other sorts of civil society associations. The argument here is not that common obligation is the only ingredient of a successful community, but rather simply that an association cannot really be considered a community without it.

Human beings find many reasons to associate, some of which—including shared interests, shared location, shared identity, and common experience—are often contingent attributes of communities, which complement and support the obligations that bind the community together. Absent such obligations, however, people associated on this basis (i.e., as gun owners, neighbors, women of color, survivors of abuse) remain associates, but it is not clear why we would describe their associations as communities rather than as various forms of interest, geographic, identity, or affinity groups. It is only of late that we reflexively designate as a community any aggregation of people linked by interest, proximity, identity, or experience.

In the account I am presenting here, community is a substantive designation reserved for civil society associations in which members—regardless of whatever else they may share—are bound by a mutually observed obligation to one another. To press this line of thinking further, I would like to suggest that it is *moral* obligation in particular, and even more specifically the mutually observed moral obligation to regard one's fellows despite one's interests, that characterizes community theoretically as a distinctive form of civil association.³²

In the context of human relationships, to regard is to give heed to, to take into account, and to let one's course be affected by others. The English word *regard* comes from the French *regarder*, which translates as “to watch,” but also means to look closely, think twice, and take care. *Regarder* derives from *garder*, which means to look after, to guard, to care for, to protect. When we regard others we not only take them into account and allow ourselves to be affected by them, we are also careful with them, we look after them, we protect them. To regard is to think twice before acting—our first thought is typically for our own interests, our second thought is at least potentially for the interests of others or for the common good. There are many accounts given in the Western philosophical tradition of the source and character of the moral obligation being sketched here as the mutual obligation to regard. For a variety of reasons that are beyond the scope of the present discussion, I prefer the account given by Simone Weil, who writes: “Obligations . . . all stem, without exception, from the vital needs of the human being,” and that “[t]here exists an obligation towards every human being for the sole reason that he or she *is* a human being, without any other condition requiring to be fulfilled, and even without any recognition of such ob-

ligation on the part of the individual concerned.”³³ My purpose here is not to establish the source of the moral obligation to regard one’s fellows but rather simply to suggest that the word *community* designates a civil association within the boundaries of which this obligation is observed and enacted. I think this respects, rather than strains, a fairly common sense of the word *community* and its meaning, and accurately reflects what has traditionally been thought to distinguish community from other forms of association in civil society. Put bluntly, a community has customarily been thought of as a place where people look out for each other, regardless of whatever else might join or separate them.

The moral obligation to regard one’s fellows, observance of which distinguishes community in the account presented above, bears an interesting relationship to communication and shared interest, the two defining attributes of virtual community. Political obligations, linked as they are to obedience (i.e., the obedience of a subject to a ruler), have an overtly communicative character. The word *obedience* derives from the Latin *edire/audire* for hearing: to obey is to do what you are *told* to do. Moral obligations, by contrast, are observed (often silently) and acted upon rather than communicated, felt as the quiet prick of conscience rather than uttered as consent or heard as command. Members of a community defined by a mutual moral obligation usually know what to do, or what not to do, without having to be told. Habituation to obligation, rather than its declaration, is the mark of community whose bond is moral. Rational, transparent communication, so important to democratic citizenship and legitimate political obligation, is not a requisite of membership in a community defined by mutual moral obligation.³⁴ Indeed, one of the consistent complaints about communities of mutual moral obligation is that they are often noncommunicative, opaque, irrational, and seemingly arbitrary. Similarly, anyone who makes a point of repeatedly declaring their moral obligations (rather than quietly observing and meeting them) is usually seeking to evade or be compensated for them. And unlike social contracts that establish liberal democratic political states, the moral obligations that bind traditional communities do not require consent or agreement; indeed, it is the mark of a moral obligation that it binds despite consent or agreement. Sometimes the moral obligation to regard our fellows invokes a duty to communicate (i.e., to tell the truth), but in these cases communication results from the obligation attached to community membership—it does not constitute the community or what binds it. Thus, the relationship between communication (the heart of virtual community) and the moral obligation to regard one’s fellows (the heart of the alternative conception of community sketched here) is at best contingent.

