"Community - arianism"

Chapter : Community connections in an information society

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Most readers of this book are likely to have at least a vague idea about the capabilities of the Internet although unless they are reasonably frequent users of some of the Computer Mediated Communications (CMCs) it offers they may find the material discussed in this chapter somewhat mind-blowing (see Winder 1994... for basic introduction). Much of the research for this chapter was carried out by searching the World Wide Web for up to date articles on themes such as virtual community and communitarianism. Quotations such as that from Kapor (below) were downloaded and imported into the author's word processor, and bibliographical details of most of the references for the book were discovered by on line searching of the Social sciences citation index and library catalogues as far away from the author's desk as Washington DC. Clearly the new CMCs are having a significant impact on information processing, in the academic world. This chapter considers their impact on the debate about communitarianism and the nature of contemporary communities. Although the Communitarian Network uses the Internet to communicate, is this globalism in contradiction with their themes of local decision making, and community responsibility? How do virtual communities differ from the communities of Real Life? Can the new technologies bring wide scale benefits to local communities, especially those characterised by poverty and deprivation, or will their value be restricted to a rich and powerful elite? Finally how do technologies such as multimedia and virtual reality and the cultural forms they generate feedback directly into popular conceptions of 'community' itself?

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Virtual communities: utopias

From the direction of cyberspace, comes a very optimistic view of the potential for community in an information society. In an article appearing as foreword to the Dummy's guide to the Internet Mitch Kapor (1994) Co-founder of the significantly named Electronic Frontier Foundation makes these claims.

'New communities are being built today. You cannot see them, except on a computer screen. You cannot visit them, except through your keyboard. Their highways are wires and optical fibres; their language a series of ones and zeros.

'Yet these communities of cyberspace are as real and vibrant as any you could find on a globe or in an atlas. Those are real people on the other sides of those monitors. And freed from physical limitations, these people are developing new types of cohesive and effective communities - ones which are defined

more by common interest and purpose than by an accident of geography, ones on which what really counts is what you say and think and feel, not how you look or talk or how old you are. .... The new forums atop computer networks are the great levellers and reducers of organizational hierarchy. Each user has, at least in theory, access to every other user, and an equal chance to be heard. Given these characteristics, networks hold tremendous potential to enrich our collective cultural, political, and social lives and enhance democratic values everywhere'.

And in keeping with the spirit of postmodernity and the New Age the article ends with a quotation from the Buddha.

'As a net is made up of a series of ties, so everything in this world is connected by a series of ties. If anyone thinks that the mesh of a net is an independent, isolated thing, he is mistaken. It is called a net because it is made up of a series of interconnected meshes, and each mesh has its place and responsibility in relation to other meshes.'

Although social scientists are beginning to take an interest in Cybersociety (Jones ed. 1994) the most extended discussion of the notion of virtual community to date is that of Rheingold (1994). His popular book The Virtual Community besides outlining the history of the Internet technologies, and drawing a sketch map of cyberspace, argues that the interactive and participatory nature of CMCs provides many opportunities for community building. As a self confessed, Granola eating ex-hippy, Rheingold relates from his own experience how he has built networks with people of common interest around the world. He glories in the current semi-anarchy of the Internet and argues for minimal regulation of its services.

As a prime example of a virtual community Rheingold describes the WELL which grew out of a bulletin board set up by a group of computer literate alternative lifestyle enthusiasts in California. Here they were able to exchange information about music (especially that of the band Grateful Dead), political protest events and happenings, and New Age spirituality. Similar alternative virtual communities now exist centred in a number of locations, for example the Phreak bulletin boards in the U.K., and are linked in many cases to the global Internet. Rheingold celebrates the co-operative spirit and participatory nature of the WELL and similar services. Yet interestingly, he also relates that many WELL subscribers feel the need to meet up at least occasionally in Real Life (IRL), for example at the annual WELL family picnic.

Another WELL user Eric Theise (1995) describes his involvement, in contrast with the anonymous neighbourhood where he lives, and where he only knows two people in any depth, and where certain surly neighbours never ever smile.

