POSTMODERNISM, COMMUNITY BUILDING AND ONLINE COMMUNICATION:

- "Are virtual communities 'real' communities?"-

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Abstract

This paper serves to analyse the relationship between postmodernism, community building, and the development of online communication. Special emphasis is put on investigating how virtual communities such as Facebook have developed in the postmodern era, and how they eventually affect social interaction.

My research paper opens with an overview of both modernism and postmodernism in order to give a comprehensive illustration of significant features and societal and cultural conditions of both eras. The role of technological advancement, in particular the emergence of new media forms such as the Internet, is part of this broad analysis.

Having proposed in Chapter One that postmodernism brought along significant changes for societies on different levels, the Chapter Two continues to examine how community building has changed in the technologically driven postmodern times. The main dichotomy between traditional concepts of community as consisting of strong and weak ties between people in "real-life," and more progressive ideas of community as de-located groups of people who share the same interests is analysed in this context.

The Chapter Three serves to illustrate and evaluate the debate about whether virtual communities can be 'real' communities given the example of Facebook.

The findings show that firstly, we need to develop a broad theoretical framework to understand and evaluate the relationship between postmodernism and virtual communities. Secondly, and most importantly, the conclusion was that virtual communities are neither replacing "real-life" communities, nor do they differ extremely from them. Virtual communities might be useful additions to our social lives and certainly reflect the postmodern condition that dictates our lives today.

Introduction

> It (television) is the first truly democratic culture, the first culture available to everyone and entirely governed by what the people want. The most terrifying thing is what the people do want.
>
> (Clive Barnes, *New York Times*, December 1969)

Deciding to begin a thesis with a rather sarcastic quotation made by a debatable though extremely successful critic of modern art, might give the impression that the main part will draw the picture of a declining art scene in the postmodern era of today. As "beauty lies in the eyes of the beholder," the "decoding"[1] of Barnes` quote is up to each reader`s own interpretation and perception. It was chosen because it brilliantly points out that firstly, popular culture and television is influencing, some would even say penetrating, our daily lives up to forming culture, and secondly, that we the people bear a great responsibility in regard to how we handle the media and its impact on our habits and thoughts.

Scholars of cultural and media studies might be amused, or alternatively, upset about the fact that the dissertation did not begin with the ideas of any of the great theorists of today. It is indeed, generally agreed that Ferdric Jameson or Stuart Hall has written the most valuable commentaries on popular culture, community, communication, and postmodernism. However, it appears that Barnes gives us a simple, but most convincing argument to chose his observation as introductory lines. He is the mirror we all need as scholars of cultural and media studies. It appears to that quite a number of theoretical

texts that provided some of the background materials for this dissertation look at the development of popular culture from a biased perspective. We tend to believe that it is natural to develop biases and ideologies when doing research, and thus making an external perspective quite unlikely. We usually debate subjects that matter to us personally, or in a broader perspective, because we think they matter to society. In my case, the topic I chose to present in this paper, - the relationship of postmodernism, popular culture and virtual communities/the significance of virtual communities in postmodern times -, affects me as a scholar as well as a regular person. I do not exclude myself from the "television viewers," and "internet users" and thus I am not free of responsibilities either; as a scholar of cultural and media studies I feel all the more intrigued by the thought that any study which I conduct tells me a little bit more about the life I live.

Since my own observation alone would be insufficient to grasp the phenomena of which I am speaking of in the following chapters, a theoretical framework had to be developed first. This turned out to be a rather challenging task since many texts delivered valuable information, but hardly any proposed a thouroughly nuanced point of view. Communist, socialist and capitalist ideologies share the same space with structuralist and post-structuralist approaches, for instance, but none of them offer an approach that is wide enough to consider all aspects appropriately. It was unsatisfying to a certain extent to deal with rather one-sided applications of these theories, and oftentimes, I felt that the view presented in those works, distances the writer from the actual topic. What came up during my research though was the idea that I should listen closely to what the actual participants of virtual communities have to say and how they judge the postmodern

[1] "Decoding" is an expression which became popularized by Stuart Hall's studies on the decoding and encoding of messages. In the following paragraph more comprehensive examples will be given in order to document the implication of these expressions.

condition. Therefore, my literature review includes a great deal of internet sources, pieces of group discussions, and dissertations written by young scholars. It would be understandable if that becomes a point of critique, for, a blog entry in a virtual community might lack a sophisticated academic stance. However, I do feel that also valuing those opinions opens up new possibilities to do academic research, since we get an insight from the actual participants of this vibrant form of community.

In my point of view it is not only insufficient to simply stretch the existing theories on cultural and media studies to make them fit into the context of my thesis, it is also not practical; therefore, I chose to present a truly postmodern approach of giving equal space to traditional and also to more progressive, perhaps less academic, concepts, which overall might give the impression that my work is fragmented to a certain extent.

My thesis is divided into three main chapters. Not all the issues are, however, discussed in great detail since the dissertation prioritizes a broad approach to postmodernism, community building, virtual communities and communication. The ideas that have been raised here can certainly be part of further discussions and a more comprehensive research.

It is not only logical, but also crucial to present an overview of modernism and postmodernism first; the problem I faced in the very beginning was the question of defining and positioning postmodernism and postmodernist theories. There is a vast amount of literature written and published on both modernism and postmodernism. Oftentimes the respective authors define postmodernism as everything that comes *after* modernism; this is because the prefix "post" might be slightly misleading here. On the other hand, there is the group of critics who claim that postmodernism breaks with the

tradition uphold by modernism, such as depths, the unified individual, and the dichotomy between high and low culture.

My literature review indicates that my concern is not to document that postmodernism is the advancement on or a development of modernism, though naturally it can be identified as the era, which followed modernism. Much more interesting to me is to find out about the nuances that make postmodernism "post"-modern, meaning what constitutes the differences between modernism and postmodernism. Therefore I present a short overview of modernism first, which gives us the foundation on which grounds we can gather the differences to postmodernism. In this context I think it is most interesting to follow up on Jürgen Habermas` aesthetic and cultural debates on modernism in "Modernity versus Postmodernisty", and how it is slowly overthrown by postmodernism.

A clear understanding of the structures and outcomes of postmodernism is necessary for the whole concept of my thesis. Saying that postmodernism led to societal changes in terms of community building and communication, we eventually have to have a look at the aspects that make our recent time different from the modern era. This means it is crucial to investigate phenomena such as industrialization as a powerful source for societal change, thereby also paying attention to the transmission from industrialization to what we call globalization[2].

