Book Reviews

H. Rheingold. 1993. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley. ISBN 0-201-60870-7
H. Rheingold. 2000. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier (2nd Edition)*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press. ISBN 0-262-68121-8

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In the past 10 years, alongside the swift expansion of the Internet, scholarly attention to virtual community has grown rapidly. The analysis of virtual social relations has emerged as a clear, key theme in the study of new media. For the foreseeable future at least, studies of virtual community are set to play their part in informing our wider understanding of technological and social change. As such, conducting a retrospective review of Rheingold's (1993) seminal text *The Virtual Community* is a timely exercise. No figure has loomed as large, or as controversially, over the study of virtual community as Howard Rheingold. *The Virtual Community* remains one of the most commonly discussed texts on the subject, and as such remains required reading for anyone interested in online sociability.

Rheingold's basic argument is, by now, well known. After publication in 1993 *The Virtual Community* was widely reviewed from a variety of perspectives (e.g. Adams 1994; Lehman 1995; Plotkin 1995; Stimson 1995; Wellman 1997a), and has been analysed and discussed in innumerable books and articles since then. In essence the book is constructed around recounting Rheingold's experiences in various online environments, most notably the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link - one of the Internet's earliest bulletin board systems). In drawing upon his personal history, Rheingold constructs a pragmatic and compelling case for the emergence

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of communal relations online, noting that people use words on screens to engage in the full range of social activities: 'People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind' (Rheingold 1993, 3).

He also, tellingly in terms of stimulating subsequent debate, links the formation of virtual community to a chance to revitalise the public sphere, arguing that the means necessary to 'revitalise citizen based democracy' (Rheingold 1993, 14) are – with the advent of virtual communities – back in the hands of the public. Rather than produce yet another analysis of these views, I focus primarily on how *The Virtual Community* was received. Such a focus allows the considerable influence the book had upon ensuing debate to be acknowledged; there are few texts in the area which have provoked similar amounts of attention. More importantly, reviewing debate over *The Virtual Community* provides an opportunity to raise key issues for current, ongoing analyses of virtual community.

Almost all who have engaged with Rheingold's work note that he provides a well-written and highly readable account of his time online. Yet it is not necessary to delve too deeply into the literature to realise that the dominant response to *The Virtual Community* has been to label Rheingold a technological 'utopian' (e.g. Fernback and Thompson 1995; Robins 1996, 1999; Stoll 1995; Webster 1999; Wellman 1997). That is, he has been frequently criticised for taking an uncritical and celebratory stance on virtual community. Indeed, critics have drawn on Rheingold's work in order to dismiss the entire notion of virtual community outright; for example Robins (1999) labels it an 'impoverished' vision that overlooks the Internet's links to corporate capitalism, focusing instead on 'an escape from the real world of difference and disorder into a mythic realm of stability and order' (Robins 1999, 47). As a result, debate over *The Virtual Community*, and over 'virtual community' more generally, has been characterised by a decade of polarised discussion.

However, whilst criticisms of Rheingold's utopian position undoubtedly contain 'a degree of truth… [they] are at the same time misleading and misplaced' (Jankowski 2002, 39). This is because Rheingold's argument is more nuanced than he is often given credit for. Whilst *The Virtual Community* does indeed focus upon describing the potential of the Internet as a communal medium, Rheingold is also guarded about the likelihood of this potential being realised. He argues that the WELL tolerates a large range of opinions being expressed online in a way that encourages communal relations. However, he also acknowledges 'fragmentation, hierarchization, rigidifying social boundaries, and single niche colonies of people who share intolerances could become prevalent in the future' (Rheingold 1993,

207). Moreover, he argues that the potential for citizen-based democratic renewal is not necessarily going to be realised via virtual community on the Internet:

> We *temporarily* have access to a tool that *could* bring conviviality and understanding to our lives and *might* help revitalise the public sphere. The same tool, improperly controlled and wielded, could become an instrument of tyranny (Rheingold 1993, 14. Emphases added).

There is a cautionary element to these aspects of Rheingold's argument, a warning of the potentially 'darker' side of virtual relations that sits directly alongside his vision of communal development. Thus, Rheingold's text is not entirely a utopian celebration of the technology, although it does indulge in hyperbole. Examined in its entirety, it reads more like a call to social action by a committed user of the medium (one who is aware of potential pitfalls in developing virtual forms of community).

In making sense of such a call to social action, it is worthwhile taking account of certain contextual factors at the time Rheingold was writing. Although the roots of the Internet can be traced back to the development of ARPANET in the 1960s, in 1993 the Internet remained relatively unknown. At the time, just before the advent of the World Wide Web, Rheingold (1993, 5) even felt the need to introduce his readers to "the Net", about which he assumed most would know nothing. As he points out, popular understandings equated computer use with the figure of the lonely 'computer nerd'. Moreover, as Baym (1998) and Hine (2000) both point out, academic analyses of computer mediated communications (CMC) were then dominated by a "reduced cues model" that also stressed its nature as an anti-social medium.