'My virtual community, The WELL, has about 8000 residents. Many of them live in the Bay Area, but many don't. I have made friends in Austin, where I go this weekend, New York City, Seattle, Boston, Chicago, Belgium, Japan, and Australia. These people have, sight unseen, fed me, let me stay in their homes, given me work, and provided me with emotional support. The best advice I got when my girlfriend and I broke up showed up as simple text on a computer screen, sent from an 'aging cyberpunk weirdo' in Texas. Ditto for when my parents died. On The WELL I know dozens of people well enough to know what makes them laugh, who I can trust, who I can collaborate on projects with, who's in a relationship, and who has diametrically opposed views to mine on gun control, abortion, the latest popular film or song, or the eternal Mac versus DOS and what about the Amiga, anyway?, question.'

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Virtual communities: dystopias

However, even the enthusiastic Rheingold raises some of the social implications of the new CMC

technologies. Other commentators such as Postman (1995) have a far more pessimistic scenario in view, while Stallabrass (1995) explores in some detail the narratives and cultural conflicts around the notion of cyberspace concluding almost apocalyptically that it is 'the last act of the Enlightenment'. Scime (1995) in a direct comparison of Etzioni and Rheingold is guardedly optimistic about virtual communities. There are a number of key issues that need to be considered if the dystopic nightmares are to be avoided.

Firstly there is the question of social exclusion. Just as major commuter roads, such as East London's Newham Way have carved through the heart of urban neighbourhoods and left a deprived and under-resourced community cut off from mainstream society, so the Information Superhighway could further bisect and polarise the world. Many people because of poverty, or simply lack of access to computers and cables will never be able to participate. Most of the people of the Two Thirds World, and the growing underclass in the West will be too busy in long hours of low paid manual service work, or standing in line in benefit offices and soup kitchens to find their way onto the Internet. The economic potential of CMCs is likely to resonate with other contemporary economic and political processes to further increase the gap between the haves and have nots. (Devins & Hughes 1995)

Alongside economic exclusion comes cultural exclusion. Education and training in IT skills is a key determinant here. Anyone who has begun to "surf the Internet" will recognise how difficult the process of learning to connect up, let alone to navigate through the information jungle can be, especially if you do not have access to expensive training packages, or at least a friendly and patient "native" tourist guide. Although new generations of more user friendly software may encourage wider access, many people, especially the elderly will never catch on. Language is another barrier. At the moment written English is the main medium. Although increased use of graphics, other language channels, perhaps with machine translation and speech - machine interfaces may soon be in place, English is inexorably becoming the globally dominant language. Linguistic, and other ethnic minorities may well remain excluded. If age and ethnicity prove to be barriers to access, disability may not. For there are many accounts of people with profound bodily limitations who, given appropriate hardware and software play a full and active part as "normal" members of virtual communities. On the other hand gender could still be barrier to access since the CMC world is dominated numerically by males, and as some feminists argue that the medium and style of communication is controlled and defined by men. As long as the Internet operates mainly in text neither disability nor gender need become an issue, nor for that matter sexuality or race. For invisible participants can remain totally anonymous if they wish, or disclose as much or as little about themselves as they wish. Of course even then, they need not disclose the truth; there are many accounts of participants with aliases, and fantasy identities in cyberspace, including flirtatious chat between men who present as women and women presenting as men.

As the usefulness of the technology increases the commodification of information has begun. Even now on-line costs to really useful information services are prohibitive to all but high profit companies and privileged sectors of government; with the massive capital investment needed to make the high bandwidth "superhighway" a reality, true costs are likely to soar, subsidised access is likely to disappear, almost every service will be expected to make a financial return, and accountants are likely to restrict usage to those who can generate income. The copyrighting and protection of information sources by improved cybersecurity will undoubtedly grow. Ominously information once freely in the public domain, such as small area census data, is now only available to people or organisations who can pay large sums of money, and the liberation of information ("hacking") is in many countries a criminal offence.

As long as IT is dominated by the market any benefit to ordinary people will be minimal. As far as the general public is concerned the main functions of the superhighway will be distribution of entertainment (58 channels of American trash movies, soaps and game shows, and zappit games improving each year in their search for virtual reality). There are dangers too that all cultural and sporting activity will become spectator oriented rather than participatory, spelling danger to physical and mental health as the only exercise of the channel hopping couch potato will be to press a zapper, on average every 45 seconds. Even those who choose to use CMCs interactively, to obtain a tailor made education, or build a personal virtual community, face physical dangers from Repetitive Strain Injury (Mouse muscles!), failing eyesight,

radiation from VDU screens, virtual (only) aerobics, and psychological alienation from other human beings. While there will be a surface appearance of a cornucopia of cultural choices the products available will inevitably be constrained within the limited choices of the dominant Western mass culture.

