
Imagined Electronic Community: Representations of Online Community in Contemporary Business Discourse

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*T*his chapter presents a history of how online community has been represented in business discourse. It critically examines some of the arguments, narratives and rhetorical strategies drawn on within business texts to represent online community. The chapter outlines some of the changes that occur between 1994 and 1999 with respect to how community is represented, and the role assigned it in business models. I suggest that one can identify three main ways of conceptualizing community during this period. Online community is first represented in business discourse as either peripheral to commercial goals, or as a minor impediment to them. By 1995, online community has become a synonym for new strategies of interactive marketing, as dreams of online sales

fade and advertising and marketing become the primary means of making money on the net. In 1997 and 1998, online community is depicted as central to models of commercial Internet development, as well as to the future of narrowcasting and mass customization in the wider world of marketing and advertising.

The chapter discusses two business texts, Cantor & Siegel's *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway* (published in 1994), and Hagel & Armstrong's *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities* (published in 1997), to illustrate how representations of online community shift over time. The chapter discusses why these shifts occur, and provides a critique of some of the ways in which contemporary business models seek to commodify and privatize online community, regulate social interaction, and organize the resources and knowledges produced within communities. The paper ends by discussing why academics may have an interest in involving themselves in helping organize alternative modes of community formation and knowledge production in the context of moves to corporatize and commodify higher education.

Early Business Texts & “The Community That Isn’t”

“It is important to understand that the Cyberspace community is not a community at all”. (Canter & Siegel 1994, p 187)

Early business texts tend to have little to say about issues of culture or community on the Internet. Texts describing online commerce begin to emerge in 1993 and 1994 as the Internet is opened to commercial development. The focus of these early books and journals is on how to establish a presence on the net, set up a web site, virtual storefront or webmall, get listed on a directory service, and access lists of email addresses (examples of early business texts include Resnick and Taylor 1994; Cronin 1994, and Ellsworth and Ellsworth 1994). The web design that grows out of such business models tends to emphasize electronic product lists, online catalogues, order forms and static mall-like architectures. There is little attention to issues of culture or community in the business models advanced (the only place in these texts where community is sometimes considered is in the occasional discussion of “netiquette”). The general thrust of these books is nicely summarized in the title of a section from one of the most popular books on Internet commerce, Ellsworth's *Internet Business Book*. It reads: “If you build it they will come” (Ellsworth 1994, p 68). Internet users are the anonymous “they” in this formulation, an undifferentiated mass, and web commerce is primarily about setting up a shop in cyberspace to which “they” will naturally gravitate.

One of the first business texts to consider online community in any detail is, ironically, Canter & Siegel's book *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway*. The irony of this stems from the fact that it was Canter and Siegel who first came to symbolize for many net users that their community was under threat by commercial development of the Internet. Canter & Siegel, immigration lawyers from Phoenix, became notorious for spamming advertisements for their services across USENET news in 1993 (dubbed “the Green Card incident”, the controversy was widely reported in the popular press). Canter and Siegel's actions led to mass protests in cyberspace, and to the charge that cultural and com-

munity norms had been violated. Because of the enormous controversy they were involved in, Cantor and Siegel's book displays a self-consciousness about questions of online community that is absent in previous business texts.

Canter and Siegel's account of the Internet and of doing business on it is organized around a very familiar trope, namely the Internet as frontier¹. For example, in a chapter entitled "What it Means to be a Pioneer", they write:

In Cyberspace, the homesteading race is on. Hoards of anxious trailblazers are prospecting for the best locations in Cyberspace. At the moment, everything seems up for grabs. We've staked our own claim. We've explained to you how to do the same. While you may need some of the pioneer spirit to get involved in cyberselling, the good news is that you won't have to live in a tent and brave the elements to make your fortune. The worst you will have to deal with is some misguided electronic vandals and the foolishness of a few flames. (216)

The frontier narrative pervades Canter and Siegel's writings. It is central to their understanding of the Internet, the people who use it, and the nature of online commerce. It is used to distinguish between the two main populations that exist on the Internet, namely "natives" and "pioneers". "Natives" are those who have so far constituted the majority on the net, and include researchers, students, those working in government institutions and other non-commercial areas. "Pioneers", on the other hand, are those in business who are advancing the process of commercial "exploration". Canter and Siegel's deployment of the frontier trope works to define exploration as the expansion of commercial development into the "undeveloped" lands of cyberspace.