Popular understandings have now shifted, and many social scientists now comfortably comment that 'online sociability [in virtual communities] is a fact of everyday life' (Feenberg and Bakardjieva 2004, 37). Yet it is important to remember that Rheingold (1993) was one of the first to popularise this *counter*-argument, by arguing for the "visionary" possibility of virtual communities against a dominant, well established view of computer use as anti-social. Furthermore, he was doing so at a time when he, alongside many early Internet adopters, was growing fearful of the increasing commercialisation of the medium. As such the main thrust of *The Virtual Community* is twofold: first to identify this "new" form of social relations for a broader population of readers/potential users; and second, to point out its potential importance to social life and 'political liberties' (p.4) before the Internet is commercialised by corporate interests. Rheingold argues, with the passion of a committed user and community activist, for individuals to take action in relation to this new medium, knowing that its "latent technical possibilities" will not be realised outside of such action:

> More people must learn about [the Net's] leverage and learn to use it, while we still have the freedom to do so, if it is to live up to its potential… What we know and do now is important because it is still possible for people around the world to make sure this new sphere of vital human discourse remains open to the citizens of the planet before the political and economic big boys seize it, censor it, meter it, and sell it back to us (Rheingold 1993, 4-5).

To label *The Virtual Community* an uncritical utopian celebration of technology is to overlook these aspects of Rheingold's text. In this sense, when Webster (1999) objects to Rheingold's 'suggestion that the technology can create community of itself' (1999, 83), or when Robins (1996, 1999) critiques Rheingold as a utopian fantasist that overlooks corporate control of the medium, their views need to be qualified.

Nevertheless significant problems with Rheingold's account remain. If a retrospective review of debate suggests that attempts to pigeonhole Rheingold as a utopian are misleading, at the same time it reveals that aspects of critics' concerns remain valid. Here we need to differentiate criticisms of Rheingold's utopian and celebratory style from a more central issue, namely the way that "virtual community" itself is (under-) conceptualised in *The Virtual Community*. Regardless of Rheingold's awareness of growing corporate interest in the Internet, or of the guarded nature of his final conclusions, it is this feature of *The Virtual Community* that remains highly problematic.

For example, Rheingold's (1993) conceptual analysis is, somewhat paradoxically given his broader concerns over corporate control, prone to treating online interaction as an isolated social phenomenon. He fails to take full account of how online interactions fit within people's broader social lives or of "offline" contextual factors important to the creation and maintenance of virtual community. Indeed, in regard to the latter, his oft-cited definition of virtual communities as "social aggregations" that 'emerge from the Net' (Rheingold 1993, 5) actually flies in the face of much of the evidence he himself provides. That is, Rheingold (1993) goes to great lengths to document the offline social relations upon which the WELL was founded – '[t]he WELL is rooted in the San Francisco Bay area and in two separate counter-cultural revolutions that took place there in past decades' (1993, 39). The first of these "revolutions" was the (text based) publication of the *Whole Earth Catalogue* – a periodical aimed at supporting people attempting to build alternative lifestyles, which (secondly) brought together a critical mass of activists. These people, including Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant, already shared a social

and political vision for computer technology, were highly computer literate, and were key figures in an early and distinct Internet culture (Castells 2001). There was a great deal of the "communal" about these pre-existing relations. Brilliant and Brand were indeed part of a broader counter-cultural activist community. Thus, the WELL, as a community, arguably pre-existed its move into online space. Its subsequent online development was also dependent upon a multitude of connections that existed beyond the virtual realm, as well as within it (Hafner 1997).

As opposed to Rheingold's (1993) "utopian" stance, it is these types of conceptual issues that limit the analysis presented in *The Virtual Community*. For example, Rheingold's failure to take full account of pre-existing social relations in the formation and maintenance of the WELL leaves him free to speculate that *all* users will "inevitably" build virtual communities with Internet technology, 'just as micro-organisms inevitably create colonies' (1993, 6). Yet, as he himself admits in reflecting upon his original work, such views are too determinist:

> One major difference between what I know now and what I knew when I wrote the first edition of this book is that I've learned that virtual communities won't automatically emerge or grow… simply by adding a forum or chatroom to a web page (Rheingold 2000, 341).

Indeed Rheingold's (1993) model of the WELL, dependent upon a core sub-culture of technically literate individuals committed to utilising computing for social change, contrasts with the mainstream diffusion of the Internet into society, which has been marked by the observation that '[the Internet's] effects on sociability [have become] considerably less dramatic' (Castells 2001, 119). This is why Rheingold's (1993) vision of a computer mediated world rapidly headed towards "panoptic control" or "inclusive agora" paints a false picture. Such dualistic thinking contrasts with the more mixed reality technological change presents to us, even when it arrives with unparalleled pace, as in the case of the Internet. Indeed, it encourages the type of polarised debate that saw Rheingold (1993) labelled a "utopian", but the heart of the issue remains his failure to adequately *conceptualise* the phenomenon under study, not his celebratory style.

Differentiating between such elements is not a matter of semantics. The need to create adequate conceptual models, capable of rigorously interrogating empirical data, is the central issue now facing virtual community studies (Jankowski 2002; Wellman 2004). The application of social network analysis (Wellman 1997b, 1998, 2001), or the development of Baym's (1995, 1998) "emergent" model of virtual community, reveal that steps have been taken in the right direction, but much remains to be done. If we look beyond criticisms of Rheingold as a celebratory utopian, reviewing the seminal contribution to debate made by The Virtual

Community provides an opportunity to reinforce this much needed direction. This text will remain widely read and discussed, despite dismissals of Rheingold as a utopian. In 1993 it was a timely and provocative intervention at a salient point in the Internet's history. It should be read today as a springboard to thinking through conceptual issues.

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