Therefore paragraph I exclusively deals with the development of industrialization and globalization, hereby enhancing the "Rise of Media and Information Technology." It is interesting then to have a look at Enzensberger`s analysis of the *Constituents of a theory*

[2] Though globalization itself is a matter of (emotional) debate, and has most likely the same number of loyal supporters as it has strong critiques, I decided to focus on the positive, in a broader sense liberating aspects of it.

of the media for that it gives a comprehensive picture of the "mobilizing power of the media" (69). Though I do not fully agree with his critique on capitalism, I would like to work with his theory that media in the postmodern era in a sense "liquidate the 'heritage', that is to say, the class-specific handing-on of nonmaterial capital" (Enzensberger, 75). The socialist writer Raymond Williams has developed a similar theory though highlighting the development of advertisement and its impact on society. In "*Advertising. The magic System,"* Williams gives an idea about how "the Industrial Revolution, and the associated revolution in communications, fundamentally changed the nature of advertising" (413). However, Williams raises the question whether our capitalist (postmodern) society again favors the few who decide about images and the production and dissemination of those, which in turn makes the mass of consumers powerless to a certain extent. Stuart Hall, an expert in the field of communication, would probably agree with some of Williams ideas raised above. In his comprehensive model on "Encoding/Decoding", Hall suggests that the so called receiver of a message (visual signs or (non)verbal message) is powerful in so far as he or she can decode respective messages individually, in a sense reading them oppositionally. Information technology that provides the images might simultaneously provide means of resistance, too.

The second part of chapter one therefore deals with "*Media, meaning and everyday life in a postmodern world."* I consciously chose Angela McRobbie`s essay on "Postmodernism and Popular Culture" for the introduction of this paragraph since she pin points at the most crucial element in the relationship between postmodernism, media, and society: "It is no longer possible to talk about the image and reality, media and society. Each has become so deeply interwined that it is difficult to draw the line between the two" (McRobbie, 388). Jim Collins' essay on "Television and Postmodernism" supports this idea while enhancing the medium television. He suggests further that intertextuality is not

only found in the different forms of media, but it can also be identified in the relationship between individuals and the media.

Richard Dyer goes one step further then and investigates the relationship between "Entertainment and Utopia," and the respective meaning of it for our daily lives. Since utopia is a distinguished feature of postmodernism, we can close the circle here.

The second chapter of this thesis, "Culture, Community, and Social Networks," analyses how people interact with each other. All three terms, Culture, Community, and Social Networks, have an almost polarising effect in manifold debates and theoretical (academic) works. It is not only the academia which gives them a high significance, also the public, the regular citizen in the postmodern era, comes across these three expressions more often than ever.

It is not surprising though that culture, the term itself, has lost its innocence. Considering that culture has implied segregation, moreover, exclusion of nations and therefore surpression of identities in the times of colonialism and imperialism, we can easily acknowledge that there has happened plenty of misuse with this term. This is also part of the dilemma why "culture" is thoroughly controversial these days; many scholars emphasise the fact that this term can only serve as a loose umbrella-expression trying to cope with new phenomenons such as "cyber-culture."[3] Where parallels to the mere traditional definition of culture is missing, society and academia desperately try to find a connection to the new cultures that have been establishing themselves in postmodern times.

[3] The term Cyber-culture defines the "culture" is defined differently depending on the source. Roger Clarke formulates it in the following: "(cyber-culture) is the dynamics of the current and rapidly mutating electronic environment in which we're working and playing."
http://www.rogerclarke.com/II/CyberCulture.html

In this sense the term community poses a similar problem; it is not sufficient, let alone appropriate, to just have a single definition of what constitutes community these days. Globalization has certainly its fair share of this situation since its basic idea is to de-centralize geographic communities and instead creating global communities. However, it is equally exciting and fascinating to see new definitions delveloping, and help predicting the future of communities.

This tension created by the clash of traditional concepts developed in times that were different from this postmodern era with its concepts and definitions just newly born or still in the making, will perhaps be the underlying tone in this paragraph. Tension usually causes debates, which, at the best, end with a satisfying agreement. This is already partly achieved by coming back to the postmodern approach that implies multiplicity, thus making possible that different concepts and definitions might coexist.

Barry Wellmann, a famoust American blogger, University lecturer, and self-proclaimed excessive Internet user, has given an intersting outlook on how these three main terms, Culture, Community, and Social Networks, are related to and affect each other. He points out that concepts for all these three terms have existed and co-existed for hundreds of years, as it is shown by "Machiavelli's (1532) celebration of the liberation of communal patterns, or Hobbes' (1651) fears that the absence of social structures would result in the interpersonal war of all against all" (3). It seems only logical to me to introduce Wellmann`s main arguments first, basically as an introduction to the more abstract theories on culture and community. His ideas on communities and social networking might to a larger extent reflect his own experiences as an internet user, however his comprehensive study on the history of culture and community thoroughly demonstrates a

deep understanding of the processes involved in developing and manifesting those aforementioned concepts

Thus in the first paragraph we get familiar with the idea that communities and social networks are in the process of re-structuring in postmodern times.

The second part of this chapter naturally has to deal with the nature of community in computer-mediated systems, introduced by the crucial question whether online communities can be defined and acknowledged as "real communities". Though we could most likely find hundreds of critics who vehemently protest the attempt to legitimate this propostion, I rather focus on the arguments put forward by scholars who support the idea that virtual communities and computer mediated networks might have the same importance and function for and in society as "real communities". Most convincing in their argumentation have been Amy Bruckmann and Howard Rheingold; both reflect upon this issue from the position of a supporter though Bruckmann clearly pin points at the flaws in virtual communities. This has to be part of further, more comprehensive examination; in this regard I found it quite helpful to have a look at Trebor Schulz` "Critique of Sociable Web Media." Barry Wellmann and Milena Gulia assume then that ultimately "Net Surfers don`t ride alone: Virtual Communities as Communities," thereby contesting the meaning of traditional concepts of community. I chose to end this chapter with their evaluation on virtual communities and their social significance for that it enhances the vast opportunities that virtual communities offer without neglecting to hint at the dangers implied in it.

