

## REVIEW

### **Community in the Digital Age**

*Social scientists and philosophers argue the meaning of our evolving online lives.*

Review by Arun Kumar Tripathi

"Community in the Digital Age," Andrew Feenberg and Darin Barney, 293 pages, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers (August 15, 2004), ISBN: 0742529584

Contributors: Phillip E. Agre, Maria Bakardjieva, Darin Barney, Bruce Bimber, Albert Borgmann, Hubert Dreyfus, Amitai Etzioni, Andrew Feenberg, Tetsuji Iseda, Diane Johnson, Richard Kahn, Douglas Kellner, Yumiko Nara, Mark Poster, Douglas Schuler, Leslie Regan Shade, Sherry Turkle.

The new book "Community in the Digital Age" discusses the questions: Is the Internet the key to a reinvigorated public life? Or will it fragment society by enabling citizens to associate only with like-minded others? Are virtual communities "real" enough to support the kind of personal commitment and growth we associate with community life, or are they fragile and ultimately unsatisfying substitutes for human interaction? How is the Net affecting our culture and what should be the language of the Net? What if the Net became central in our lives? What if it becomes what Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, calls an "irresistible alternative culture?"

While doing the review of this new anthology on "Community in the Digital Age" by Andy Feenberg and Darin Barney I would like to share with *Ubiquity* readers a quote related to the (dis)embodied world of the Internet from "*On the Internet: Thinking in Action*" (Hubert Dreyfus, Routledge Press, 2001), which states that the Internet offered "a detached world in which everyone had an opinion about & commented on all public matters without needing any first-hand experience & without having or wanting any responsibility."

I will here undertake the Kierkegaardian view to show how it is possible. "A member of the public can have an opinion about anything but won't usually make an action for that opinion," Dreyfus has noted. "Kierkegaard says that no single person who belongs to the

Kierkegaard's principles can be applied to something as high-tech as the Internet. The Internet doesn't require expertise and actually undermines expertise, according to Dreyfus. Kierkegaard says people have to have an infinite passion that includes an unconditional commitment to something.

Dreyfus further proves this by saying in a lecture, "This idea is similar to Dante's love of Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*, because Beatrice is Dante's saviour and has an unconditional commitment to her by loving her. It is the possibilities of anonymity permitted by the use of technology that, as Kierkegaard sees it, removes communication from what he refers to as "The Situation." The Situation represents for Kierkegaard that characteristic of individual existence that distinguishes the "individual" from the "crowd" or "the public." In The Situation you and I have the possibility of having an encounter not as anonymous agents, but as people with distinctive, accessible histories. Because of this, communication within The Situation can become individualized -- my words can become words meant for you and words that you can recognize as being from me.

Going beyond the hype of the cybercrowd, Dreyfus, [1] a celebrated writer on philosophy and technology, asks whether the Internet can really bring humanity to a new level of community and solve the problems of mass education. Ethical people might use the Internet to make up and keep track of their commitments but would be brought to the despair of meaninglessness by the ease of making and unmaking in any domain. Dreyfus's critique of hyperlearning provides much food for thought and raises the level of the discussions amongst concerned educators and technologists.

Following Dreyfus, I have pointed out effectively what "interactive" education leaves out. This awareness should inform the planning and use of educational technology. However, there is another aspect to interactive technologies that needs to be included in the discussion. An interactive (networked) environment allows a person to reveal some aspects of himself/herself to a large community, which could not be done as effectively in a less interactive environment. In this sense, the new information and communication technologies involve an expansion of scale and scope over which one might exercise (assert) one's humanity. That is its key appeal for me.

In writing a review of *Community in the Digital Age* if I do not mention the book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (MIT Press, 2000), then I would be failing to do justice to the Internet community. The arguments given in the second chapter "Daily Life in Cyberspace: How the Computerized Counterculture Built a New Kind of Place" (pp.25-55) and the eleventh chapter "Rethinking Virtual

truly serves the final communities not as focus but as a foil. In the "Culture of Technology," Albert Borgmann [2] argues on consumption, community and celebration. The character of contemporary culture is best captured, I believe, by the term technology. It reminds us of the artefacts and procedures that distinguish our time. And, on consumption Borgmann said, "Consumption is the adversary of community.

