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Memory, Interpretation and Connectedness: The Imagined Part of Virtual Communities

Abstract: This article focuses on the contemporary sociability built in the technological texture of everyday life. The virtual communities re-opened a large debate about human solidarity, collective identity, and sense of belonging. Their specific characteristics produced multilayered interpretations and polarized theories. I choose to point out the importance of the very act of interpretation and to follow the presupposition that the virtual community is, in fact, an imagined community. The usefulness of this presupposition will be analyzed in this article, with an emphasis on the role of memory in the imagined part of virtual togetherness.

Keywords: virtual community, imagined community, interpretation, collective memory

1. Technology as texture

In contemporary everyday life, the technological benefits are almost taken for granted, forming a background of presuppositions: we are reliant on many sets of technologies from the moment we wake up in the morning till the end of a day. A brief examination of this situation has to conclude that "technology at least provides a certain texture to the context of daily life" (Ihde 1983, 10). The texture depth depends on many factors, every person using a certain technological path, with different levels of bias and needs. The pervasiveness of technology in our life made its reflection very hard to accomplish, because "all of this is familiar, even if we do not critically reflect upon its meaning for human life. And if Heidegger is right, precisely because it is familiar it is even more difficult to elicit its existential significance. Such a technological texture to life forms a 'life-world', and familiarity itself may be a clue or index for what is taken as 'true'. If humans always interpret the world and themselves in some dominant way, how do they do this in the midst of technology?" (Ihde 1983, 11). Human beings have connections not only with other persons, but also with technologies and things that offer a kind of intertextual relationships. This technological environment became an important domain of the philosophical wonder, involving epistemological, axiological, metaphysical, and methodological

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interrogations (Ferré1995). Thus, technology provokes questions about knowledge, values, ethical usage, reality, and human nature. In this respect, we witness, for instance, an interesting vocabulary that bound the technology and the philosophy. Also, the dominant metaphors for a given period of time (such as the metaphor of the machine) are truly significant for the role of technology not only in the respective society, but also in the stream of ideas.

New media history has shown how technology issues were converted towards social, communicational, and cultural themes. The social turn of these new technologies implied a repositioning of the interpersonal relationships, of the sense of community, solidarity, identity or power. The case of the virtual communities is emblematic, intriguing by the possibility of creating an authentic communitarian sense in the lack of the classic characteristics of the organic community. Of course, as almost any other subject of discussion from the inside of new media umbrella, the virtual community was the trigger for a very polarized opinions and theories. Seen as a supplement of the offline communities, pseudo-communities, a kind of community that functions at another level of reality, the concept of virtual community revived the conversations about the human connectedness in general. Even if the traditional community was considered the gold standard of the entire discussion, the online sociability had consequences for the ways in which we conceptualize the concept of community, indifferent of its forms. Especially in the effort of distinctions between offline and online communities an intricate element suddenly appeared: the imagined part of this virtual social connection. The translation of "imagined community" notion in the frame of new media studies became shortly an inherent presupposition of the interpretation of virtual communities. The usefulness of this presupposition will be analyzed in this article, with a special emphasis on the role of memory in the imagined part of virtual togetherness. Among many interpretations, such as metaphor, stereotype, functional element, the role of the imaginary may fill a missing part in the complex perspective on virtual communities.

2. The online imagined sociability

The virtual community challenged the senses of being social, re-opened the troublesome debates about the concept of community mainly in the fields of sociology and anthropology. The possibility allowed by new media to communicate anonymous, with a created identity, with disembodied people located almost in any place where a connection exists, transformed the traditional interpretations of community. Just as television, telephone, or telegraph have done previously, the new technology of communication offered new possibilities for communication, reducing the distances and

trying to offer much more choices for the users. For Rheingold, virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussion long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (2000, xx). They are social forms of organizations made to connect people with the same ideas, hobbies, or jobs. The level of freedom is higher in online than in organic groups, the possibility to leave a community or to be a member in a multitude of them being evident.