In this scenario, much as with Frederick Jackson Turner's original frontier thesis², the people who are already there exist largely at the margins of the narrative (Canter and Siegel argue that the only real cultural contact necessary is that pioneers must "learn a few words of the language spoken here so you can converse with the natives". Canter and Siegel 1994, p 3) The native population exists primarily to be explored and mapped by commercial pioneers. Natives are equated with the frontier itself, subsumed into the "natural" environment, incorporated into a progress narrative in which this environment is "developed". Canter and Siegel's text represents the Internet and the groups of people on it as part of nature, and both

¹ Slotkin, a historian who has written extensively on the various uses of the idea of the 'frontier' in historical and political discourse argues that the frontier narrative continues to be a myth of great importance in contemporary America:

The myth of the frontier is arguably the longest-lived of American myths, with origins in the colonial period and a powerful continuing presence in contemporary culture. (Slotkin 1985, page 15)

Although I would question Slotkin's positing of an uninterrupted line of descent in the use of frontier mythology, current appropriations and reworkings of the idea of the frontier in writings about the Internet confirm its contemporary significance.

² Frederick Jackson Turner's highly influential treatise 'The Significance of the Frontier in American History', written in 1893, defined the roots of American identity as growing out of the experience of settling the West. According to Turner, the frontier was a geographical force that profoundly shaped the character and institutions of American life, as well as the nature of American democracy and individualism. As many critics have pointed out, Turner's thesis both naturalizes and backgrounds the colonization and depopulation of native peoples by conflating this with the development of the land by European settlers.

are seen as operating via certain immutable natural laws. Such “nostalgic progressivism” implies that what will be found on the net is in a sense already there, and that what will emerge in the future is prefigured in an idealized past of commercial and colonial conquest. The ideological force of this representation, as with many previous uses of the frontier narrative in American history, is to legitimize a narrow set of interpretations of the landscape, who has the authority to own and shape it, and what its future will look like.

There are several aspects of Canter and Siegel’s representation of the Internet community that are worth focusing on. Firstly, the population of Internet users, when not merely a territory to be mapped, constitutes a potential threat to the operation of Internet commerce. Canter and Siegel state that “like the Old West with which analogies are often drawn, Cyberspace is going to take some taming before it is a completely fit place for people like you and me to spend time. There is a small but extremely vocal group that will do almost anything to keep out the new settlers.” (187) The many negative characteristics attributed to natives reinforce the idea that they cannot be left to control the Internet. They are described as incapable of self-government, as having the wrong attitude to private property, as prone to committing criminal acts, and as consisting of significant numbers of “electronic sociopaths” (pp 187–208). In a chapter entitled “Crimes in Cyberspace: Why the Net Needs You”, Canter and Siegel describe the threat that groups of Internet users pose to online commercial practices, and how this population ought to be policed and disciplined in ways that safeguard business interests.

Secondly, Canter and Siegel’s definition of the native population is constructed so as to deny the legitimacy of their claims for control or ownership of cyberspace. Canter and Siegel stress that unlike pioneers, whose work transforms the landscape in productive and worthwhile ways, natives produce nothing of value. Their resistance to commercial development is defined as aggression, and their attitude to private property is deemed so backward that claims to ownership or control carry no weight. One of the most striking aspects of the rhetoric of *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway* is the way it reproduces some of the language and arguments used by Locke in the “property” sections of the *Second Treatise*. There Locke asserts that land belongs primarily to those who engage in productive labor to develop it. Indigenous people who resist European development can thus be defined in certain contexts as “aggressors”. (This reading of the *Second Treatise* is discussed in Glausser. According to this interpretation of Locke’s position, “people occupying (or claiming as property) land that they either cannot or will not develop may become aggressors against those who can and would develop that land.” Glausser 1990, p 208) Canter and Siegel’s text works similarly in defining opposition to commercial development as illegitimate hostility by a population with only limited claims to ownership and control of the “lands” they inhabit. Canter and Siegel argue that the deficiencies evidenced by natives stem from the fact that the Internet was for so long populated by academics and researchers, who made volunteerism and a “gift economy” the norm (p192).

However, one of the most distinctive aspects of Canter & Siegel’s text is the way it is organized in consistent opposition to the notion that cyberspace is characterized by authentic social or community relations. Canter and Siegel go to great pains to dismiss the idea that the “natives” who populate the Internet constitute any kind of community. They describe the Internet as “the community that isn’t”, (p 187) and write:

Some starry-eyed individuals who access the Net think of Cyberspace as a community, with rules, regulations and codes of behavior. Don't you believe it! There is no community....Along your journey, someone may try to tell you that in order to be a good Net "citizen", you must follow the rules of the Cyberspace community. Don't listen. (12)

Canter and Siegel argue that the net consists solely of "individuals and inert messages", and that just as owning a phone does not make one a member of "phonesville", communicating and interacting online does not make one part of an online community. Canter and Siegel's notion of the Internet, and of how commercial development is to proceed, is predicated on the notion that online community does not exist. In this way they can argue that no social or community relations exist that could be encroached upon by the spread of advertising and commercial activity. While *How to Make a Fortune on the Information Superhighway* is almost hysterical in its attitude to online community, it is nonetheless symptomatic of business texts produced at the time, in that it presents community as largely at odds with commercial development of the Internet. In Canter and Siegel's text, as with most others written in the same period, online community is at best irrelevant to models of net commerce, and at worst a potential impediment.