In a philosophical sense, consumption is the unencumbered use of glamorous commodities. Borgmann provides in "Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life" [3] a unique way of conceiving of the inherent limitations of technology for the betterment of life by an explication of the "device paradigm." According to Borgmann, the promise of technology for improving the quality of life has turned out to be inherently limited, and that technology must be seen for what it really is and what it can offer while distinguishing it from "focal things and practices" that can provide the requirements necessary to achieve fulfilment in life. Technology [4] is the kind of life in which enlightenment has been shaped by a promise of liberty and prosperity and taken on a peculiar and pervasive pattern is dominant, can be explicated through the Device Paradigm.

In another book [5] Howard Rheingold explores the necessity of digital community. The digital revolution did not begin with the teenage millionaires of Silicon Valley, Rheingold reminds us, but with such early intellectual giants as Charles Babbage, George Boole, and John von Neumann. In a highly engaging style, Rheingold tells the story of what he calls the patriarchs, pioneers, and infonauts of the computer, focusing in particular on such pioneers as J.C.R. Licklider, Doug Engelbart, Bob Taylor, and Alan Kay.

On the other hand, historian Rosalind Williams [6] claims that today technology-driven change defines human desires, anxieties, memories, imagination, and experiences of time and space in unprecedented ways. But technology, and specifically information technology, does not simply influence culture and society; it is itself inherently cultural and social. If there is to be any reconciliation between technological change and community, Williams argues, it will come from connecting technological and social innovation -- a connection demonstrated in the history that unfolds.

Contemporary life is mostly a technologically mediated life. Our identities are to a great extent determined by the roles we play in our society. And these roles are often created and constrained by -- if not wholly dependent upon -- our technology. In its many forms, technology is both something we create "an expression of our understanding and our mastery of the world" and something that recreates us, fashioning new roles and

Darin Barney in his paper "The Vanishing Table, or, Community in a World That is No World" investigates the possibility of community under modern conditions of "wordlessness," displacement and disburdenment, conditions recently materialized in, and accelerated by, digital information and communication technologies. It proceeds from the premise that human social relations (not to mention individual human souls) always depend for much of their character on the material conditions in which they arise and subsist. As Borgmann has written: "There is in every case a symmetry between human life and its setting."

The questions the next paper [7] seeks to explore are, what setting does digital technology provide for human social life, and, particularly, to what constructions of community does this material setting lend itself most readily?

Darin Barney [8] engineers an encounter between two literatures. The first comprises a body of philosophical writing that locates the phenomenon of worldlessness (i.e., time-space displacement, deracination, disburdenment) in the progress of modern technology generally; the second is the growing social science literature examining the character and dynamics of digitally mediated community practices and forms. Barney [9] begins with a theoretical exegesis of aspects of the work of four thinkers -- Harold Innis, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Albert Borgmann -- who have made thoughtful contributions to our understanding of the technological phenomenon gathered here as worldlessness. It then proceeds to reflect upon recent empirical accounts of digitally mediated community, in light of the philosophical questions raised by these thinkers.

At this point, the discussion turns to the question of the prospects for community under conditions in which co-inhabitation of a common world of things has been eclipsed by various forms of technologically mediated communication. The paper concludes by arguing that digital technology, as it is elaborated in the context of contemporary liberal capitalism, provides a material setting in which community is likely to thrive only in a particular, truncated form: as a market infrastructure for the convenient exchange of valued resources between networked individuals.

Cyberspace is embraced as the realm where one can live and celebrate the life. Life in cyberspace is inauthentic and unreal. It is plausibly proved by Borgmann in the book [10]: "While the real world holds misery and grace, the hyperreal universe contains only news, challenges that demand one's reaction. And while in reality one may be defeated or redeemed, in hyperreality one can only win or lose. In the real world one may earn

In "Cyberville", Stacy Horn's analysis of the chat salon ECHO, she remarks that people can "have different personalities in text" than their real life personalities, and may be different again over the telephone. Personality is not a property of the abstract mind, but of the mind-body as experienced through all its motor-intentional modes. If we can understand those modes, we have at least a glimmer of hope of building a cyberspace that is an acceptable alternative for the physical world. It is not a question of real versus virtual but of understanding how we live rather than simulating the where.