The relationship between interests and obligations is more complex. The English word *interest* combines the Latin words *inter* for “between” or “among” and *esse* for “being”—an interest is something that exists between or among people. This suggests the dual, contradictory nature of interests: being between, they both join and separate. Interests join when two or more people have a similar interest, they separate or distinguish when people’s interests differ or conflict. Interests can bring people together, but it should be noted that common or shared interests produce associations only of a particular type. All interests are a function of appetite, whose nature it is to be particular, dynamic, and demanding of satisfaction. Put simply, interest is self-centred, and wanes when appetite changes or has no prospect of being satisfied. Thus, associations based on common or shared interests persist only so long as the individual appetites animating them continue with a reasonable prospect of satisfaction. When appetites shift, or when one self-interest is eclipsed by another that is not complementary, an association built upon these appetites and interests will tend to dissolve. Unless there exists a compelling reason to maintain the association even when the interest for which it was established is no longer present, strong, or fulfilled, associations based solely upon shared (i.e., communicated) interests will tend to be unstable. Indeed, this was Thomas Hobbes’s great insight into the nature of social relationships based on contracted exchanges of self-interest. People will remain sociable, and can live together peaceably, only so long as they have an interest in doing so. However, the same self-interest that leads individuals to seek peace in common will seduce them to seek advantage over their fellows at the first opportunity, despite their communicated promise of civility. As Hobbes famously wrote, in the face of self-interest “nothing is more easily broken than a man’s word,” and the force of words is “too weak to hold men to the performance of their Covenants.” Thus, he concluded that “[c]ovenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all.”³⁵ The single interest capable of joining people in a stable political association—in Hobbes’s terms, a “Commonwealth”—is the overwhelming fear of corporal or mortal punishment by a common power, a fear experienced equally by every individual. Absent the sword, human associations founded on contracted, communicated interests are inherently vulnerable and unstable.

Interests associate people when they are shared, but only temporarily, as long as these interests do not change or find themselves unsatisfied, in which case they will tend to divide people, unless an ultimate interest in survival recommends otherwise. This expresses the form of instrumental calculation that defines the character of political

obligation under modern social contracts. C. B. Macpherson has suggested that such calculations of Hobbesian self-interest form prudential obligations, which cannot be distinguished from moral obligations.³⁶ It should be noted that Macpherson reaches this conclusion only after endorsing Hobbes's implicit rejection of the possibility of any nonprudential, disinterested, irrational source of moral obligation. Regarding Hobbes's account of instrumentally rational, strictly prudential obligation, Macpherson writes: "He thought it the best that men were capable of without fraudulently bringing in religious sanctions, and he thought it more moral that men should stand on their own reason than that they should evoke imagined and unknowable deities or essences. He thought that his rational, albeit self-interested, obligation was as moral an obligation as could be found."³⁷ Thus, prudential obligation can stand in for moral obligation only when the latter is dismissed as mere fantasy. If, on the other hand, one can conceive of non-interest-based grounds for obligation that are also not fraudulent or imaginary, then the distinction between moral and prudential obligation remains meaningful. In this case, a prudential obligation is one derived from, and pursuant to the satisfaction of calculated self-interest; a moral obligation is one by which we are bound despite interest and prudential calculation. Prudential obligations bind us voluntarily to that in which we have an interest (including other people); moral obligations bind us to that in which we have no interest (including other people) whether we volunteer or not. In essence, moral obligations often constrain precisely that which prudential calculation otherwise recommends, and it is in this constraint of interests that their binding action is made manifest.

In this section, I have argued that moral obligation is only contingently related to interpersonal communication, and that it can be distinguished from obligation derived from prudential calculation of self-interest. I have also presented a theoretical account of the nature of community based on the moral obligation of mutual regard. I think that observation of the mutual obligation to regard others substantively distinguishes genuine communities from other forms of civil associations, such as those based on shared interest, identity, or location. In my view a community is an association in civil society that binds individuals who meet its demand of mutual regard: in a community, individuals do not always get to do what they have an interest in doing, because sometimes their regard for others requires them to moderate their self-interest, and to do what they might not otherwise choose to do. However, it should be acknowledged that such views are idiosyncratic. Ours is a culture in which communication is valued over conscientious regard, in which moral obligation is considered an oppressive and reactionary phantom of a

bygone era, and in which the pursuit of calculated self-interest is understood as the essence of freedom. The actual communities in which we live bear little or no resemblance to the account I have presented above as theoretically definitive of that designation.