Community as Interactive Marketing

"The successful marketplace will invite consumers into a communal experience and let them meet people as well as buy products...it will make shopping a transaction involving not just goods and services but also experience. It will not forsake community for commerce". Alburty 1995.

Less than 2 years after the publication of Canter and Siegel's book an explosion of interest in online community is identifiable. A variety of journals, magazines and guides begin mentioning community in relation to online business strategies. "Making your online business a site that fosters community", is described by *Internet World* magazine as one of the "5 Keys to Successful Net Sales...even though a store resides in cyberspace, it should build a community—a place where it feels good to shop" (Internet World 1995). A series of influential articles in the *Harvard Business Review* begin charting the dynamics of "marketplace", the term given to an emergent cyberspace in which commerce is central, and in which communication and social interaction between customers and vendors is important. According to an editorial in the New York Times written in 1995, to succeed in this new "marketplace" one needed business strategies that took community into consideration ("The successful marketplace will invite consumers into a communal experience and let them meet people as well as buy products...it will make shopping a transaction involving not just goods and services but also experience. It will not forsake community for commerce". Alburty 1995, p A17)

There are several primary reasons why this sudden interest in online community emerges in 1995 and 1996. Firstly, the virtual mall model proved a disaster. The motto "if you build it they will come" became a grim joke, a slogan that would haunt early business

texts (in a list of the top ten “ecommerce myths”, a recent issue of *ComputerUser* magazine states: “Myth #2: If you build it they will come. The web is not a field of dreams. Unfortunately, the ecommerce pioneers found this out the hard way”. Kurkowski 2000, p 1.) Few people came to such sites, and fewer still bought anything. In a 1997 survey of Internet business models, *The Economist* argued that “the virtual malls that have sprung up in their thousands over the last two years have been an abject failure”, adding that “the industry has defined electronic commerce too narrowly”. A successful alternative model could be found, it was argued, in “the few businesses that begin grouping themselves by theme, joining or creating communities with shared interests” (Anderson, 1997).

Secondly, as with traditional mass media, advertising became where money was made online. Or as a number of industry commentators put it, the focus switched from talk of sales, to talk of “capturing eyeballs”. Marketing analysts discovered that while people might not yet buy very much online, they did make purchasing decisions based on what they read on the net. It thus became important to bring people back to a site, and “community” became a kind of synonym for this imperative.

Thirdly, from 1995 onward a significant amount of demographic information had been gathered, and a number of key market segments identified. “Community” became a polite way of talking about audience, consumer demographics and market segmentation while seeming sensitive to Internet users, their culture and community. (Numerous examples of this can be found in the sections of commercial web sites where companies describe for advertisers how attractive their web site users are. Since this information is usually public, available to both site users as well as prospective advertisers, the word “community” functions to signal demographic desirability while appearing sensitive to the groups of people who frequent the site. Thus several of the best known online brokerage firms invite advertisers to “reach our community” of demographically desirable members. Or as the E*TRADE web site puts it, “Advertise with Us: Reach our community of tech-savvy investors”).

In practice, what this new found interest in “community” often meant when translated into web design was that commercial sites began to add chatlines, bulletin boards and games, forms for people to enter personal information, and celebrity guests to host discussions. In 1995 and 1996 one can identify a movement away from the Internet mall design that dominates early business texts. There is instead an attempt to build sites that enable interactivity, allow users to communicate with each other and with site sponsors, and which bring people back. Many commercial web sites began to graft interactivity and various forms of “communityware” with advertising and marketing strategies. Cybersight, a design company that has worked on some of the most prominent corporate web sites on the Internet, described their approach to building community in the following terms:

We’re looking for applications that give users the freedom to talk to one another, but also keep people focused on promotion. The trick is to get interactivity that keeps the product always on the top of the user’s mind. *Internet World* 1997.

An example of the rather strange hybrid of “community” and marketing imperatives that emerges in web design during this period can be seen in the Café Herpé site, shown below:

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE (THE IMAGE FILE IS: HERPE.GIF)

An example of community as interactive marketing: Café Herpé
(<http://www.cafeherpe.com/>)

Sponsored by the pharmaceutical company SmithKline Beecham, Café Herpé promotes itself as “the genital herpes resource information spot for U.S. audiences”. The site is designed to simulate a café, complete with reading lounge, espresso bar, terrace and buffet. Café Herpé strives valiantly to make genital herpes a topic of relaxed conversation and fun. The site has games, a “gallery of romantic art”, a guest book, links to online support groups and web sites, as well as information about genital herpes and SmithKline Beecham products.³ Café Herpé is paradigmatic of the first wave of web sites to make online community a central part of their business model. In this model “community” functions largely as a synonym for new strategies of interactive marketing, and signals a shift in net commerce from a focus on product sales to a focus on advertising, promotion and the collection of demographic information.