Human-computer interaction is a great challenge for telepistemology. In the real world, we rely on others for most of our knowledge. If we can believe and trust the people we meet online, we can continue to learn and prosper as online beings. Without intimacy and trust, our existence in cyberspace will remain an impoverished substitute.

The call of Borgmann is important as he writes, "The claim that cyberspace liberates people from the accidents of gender, race, class, and bodily presence is often made by advocates of electronically distributed education. But to conceal a problem is not to solve it. We have to learn to respect and encourage people as they actually exist. ... The fuzzed identities of cyberspace, moreover, lend themselves to their own kind of mischief."

Network culture [11] calls us to a new mind, one in which we must not merely affirm seemingly passive choices but find a ground upon which to do. The book "Othermindedness: The Emergence of Network Culture" is an appeal to the new media and the Internet (as well as to specialists in literature, feminist and cultural studies, rhetoric, and interactivity). "Network culture is an othermindedness, a murky sense of a newly evolving consciousness and cognition alike, lingering like a fog on the lowlands after the sweep of light has cleared the higher prospects. The same or a like fog increasingly seems to cling in the folds of the brain. We ache with it, almost as if we could feel the evolution of consciousness in the same way a sleeping adolescent feels the bone ache of growing pains as if in a dream."

Where technological resembles cultural information, differences between reality and cyberspace are less stark. The lack of repleteness [12] and continuity gives technological information a special sort of underdetermination. The lack of continuity gives technological information a peculiar kind of brittleness. Information in cyberspace fails to have the suppleness and life that the semantic plenum of reality supplies to natural and cultural information and to the presence of real things and persons.

About the authors of *Community in the Digital Age*: Andrew Feenberg is professor of philosophy at San Diego State University. Darin Barney is assistant professor of communication at the University of Ottawa.

#### Non-cited References

Tripathi, Arun Kumar: Review of Hubert L. Dreyfus's *On the Internet: Thinking in Action* (Routledge Press, 136 pages, 2001) in *Information, Technology & People*: Vol. 15, No. 4, 2002

"Digital Promises" by Arun Kumar Tripathi, *Ubiquity* <a href="http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_4.html">http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_4.html</A>

"Digital Resources in Education" by Arun Kumar Tripathi, *Ubiquity*, <a href="http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_3.html">http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_3.html

"No Boundaries for the Journeys of the Mind" by Arun Tripathi, *Ubiquity*, <a href="http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_1.html">http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/views/a\_tripathi\_1.html

Albert Borgmann,  *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium*, University of Chicago Press, 1999

*Arun Kumar Tripathi is with the Philosophy of Technology Department, Institute for Philosophy at the Technical University of Dresden, Germany, and an associate editor of Ubiquity.*

#### Footnotes

- 1) Hubert Dreyfus in *Nihilism on the Information Highway*
- 2) Albert Borgmann in *Is the Internet the Solution to the Problem of Community?*
- 3) Published in 1984 -- in short it is called as TCCL
- 4) Reply to the Symposium on Albert Borgmann in Paul Durbin (ed.) *Technology and Contemporary Life* (P.34)
- 5) *Tools for Thought: The History and Future of Mind-Expanding Technology* (MIT Press, April 2000)
- 6) in *Retooling: A Historian Confronts Technological Change* (MIT Press, August 2002)
- 7) *The Vanishing Table, or, Community in a World That is No World*, Darin Barney
- 8) The paper is a substantially revised version of one presented by Dr. Darin Barney while he was Hixon-Riaqs Visiting Professor of Science, Technology and Society at Harvey

- 9) *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (UBC/Chicago, 2000)
- 10) *Crossing the Postmodern*, University of Chicago Press, 1992, p. 99
- 11) Michael Joyce, *Othermindedness: The Emergence of Network Culture* (2000)
- 12) Albert Borgmann: Information, Nearness and Farness, in *The Robot in the Garden: Telerobotics and Telepistemology in the Age of the Internet*, ed. Ken Goldberg.

Source: *Ubiquity*, Volume 5, Issue 28, Sept. 8 - Sept. 14, 2004, <http://www.acm.org/ubiquity/>