I have decided to introduce the third chapter with Guy Lecky-Thompson`s question: "(...) are social networking sites enabling interaction or reducing it to a escapist experience,

displacing real interaction in favour of an alternative reality?" His question can be understood as a continuation of the ideas collected and evaluated in the chapters afore. The difference here is that he explicitely refers to one of the most popular social networking sites that exist today: Facebook. Many of us know 'facebook' as a book given out to friends in school in times of graduation, as a tool to stay connected after everyone goes seperate ways. In postmodern times when technological progress easily enables communication and connection via Internet, it seems only logical that also a paperbased Facebook turns into an electronic version. With currently more than 95 million users or "members", and its ability to "reach over 10% of the national population in 26 countries."[4] Facebook might easily prove its success as a social network site.

Hardly any social networking site has caused so much controversy since its very beginning; scholars, politicians, parents, and students alike are engaged in debates about benefits and dangers, and produce excessive amounts of essays thereby often using internet forums.

Yet, first and foremost, it is crucial to understand what Facebook is all about and what makes it attractive and useful for the various types of users. Ultimately we could easily rephrase what the founder of Facebook, Marc Zuckerberg, defines as the aim and ultimate goal of this network. Paragraph I therefore deals with Facebook's history, its privacy politics, and terms of use. This is important, but would be just one side of the coin. A distanced evaluation of the arguments that are put forward by the makers of Facebook is essential then. It is equally important to listen to what the actual user has to say, may it be positive or negative. Our concern should be to evaluate the strength of Facebook and thereby carefully consider the possible flaws too. To me it seems crucial to

[4] This data is given by Justin Smith. http://www.insidefacebook.com/facebook-global-market-monitor/.

treat Facebook as a postmodern phenomenon, which means that traditional means of communication and community building might be re-defined, adjusted or even newly invented. Hence, I chose to work with the comprehensive study on Facebook use by Pavica Sheldon and James Honeycutt (2008) in paragraph II for that it provides a vast amount of empirical data collected from hundreds of Facebook users. From this we can develop a theory on facebook usage as a mean to both maintain relationships (local communities) and build geographically de-centred new communities based on shared interests only.

Finally, we would need to come back to Lecky-Thompson`s question; instead of repeating arguments brought forward by critics who claim that virtual communities force 'real-life' communities to disperse, I would focus on showing that Facebook can be both: a tool to increase the number of supportive ties, but also a medium that may have addictive potential for its user.

Unfortunately, the number of theoretical texts on Facebook is limited; this seemed to be a disadvantage first, but it turned out to be helpful in a way, since we can focus more on chats between parents, journalists and Facebook users in order to evaluate the significance of Facebook as a virtual community. Again, there is a vast amount of different opinions, polarizing arguments and emotional debates from which we have to make a selection to present and reflect upon both sides systematically. Ultimately, our reflections on community building and postmodern culture as discussed in the aforementioned chapters will play a key role in my analysis on Facebook.

Chapter one: From Modernism to Postmodernism

I. The Rise of Media and Information Technology

"Modernism is dominant but dead"

-- Jürgen Habermas [5]

Habermas makes this provocative statement in the year 1981 after he had done extensive research on issues such as "cultural modernity and societal modernization." Fortunately, he provides us with an excellent overview of scholars who deal with the supposed decline of modernism in the 1970s[6]; yet, his approach to the theoretical concepts developed to grasp the "old phenomenon" modernism seems rather distant, which is shown by his operative even neutral treatment of Max Weber or Adorno. However, he apparently supports Daniel Bell`s ideas on modernism. Bell, whom Habermas considers as "the most brilliant of the American neoconservatives" (94), claims that only "religious revival (can) be the solution" for the re-establishment of norms which allow "virtues of individual competition for achievement can again dominate" (95). What Bell rather subconsciously demonstrates is that the neoconservative scholars, both in Europe and the United States of America, already develop "an intellectual and political confrontation with the carrieres of cultural modernity" (95) which eventually accelerate the development of postmodernism. Habermas on the other hand explains quite comprehensively why the neoconservatives fail to judge the achievements of modernism:

> Neoconservatism shifts onto cultural modernism the uncomfortable burdens of a more or less successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society. The neoconservative doctrines blurs the relationship between the welcomed process of societal modernization on the one hand, and the lamented cultural development on the other. (96)

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[5] Jürgen Habermas makes this quotation in his introductory part in "Modernity versus Postmodernity" (1981), page 95.

[6] There is no consensus on whether we can link the beginning of postmodernism with one particular date or whether the shift from modernist style to postmodernist was a slow one that proceeds for several years.

We can gather from his critique that societal modernization created cultural development, which brought along the question of identity for the individual and the mass, the formation of community and network building, and the problems of productivity and consumption

.

It might be crucial then to investigate what Habermas defined as the "successful capitalist modernization of the economy and society" (96). In other words, we need to ask how industrialization and capitalism influenced or even transformed whole societies and cultures. Hereby the challenge is to untangle the manifold ways in which societal and cultural change takes place.

One way of looking at it is to turn to the examples given by the visual art in the modern times; classically we would consider architecture, paintings, literature, TV programmes and films, and ultimately advertisment (basically popular culture) as those elements that constitute visual arts.

Scholars such as Andreas Huyssen describes architecture as a distinctive feature of visual art and points out that the modern style reflected the societal change in many ways; he poses the question whether modernist architecture reflects "the declining rate of creativity in late capitalism" (112) as it is often been assumed by critics of the postmodern times. Those suggest that the new architectural style by Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier created 'machines for living'[7] whereby creativity is neglected in favor of practicability and pure rationalism. Huyssen reminds us then that the modernist architectural style was born out of necessity to a certain extent, considering that it was "part of a heroic attempt after the Great War and the Russian Revolution to rebuild a war-

ravaged Europe in the image of the new, and to make building a vital part of the envisioned renewal of society" (113). The "new", both in architecture and culture "demanded rational design for a rational society" (114). In other words, standardization and rationalization dominated the visual arts in modern times. Huyssen makes an interesting observation when he talks about the influences of the post-war era on architecture; he suggests: "after 1945, modernist architecture was largely deprived of its social vision and became increasingly an architecture of power and representation" (114). Power and representation has been essential elements in the re-formation and transformation of whole societies after the war and its consequences in terms of major shifts in power relations. However, Mies van der Rohe and other architects struggled to keep a balance between a modern standardized living and the needs of the individual. Critics suggest that this unbalanced relationship that ultimately ignored individuality and multiplicity is the main failure of modernism; even Huyssen points out that "modern housing projects became symbols of alienation and dehumanization, a fate they shared with the assembly line, that other agent of the new which had been greeted with exhuberant enthusiam in the 1920s by Leninists and Fordists alike" (114).