As IT proliferates Information overload will be an increasing problem/temptation to the non discerning user. Technofreaks who regularly log in know how easy it is to waste hours just "surfing the Internet," being sprayed by slightly interesting information and riding where the current takes us. Will "knowledge" or "wisdom" increase along with this surfeit of information? Is any, or all of the information found there up-to date, relevant, accurate or (dare we use the word/) true? Already too we are reaching the point where electronic junk mail could clog the system or render it unattractive. Subscribers to electronic mailing lists already suffer from "spamming", megabytes of advertising, unsolicited instructions about how to make a nuclear weapon or eccentric chain letters. Such junk landing in your mailbox, means that you either leave everything unread or find you don't start productive work till about midday. Software products are being developed to sort and filter out some of the unwanted junk, and it is not impossible for the virtual community to develop mechanisms for social control (Baym 1994, MacLughlin et al.1994).

Mutual social control is one universal feature of face to face communities. The current invisibility of participants and near anonymity of CMC networks makes social control a problem area in virtual communities, just as it is in large scale urban societies. With relationships being impersonal and at a distance it will be hard to establish shared cultural norms of behaviour. Ground rules for communication or netiquette are reasonably easy to codify, but the existence in cyberspace of cliques with divergent and extreme political and religious views has two effects. Extremists and fundamentalists can easily find a small support group scattered across the world, even if their views are regarded as lunacy by mainstream society. On the other hand because they are publicly advertised and easily contactable, people with contradictory views can communicate their displeasure without much fear of physical attack. So it is that the Internet suffers from "flaming" where angry obscenities are traded across the world. Nonetheless Rheingold writes of various strategies being developed informally to impose sanctions control on those who breach netiquette, ranging from returning megabytes of junk mail from all parts of the network, to the ultimate punishment of banishment from the community, by removing access to the server. This possibility, despite the seeming anarchy of the Internet, does indicate that it is not in principle beyond human and political control.

Unsurprisingly issues of external censorship, surveillance and social control are repeatedly found in the dystopian accounts of the Internet. Parents, women's groups and moralists have expressed concern about the easy availability of pornographic stories, sex centred interactive discussion groups and obscene images on the Net, although it is hard to see how CMCs in themselves are qualitatively different from any other medium. Surely the moral issue is one about post-modern culture as a whole, which allows and encourages such approaches to sexuality and human persons. But it is not mere prudery to fear that fantasy lives full of sex and violence may too easily and frequently be translated to atrocities in real life. Governments are already responding to these concerns. In the UK there have been prosecutions on Net pornography, in the USA strategies for parents to put electronic locks on undesirable channels are being promoted, and in certain Islamic states legal barriers to access to the Internet are under consideration. However, controlling pornography is but one example of government concern about the present relatively anarchic form of the Internet, and its potential for by-passing information control imposed by the nation state.

Worse still for libertarians are the Orwellian nightmares, including the possibilities or rewriting historical documents or parliamentary decisions with a few key strokes. They often point out the potential for linked databases in the hands of a totalitarian state, or even just an efficient bureaucracy. It is probably the case that information technology makes the possibility of the "panopticon" ideal of universal surveillance more feasible (Foucault 1977). However, it has yet to be shown that such surveillance is unbearably intrusive to most citizens, or that it is less desirable than some of the more personal, but perhaps more cruel mechanisms of social control used in traditional small scale communities. In face of rising concerns about crime and community safety, many people may feel that a certain level of electronic surveillance is a price

worth paying.

Whether the enthusiasts from cyberspace or the prophets of doom are vindicated only time will tell. It is probable that both sides will be proved partially correct. Whatever happens it is clear that the world as a whole has become utterly dependent on advanced global informational infrastructure. This in turn is dependent on global trade networks for supplies of raw materials from all over the world and on a reliable and efficient system for the distribution and production of electricity. In such a complex and interdependent network it does not take the imagination of a science fiction writer to think through the possibilities of organised fraud, economic sabotage, military incompetence or malign dictators, cyberspace terrorism or simply a cataclysmic cock up. However, it is said that the origins of the Internet in the military industrial complex of the USA ensure that it would survive a nuclear holocaust. Perhaps this is the point where we should return to real life, before fantasy merges with virtual reality and leads to real death!