Online Community and the Future of Internet Commerce

“Community is one of the biggest buzzwords in the Internet business, with nearly every site trying to incorporate some kind of bulletin board or chat room”. Brown 1999c.

“In electronic markets...your creativity and ability to leverage the communal ethos of the marketspace dictate whether you win or lose.” Hagel and Armstrong 1997.

In contemporary business discourse online community is no longer seen as an impediment to online commerce. No longer is it thought of as just a useful add-on to web sites, or as merely a synonym for strategies of interactive marketing. Instead, community is frequently described as central to the commercial development of the Internet, and to the imagined future of narrowcasting and mass customization in the wider world of marketing and advertising. In the last few years business texts with titles like “Expanding Markets through Virtual Community”, “Creating Compelling Commerce Sites Via Community”, and “Hosting Web Communities: Building Relationships, Increasing Relationships and Maintaining a Competitive Edge” have become widespread. In a paper delivered at the Internet Commerce Expo in March 1999, Wilson states:

Many electronic commerce sites have fallen short of expectations because they failed to create compelling reasons for customers to change their buying behavior. The missing element: community. By using interactive discussions, busi-

³ Interestingly, evaluations of online health information seem to indicate that the best sites are offered by the federal government and universities. A study of commercial health sites published in the *British Medical Journal* indicated that they are, as one reviewer put it, ‘a mix of excellence and exploitation, equally capable of help or harm’ (Brink 1998, p 48).

nesses can infuse electronic commerce sites with community, thereby delivering value in addition to convenience, enhancing perceived trustworthiness, and creating online experiences conducive to shopping instead of simple browsing or buying. “Virtual communities”, built around products can increase sales, reduce marketing and customer acquisition costs, foster brand loyalty, and provide cost-effective market research and focus groups...community is the fourth evolution of the Internet, and commerce sites that don’t harness it will miss out. Wilson 1999.

Such claims about online community have been accompanied by heavy investment in commercial community software, by the sale of large web-based community sites to major media corporations and Internet portals, and by high stock market valuations for community sites such as Geocities, iVillage, Talkcity and AOL. The new-found financial value of online community is perhaps best exemplified in the pending merger between AOL, the world’s leading developer of commercial online community, and Time Warner, the world’s largest traditional mass media company.

One of the most influential business texts to theorize commercial community development is Hagel and Armstrong’s *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*. I will discuss some of the main arguments, figures and narratives used by Hagel and Armstrong to represent online community, since their text has been important in shaping the way community is talked about in business discourse, has influenced corporate web design, and as I shall describe in the next section, has an interesting status in the context of recent charges made concerning the exploitation of online community members.

Hagel and Armstrong talk about online community in a way that differs significantly from Cantor and Siegel. Hagel and Armstrong not only acknowledge the existence of community, but consider in almost ethnographic detail various different aspects of online community and culture (in many respects their work can be read as a kind of corporate cultural studies.) Hagel and Armstrong believe that commercial development of the Internet centers on organizing and exploiting the potential of online communities. They write:

We suspect that the skills required to organize a community will be as important as any initial advantage a company might appear to have based on its assets...The keys to becoming a successful organizer over time will be the abilities to aggregate members, retain them, and encourage them to make transactions. (p 128–9)

The text provides a description of how to design, build, and organize online communities. For example, it describes how to train “community architects” whose job it is to “acquire members, stimulate usage, and extract value from the community”. Hagel and Armstrong describe how to identify community members who can be paid to manage sub-communities, and volunteers who can be encouraged to build parts of a site.

In contrast to Cantor Siegel, who represent the user environment as something to be controlled, dominated and planned, a landscape to be reterritorialized and repopulated with people who engage in or are receptive to commercial development, Hagel and Armstrong do not consider online space as something one can design or organize the way one would a mall. Hagel and Armstrong’s discussion of community is organized around metaphors of the

organic and of the ecosystem. For example, at the center of Hagel and Armstrong's model is what they term an "organic management style" (155). They argue that with online community a radically different approach to management must be followed in which a high degree of autonomy is ceded to members, and managers display a "a gardener's touch". (150) They write that "seeding, weeding and feeding are the best metaphors for online organization and evolution." The figure of a dynamic, partially "self-organizing" ecosystem is perhaps the most pervasive means of representing virtual communities, a result of the fact that member-generated content and interaction is of prime importance in models of commercial online community, and this cannot be controlled too directly. An organic management style involves such practices as "planting" conversations and provocative ideas, allowing a high degree of self-organization, and carefully balancing factors such as size, intimacy, continuity and growth (151–156).