Of course, modernist architecture is inseparable from urbanization. With the rapid growth of suburbs, shopping malls, and skyscrapers, the aesthetic design of housing certainly reflected the decline of the "old neighbourhood culture" (Jameson, 2). Jameson, an outstanding scholar in the field of postmodernist theory, further claims that "the radical disjunction of the new Utopian high-modernist building from its surrounding context" (2) emphasized the elitist and authoritarian concept behind modernist architecture. In addition I would like to point out that modernist architecture deliberately excluded trends of mass culture and the popular. This, to a certain extent, is surprising even contradictory

[7] Huyssen claims that Le Corbuiser himself has mentioned that modern architecture promotes the idea of

considering that modern architecture was basically designed for the urban mass. The dehumanizing effect of architecture arose from the fact that anonymous buildings were created in order to host masses of people. Undoubtedly we can speak about a "sense of unified centre" here which all the more documents that the celebrated Master narrative was favoring "progress through science and technology" (Jameson, 4). It is only logical that architecture reflected capitalism and society's increasing urge for consumption, which was only made possible through modern science and technology. In addition, "the accelerated rhythms and anonymities of mass-urban living" (Nigel Wheale, 23) are only part of the whole commodity culture, which had been developed by industrialization and capitalism.

Jameson and other critics challenge the notion of unified individualism and come back to the dichotomy of high and low culture, shown by the modernists' dismissal of low and mass culture in favor of elitist art. Their critique points out that modernism in its early form was highly exclusive, even willingly isolating the elite from the mass. It is fascinating to see that the engines of modernism, industrialization and capitalism, finally made the steady decline of its own product possible. This was crucially shown in the "crisis in representation and status of the image after photography and mass media" (Jameson, chapter 1). Images could be reproduced easily now, and the process of distribution was quicker than ever before. Suddenly art "as unique object and finished work authenticated by artist and validated by agreed upon standards" (Jameson, chapter 1) was losing importance and meaning due to both, emerging subcultures and the development of intertextuality. Hence, it was no longer possible for artists and architects to stick to what Jameson calls the simple "dichotomy between organic and inorganic, human and machine" (Chapter 1).

"the modern machine for living" (114).

Popular culture turned out to be the striving force in eliminating modernist structures; Lawrence Alloway, an expert in the field of popular culture, proposes that in the 1950s and 1960s pop culture was taken out "of the realm of 'escapism', 'sheer entertainment', 'relaxation'" and was finally treated "wih the seriousness of art" (John Story, 133[8]). The simple acknowledgement of popular art as art, was in fact a breakthrough in the history of art; in a sense, popular art erased the dichotomy between low and high culture and presented a different set of aesthetics then. Subcultures became vocal and differences were celebrated.

This was the point in time when postmodernism was born. John Storey claims that:

> Most contributors to the debate on postmodernism agree that whatever else it is or might be, postmodernism has something to do with the development of popular culture in the late twentieth century in the advanced capitalist democracies of the West. That is, whether postmodernism is seen as a new historical moment, a new sensibility or a new cultural style, popular culture is cited as a terrain on which these changes can be most readily found (Storey, 133).

Storey makes two important points here; firstly he makes the connection between the birth and development of postmodernism and poplar culture, and secondly he already hints at the problematic involved in defining postmodernism. In 1966, American cultural scholar Susan Sontag refers to the new development in art and academia as "new sensibility" (Storey, 133), while other scholars might define postmodernism as the dominant new cultural style. Whatever the ultimate definition might be, I propose that most scholars would agree upon the fact that postmodernism marks the disruption of the modern culture and style in manifold ways.

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[8] Firstly cited in John Storey, ed. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2001).

Again, the shift from modernism to postmodernism happened most visibly in the field of arts. While Huyssen recalls the exact date and time for the "modern architecture's symbolic demise"[9] (114), other scholars keep the final turn more vague and propose that it was a slow process which lead to the development of postmodernist art. Major changes in the field of architecture happened; this is, for instance, that the dominating modern metanarrative gave way to multiplicity, and a deliberate mix of organic with inorganic was visible. Suggesting that the postmodern architecture came with a new style, a new aesthetic, is correct insofar as we can 'see' a change in the architectural design. However, the very concept of postmodernism alludes to the fact that there is intertextuality, hybridity, and subversion of earnestness. This means that also postmodern architecture does not simply break away with the modern tradition, but it rather looks for a playful debate with it. Hence, I do not fully agree with those scholars who propose the idea that postmodernism denies history or depths; it is true though that postmodernist art favors the surface and fragmentation, yet it is aware of history and past. Without this awareness, key elements of the postmodern style and theory, such as nostalgia or parody, would not work and become meaningless.

The debate about postmodernism as either a new era or just a recycling of failed modernist ideas was led by socialists and communists for a particular reason. Of course, we would assume that the postmodern approach to erase the dichotomy between high and low culture would fit the socialist beliefs. However, Jameson, who himself is a Marxist writer, makes an interesting observation:

> what has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh

[9] Huyssen argues that the end of modernist architecture was proclaimed when on "July 15, 1972, at 3:52 p.m. (...) several slab blocks of St. Louis' Pruitt-Igoe Housing (built by Minoru Yamasaki in the 1950s) were dynamited, and the collapse was dramatically displayed on the evening news." (114)

> waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (...), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly essential structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation (Chapter 1).

I would like to work with this statement for that it reveals two important points: firstly, we need to acknowledge that postmodernist culture depends on and is part of "money culture" or "commodity culture," the new forms of capitalism in the late twentieth century, and it is flourished by the steady production of commodities. Hence, the idea comes up that postmodernism does not object to or negate the impulses of modernism.