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Cyberville and local communities

The possibilities of global networking by telematics push to an extreme one of the fundamental questions about the nature of community. Is it meaningful to talk about a sense of community without a sense of place, without anchoring it in locality and/or personal face to face interaction?

Rheingold relates a now famous story of the father who used the WELL bulletin board when his daughter contracted leukaemia. He searched everywhere for information about the best treatments, and was inundated with both useful advice and messages of what could best be described as "prayer support". Happily the girl got quality treatment recovered. Obviously this was a case of real human benefit from the use of new technologies. However in other types of case traditional face to face community is more effective. For example not so long ago my own two year old daughter had to be admitted to our local hospital as an emergency at eleven at night. In the end the illness it was nothing too serious and after two days she was fine again. But that evening was not the time to use the Internet. Instead, we have our next door neighbour, Jenny. She had already been with us two hours while we waited for the GP to visit. Then without being asked she took in our son for the night, while two worried parents drove their child to hospital. We know we are privileged as a family to be part of a local community network where such behaviour is common. It is of course built out of thousands of daily acts of mutual co-operation and reciprocity, formal and informal childminding arrangements, sharing cars for supermarket trips, looking after cats and rabbits when families are on holiday, going to boring parties and school meetings and tolerating through thin walls the incompatible musical tastes of one's neighbours. But such community is possible even in the fragmented society of East London and at times is vital for sanity and survival. And it cannot yet be found on the Internet.

In order to answer this question at a more theoretical level we need to return to our earlier discussion of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, and of community lost, saved or liberated. Scime (1995) argues that Etzioni's criteria of community, shared interests, shared values, discourse and the characteristics of a moral voice, and of caring and nurturing, can be applied at least in part to many virtual communities. However we have also noted the tendency of communities, indeed their function, to build boundaries and barriers. A totally open network such as the Internet will always find it hard to develop internal solidarity, since so much of this depends upon building a distinct identity by comparison with other groups, even by conflict with a common enemy. This appears to be an unlikely scenario for the prototypical virtual communities. While relationships of communication will grow in number, and personal networks of participants may expand they are almost certainly going to remain at the level of Gesellschaft. The contacts will remain for the most part transitory and instrumental, only in some cases such as interactive

bulletin boards and cyber conferences developing into Bund structures. Even then it is unlikely that the networks will become dense and multiplex, despite the mixture of play and serious information hunting, and despite the annual real life picnic gathering of WELL participants described by Rheingold. Virtual networks are inherently incapable of building Gemeinschaft.

Nonetheless the idea of community without propinquity reaches its extreme in the Internet, and is clearly going to influence the direction of social change in years to come. Many people will have less need to move out of their own homes for information, entertainment and even work as telecommuting develops. Some people will chose to live and work in idyllic and remote mountain villages, or on small off-shore islands, providing of course that there is an electricity supply, a phone link and a hypermarket within an hour's drive. Interestingly it is in such rural settlements that the nostalgic myth of community is usually located. Using cyber conferences and video link meetings it will be easier to establish world-wide business networks, but harder if less necessary to bring people together for local face to face interaction. Information technology may have some potential for countering the growth of oil fired transportation for commuting and international business, possibly bringing some environmental benefits in its wake.

In the science fiction (becoming fact!) world of virtual reality, it may soon be possible to send 3D visual images, a hug, and even engage in virtual (hardly virtuous!) sex over the information superhighway. However, it is likely that people will still need to, and prefer to meet, not to mention make love, in the flesh (sic). Even if teleworking, teleshopping, teleleisure (in homes surrounded by video cameras and security fences and patrolled by rottweilers) become the norm, it is inevitable that for the foreseeable future people will live, play and be educated, go to pubs and churches and go for walks in neighbourhoods. It will be harder but still not impossible to distinguish real life from the fantasy of "pretend land". Inevitably people will meet neighbours face to face, talk with them, discover common interests and some sense of local community will persist. It is even possible that people who meet in virtual communities will decide to move home to locate near each other. Castells has shown how the economic and skills base of high tech industries are concentrated in favoured urban locations, such as silicon valley in California (1989). While logically there is no reason for software engineers to live in the same continent there are advantages of maintaining human contact with colleagues, and developing personal networks with potential collaborators and customers. And if face to face community at the neighbourhood level seems likely to persist as an ideal or a real life need for the people of cyberville, it will remain even more important for the ordinary citizen.