Unlike Canter and Siegel, there is little sense of conflict either between the "native" population and commercial developers, or within "native" populations. The figure of the community as "self-organizing" ecosystem is used to promote the idea that community interaction is essentially conflict free. The community will naturally contain a mix of four types of people: "builders", "browsers", "users" and "buyers", and since these groups differ in value, one must try to encourage the correct ratio between them (p 59–61). The metaphor of community as ecosystem is used to promote the idea that if left to themselves, communities will evolve in ways that are rational, suit commercial development, do not require coercion, and which will fit traditional patterns of ownership and control. For example, Hagel and Armstrong argue that virtual communities will "naturally" become run less by volunteer, noncommercial groups, and more by corporations and professionals. When it comes to ownership, there exist what they term "natural owners": businesses and groups that have related interests and who are specifically suited to the task of building virtual community (natural owners are those who "enter the arena with a strong advantage because of assets such as brand name, deep customer relationships, and in some cases, published content that they own." Hagel and Armstrong 1997, p 128) Thus they suggest that Johnson & Johnson, ToysRus, HMOs and other such groups would be naturally suited to constructing and managing a community devoted to parenting (206).

A central argument made by Hagel and Armstrong is that the knowledge, content and resources produced by online communities are extremely valuable commodities. They write that online communities "aggregate an enormous collective expertise that could not possibly be matched by any individual expert, no matter how well trained or experienced. In many cases the value may not be so much in the experience and knowledge of any one individual but in the comparative experiences and perspectives of many individuals" (p 30). Unlike Canter & Siegel, they believe that the "gift economy" and tradition of volunteerism that exists on the Internet are assets. They assert that "in electronic markets...your creativity and ability to leverage the communal ethos of the marketspace dictate whether you win or lose". However they argue that up till now, such potential resources have been highly disorganized. They propose that community architects, developers and archivists could organize, structure and store community knowledges and resources so that they are searchable and accessible in ways that that are profitable to both the community, and to vendors, advertisers and marketers.

Member generated content is seen by Hagel and Armstrong as particularly valuable for several reasons:

- It attracts new members
- The investments people make in their writings and relationships foster strong member loyalty. This inhibits what the authors call “churning” (or to use the terms commonly employed in business texts, it raises “switching costs” and enables “lock-in”.)
- It enables more subtle ways of interweaving marketing and advertising, media form and content, communication and community formation than exist in traditional mass media.
- It allows for sophisticated forms of customization, which in turn creates another barrier to people switching to a different virtual community.
- It provides detailed and inexpensive demographic information on people’s interests, habits, and buying practices, and reduces vendor search costs. (Hagel and Armstrong 1997, pp. 8–12).

In general, online community is seen as a means of intensifying and advancing existing trends in mass customization and narrowcasting. Thus in describing the evolutionary paths of online community development, they argue that the highest stage of development is the “infomediary”, where there is perfect symmetry between user interests, profiles, and the interests of vendors (104–8). This is where the most sophisticated mass customization can exist, where transaction costs are negligible, geography is insignificant, intermediaries disappear, where consumers are fully informed and can maximize the value of their personal information. In short, this is the “frictionless capitalism” described by Bill Gates in *The Road Ahead*. At this point, we stand at the threshold of the perfect market and the fully realized individual who is a “market segment of one”. The interpenetration of community, communication, commerce and marketing is so perfect that they are practically indistinguishable. Or as Hagel and Armstrong put it, “at this point the community redefines the market by becoming it.” In essence, virtual communities have the potential to enable the formation of a subject closer to the ideal, fully informed customer of traditional economic theory, and enable market efficiency to leave the realm of abstract theory and descend to earth.

Hagel and Armstrong’s representations of online community and strategies for developing it have been echoed in the business plans and press releases of many present-day corporate sponsored sites. Consider, for example, the case of Talk City. Talk City has become a pioneer in the field of commercial community development, has built a substantial network of sponsorship and cross-promotion deals, and builds customized online communities for Fortune 500 companies. For example, a number of Hagel and Armstrong’s suggested strategies and arguments above about the commercial value of online community are echoed in the following press releases from Talk City:

Thanks for coming to learn more about Talk City—the Internet’s leading community site. We offer our advertisers and sponsors an integrated portfolio of ef-

fective and innovative online marketing opportunities that deliver what web marketers are looking for: real interactivity with your customers. Tighter, real-time relationships with your customers. And exceptional targeting. All at very affordable prices. We're pleased (and even a little bit flattered!) that some of the most influential brands in the world have chosen Talk City as their online community advertising destination. The list includes Procter & Gamble, Mattel, Columbia-TriStar, Intel, The Discover Card, Sears, Toyota, Microsoft and many others.....As you're probably aware, community sites are one of the fastest-growing and most envied categories on the Internet today. Why? Because community sites deliver real customer loyalty and tremendous usage patterns. People who join community sites have decided to put down a stake in a cyberneighborhood, which means they'll come back and stay for long periods of time. From the Talk City Media Kit, May 1999.
<http://www.talkcity.com/mediakit/welcome.html>

