COMMUNITY AND MORALITY IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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The aim of this essay is to show that the expansion of the electronic communication technologies leads to the appearance of new forms of communities the function of which are to foster communities of interest and equality of status all work to enhance social capital, despite their lack of direct physical orientation. Mediated individuals treat these mediated communities as real. That is, the role of communication as value-based in mediated communities works to create traditional forms of communities as well. To understand why these new forms of communities can be regarded as moral entities, we wish to highlight how communal existence affects our moral decisions and judgements in the information age.

Keywords: electronic communication, mediated community, morality, social capital, social media, social network.

Introduction

Community is a moral entity that allows individuals to transcend themselves and find partnership with humanity, and that, therefore, has some level of social capital. The essence of social capital of community is the trust among individuals which allows a community to accomplish more with individuals' physical and mental capacities than they can alone. That is, social capital of community can be regarded as an aptitude of individuals to cooperate for common communal goals. It is influenced by social interaction and communication, relations of trust, communal norms and values, and it describes the social networks of the individual along with the various webs of reciprocity.

Thus well-developed social capital of community is linked to a strong internal morality in which individuals balance their individual rights with collective responsibility. Collective responsibility appears to be closely bound to an acceptance of moral norms and values. According to Amitai Etzioni (1996), moral order then rests on core values that are shared by community and embedded in its social structures. As Etzioni (1996) suggests, communities often have strong "moral voices" that help to

maintain social order in which values are accepted voluntarily rather than being forced to do so. Such a "moral voice", therefore, should encourage individuals and communities to reflect on their shared moral values and to avoid behaviour that contributes to unsustainable development.

In this article, we argue that in the information age, the expansion of electronic media leads to the rise of new forms of communities which has a high level of social capital. The development of these mediated communities contributes to the new notion of the relationship between self and community. As a result of this process, a kind of networked individualism is developing in which individuals can choose their own communities, rather than being involuntarily fitted into them with others. Consequently, these new forms of communities imply a stronger individualism and weaker social ties.

The use of new communication technologies transforms our conceptualization of social norms and moral values. As Mark Johnson (2014: 127) writes:

"The ever-increasing complexity of life gives rise to new possibilities and new desires (and, hence, new problems) that could not have been imagined by some of our ancient ancestor. New technologies generate new possibilities for human behavior plus new desires and values. In this context, that code is more progressive that can understand how the new desires/possibilities/values arose, why they were not part of the deliberations of earlier groups, and how we now can accommodate these new desires and values within our evolving moral system".

The "new desires and values" are attached to the new, mediated forms of communities, in which individuals' communication attitudes are determined by their impression of their "self" as a permanently available individual whose communicative acts are related to the global and local network of communicative interactions.

In the new forms of communities, however, human relationships have become organic, since communal ties are based more on common interests, values, and principles. It seems, therefore, that social capital is enhanced when new forms of communities extend traditional forms of communities.

The aim of this essay is to show how communal ties affect an individual's moral judgments and reflections on shared moral values and norms, and is to highlight how the rise of new types of communities contributes to enhance social capital that is linked to a strong internal morality in which individuals balance their individual rights with collective responsibility.

Social capital and community in the information age

Our conceptualization of moral behavior and our moral judgments are affected by our communal ties that represent some level of social capital along with technical conditions. In the followings, we wish to highlight how social capital and thus internal morality of communities are enhanced when new forms of communities develop around and extend traditional, physical forms of communities.

The traditional theories of community regard real (face-to-face) and virtual communities as mutually distinct forms of social organization. From this perspective, a real community can exist only by virtue of physical co-location in space, and is built on individuals' natural association through sameness and residential cooperation. Virtual communities established through shared social practices and interest, however, attempt to eliminate the boundaries of geographic location, gender, and ethnicity created in real communities. Recently, considering the impact of electronic media on our conceptualization of community, many theorists suggest that we need an integration of real and virtual communities. Manuel Castells

(2000), for example, suggests that we need a "bridge" between physical and virtual places in order to unify our experiences, because virtual communities only deal in fragmented individuals when they are opposed to real life. Others, like Etzioni (2001), Caroline Haythornthwaite and Lori Kendall (2010), hold that the best communities are indeed the hybrids of physical and virtual communities. As they suggest, in these new, hybrid forms of communities, virtual communities enhance physical communities. In this view, as new communication technologies expand, the boundaries between real and virtual forms of communities become increasingly indistinct, and individuals regard their virtual community as real. In the digital age, the function of communication as value-based in virtual communities also works to establish physical communities as well.