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Community development & IT

Despite the dystopian visions it can be argued that within ordinary urban and suburban neighbourhoods, and perhaps even more in scattered rural communities CMCs have many potential benefits for ordinary people and for local community groups. Beamish (1995) analyses and describes the development of a number of local community networks in North America. Typically they can be accessed on line via a modem, or at public access kiosks or terminals. Information about local events and services, opening times of museums and clinics, and public bulletin boards advertising new community groups, the search for a lost cat or second hand baby equipment for sale could all be set up. Video linked interpreting services and for a dozen or more ethnic minorities, and public access terminals offering direct contact with the authorities, or the police, can be set up as in the ATTACH project being piloted a number of European locations including Newham. (Horten 1995, Attach 1995).

Such networks clearly have a role in community development in deprived neighbourhoods . If information spells power, any success in shaping and/or liberating information must be an empowering experience. Direct access by the public to useful on-line databases could in theory help people navigate in such

impenetrable jungles as the social security or health service bureaucracy. The search for funding for community projects could be simplified. Email could give many people and grass roots organisations fast cheap international and local written communication, one to one or via mailshots. Local unemployed people could search for jobs and upgrade their skills as they start to use such technologies. There could be other positive spin offs such participation in the labour market for women and disabled people unable easily to travel to work, although such "homeworking" is a sector notoriously prone to low pay and exploitation, despite the savings to employers in overhead costs. The local economy could be strengthened as small businesses could advertise their wares, and LETS schemes, where people swap labour measured in local units of currency could be facilitated (Carter 1995).

A major problem at this stage is that all such schemes for Community CMC networks are relatively experimental, and have rarely been properly evaluated. It seems that many such projects are technology led rather than based on a clear analysis of demand or need from the local community. There is as yet no evidence that simply providing public access and information is followed by take up, especially by categories of people who are otherwise socially excluded. Without a major educational programme and huge culture change among the mass of people the case for such services remains unproven. It is also far from clear whether market returns or state subsidies are sufficient to fund the initial investment and running costs of such systems. However, experiments should surely continue, and in twenty years from hence the situation may be entirely different.

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Electronic democracy

Communitarians place a high value on participation in the political process and many have seen CMCs as an important tool to encourage it. Complaints and campaigns could be directed instantaneously to the top, with copies to thousands of concerned people across the world; even now it is possibly to send an Email message direct to Bill Clinton at the White House, although it seems unlikely that he is guaranteed to read it in person. The use of Bulletin boards, computer conferencing and other forms of electronic publishing could help relatively marginal campaigning groups get their message across, and mobilise for action such as demonstrations and mass letter writing..

One area of great significance is that of electronic voting. (Percy Smith 1995) In the USA mechanised voting apparatus has been in use for many years while in the UK, pencil and paper methods with public manual counting remains in force. Information technology could offer not just rapid and accurate calculation of results, but a much more profound change in political culture. If elections were cheaper and more efficient there could be lots more of them, and referenda as well as parliamentary and local elections could take place from the comfort of people's homes. It is argued by some that this would enhance democracy and accountability, as the people would take all the important decisions directly. There are three serious arguments against this form of electronic plebiscite. Firstly it would be likely that a large group of people, most probably the poor and socially excluded would be excluded from participation, either because they could not afford to have the necessary equipment in their home or because, having no susbstantial stake in society they would feel such processes to be irrelevant to their lives, and have no trust in the political process. Secondly dealing with too many political decisions in this way would devalue the currency of democratic participation. Voting on capital punishment or nuclear disarmament, by pressing zapper buttons in front of a TV screen would soon be equated with similar polling for the winner of the Eurovision Song Contest, or preferences for plot outcomes in interactive soap-operas. Thirdly the information base for deciding on important questions would be a contentious issue. Every question put to the public would need to be framed by politicians and bureaucrats, giving them immense power in shaping the terms of any debate. Despite a minority of people using CMCs to discuss the issue and question politicians before the vote, the majority of people would be informed of the issues by mass

media, where complex policy options are usually reduced to slogans and images. While it is obvious that politicians have a vested interest in resisting such changes, it would seem wise to engage in a long and extensive public debate on any proposals for electronic voting, before attempting to modify existing systems. After all representative democracy, called to account by opposition parties in the legislature, lobbying, protest, sophisticated public opinion polling and regular general elections has a long and respectable track record as one of the least worst options for political life..