Secondly, we might want to argue that postmodernism itself has fuzzy boundaries; its supposed depthlessness creates the difficult to find 'originals'. In other words, postmodernism is a recycling culture, which playfully suggests that simulacra[10] are more powerful than the real, the original. The "ever more novel-seeming goods" (Jameson, Chapter 1) subverts the meaning of the original, and basically recycle images and ideas that have been there before. Thereby postmodernism is intentionally "blurring or destroying distinctions between established cultural hierarchies" (Nigel Wheale, 34). While some mourn the loss of so called cultural hierarchies, others judge this as the main positive quality of postmodernism. In addition, I would suggest that capitalism itself already blurred the boundaries between high and low culture thru its promotion of commodity-fetishism. Hence, we can say that even though modernism promoted elitism, it never managed to fully realize the neglect of low culture due to the massive influence of capitalism, which indeed promoted mass commodity culture.

[10] simulacrum (sing.): In his essay on "Postmodernism: From Elite to Mass Culture?", Nigel Wheale gives a comprehensive description of the meaning of simulacrum and its functions: "In a world of commodities that are endlessly reproducible, the process of serial replication takes on a logic and momentum of its own, to the point where it becomes impossible to distinguish between the original and the fascimile" (50).

With the example of architecture, we could illustrate that postmodernism eventually continued with the promotion of commodity and money culture: "many of the buildings ascribed to the postmodern phase of the 1970s and 1980s are commercial developments, speculative office constructions or corporate headquarters which are symbols of the economic power of multinational business" (Nigel Wheale, 40). As much as postmodern buildings may respond to their very individual localities (e.g. in shape and material), its architects cannot deny that this cultural practice stands in direct relationship with a booming capitalist economy.

Major changes were also visible in the field of fine arts and advertisement, where postmodernism manifests itself mainly thru a social discourse of commodity and money culture. One of the most striking developments happened in the field of television though; Jean Baudrillard reminds us that one important feature of postmodern TV productions was their strong dependence on hyperrealism. Storey further elaborates this point by saying that "in the realm of the hyperreal, the 'real' and the imaginary continually implode into each other. The result is that reality and (...) 'simulations' are experineced as without difference – operating along a roller-coaster continuum" (135). As a consequence the simulation can be experienced as the 'real'. Classical secondary representation of the 'real' as it was provided by modernism is missing in the postmodern media, instead the production of news, events, and entertainment is prioritized. Hereby, a metanarrative is missing, and we rather see that forms of pastiche[11] are being applied. Critiques argue that the technological advancement eventually favored image saturation and the loss of originality. Though I do agree with the argument that real-time media offers an almost overwhelming variety of images, I refuse to support the idea that media today is less innovative than modern media and arts. The recycling of images, signs and even history

demands a close examination or at least to have knowledge of the past, former cultures and schools of thought. In the field of music, there are plenty of examples that show how successfully the creative artists use postmodern style in order to create something significantly "new". The band Coldcut, for instance, who are known for producing mainly electronic music, has invented the form of Video-ing, which breaks away from the rather traditional of Dj-ing.

The new art form that these two artists have invented can only be described as incredible creative; both would agree that they are postmodern artists who deliberately use the means of pastiche[12], intertextuality and irony together with technological innovations in order to feed the spectator/consumer with a collage of "past/present, history/nostalgia, fiction/reality" (Storey, 140). Undoubtedly, machines and technology play an important role in this musicial and visual scenario.

This is exactly the point that creates such an uproar and documents a certain scholarly anxiety. Jean Baudrillard or Frederic Jameson, for instance, proposes that the "new self-referentiality constitutes an excessive reality that is only (made) possible by/through constant development and dissemination of simulation" (Marc O`Day, 103). Commodities themselves become both simulacra and simulations, for that we often 'buy' images. The growing consumer society accepts and apparently appreciates the manifold options offered by the postmodern media culture.

It is no surprise then that advertisement plays a crucial role in the media network. Though the nature of advertisement and marketing, meaning to promote goods and increase consumption, is unchanged, the means of achieving this have changed dramatically. With

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[12] Pastiche is defined by Barry Lewis as "a kind of permutation, a shuffling of generic and grammatical ties" (chapter 12).

the advanced technological development, advertisers could suddenly use satellite, cable, digital and interactive TV as platforms to distribute their images and thereby were able to reach a broader though more fragmented mass of potential consumers.

I would like to direct our attention then to a rather crucial question; since the electronic media is said to have a mobilizing power (e.g. animates the consumer to buy goods), we might need to examine in how far the consumer is allowed to be involved actively in the process of media creation. Hans Magnus Enzenberger takes a critical stance here and claims that the rise of electronic media has caused the consumer to become immobile, therefore passive. He refers to telecommunication which "allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system" (70). Enzensberger justifies his position by saying that technology alone is not the root of the problem, he rather points at the social and political implications that come with the increasing influence of electronic media. His statement that electronic media reflects the relationship between "monopoly capital or monopolistic bureaucracy (...) and the dependent masses" (70) implies a rather critical, suspicious tone.

I would not argue against Enzensberger`s statement that the influence and importance of electric media for our consumer society has increased over the last decades. However, I recommend avoiding a totalizing and generalizing approach that limits our perspective only to a negative judgement on electronic media. Furthermore, the implication that society in general is reduced to a passive mass that is too easy to manipulate by the monopolist media economy is highly questionable in my point of view. This is because, it is suggested that the consumer is manipulated without his or her knowledge; however, it could also be that the consumer is aware of the fact that advertisement and mediated information allure him into consumption. His conscious decision to buy the product(s)

then indicates that the consumer can be held responsible for making his or her own decisions. Conclusively, Enzensberger`s thesis basically overestimates the power of the electric media and deprives the consumer of any active involvement.

Raymond Williams supports Enzensberger`s thesis to a certain extent since they both argue from a rather socialist perspective. Williams has a slightly different ankle though; he investigates the relationship between electronic media and the production of advertisement. Hereby he reminds us that "the fundamental choice that emerges, in the problems set by modern indstrial production, is between man as consumer and man as user" (423). This approach is different from Enzensberger`s in so far as it suggests that people actually have an option to become actively involved in the whole process of consumption. Though Williams makes clear that we are confronted with a challenge here, one that is oftentimes underestimated, he also implies that people have the potential to influence the development of media and the process of consumption. Nevertheless, the socialist approach which he in general supports apparently does not allow to leave out the fact that advertisement has a rather ambivalent role in this process: "The system of organized magic which is modern advertising is primarily important as a functional obscuring of this choice" (423). This thesis refers to the system of advertisement in modern times; I suggest that it will be equally easy as it is difficult to transfer it to postmodern advertisement. This is because postmodern advertisement is much more interactive and user-motivated, mostly thru the means of the Internet (WorlWideWeb). Though the postmodern consumer is most likely confronted with an overload of information and signs, he or she still has the power to "decode" the perceived message in a different way than it is supposed to be. Stuart Hall refers to this scenario as "oppositonal reading" (517). What these examples document in one way or the other is that firstly, we still have not come to a consensus about the role of the consumer within

the context of postmodern media industry. Secondly, we are still debating the positive and negative effects of the rise of media and information technology without knowing a definite answer. Ultimately, most of the scholarly approaches signify a socialist position that naturally holds a slightly sceptical attitude towards increased consumption (meaning money culture and consumer society) created by the accelerated development of the media industry. I have made clear that I support logical arguments brought up by Williams and others to a certain extent, still I feel that their theoretical approaches are often one-sided and therefore limited. However, I also do not favor a merely capitalist approach that idealizes the manifold negative effects and flaws in the development of media and information technology.