It seems that through this new integration of virtual and real communities, the expansion of electronic communication leads to a new conceptualization of the self. The appearance of mediated communities contributes to develop fragmented and fractured selves, because it opens up many other possible communities in which to participate. The electronic media enable humans to share alternative set of values, norms, and expectations. As Kenneth J. Gergen (2003: 111) suggests: "There is little in the way of 'looking inward' to locate 'one's true self', because there is little remaining core. Indeed, for the newer generations the very idea of a core-self turns strange".

As a result of this process, individuals are attached less to position determined by their social ties. Thanks to new communication technologies, they can get acquainted with new sets of communal conventions, norms, and values in view of which they can choose more deliberately from among the competing local communities. The possibility of this free and more deliberate choice establishes the more complex and multi-layered identity of individuals. As Joshua Meyrowitz (2005: 30) writes,

"we can each create our own customized – and evolving – fusion of local and global identities".

As electronic communication technologies expand, new localities rise which are particular in many ways, and also are influenced by global processes and global values and norms. These new localities developing in the space of electronic communication strengthen the local identity and become integrated elements of the virtual communities created by global information exchange at the same time. By using the new technologies, an individual understands the features and values of his own local community in view of information acquired in the global media space. The global aspect provided by electronic media determines not only the notion of community but individuals' attitudes toward social norms. There is a new possibility to transform the rules of social perception and the national institutions of political and cultural domination, and to eliminate traditional categorical and classification boundaries in society. As Meyrowitz (2005: 29) points out:

"Yet, just as there is a blurring of traditional distinctions between children's and adults' experiences and between male and female spheres, so is there breaking down of the traditional similarities among what people of the same age or same gender experience".

A new virtual social space is in the making in which the communication contexts related to the use of new technologies foster greater emotional attachments to the local community which we choose from among the competing communities. Thus the networked society provides fundamentally new possibilities to change the rules of social perception and the conceptualization of the relation between the traditional political institutes of state and the local communities. As consequence of these changes, an individual is attached to the position appointed by his social class less and less.

Morality and virtual community

In the first two decades of the 21st century new social media seems to transform community life (Bodoky, Urbán 2011: 121). Users of Facebook, MySpace or Twitter have started to build small-scale virtual communities in the "global village" Marshall McLuhan (1964) dreamt of in the beginning of the 1960s. These small-scale communities, placed also in this global space, are characterized by quick information exchange, everybody knows everything about everybody's everyday life and they do care to share this information with each other. Relationships are getting reshaped among people, social bounds and social roles are reinterpreted.

As we mentioned above, these relations are not strictly face to face relations. In shaping social networks users take part virtually, little or more, it depends on individual choices. There are some, who registrate in social networks only because of tending already existing relations of their families and friends easier, quicker and more effectively. On the other hand, there are many, who venture beyond their existing circles and wish to form new relationships which, for example, never could be realized in real life because of physical or other constraints, or wish to join bigger communities formed to handle significant issues and they want to become a part of it. Web 2.0 enables for users to weave their online social presence together with their existing offline nets in a process where original functions of internet has changed and have become shelter of mostly anonymous or pseudonymous identities creating what we call today social networks (Vallor 2012).

Beside of their online and offline community members, social network developers, maintaining institutions, companies, governments, civil organizations and other institutions, those who perceive social media as an advertisement surface opportunity also take part in relation building, net developing through their joint complex web based interactions. Today, due to internet, the individualist passive receiver consumer culture (Riesman *et al.* 2001) is getting to be replaced by a new one which is more dedicated towards social values (Reimeris 2016). While a passive receiver attitude shaped by consumer society was generally observable before internet grew worldwide, online social networks contribute to the development of different behavior in relations of citizens to citizens and citizens to state. Factual route to active community based behavior derives from the shift of attitudes by more steps. For the first, online opinion articulation in community framework which forms online opinion communities, moreover, contributes to real active participation.