Consequently, they were criticized for their fluidity, flexibility, lack of commitment and responsibility. The pulling out from the in-person ties, from the traditional communities were seen as alienating factors that disturb the solid organization of society and erode the social capital (Wellman et al. 2001). This search of effects may enter under the umbrella of the supposed "killer implication" of virtual communities (Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004), that seeks to delineate the most important impact for the future, or, in McLuhan's terms, the real message of this new technology. For Feenberg and Bakardjieva "virtual community has no killer implications. Online forums stage superficial fun, deeply spiritual experiences, and practically useful exchanges without discrimination. In defiance of both optimists and prophets of gloom, they are rarely either uplifting or degrading and much more often simply amusing, instrumental or inconsequential. They give rise to specialized relationships, not all-embracing solidarities. They are driven by fleeting interests, not unconditional commitments. In short, they have colonized a technical system that is intended for information exchange by implanting within it a staggering variety of old, hybrid, and brand new forms of human sociality" (2004, 39). Nevertheless, the communicative online spaces can support superficial and egoists uses, as well profound and solidary relationships. In the same vein as Barry Wellman, Manuel Castells thinks that online communities are not "imitations" of the offline groups and they have a specific dimension and dynamic. Also, they are "interpersonal social networks, most of them based on weak ties, highly diversified and specialized, still able to generate reciprocity and support by the dynamics of sustained interaction" (Castells 2010, 389).

The theoretical battlefield formed around the interrogation of the reality and consistency of virtual communities represented one of many points where another supposition emerged. Thus, the inclusion of the virtual sociability into the category of imagined communities seemed to have the power to explain its specificity. In this respect, Benedict Anderson's expression "imagined community" become a very used formula for the scope of explaining how people that do not know each other or even met at any time may succeed in building a sense of belonging and a functional group. If even the traditional communities are imagined (Anderson 1983, 18), containing a level of virtuality and potency, all the more so is the case

for the online communities. Moreover, communication media shape the styles in which communities have been imagined, so the importance of the style, as Anderson pointed out, is here at work. Anderson's remark, that the optimum criterion is not the falsity/genuineness of the community, but the style in which it is imagined, is very helpful for the case of virtual communities. In this way, the endless polarization of discussions is translated into another frame of interpretation.

The presence of imagination and the constant requirement of interpretation is observed in many components of the community and in its theorizations. Thus, the community is a cognitive, affective, social, symbolic construct that involves in the same time an ideal image and also a special reality. We witness a duality between experience and interpretation, between freedom and normativity: "community has a transcendent nature and cannot simply be equated with particular groups or a place. Nor can it be reduced to an idea, for ideas do not simply exist outside social relations, socially-structured discourses or a historical milieu. To invoke the notion of community is recognize that it is an ideal and is also real; and it is both an experience and an interpretation" (Delanty 2010, xii). The focus on the intersection between reality and interpretation is a fruitful point for the "localization" of the imagined part in the comprehensive view on community. A community involves very concrete practices and social relations, but it is also supported by a guiding idea that enables the creation of the distinctive traits of its recognition. The particular ways of talking, joking or responding on comments constructs the specific profile of the community, its intrinsic way of searching for cohesiveness, solidarity, and a sense of belonging. Also, the recognition from other people that belong to other groups constitutes an important clue for the statement of its collective identity.

Anthony Cohen (1985) emphasized that a community is rather a symbolic structure than a social practice. This constructivist approach stressed the symbolic nature of communities, seen as a fabric of norms, values, and behaviors that confers an identity to its members. Thus, community is a mental construct, their members strongly believing that they are sharing a similar sense of things, in contradistinction to other people. For Cohen, as the structures do not produce meaning in themselves, also the symbols do not create in themselves a meaning. So, "maintaining and further developing this commonality of symbol" (Cohen 1985, 16) became an important task for the members of a certain community. The passing from symbol to meaning is shaped by the force of individual and collective imaginary. As Gerard Delanty emphasized, "the whole point of Anderson's study was to show that community is shaped by cognitive and symbolic structures that are not underpinned by 'lived' spaces and immediate forms of social intimacy" (Delanty 2010, xii). The transcendence of geographical

boundaries and of classical forms of interpersonal relationships is a main trait of the virtual community, thus its symbolism and its units of meaning represent axes of its existence. Despite the fragility of the communicative bond of the technological-mediated communities, they provide the possibility of authentic forms of sociability.