The Essence of Virtual Community

What sort of community is a virtual community? In a fine article on the politics of the Internet, Bruce Bimber distinguishes between “thick” communities, which collectively pursue goals beyond the sum of their members’ private interests, and “thin” communities, which are merely associations of individuals whose private interests are complementary. Bimber writes: “[O]ur understanding of the content of social interaction on the Net gives little reason to think that community will be significantly enhanced on a large-scale. Building community in a normatively rich sense is not the same as increasing the amount of social talk, and there is good reason to think the latter will be the norm on the Net.”³⁸ He concludes that while network media are likely to facilitate the proliferation and operation of thin communities of complementary private interests, they are unlikely to contribute to the constitution and maintenance of thick communities which cohere around a collective good. In Bimber’s estimation, digital technologies mediate an accelerated pluralism of interest groups, but not necessarily a substantive deepening of community. Even those who see greater potential in virtual communities generally concede that the relationships they contain are more or less defined by the communication of shared interests. Wellman and Gulia, for example, affirm that on-line relationships in virtual communities “develop on the basis of communicated shared interests.”³⁹ Add to this the facility of digital networks to link similarly interested communicators otherwise separated by vast distances (or, in some cases, by arbitrary, visually cued prejudices) and the shape of virtual community begins to emerge.

However, it is possible that neither the mediation of shared interest nor communication across geographic and social barriers constitutes the particular virtue of virtual communities. Instead, I would argue, what distinguishes virtual communities is their status as associations in which the binding moral force of the mutual obligation to regard others is largely absent. That is to say, the distinctive excellence of virtual communities is that they present a perfect technological solution to the problem of community in a liberal, market society. As William Galston has characterized it, this “central dilemma of our age” is one of somehow reconciling the overwhelming cultural value placed on individual autonomy and choice in liberal market societies with the abiding need human be-

ings feel for association with their fellows.⁴⁰ The solution in liberal societies—at least in the Lockian variants that prevail in the contemporary West—has been to construct civil and political associations on the market model, wherein participation is voluntary and revocable, and the only constraints on the play of individual interest within the association are derived from the freely given and also revocable consent of the members.⁴¹ This is supported by the grounding of political obligation in rights rather than in right; and social identification in shared but relativist values rather than in common faith with the good.⁴² Thus, in a liberal market society that poses individual autonomy as the highest value, civil association is permissible so long as its terms express rather than constrain individual liberty understood as freedom of choice. Of course, under such conditions, the fundamental restrictions imposed by a moral obligation that operates and binds despite particular interest (the kind imagined by illiberal democrats such as Rousseau) are untenable.

Virtual communities meet the conditions of human association in a liberal market society better than most other forms of community, not only because of their bedrock foundation in communicated interest, but also because they are technically biased against the fundamental constraints of moral obligation that sometimes operate to bind individual choice making. Virtual communities are technically suited to meet the conditions of voluntarism—membership/obligation based on consent; low entry and exit costs; nonprejudicial relationships—which, in ensuring compatibility between social ties and autonomy, fulfill the test of legitimacy for liberal, market associations.⁴³ No one is obliged to be part of a virtual community in which they have no interest or for which they do not volunteer. As noted virtual communitarian Amy Bruckman writes: “In an ideal world, virtual communities would acquire new members entirely by self-selection: people would enter an electronic neighbourhood only if it focused on something they cared about.”⁴⁴ There is no suggestion that virtual communities fail to live up to this ideal. Such voluntarism is of course in strong contrast to communities built upon moral obligation, which sometimes compel the duties of membership despite expressed interests, and in any case are not bound primarily by consent. Indeed, it is definitive of virtual communities that they lack, as a function of their technical organization, the binding force of what Stephen Doheny-Farina has characterized as “extraordinary communal constraint.”⁴⁵