But, why do we want to live in communities, to belong to communities that shape frames of our interpersonal relations? Why and how do we want to change our individualist perceptions on life that is based on centuries long built and expanded individual rights? These questions reveal the potential of internet to redefine social relations. Our communities put a stress on our ethical behavior through social media: what to think about the others they mediate on themselves through their virtual profiles, moreover, how to design our profiles to show it to the others or how to behave and how not to behave. Gergő Prazsák has a partly satisfying answer for these questions (2010: 39–41) based on his analysis on European Social Survey Schwartz questionnaires. He raises the attention firstly on tendencies of conformity which means online social networkers also need to orientate themselves to opinion asserts and behaviors of others; secondly on hedonism which happens to appear as a general value involving openness and individuality, in this interpretation a hedonist aims to feel good and satisfied; thirdly Prazsák characterized user's claims to be treated as important personalities, to be honored by others for their achievements, to have opportunities to show their particular skills to others; finally, for the fourth, he named universalism as a typical value among internet users: in recent years feeling responsibility for others and the

maintainable environment, caring and support of each other became more intensive. Today, the strengthening of these values indicate, communities may become value-holding alternatives of the individualist approach.

More researches underpin (Bodoky, Urbán 2011: 124; Gayer, Balog Barabás 2011; Prazsák 2010), that Y generation, those who were born between 1977–1997 (Tapscott 2009); according to other sources, between 1976 and 1995 (Tari 2010), spend a lot of time on social net. According to a survey of Facebook AdPlatform in July 2011 50% of members of the Hungarian social net communities were between 18-34 years of age. This is mostly due to the fact that they use only this internet portal for their inter- and group communication, many times for mass communication as well, moreover, we should not neglect the fact that managing social network life tends to be their everyday custom (Bodoky, Urbán 2011: 123).

Being present on social networks is a characteristic feature of the Net Generation that "developed together with the Internet, the information technologies and the social media" (Klibavičius 2014: 92). During recent years we have conducted or led student researches on social networks. Within the framework of these researches we tried to find out whether in these technical conditions of social networks is it possible to find real ethical communities. In ethical communities people care about each other and about their relationships. We have detected these motivations in Facebook communities. However, maintaining the same community is a more complex commitment. Virtual community building and community care many times are regarded as a quicker and easier supplement of maintaining real relationships. But if they have to choose, which is more important, they choose for example to meet with a couple of friends personally than to send Christmas postcards to even a hundred of acquaintances no matter the latter is easier and quicker. In contrast, regarding vulnerability and the ability to defend themselves virtual community members

are more active than in real life, which is also an ethical point of view. They are more brave in their opinion assertion and in redressing offenses, in defending their friends or attacking others than in real life. These phenomena can be explained by the absence of personal contact. In lack of direct personal contact they take confrontation easier. However, from the other perspective vulnerability is revealing on members of virtual communities. This assertion was underpinned by the research of Zoltán Gayer and Tibor Balog Barabás (2011), in which by a sample of five hundred people, nearly 70 percentages of users allowed for strangers to have a look in their "everyday life" posted on their Facebook walls. It is true, this attitude characterizes users when they are in their community building period, collecting friends and other acquaintances, but later on, in their mature phase this kind of openness disappears more or less. Yet, their research on the acceptance of strangers concluded with a surprising result, according to which 44 percent of the sample accepted as an acquaintance of totally strange users contacts.

Although users may neglect or erase relations or hide their posts consequently from others, the high visibility and perceived values of online connections make this possible way less attractive for community based common thinking. This is called the affordance of online technologies (Frick, Oberprantacher 2011; Vallor 2012) so long as they provide a more attractive and more comfortable sample of usage (keeping alternative samples as well for the illusion of choice). In this regard on social networks, such as on Facebook, users have to confront the purposes of the portal to defend themselves from disliked opinions. This is why these portals are called moderately democratic social networks.