The mediation supposes an inherent transformation and interpretation of the technological embedded situation. Any medium transforms its object and becomes a part of it; it is not a simulacrum or a representation, but it is a "variant 'world'" (Ihde 1983, 59). In this respect, the hermeneutic is required for every mediated situation and so much the more for such a complex entity as the virtual community. The explanation is simple: "the media-phenomenon is hermeneutic – it is mediated. Its presence is that distant presence which needs the adumbration of critical imagination to 'come alive'" (Ihde 1983, 61). Thus, the imagination is a very present element in the interpretation, with the role of filling the gaps. In Silverstone's approach (2002), the mediation is technological and social in the same time, situation that fits with the virtual community structure. Thus, it has significant consequences for the perspective that we construct on everyday life and on the "distant other", creating a hermeneutic framework of reference. The relationships between individual and social are in the center of the mediation. Thus, the mediation depicts "the fundamentally, but unevenly, dialectical process in which institutionalised media of communication (the press, broadcast radio and television, and increasingly the world wide web) are involved in the general circulation of symbols in social life. That circulation no longer requires face to face communication, though it does not exclude it" (Silverstone 2002, 762). In the same time, the computer-mediated communication mixes and blurs mediation and immediacy (Wood and Smith 2005), in a general quest of media immersion. This combination reveals one deep desire – the transparency of medium – and, more accurate for digital environment, the "natural" immersion into the medium.

Where can we find the application of the imagined community characteristics? In general, the study of nation and of ethnic groups were the most frequented *loci* in terms of the research on imagined communities. Anyhow, the organizational research reclaimed also the pertinence of this perspective. The economic organizations are, too, historically built and imagined, and the company's rhetoric or brand construction record many imagined sets of slogans or identitary sets of values (Anteby and Molnar 2012, Jenkins 2008). In the online environment, every community seems to have an imagined part, and this happens because of several forms of *absence* in comparison with the offline environment. In this respect, a virtual community has been labeled as the "metaimagined community" (Brabazon 2001, 2) or as "the new imagined community" (Fox 2004). Nevertheless,

not all the online platforms are designed with the scope of creating and maintaining a community, but, on the other hand, imagined communities were created even on these inappropriate "spaces". Thus, Twitter has been analyzed as a basis for creating not just an imagined community, but also a shared sense of community (Gruzd et al. 2011). Twitter's imagined community includes the significant traits extracted from the interpretation of Anderson's work. Twitter participants share a common language, there is a sense of temporality ("presentism" and not the "homogeneous" time discussed by Anderson) and the high centers are still present (quite contrary to Anderson's idea of decline of high centers). In this way, "Twitter links Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined communities and Mark Granovetter's concept of 'the strength of weak ties' (1973). Indeed, Twitter turns out to be an implementation of the cross-cutting connectivity between social circles that 19th-century sociologist Emile Durkheim (1893/1993) argued was the key to modern solidarity" (Gruzd et al. 2011, 1314).

Another surprising platform for the construction of an imagined community is constituted by the newspaper threads, analyzed from this perspective by Bryn Alexander Coles and Melanie West (2016). Here, the role of membership is completely unnecessary, and the same thing applies to the existence of an account or profile, so the posters can be written anonymously. Even if there had been no necessary connections and interactions between the users, the common themes of reflection and debate nonetheless had the power to coagulate these users into a community: "even without a formal infrastructure to support the formation of communities, users of a given online space will seek to join with like-minded individuals to establish an imagined community" (Coles and West 2016, 46). This thematic commonality may transform atomized individuals into people that belong to a larger group, acting as if they connect to a big social entity. This assertion resonates with and probably confirms the well-known Rheingold remark according to which "whenever CMC [computer-mediated communication] becomes available to the people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies" (Rheingold 2000, xx). The explanations offered by Rheingold for this state of affairs are "the hunger for communities", which takes place due to the disappearance of the informal public spaces able to bring people together in offline, and the innovations brought by new media that give the users the possibility of doing things in new and provocative ways.

Coles and West (2016, 47) noticed something very interesting, too: even if the members do not know each other, they have to decide who is a member of the respective community and who is not. The markers of the group (linguistic, symbolic, modes of relating, posts) and the shared history made that group act as a community. In the very act of identifying the

members and the non-members, the presuppositions about what the identity of the community should be, about the nature of its norms, codes, values, and practices, or about the interaction among its members are, evidently, put to work. The representations about these things function almost every time in terms of guidelines of orientation and interpretation of that group.