A second mark of the voluntarism of virtual community is the ease with which prospective and dissatisfied members can enter and leave it. While it is true that certain virtual community formations maintain admission requirements and controls, these are not typically very restrictive, and usually involve some kind of basic qualification (which is typically an

automatic function of a person's interest in a particular virtual community in the first place—for example, I am interested in joining the virtual community of political scientists on-line only because I am a political scientist, which, not incidentally, qualifies me to join), an agreement to adhere to certain protocols or rules of discourse, or the payment of token fees. More important is the ease with which a member can sever himself from a virtual community when it no longer holds his interest. Network technology—as proponents of virtual community consistently affirm—not only favors voluntary relationships based on the exchange of mutual interests, but also makes it very easy to abdicate these relationships and establish others as interests change. It is true that self-interested individuals become strongly attached to virtual communities that arouse their interests.⁴⁶ It is also true that the very same appetites, arousal of which prompts strong attachment, will cause individuals to abandon their attachments when they are no longer satisfying. As Wellman and Gulia write, in support of virtual community: “Computer-mediated communication accelerates the ways in which people operate at the centers of partial, personal communities, switching rapidly and frequently between groups of ties. People have an enhanced ability to move between relationships.”⁴⁷ Harmless defection from voluntary social relationships when they no longer suit one or another party's interests is, then, precisely what network mediation is configured to enable.⁴⁸ Again, such fluid, contingent, and ephemeral attachments distinguish virtual community from forms of community bound by mutual obligations that are not so easily evaded, at least not without moral consequence. Thinking of such a community, Doheny-Farina writes: “It is not something you can easily join. You can't subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net.”⁴⁹ Presumably, neither can one escape—or “unsubscribe”—from communal obligation in good conscience, as one can from a virtual community. However, ours is not an age of communities of moral obligation, and the “easy-come, easy-go” ethic of virtual community comports perfectly with the imperative of voluntarism that directs human association in liberal market societies.

A third element of virtual community embodies the view of equality as neutrality, which is crucial to market liberal imperatives regarding free and voluntary association. As an opaque medium that enables participants to obscure their identity and, in particular, any visible social cues that might evoke stigmatization and arbitrary exclusion, computer networks provide associates with a socially neutral ground upon which they might engage in nonprejudicial, nonhierarchical relationships based on mutual interest and merit. Additionally, to the extent it is possible to construct multiple identities and personae for use in a range of on-line

contexts and situations, virtual communities present an opportunity for an explosive liberation of “selves” that can access a variety of relationships previously denied to one’s “self” due to inescapable physiological attributes and the prejudices attached to them.⁵⁰ One might expect this emancipation of alternative subjectivity to yield a genuine pluralism in virtual communities, especially relative to what is often characterized as the oppressive conformity demanded by communities bound by moral obligation. It is not clear that this is the case. Just as free markets promise consumer variety but tend toward homogeneity, virtual communities are often populated by members whose identities bear a striking uniformity and perfection. It is possible that what I have characterized above as moral communities are more open to difference than are virtual communities unleashed from the moral obligation to regard others.⁵¹ As Doheny-Farina writes: “In physical communities we are forced to live with people who may differ from us in many ways. But virtual communities offer us the opportunity to construct utopian collectivities—communities of interest, education, tastes, beliefs and skills.”⁵² Though he prefers the language of market “incentives” to communal obligations, Galston is even more persuasive on this point: “When we find ourselves living cheek by jowl with neighbours with whom we differ but from whose propinquity we cannot easily escape, we have powerful incentives to develop modes of accommodation. On the other hand, the ready availability of exit tends to produce internally homogeneous groups that may not even talk with one another and that lack incentives to develop shared understandings across their differences.”⁵³ Nevertheless, the shedding of prejudicial limitations on interest and appetite—including moral obligations—fits well with a notion of community as essentially voluntarist, and as enabling rather than constraining of individual liberty and choice. Plato’s ring of Gyges conferred invisibility and, with that invisibility, liberty. It also, of course, constituted a license for immorality.⁵⁴ Community bound by mutual moral obligation cannot coexist with technologically enabled license. Recognition and enforcement of moral obligation, tied as they are to notions of accountability and responsibility, are impossible without reliable and stable identification. In Bimber’s phrasing, “Trust, social capital, and the shared norms of thick community do not grow well in the soil of anonymity.”⁵⁵ But freedom of choice—the essence of modern liberty—does grow well in this soil, which also happens to be the soil in which virtual community thrives.