The most important condition of maintaining online communities is that members are able to contact each other actively. Active information sharing process can serve as a basis of developing community based social values.

Information flow is even more faster on social networks as all active users feed each other with information with specific content tags and metadata for common interest. Their shared collections contain a mixture of information and attitudes, feelings and value-orientation. In this way social networks can be more actual and trustworthy than TV channels or traditional news agencies. Social media is part of not just everybody augmented personal life to be part of one or more virtual communities but it is also a part of the public sphere.

This is why French press releases were posted first simply on Twitter in order to get information shared in its quickest way ever just minutes after the terrorist attacks in Paris (Szabó 2015). Internet users created a more complex picture on the outcomes of the attacks as they provided information from everywhere, even from the very scenes of the attacks where the press or the police did not have access. Those who were personally involved contacted their family members and friends immediately through social media. We can say, members of online social media acted a way we can call moral community. For the first sight, it seems, Kantian values of universal humanity showed up just after the attacks. There was a flood of compassion and sympathy emerging on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter from all around the world. It appeared in several forms, in words, pictures, photos, mainly by sending photos on local buildings dressed in the three colors of the French national flag and by using other symbolic means. Immediate and mass assistance was organized: expressing compassion and sorrow by words, everyday internet-users and famous people as well, and also by pictures, Even Youtube itself dressed up in French tricolors, or by acts. Through hashtag #PortOueverte many Parisians sheltered those who stuck in the streets of Paris after the attacks when traffic collapsed and they could not get home safely. Facebook introduced a "checked in safe" button for those who were in Paris that night for setting an ease for family members and friends.

Despite of the global coverage of these social networks, however, augmentation of virtual space does not necessarily involve the augmentation of communities as well. Those active online participants of the Paris attack events raised their voices in favor of their own cultural values and in favor of people who share their culture. In fact, there were other terrorist attacks around that November night in Beirut (Lebanon), Aleppo and Douma (Syria) as well, where many innocent people died but remained nearly non-reflected by social networks. However, the safety check was introduced for the November 2015 Paris Attacks, hashtags were formed only for #PrayForParis and #PeaceForParis, as if other people of the world were not as important or not as worthy for the mainstream social media. This can lead us to a supposition that this concentrated exclusiveness underpins virtual moral communities which can be regarded as moral communities only if we accept extended moral communities are based on cultural distinctions.

Conclusions

This article holds, on the one hand, that community is a moral entity which has some level of social capital, and the expansion of electronic media leads to the appearance of new forms of communities the function of which are to foster communities of interest and equality of status all work to enhance social capital, despite their lack of direct physical orientation. We argued that these new forms of communtiy has a some level of social capital that is linked to an internal morality in which individuals balance their individual rights with collective responsibility.

This conception is based on the assumption that meaningful communication, information-sharing can be regarded as a resource of social capital of a community. Developments of key components of social capital (e.g. shared norms and values) are essential to meaningful communication. That is, we can conclude that communities are built into value-laden access

of other people, the ability of moral and trust-worthy communication in the information age.

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BENDRUOMENĖ IR MORALĖ SKAITMENINĖJE EPOCHOJE

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Straipsnio tikslas – parodyti, kad dėl elektroninių komunikacijos technologijų plėtros kuriasi naujos bendruomenių formos. Šių bendruomenių funkcija – burti suinteresuotas ir lygiateises bendrijas bet kokiam darbui, stiprinti socialinį kapitalą, net jei jų nariai fiziškai nesusiję. Medijuoti individai šias medijuotas bendruomenes traktuoja kaip realias. Tai reiškia, kad vertybiškai orientuotos komunikacijos vaidmuo medijuotose bendrijose taip pat konstruoja tradicines bendruomenių formas. Norėdami suprasti, kodėl šios naujos bendruomenių formos gali būti laikomos moralinėmis esatimis, siekiame pabrėžti, kaip bendruomeninis egzistavimas daro įtaką mūsų moraliniams sprendimams ir apsisprendimams informacijos epochoje.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: elektroninė komunikacija, medijuota bendruomenė, moralė, socialinis kapitalas, socialinės medijos, socialiniai tinklai.