The kind of web design that emerges out of such strategic use of community can be seen in the Talkcity home page. Below is a copy of the Talkcity homepage taken from May 1999:
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Talk City, a leader in the field of commercial community development
 (<http://www.talkcity.com>)

In Talk City, member generated content is tightly integrated into marketing and advertising strategies, as in the selection of "Cool Home Pages" by members that focus on current or forthcoming television shows and films. Bulletin board topics ("What Interests You?") are clearly influenced by demographic and marketing considerations, divided as they are into such categories as "Autos", "Business & Finance", "College", "Computing", etc. Interaction between members and the community organizers is heavily inflected by product testing and market research, as in the "Speak Up Poll" at the bottom of the page that enables people to "vote" on their marshmallow consumption. The topics selected for chatline discussions, shown in the right hand column, appear a similar mix of promotion, advertising and market research as in the "Fashion Chat" sponsored by Sears in which members are urged to "tell us all about YOUR personal style this year").

Other corporate sponsored community sites have attempted to leverage the value of member generated content in more direct ways. For example, Keen, Infomarkets, and Experts Exchange (<http://www.keen.com>, <http://www.infomarkets.com>, <http://www.experts-exchange.com>) have set up sites in which they invite community members to assemble various resources and pieces of information (jokes, riddles, recipes, stock tips, etc.). Here for example are statements from Keen and Experts Exchange describing their sites:

Got a question? Got an answer? Just want to find someone to talk to about, well, anything at all? Welcome to Keen.com, the Web's first Live Answer Community. Just search our directory of listings for an available Keen.com member

who shares your interests and can answer your questions. (<http://www.keen.com/web/keenhelp/help.asp>)

Experts Exchange has pioneered the IT knowledge sharing community market place since 1996, enabling its members to quickly find specific solutions to their specific questions. Through its community, Experts Exchange developed an open market place where experts compete and collaborate with each other in the process of answering questions. (<http://www.experts-exchange.com/info/about.htm>)

Member generated content is stored as text or audio messages (live advice is also sometimes available), and this is then sold as part of an online information market or auction. This enables such sites to make money from the valuable and extensive “collective expertise” that Hagel and Armstrong argue exists within online communities.

A Critique of Contemporary Internet Business Models

To those committed to the project of democratizing media, and to producing what one might loosely call an oppositional public sphere, the techniques of community formation discussed in *Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*, and the strategies embodied in many contemporary corporate sponsored community sites are hardly encouraging. In this section I will adumbrate a critique of some of the ways in which contemporary business models seek to commodify community, to organize and regulate social interaction, and to control practices of online knowledge production.

Online community is frequently described in the popular press as a kind of “media from below”. Yet in spite of the rhetoric of democracy, accessibility, participation, and utility surrounding virtual communities, real control is often very limited. Corporate sponsored online communities are characterized by many of the same limited constructions of the “popular”, the same forms of creative ventriloquism identifiable in mainstream media genres such as talk shows, “reality TV”, docudramas, etc. Moreover the power of members is defined largely in terms of consumption rather than production or control of community resources. Much of the framework for conversation and interaction is constructed around the imperatives of advertising, sales and market testing. Where member opinions are sought, it is frequently in the form of surveys and polls. Which is to say a consumer model of power, politics and participation is being preferred over a citizenship model that entails deliberative interaction. While members obviously use corporate sponsored community sites in creative ways for a variety of ends, it is important to note that real power tends to be the hands of site owners. This is evident in the closings of a number of community sites. AOL has shut down big community areas without any warning on a number of occasions. And as Brown writes in “Netscape to Community: You’re Evicted”, when the community area of the Netscape Netcenter web site was closed in April 1999, members were neither consulted nor given advance notice: “No warning – canceled, the hosts let go, the community members left to consider what, exactly, happened to their home.” (Brown 1999b). Such acts of “weeding”, to use Hagel and Armstrong’s terms, have begun to occur more often as com-

munity sites come under pressure to organize member content in ways that are commercially profitable, or to get rid of them.

The strategies described in Internet commerce texts, and implemented in corporate sponsored community sites can also be exploitative. Watchdog groups such as the Center for Media Education charge that community web sites for children are being used to gather personal information and conduct market research without proper disclosure (Horowitz 1999). A more pervasive problem exists in the way that contemporary models of Internet commerce advocate exploiting the volunteerism and “gift economy” traditions that prevail on the Internet⁴ As Hagel and Armstrong note, community members produce knowledges, information and resources that are commercially valuable. Furthermore, much of the work carried out on community sites has, for many years now, been done by volunteers. For example AOL is reported to employ 12,000 workers, 10,000 of whom are volunteers. However the practice of using volunteers is coming under scrutiny, with AOL recently under investigation by the U.S. Labor department. Unpaid AOL volunteers have been required to work specific shifts and file time cards, which, it has been argued, may be a violation of labor laws. As community has become more central to Internet commerce, volunteers have been put under increasing pressure to engage in community building activities that are profitable. It is in part due to this tendency that volunteers were initially moved to complain to the Labor department about AOL. Zaret cites the comments of a former AOL employee, who says:

When it gets to “We want to keep this fresh so people buy things,” you’re not doing this for fun anymore—you’re doing this for the company. And when you’re doing it for the company you’re not a volunteer anymore. There is a place for volunteers online, but not in a for-profit company. That’s getting real close to exploitation. (Zaret 1999)

When the question of exploitation is raised, commercial community sites typically defend themselves by echoing Hagel and Armstrong’s description of online community as “organic” and an “ecosystem”. Consider for example these statements by spokespersons for iVillage and AOL in defense of their use of volunteers:

iVillage.com community leaders are true volunteers and not employees. Our community leaders typify the organic, member-driven nature that drives Internet community development in general...Volunteerism is one of the central attributes of the Internet. Our hope is that the Internet’s participatory nature is not what’s at issue here.

AOL denies that the volunteers are that critical to developing the communities. According to AOL spokeswoman Ann Brackbill, the volunteers don’t build the communities, they simply emerge out of them. “It’s less about whether [volunteerism] is critical or not critical, but is it organic to the Net and will it just happen. We think natural leaders who participate arise in both the online world or the offline world.” (Cited in Brown 1999c).

⁴ For a discussion of the genealogy of this tradition see ‘The High Tech Gift Economy’, Barbrook 1998.

Such representations of online community as an organism naturalize the work done by community members. They suggest that growth, maintenance and reproduction are qualities inherent to the system, and happen automatically. While the metaphors and narratives used to describe online community differ from Canter and Siegel's, they still naturalize the Internet population, subsume it into the natural environment in a way that denies both the legitimacy of work done and the potential for claiming ownership rights.

Online community is frequently described as an alternative to traditional mass media, yet it is being rapidly integrated into existing networks of corporate commodification. In texts such as Hagel and Armstrong's, and in the press releases of community developers, online community is described primarily as a means of advancing existing techniques of market segmentation, mass customization and narrowcasting. Online community is touted as a more sophisticated way of inscribing commercial imperatives into communication and interaction. Many of the same mass media genres that interweave marketing, advertising, media form and content, have been produced for online communities. Online equivalents to product placement, complementary copy, and advertorials abound, and companies such as Talk City have pioneered new genres such as "infochats" and "intermercials" (the CEO of Talk City states that their aim is to develop "Internet advertising [that] will draw upon the Net's unique real-time and social interactive qualities" Talk City Press Release 1998). The Internet greatly extends the ways in which content, marketing and sales can be integrated within publishing. For example, many online news sites collect a commission for books sold via the links in their news stories with booksellers such as Barnes & Noble. As Hansell notes, "never before have publications had such a direct interest in sales directly tied to their news reports".⁵ Similar tendencies have taken shape in online communities. Content which supports links to commercial sites and can generate sales commissions is exerting a gravitational force on community formation. For example, community members on Geocities are encouraged to create content with links to company web sites, and are paid a commission on sales that result, or for traffic generated (Guernsey 1999). The development of corporate sponsored community sites is becoming influenced at a number of different levels by such practices of multi-level marketing. This tends to skew community formation and the production of online resources in ways that are aligned with corporate interests, rather than wider public or community interests. It makes alternative forms of community formation difficult to achieve, and makes community knowledge production that responds to a variety of social interests and needs harder to attain.

Lastly, what is often downplayed in ecommerce texts and sites is the various ways that communities are organized, regulated and policed. Commercial online communities are organized via systems of rewards, disincentives and punishment, and the normalization of particular modes of behavior. This can be seen explicitly in the rules that members must sign when joining, in the training volunteers are given, and in the policing functions volun-

⁵ Such interpenetration of content and marketing has resulted in several minor scandals, as for example when the New York Times revealed that lists of recommended books published by the online bookseller Amazon.com (with titles such as 'What We're Reading', and 'Destined for Greatness') were in fact bought by publishers. See Gardner 1999, pp 1 & 40.

teers and other workers are assigned. Control and regulation is also identifiable in less explicit areas, such as in how member content is categorized, links are organized, and search facilities ordered. These modes of organization delimit the kinds of communication, interaction and exchange that are possible, and do not encourage a fully open, participatory, democratic context for community formation.

Online Community and the University

The commercial exploitation of on-line community foregrounds the importance of both safeguarding and expanding spaces for community formation that are not entirely dominated by the market, that are open, participatory, diverse and democratic. It suggests the need to think about strategies for organizing existing on-line community resources in ways that keep them in the hands of the communities that produce them. And it makes clear the need for critical work by academics that deals with the complex specifics of discourses, practices, institutions and economics that shape the Internet. Unfortunately, too much academic work ignores the most important forces shaping on-line culture, leaves large areas of debate uncontested and doesn't really speak to groups actively involved in new media who could constitute potential allies. I would like to conclude by suggesting several possible strategic responses to the commercial development of on-line community. I believe that the representation and organization of community in models of electronic commerce open up a number of challenges and opportunities for academics as teachers, knowledge producers and "specific intellectuals".