Paragraph II., "Media, meaning and everyday life in a postmodern world", is a documentation of my attempt to give voice to less known scholars who achieve to present a balanced view. I value their opinion as equal and well thought thru; moreover, it is encouraging to see that these scholars are well aware of traditional theoretical concepts and consider history carefully. In addition, we would not find the attempt to create a black/white picture here; besides all the criticism implied, these writers also modestly promote the idea that information technology has a liberating function for societies and the individual.

II. Media, meaning and everyday life in a postmodern world

> The field of postmodernism certainly expresses a frustration (about) the increasing inability to make tangible connections between the general conditions of life today and the practice of cultural analysis.
>
> -- (Angela McRobbie)

Angela McRobbie points out a crucial problem that postmodernist theory faces when debating media and everyday life; our cultural analyses are often insufficient to grasp the

new cultural practices that occur in the postmodern time. Sociological --in blunt empirical analysis-- or solely structural analyses of new postmodern phenomena do unjust to the complexity shown in everyday life. McRobbie suggests then that scholars need to develop a broader cultural concept that allows diverse cultural theories to merge or at least co-exist. This means that we cannot simply apply modern cultural analyses to the postmodern condition, instead we need to focus on the benefits of a postmodern theory that liberates us from traditional intellectual categories. Furthermore, she emphasises that postmodern theory has "spread outwards from the realms of art history into political theory and onto the pages of youth culture magazines, record sleeves, and the fashion pages of *Vogue*" (387). This shows that postmodern theory engages with everyday life and does not pretend to be an isolated institutionalized concept. Cultural ananlysis has to consider the distinctive features such as multiplicity, flexibility, often superficiality, and self-referentiality in order to work with the higly fragmented postmodern condition that is based on simulations and real-time media as substitutes for the real.

McRobbie`s approach is quite similar to Frank Webster`s, who did extensive research on 'the information society'. He argues that:

> developments in information processing, storage and transmission have led to large-scale and ever-increasing application of IT in everyday life. This view sees the convergence of telecommunications and computing, and increased linkage between banks, homes, offices, factories, shops and educational institutions (1).

What is documented here is the ultimate linkage between IT and everyday life. Hence, we can draw the conclusion that our postmodern society is strongly dependent on the use and development of information technology. It is impossible to imagine Popular culture without the means of media and information technology, for example. McRobbie

explains that this condition evokes "new associations and resistances" (390), which in fact gives power to the fragmented groups that make up postmodern society. The example she gives about the liberating force of "cross referencing between forms, and notably between pop music and 'art', between aesthetics and commerce, between commitment and the need to make a living" (391) shall illustrate that the inconsistencies and impermanency of work and cultural conditions can work in favor to particular groups, such as, for instance, minorities.

It is indeed an interesting ankle from which McRobbie points at the positive aspects of the postmodern condition. To her black urban culture has made a significant use of postmodern techniques and deliberately celebrates "fleeting, obsolescent (...) aesthetics." (391).

Jim Collins theoretically supports her argumentation, but focuses on television and postmodernism, and its effects on society. Both writers have in common though that they try to ascribe positive values to the postmodern condition, and develop theoretical concepts that grasp the complexity and steadily changing status of postmodernism. Collins agrees with McRobbie that postmodernism`s ability to be self-reflexive and thereby critically ironic about its very own concept has a liberating impact:

> "In the 'metapop' texts that we now find on television, on newsstands, on the radio, or on grocery store book racks, we encounter not avant gardes who give 'genuine' significance to the merely mass cultural, but a hyperconscious rearticulation of media culture by media culture" (380).

Along with this goes the idea that the "concept of the postmodern subject itself as multiple and contradictory, acted upon but also acting upon, has also led to reconsideration of the 'effect' that popular culture, most especially television, has on its viewers" (381). First off all, the postmodern condition suggests that society is highly

fragmented and based on subcultures; therefore, advertisement and TV programmes have to be adjusted in a way that suits the consumer's needs. This means that popular culture has become much more creative and flexible in terms of finding ways to attract a fragmented mass of consumers. Secondly, the audience is able to develop ways to "make the meaning or need out of television programs" (381), which clearly lets them exercise power, though in limited form, over the media. This crucial aspect, meaning the consumer's ability to exercise power, "exposes not just the limitations of traditional Marxist paradigms" that are so often applied to describe and analyse the postmodern condition, but it also shows "the need to develop far more sophisticated forms of materialist analysis that recognize the multiple uses and effects of consumerism" (383). I gather from this information that Collins does not intend to idealise or romanticise consumerism, but that he strives for innovative work in the field of postmodern cultural studies.

Nancy Fraser shares his opinion in so far as that she criticises the current discourse as lacking consideration on the fragmentation of the public sphere. For her, there always was "a plurality of competing publics" (523); thus, fragmentation might have emphasised the impression that the public sphere is not heterogenous, but it has surely not created this condition. Popular culture and in particular the media has identified this condition early and celebrates it; the media almost immediately developed appropriate means to use this plurality in favor to serve its own needs.