Freedom of information is one of the widely heralded benefits of CMCs as government publications, draft legislation, transcripts of Parliamentary proceedings and MPs press releases could be available on-line. In the USA with its Freedom of Information Act and open political culture such public access is already available. In the UK with a more secretive government tradition progress is slower, and one suspects that access to the most significant documents would be restricted. There is also the potential for better communication across sectors, important in the context of partnerships for urban regeneration, and between departments of local and national government. In theory there is the potential for reducing the number of meetings and forests felled for paper documentation which no one has time to read, and behind which politicians often take cover. Accountability could be improved by easy searching for relevant key words in such texts. Such possibilities resonate well with communitarian emphases on public participation and government accountability.

The communitarian concern for workplace democracy could also be served by CMCs. In some workplaces networked computing has already led to the erosion of hierarchies and the growth of teamwork. Ideas can emerge at any level in the company, but we need to ask whether power (any more than high salaries and share options) has really shifted from the top levels of management. We also need to note that new technology has led to the growth of less socially responsible practices such as contracting out and "down-sizing". Nonetheless we must concede that IT could in some ways be a democratising force in employment.

CMCs then do hold out some hope for communitarian concerns about political participation, effective democracy and accountability. However, the major reservation must be that they are inherently a privatising technology in that they encourage people to participate from the comfort of their armchair, rather than to go out into the public world in person. They enable direct contact between a citizen and the national state, or even super-national organisations such as the EU or UN. However they probably discourage political participation at the small scale local level, and cannot seriously build community through the "small platoons" of mediating structures.

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Community as virtual reality

As a postscript to this chapter we need to take note of the impact of a technological development that is linked to but distinct from CMCs. This is the development of multimedia techniques and virtual reality. Both can be of great use in education and training. For example a single CD Rom can contain an entire encyclopedia complete with video clips, illustrations and sound track. Virtual reality simulations can be used to train airline pilots, brain surgeons or English Test cricketers, all without the risk of death or disaster. However the technologies are likely to have more mass appeal in leisure and play, with great profit to the entertainment, music and computer games industries. Such technologies underline some of the great cultural trends of the post modern period, of words being displaced by images, the pastiche of references from different historical periods and world cultures, of subjective experience and happening superseding reason and objectivity, and of the blurring of the distinctions between work and play, between fantasy and real life.

Interestingly we are already seeing the marketing by the leisure industry of "virtual community" in a different sense of the term. It comes in the shape of theme parks, industrial museums and the like, where customers are sold for the duration of their visit, environments that evoke nostalgia, and vicarious and temporary Gemeinschaft. In the slate caverns of North Wales, in the Jorvik Centre at York, in the Ragged School Museum in East London, the visitor from post modern times can step back to any number of pretend worlds, and in them participate to greater or lesser degree in "the life of the community". The tour guides in many cases are redundant miners or mill workers, a fortunate minority of whom were retrained, when the traditional industry, which was the lifeblood of the local economy and community was closed down in the face of global market forces.

Such themed environments as might be expected reach their extreme forms in the USA, in Disneyland, Universal Studios and the themed hotels of Las Vegas. There is even the marketing of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania as the Christmas capital of the USA (Cameron, & Gatewood, 1994) in which the notion of traditional community is a key selling point. But all such virtual environments need to be sanitised in order to be marketable, producing history devoid of conflict, industrial production devoid of sweat and dirt, community devoid of poverty and oppression, and even Christmas devoid of the smells of cow dung and the blood and tears of childbirth. It is hardly the stuff of which lasting loyal solidarity, social justice and liberated human relationships can be made. In the final chapter we move on to search for values and praxis which can serve such important and worthwhile concerns.

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Key books for Chapter 8

Rheingold H., (1994) "The virtual community, finding connection in a computerized world", Secker & Warburg, 1994

Jones S.G. ed., (1995) "Cybersociety", London, Sage

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