In our teaching practices we might creatively appropriate a concept articulated by Hagel and Armstrong, and attempt to produce our own "community architects". This would entail resituating courses that deal with on-line information as part of an expanded project of critical practice in which students are seen not just as technical problem solvers, but as critics who actively intervene in situations in which issues of value, power, and social organization are negotiated. Such classes might promote the idea that it is important that those who are engaged in the design and publication of electronic texts, interfaces, databases, and tools for the formation of on-line community think about the cultural, political and social implications of their work. Training community architects could involve looking at how competing "discourses of community", and competing information architectures represent the possibilities for organizing community space, activity, access, assembly, public use, control and ownership. However it should also involve consideration of how such knowledge can be made politically and technologically operative. This would entail working on producing alternative models of community, alternative systems of "communityware", and alternative models for building, storing, indexing, sharing and searching community knowledges.

Such a project might find support in several areas outside the university. Groups within the Free Software Foundation and the Open Source movement might constitute important allies. The Free Software Foundation and Open source movement provide useful examples of alternative online community formation, and offer instructive models of distributed, collaborative, online community resource management. The similarities between the academy and the free software/open source movements have been noted by a number of

writers. For example Michael Jensen states that “we should remember that research and scholarship are fundamentally open-source enterprises” (Jensen 1999, A92) and Richard Barbrook has written of the role that volunteerism and a “gift economy” play within both academic and free software/open source communities (Barbrook 1998). The next step might be to explore the possibility of constructing something like a “Free courseware Foundation”, or an open source movement for online academic resources (Richard Stallman’s article in this volume can be seen as an attempt to describe some principles and strategies that such a project might be guided by). Academics might also look to the example of community “freenets” such as the Seattle community network, and the Blacksburg Electronic village in Virginia. However models for the organization of community knowledges online also exist within academia, as for example in the “Linguist” project (<http://linguistlist.org/>), which enables communication, coordinates activities, and acts as a repository for the large amounts of electronic text produced by members of the American linguistic community. And the English server, a cooperatively run student site at Carnegie Mellon University that publishes humanities texts, journals, and other scholarly resources, has developed an extensive collection of community building resources that are publicly available (<http://eserver.org/>).

Finally, the uses of on-line community in contemporary models of Internet commerce suggest the need for constructing strategic alliances between academics and community groups as a way of keeping both community’s resources in the public domain. Contemporary models of electronic commerce seek to commodify social interaction and community knowledge production in ways that have certain parallels with processes identifiable in the university. The higher education sector in North America is increasingly shaped by corporatization, commercialization and digitalization (Noble 1998; Luke 1997). Tim Luke describes the growing trend toward what he calls the “thin, for-profit, and/or skill competency versions of virtual universities being designed by corporate consultants and some state planners” (Luke 1997). Similarly, David Noble has argued that as teaching materials and knowledge production go on-line, the ability of the universities and corporations to automate, commodify, reproduce and claim ownership rights over academic work expands.

An important aspect of the changes that are transforming higher education in North America centers on who will organize and control the resources produced within academic communities. Interestingly, many of the same organizations that specialize in developing commercial on-line communities have adapted their business models to the education market. In the U.S., companies such as Campus Pipeline (described by Norman Clark in this volume) provide commercial community sites targeted at the higher education sector. Furthermore, a number of universities have outsourced email, web and other online services to corporations that specialize in developing commercial on-line community (Blumenstyk 1999). And colleges looking to establish online instruction have sometimes partnered themselves with companies that specialize in online community development. For example Berkeley has granted AOL, the world’s largest online community developer, the worldwide rights to market, license, distribute and promote a number of the university’s on-line courses. Not surprisingly, the commercial “courseware” being sold to universities often has much in common with the “communityware” developed for commercial online communities.

If resistance by academics to such trends takes the form of claims that education and academics are somehow “special”, exempt from conditions that so many others must work under, then we run the risk of being represented as backward, obstructionist and selfish. Instead, opposition to the commercialization of teaching ought to proceed via commitment to an expanded project of public service. Polster’s notion of “knowledge collectives”, in which pools of intellectual capital are organized so that usage entails a concomitant requirement to share knowledge with the collective is interesting, as is the notion of vesting with the public rights to the knowledge academics produce. (Polster 1998) Another component of such a project could be a commitment to constructing information technologies that democratize on-line community formation and knowledge production both inside and outside the university, and which seek means of bridging the resources produced by both groups. After all, the world wide web, along with many other Internet protocols, was created by academics who needed tools for collaboration and communication within dispersed disciplinary communities. It seems fitting that academics should continue to develop these technologies in ways that benefit a broader constituency of people.

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