Richard Dryer brings another rather difficult aspect into the analysis of postmodernist culture; he investigates the relationship between "entertainment and utopia" and discovers that the postmodern condition forces us to develop a new concept of utopism too. The increased influence of media on our everyday life has also an impact on the

question of representation and signification. Dryer points out that "different modes of representation (in history and culture) correspond to different modes of perception" (374); this refers to the postmodern media as well as the consumer. To me the question arises, whether this challenges the notion of "utopia" or "utopism". "Utopia" as many scholars define it, has a direct connection to consmerism and escapism. It would be false, at least only superficial, to see consumerism equal to escapism. Dryer remarks in this context that "consumption as a spectacle contains the promise that want will disappear. The deceptive, brutal and obscene features of this festval derive from its fact that there can be no question of a real fulfilment of its promise" (376). To put it simple, Dryer claims that entertainment intentionally lures the consumer into escapism without really fulfilling his/her needs in the end. You can hold against this argument that the postmodern condition describes a much more complex situation. Though these "false promises" still exist, and basically need to exist in order to create and increase consumption, the variety of entertainment, the speed by which entertainment changes, can also increase the time that the consumer "escapes," in other words, derives pleasure from it. We do not need complex algebra here; the postmodern trend in entertainment does not offer reality instead of simulation, but it might more often offer more pleasure for the consumer. I certainly do not propose that this is a genuinely positive development, yet, I feel that scholars have paid too little attention to this side of the coin. A nuanced view or discourse need to consider the fact that postmodern entertainment by its very nature allows more time and space for pleasure, even though this form of pleasure can be debated too.

This discussion will be held again in chapter two, when we come to analysis the concept of virtual communities. The discourse on virtual communities never neglects the aspect of utopism and oftentimes views the electronic version of community building as a form of escapism par excellence.

Chapter Two: Culture, Community, and Social Networks

I. Defining Communities: When Marx and Engels collide with Wellmann and Bruckmann

> ...at all times, most people have feared that communities had fallen apart around them, with loneliness and alienation leading to a war of all against all. (Wellmann, 1)

If you are familiar with Wellmann's writing and his approach to communities, you know immediately that his remark is made with a smile and a wink. Yet, his comment basically nails it. Wellmann explains to us that the lament about the decline or loss of communities equally belongs to the past, the present and probably also the future. Thus, the discussion about the rapid loss of the sense of communities in postmodern times is a mere continuation of this debate rather than a new discourse. The factors that traditionally produce and eventually change communities remain the same to a certain extent. Undoubtedly, economic conditions and technological developments have a major effect on community building and most likely will have a strong influence on it in the future. We can agree that a socialist economy differs from a privatized capitalist economy, which leads to the conclusion that both forms of economies have different impacts on community building.

It is true that in the postmodern era, factors that have existed for a long time still remain as important for the building of communities. At the same time, considering the changes happen in the economic context, for instance, we have to acknowledge that new factors, such as the development of electronic media might lead to significant changes in terms of community building. The increasing influence of technology in our lives, might cause

lots of scholars and citizens to worry about the status and development of communities in our societies. Wellmann sums this debate up by saying that:

> Community has never been lost. Yet since the Industrial Revolution, most people have believed that large-scale technological and social changes had destroyed community in the developed world and were well on their way to killing it in developing countries. Policymakers and pundits echoed and reinforced this belief, and until a generation ago, most social scientists agreed with them. (2)

It is questioned here by Wellmann whether the fear of declining communities under the impact of "technological changes" (2) is justified at all considering that communities still exist all over the world. This is exactly the point I want to discuss: we need not to focus on the question whether communities still exist or not, instead we need to examine in which ways communities flourish today. What are the most influential factors and in which forms do communities present themselves?

For obvious reasons, the community question is both linked to the individual and the society in general. There is extensive research done on how large-scale social changes (caused by imperialism, industrialization and capitalism, and in general technological development) affect interpersonal relationships. Wellmann remarks that mostly communist scholars such as Marx claim that:

> Where religion, locality and kinship group had some integrative claims on interpersonal relations, the shift to mobile, market societies now had the potential to disconnect individuals from the strengths and constraints of traditional societies (3).

This statement documents that firstly, the change in society was perceived as negative and scaring. Secondly, capitalist forces in the economy were made responsible for the

aforementioned change in society and its impact on the individual. Both Marx (1852) and Engels (1885) suggested that industrial capitalism was the determining factor for the alienation of the individual and therefore leading to a loss of community.

As a principle of industrialization and urbanization, people tend to move to the cities and got engaged in different communities and social circles. The closely knit relationships between neighbors and families in the rural setting were probably more difficult to uphold in the city for that mobility and constant change favored loosely knit relationships and communities. However, I would argue that urbanization and industrialization favored the emancipation of people in manifold ways. This is because "companionship", "solidarity" and "financial and emotional support" could be found in diverse communities then, and were not solely located in communal bindings anymore.

In the 1960s there were a few scholar who invested time and energy into research, which was meant to prove that "community had survived the major transformations of the Industrial Revolution" (Wellmann, 8). The main idea in their thesis is that "large institutions have neither smashed nor withered communal relations. To the contrary: the larger and more inflexible the institutions, the more people seem to depend on their informal ties to deal with them" (Wellmann, 8). This ananlysis would prove my point that the industrial revolution and increasing urbanization did not take away the essence of community. Wellmann additionally mentions that we find those "supportive communal bonds remaining in allegedly pernicious habitats: inner-city slums and middle-class suburbs" (7).

Nonetheless, I consider the skepticism against the change in community building carefully and also acknowledge to a certain extent that factors such as urbanization and along with this migration might cause the uprooting of people. Then again, the uprooting of people from one social condition, in this case, a communal network based on family

and neighbors, might be replaced by another one that links colleagues and friends in another social network. As a matter of fact, we have to acknowledge that new form of communities have been developed which might offer the same benefits as the traditional communal networks.

It is not surprising though that besides scholars; many artists have made the change in community building a topic in their works. Science-fiction novels have exploited the discourse of urbanization and community building in various ways; oftentimes, the tone is a slightly dark and morbid one. The picture that is drawn then illustrates the individual struggling with the loss of community in the technology driven environment. The collapse of traditional social structures is envisioned to lead to or reinforces Darwinist manners, which alienates people from each other and creates an atmosphere of desolation and suspicion. Movies have taken a similar approach and if we look at films such as George Miller`s "Mad Max" (1979) or Ridley Scott`s "Bladerunner" (1982) it is unavoidable to recognize the similarity in depicting futuristic societies that consist of individuals only, who mourn the loss of communities. In a sense the influence of technology on societal structures has been viewed with suspicion in movies and literature; however, it might be unjustified to generalize here since lots of works have been produced which depict a less apocalyptic scenario. *Bladerunner*, as dark and depressive its underlying tone might be, also shows that it is not necessarily technology that drives us apart, but humans themselves who use technological advancement in a substantially risky way.