3. Memory and imagined communities

A significant element that bond people together into an online community is the collective memory. For those communities which have already a tradition and a history, there is also a dynamic of memory and also a consistent archive that contains a variety of materials (comments, photos, videos). The online environment created a "new digital temporality of memory" (Hoskins 2009, 93), that enables a fluid movement on the temporal axis. The digital archive that every online community creates becomes a reference for all the members and also for the people that read the comments but do not participate as members. The knowledge incorporated into a community can be compared with a "living encyclopedia" (Rheingold 2000, 46), a collective repository that is representative for the identity of the community. In this respect, the knowledge transfer is a remarkable thing that happens in online, forming an impressive "gift economy". In cyberspace, "individuals contribute knowledge and help others despite the lack of a personal, face-to-face relationship and the easy alternative of free-riding on the efforts of others" (Wasko and Faraj 2005, 53).

Andrew Hoskins described a new "emergent digital networked memory – in that communications in themselves dynamically add to, alter, and erase, a kind of living archival memory" (2009, 92). "On-the-fly" memory recognizes the role of mediation and mediatization of our everyday digital media and its inherent processes of construction and re-construction. Thus, this new memory is a hybrid one, in the same time public and private, in the same time actively produced and just recorded, in the same time well stored and fluid, modifiable and also fixed, because a digital trace will forever remain in the network. The new media memory is collectively modified and is also a social glue for the communities, actively sustaining their lives and identities.

Alison Landsberg (2004) uses the concept of "prosthetic memory" to indicate the role of media in generating, communicating, and archiving memory. Thus, "the cinema and other mass cultural technologies have the capacity to create shared social frameworks for people who inhabit, literally and figuratively, different social spaces, practices, and beliefs. As a result, these technologies can structure 'imagined communities' that are not

necessarily geographically or nationally bounded and that do not presume any kind of affinity among community members" (Landsberg 2004, 8). Paul Frosch (2011) discussed the imagined collective memory in the age of television, emphasizing two distinct layers. On the one hand, there is a "ghost effect" of media – the idea of a collective consciousness and imaginary audience. On the other hand, the memory itself is imagined and also "performed *through* the social nucleus; more particularly, that memory is imagined as a shared audio-visual simulacrum, collected and unfolding a synchronous 'now', via a central spatial location that is connected to everyone" (Frosch 2011, 129). Thus, imagination is conceived as a dual entity, as invention and representation (Frosch 2011, 123).

Grounded on terms derived from Deleuze and Bergson, Bollmer (2011) reframed collective memory, arguing against "a model of collective memory where collectivities emerge through the articulation of individual humans together through approximations of shared psychic memories. Instead, collectives *are* individuals produced through the actualization of memory as shared embodied movement" (Bollmer 2011, 2). In this explaining model, memory as movements presupposes aggregations of people and technology. The communities become communities through memory; a durable community involving a repetition of memory through rituals. These rituals can be interpreted also in Anderson's terms of community style that fashion and fix its identity. Activities such as the way of addressing to the other members, events that repeat every year, different meetings of the members in the offline may become rituals that construct the community and make paths for memory.

The internet offered the possibility of generating new forms of collaborative remembering. In this respect, virtual communities play a key role, curdling and directing the routes of memory. For instance, Wikipedia has been interpreted as a "global memory place", as a "site of memory" (Ferron, Massa 2014) that allows many acts of remembrance seen as an imaginative reconstruction of the past. Hurricane Digital Memory Bank and September 11 Digital Archive are just two other *lieux de mémoire*, sites of *prosumption* that enact commemorative strategies, emotional catharsis, and therapeutic rhetoric (Recuber 2012).

4. Conclusions

The concept of imagined community went through a large dissemination since Benedict Anderson wrote his seminal work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. The researchers of virtual communities adopted soon the term and adapted it to the online context. Thus, this concept functioned as a presupposition of interpretation, the right idea that could accurately identify and explain the set of online gaps,

such as the lack of face-to-face interaction, the context indeterminacy, the anonymity, the distance, or the flexibility of interactions. The tension between the ideal image and the concrete experiences constructed by the sets of unknown people conceived as similar is underlying the imagined part of virtual community. The members' ideas about structure, dynamics of interactions, and way of communication shape the imagined community. The easy use of the concept "imagined communities" in the online world was also criticized, transforming it into a "new intellectual cliché" (Brabazon 2001). In spite of its limitations, this term still offers useful perspectives for a profound understanding of the virtual togetherness.

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