In these three respects—consent; ease of entry and exit; and the minimization of prejudice via anonymity and identity multiplication—virtual communities fulfill the conditions of voluntarism that enable social connection without infringing upon individual autonomy and freedom

of choice. They are thus a perfect form of association for modern, liberal, market societies, precisely because they combine fellowship with an absence of the moral obligation to regard others, the presence of which could not other than violate the existential demands of the current liberal dispensation. It is in this perfection that the particular virtue or excellence of virtual community is located.

Conclusion

In his critique of virtual community, Joseph Lockard has written that “[i]n the midst of desire we sometimes function under the conceit that if we name an object after our desire, the object is what we name it.”⁵⁶ Are virtual communities really communities? Perhaps a better question is this: What sort of community is produced by digital network technology? I have argued that digital media participate in producing communities built on the communication of shared interest, communities constitutionally biased toward relieving their members of the mutual obligation to regard others, the moral quality that I think confers substance and meaning upon the designation *community*, and which ultimately distinguishes communities from other forms of association in civil society. Phrased differently, I find that the particular virtue of virtual community is that it lacks the virtue that marks the moral excellence of community, namely, the obligation of mutual regard. In this, virtual community resonates deeply with the voluntarist ethos of contemporary liberalism, and institutionalizes a form of association that gratifies the human appetite for fellowship without threatening the sanctity of individual autonomy realized through unfettered freedom of choice. It is often assumed that growing numbers of people seek out virtual community to compensate for the paucity of communal commitment in the off-line world. The argument of this chapter suggests an alternative explanation: that, despite their decay, communities off-line (in which conscience is still pricked when confronted by homelessness) continue to demand too much of individuals in the way of moral commitments that restrict the free play of choice, and that virtual communities offer people a means of reaping the benefits of communicative association without paying the constraining price of mutual obligation.

To be sure, some virtual communities do and will exhibit high levels of regard and obligation among members—sometimes even higher than is now typical in many physical neighborhoods. But such cases are still exceptional: they do not represent the technological bias of virtual community toward communicated interests; nor do they embody the particular excellence of virtual community as an essentially voluntarist

form of association. On these terms, virtual communities resemble free markets more closely than they do moral communities bound by mutual obligation and regard. There is certainly support for this comparison in the rhetoric that presents virtual community as a potentially healthy form of human association. Wellman and Gulia, for example, affirm that “the very architecture of computer-networks promotes market-like situations,” wherein people “shopping around for support” engage in relationships that are “intermittent, specialized and varying in strength.” Here, community is reduced to a store from which one can “obtain a variety of resources,” and membership to the practice of “maintain[ing] differentiated portfolios of ties.”⁵⁷ The question is, what are the moral consequences of a technology that produces communities that cannot be distinguished from markets? That is to say, what is at stake when our fellows appear before us as resources whose relative value we can estimate, accumulate, and discard, rather than as priceless beings bearing an irreducible moral dignity that commands our regard, if not our interest; when the routine practices of community membership resemble shopping more than they do looking after your neighbors; and when consumer choice replaces moral obligation as the locus of our common humanity?

Notes

Thanks to Edward Andrew, Mary Stone, Don Desserud, and Tom Goud for insightful conversation and critical commentary on the theme and substance of this essay.

1. Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

2. See, for example: Leslie Regan Shade, “Roughing it in the Electronic Bush: Community Networking in Canada,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 24:2 (Spring 1999): 179–98; Peter Kollock and Marc A. Smith, “Communities in Cyberspace,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (New York: Routledge, 1999); Roza Tsagarousianou et al., *Cyberdemocracy: Technology, Cities, and Civic Networks* (New York: Routledge, 1998); Roger Gibbins and Carey Hill, “New Technologies and the Future of Civil Society,” paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Communication Association, Ottawa, Ontario, 31 May 1998; Philip Agre and Douglas Schuler, eds., *Reinventing Technology, Rediscovering Community: Critical Explorations of Computing as a Social Practice* (Greenwich Conn.: Ablex, 1997); Jay Weston, “Old Freedoms and New Technologies: The Evolution of Community Networking,” *The Information Society* 13:2 (1997): 195–201; Douglas Schuler, *New Community Networks: Wired for Change* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1996); Barry Wellman et al., “Computer Networks as Social Networks: Collaborative Work, Telework, and Virtual Community,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 22

(1996): 213–38; Steve G. Jones, ed., *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated Communication and Community* (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage, 1995); and Douglas Schuler, “Community Network: Building a New Participatory Medium,” *Communications of the ACM* 37:1 (January 1994): 39–51.

3. For example: Peter Drucker, “The Age of Social Transformation,” *Atlantic Monthly* 274:5 (November 1994): 53–80; Paul Hoffert, “The Bagel Effect,” *Globe and Mail*, 14 January 1998, A11; Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead* (New York: Viking, 1995); Lawrence K. Grossman, *The Electronic Republic: Reshaping Democracy in the Information Age* (New York: Viking, 1995); William Mitchell, *City of Bits: Space, Time, and the Infobahn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995); John Perry Barlow, “Is There a There in Cyberspace?” *Utne Reader*, March/April 1995, 53–56; George Gilder, *Life After Television: The Coming Transformation of Media and American Life* (New York: Norton, 1994).

4. Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

5. See Katie Hafner, “The Epic Saga of the WELL,” *Wired*, May 1997, 98–142.

6. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 6. See also Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don’t Ride Alone,” in *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*, ed. Barry Wellman (Boulder: Westview, 1999), 332.

7. See, for example: Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). See also Joseph Lockard, “Progressive Politics, Electronic Individualism, and the Myth of Virtual Community,” in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 219–31.

8. Howard Rheingold, “A Slice of Life in My Virtual Community,” *The Electronic Frontier Foundation’s Extended Guide to the Internet*, 1994, http://www.lpthc.jussieu.fr/DOC_HTML/eeg/eeg_260.html (September 1999).

9. Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*, 5.

10. Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 9–10.

11. John Coate, “Cyberspace Innkeeping: Building Online Community,” January 1998 version, available online at <http://www.sfgate.com/~tex/innkeeping> (Sept. 1999). Originally published in Agre and Schuler, eds., *Reinventing Technology*.

12. Canada, *Building the Information Society: Moving Canada into the 21st Century* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply & Services, 1996), 3.

13. For a good review of many of them, see: Steve Jones, “Information, Internet, and Community: Notes Towards an Understanding of Community in the Information Age,” in *Cybersociety 2.0: Revisiting Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, ed. Steve Jones (Newbury Park, Cal.: Sage, 1998). See also Jan Fernback, “There is a There There: Notes Toward a Definition of Cybercommunity,” in *Doing Internet Research: Critical Issues and Methods for Examining the Net*, ed. Steve Jones (Thousand Oaks, Cal.: Sage, 1999), 203–20.

14. Fernback, “There is a There There: Notes Toward a Definition of Cybercommunity,” 216.

15. Fernback, "There is a There There: Notes Toward a Definition of Cybercommunity," 213 (emphasis added).

16. Derek Foster, "Community and Identity in the Electronic Village," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 24–25 (emphasis added).

17. Shawn P. Wilbur, "An Archaeology of Cyberspaces: Virtuality, Community, Identity," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 13.

18. Katherine Barber, ed., *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1998), 1622.

19. John Coate, "Cyberspace Innkeeping: Building Online Community," (emphasis added). See also Wellman et al., "Computer Networks as Social Networks: Collaborative Work, Telework, and Virtual Community," 224, 231.

20. See Rheingold's account of "The Heart of the WELL," *The Virtual Community*, 17–37.

21. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities," 338–39.

22. See Pippa Norris, "Who Surfs? New Technology, Old Voters & Virtual Democracy," in *Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World*, ed. E. C. Kamarck and J. S. Nye Jr. (Hollis, N.H.: Hollis Publishing, 1999), 77–82.

23. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities," 352.

24. As quoted in Andrew L. Shapiro, "The Net that Binds: Using Cyberspace to Create Real Communities," *The Nation*, 21 June 1999. Available online at <http://www.thenation.com/issue/990621/062shapiro.shtml> (Sept. 1999).

25. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities," 336.

26. See Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1992).

27. Thomas Bender, *Community and Social Change in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 7–8.

28. See, for example: Alasdair McIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991); and George Grant, "An Ethic for Community," in *Social Purpose for Canada*, ed. Michael Oliver (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1961).

29. Markate Daly, *Communitarianism: A New Public Ethics* (Belmont, Cal.: Wadsworth, 1994), xv.

30. For a discussion of the place of obligation in this tradition, see: C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 70–87; and Carole Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation: A Critique of Liberal Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

31. For a complete, and classic exploration of the distinction between communal and contractual social relationships, see Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society: Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, trans. C. P. Loomis (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1964). For an excellent contemporary treatment of the relationship between mass communications and community

understood in these terms, see James R. Beniger, "Personalization of Mass Media and the Growth of Pseudo-Community," *Communication Research* 14:3 (June 1987): 352–71.

32. For a concise survey of the terrain of obligation in its many forms, see John Ladd, "Legal and Moral Obligation," in *Political and Legal Obligation*, ed. J. R. Pennock and J. W. Chapman (New York: Atherton, 1970). See also A. John Simmons, *Moral Principles and Political Obligations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

33. Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Toward Mankind* (Boston: Beacon, 1952), 7, 4–5.

34. On the communicative aspects of democratic rationality and legitimacy, see Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996).

35. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin, 1985), 192, 200, 223.

36. See Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 72–74.

37. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 73.

38. Bruce Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation: Populism, Community, and Accelerated Pluralism," *Polity* 31:1 (Fall 1998): 148.

39. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," 352.

40. William Galston, "(How) Does the Internet Affect Community? Some Speculation in Search of Evidence," in *Democracy.com? Governance in a Networked World*, ed. E. C. Kamarck and J. S. Nye Jr. (Hollis, N.H.: Hollis Publishing, 1999), 45–61.

41. On the "self-assumed" character of obligation in the context of liberal individualism, see Pateman, *The Problem of Political Obligation*, 11–36.

42. On rights and values in contemporary liberal discourse, see Edward Andrew, *Shylock's Rights: A Grammar of Lockian Claims* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988) and *The Genealogy of Values: The Aesthetic Economy of Nietzsche and Proust* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995).

43. See Galston "(How) Does the Internet Affect Community?" 48.

44. Amy Bruckman, "Finding One's Own in Cyberspace," in *Composing Cyberspace: Identity, Community, and Knowledge in the Electronic Age*, ed. Richard Holeton (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998) 175.

45. Stephen Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 5.

46. According to Wellman and Gulia: "[P]eople's allegiance to the Net's communities of interest may be more powerful than their allegiance to their neighbourhood communities because those involved in the same virtual community may share more interests than those who live on the same block." Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," 352.

47. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," 356.

48. Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation," 151.
49. Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood*, 37.
50. See Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen*.
51. For a contrary account of the relationship between community and diversity or difference, see Iris Marion Young, "The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1990).
52. Doheny-Farina, *The Wired Neighbourhood*, 16.
53. Galston, "(How) Does the Internet Affect Community?" 52.
54. Plato, *Republic*, trans. G. M. A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1974) 359c–360d.
55. Bimber, "The Internet and Political Transformation," 150–51.
56. Lockard, "Progressive Politics, Electronic Individualism, and the Myth of Virtual Community," 225.
57. Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone," 353.

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