Coming back to the original search for community in postmodern times, it is necessary to investigate what kind of impact the technological development of (mobile) telecommunication and the Internet has on social networks and the structure of communities. This poses a great challenge for scholars since "seeing community in concrete, bounded neighborhoods is easier than seeing community in far-flung networks whose ties spread almost invisibly through the ether" (Wellmann, 6).

I am all the more impressed by those scholars who investigate the development of communities from a network- analytic perspective. Their strategy of analysis is to avoid the definition of community as defined to a certain local area. Instead they look for social structures and relations that might be rather geographically diverse. In my perspective this is possibly the only comprehensive approach that gives us an idea of how to examine and evaluate the development of virtual communities and networks.

For any study on virtual communities the former, and more traditional scholarly concepts would fail for a very simple reason:

> Analyses have taken mappings of local area boundaries as their staring points and then looked into the extent of communal interaction and sentiment within these boundaries. They have thus assumed, *a priori,* that a significant portion of a person's interpersonal ties are organized by locality. Such a territorial perspective, searching for answers to the Community Question only within bounded population aggregates, has been especially sensitive to the evaluation of community solidarity in terms of shared values and social integration. Consequently, when observers cannot find much solidly local behavior and sentiments, they have too-often concluded that "community" has disappeared. (Wellmann, 13)

Hence, these theoretical concepts would be naturally unjust to any kind of virtual community, for that the internet often replaces locality with geographical distance.

Summing it up, we can come to the conclusion that the existence of communities do not need to be questioned since particularly in postmodern times communitites have been build en masse. Subcultures are the best example for the more flexible approach to community today. Secondly, we can gather from the material above that traditional theoretical concepts, such as those of Marxism, would fail to evaluate the development of virtual communities objectively. The Marxist ideology would simply be too prejudiced against the technological influence on society and therefore miss the opportunity to see the liberating aspects of virtual networks. Therefore, I would like to cite Amy Bruckmann, who advocates a broad complex framework for the analysis of communities, and in particular for the examination of virtual communities: "No metric or perspective on the concept is the 'correct' one. Rather, a variety of conceptual frameworks can be used in complimentary fashion to highlight different aspects of a complex phenomenon" (618)

II. The Nature of community in Computer Mediated Systems (CMS): Online communities as 'real' communities?

"Online communitites" or "virtual communitites" are both terms that appear to be used often these days, sometimes just naturally by young people, oftentimes with a suspicious tone by elders. For obvious reasons, the internet plays a crucial role in the development of virtual communities. It is the medium that makes such communities possible. Howard Rheingold offers the following definition of virtual community, which, to me, sounds significantly simple, slightly technical, but overall logical: "*Virtual communities* are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (6).

In this paragraph I would like to focus the attention on a rather crucial question, one that polarises and is cause of (emotional) debates: Are online communities 'real' communities? I chose to set the word 'real' into single quotation marks since we have already get to know about the problems involved when defining community. Postmodern times in particular contest the very meaning of 'real' and in my point of view it is extremely difficult to justify a statement which says, anything that happens in the internet is necessarily 'unreal'. Considering the emotions an Internet user feels when chatting with others in a network cannot be simply done away with by saying they are not real because they were caused by an online conversation in which the partners do not see each other.

However, I was intrigued by the many texts written on online communities and their ambiguous stand in the academia. I feel that there is a big uncertainty and uncomfortable ness among scholars how to judge virtual networks in terms of the community question. Howard Rheingold, an internet veteran, is probably the best known supporter of virtual communities. His extensive research gives us a valuable insight into the world of online communities, power relations and the meaning of media for everyday lives.

It is quite helpful to work with his main idea, which emphasizes the liberating potential of virtual communities, but also reminds us on the responsibility that all users naturally share:

> The technology that makes virtual communities possible has the potential to bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens at relatively little cost--intellectual leverage, social leverage, commercial leverage, and most important, political leverage. But the technology will not in itself fulfill that potential; this latent technical power must be used intelligently and deliberately by an informed population. (5).

It is indeed a crucial point that Rheingold raises here; virtual communities naturally depend on technology and are thereby more vulnerable to any kind of misuse. Rheingold puts it more drastic by saying that: "The odds are always good that big power and big money will find a way to control access to virtual communities; big power and big money always found ways to control new communications media when they emerged in the past" (5). This is true for the field of television, for instance, where capitalist visions become all too apparent. A prognosis on the development of virtual communities might be expressed only carefully at this point for that it is still quite a new and highly fragmented phenomenon. The suggestion can be made though that since virtual communities attract millions of users every day, it would be surprising if not the economy (represented by advertisers) discover the huge possibility to sell (virtual or real) products.

However, Rheingold offers an idealistic view that emphasizes the user's power if he/she is knowledgeable:

> 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. (5)

In order to ultimately judge whether Rheingold draws a realistic picture of people's influence on the development of virtual communities, or if he describes a simply idealized scenario, we need to find out more about virtual communities, their structures, and their effects on social relationships.

Wellmann and Gulia commented on the structure of virtual communities in the following manner: "Such groups are a technologically-supported continuation of a long term shift to

communities organized by shared interests rather than by shared place (neighborhood or village) or shared ancestry" (5). Shared interests are a vague expression since it can include business and leisure, love and hate, and many other opposing things. However, it is clear that people look for other people with similar likes and dislikes, although there also might be a great number of internet users who might only "surf", and skip thru different chatrooms without looking for anything specific. Rheingold enthusiastically claims that people

> use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot if idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries (Rheingold, 4)

As we can gather from this statement, Rheingold is convinced of the similarities between virtual communities and "real-life" communities. Besides, we are informed that there are virtual communities for different needs; "exchanging knowledge" or finding "emotional support" might be immensely important for most of the Internet users. It might be worth to consider that particular virtual communities can offer both emotional support and useful advice that might not be given in real-life. Reaching out for help could be made easier thru the chosen anonymity in a virtual community, for example. People who fear judgement in their real-life communities probably feel more comfortable to express their opinion, thoughts, and fears in virtual communities, where face-to-face communication is often intentionally eliminated. Derlega, Metts, Petronio and Marquils (1993) also suggest that "the Internet's anonymity and reduced cues might stimulate online self-disclosure

because there is no fear of being ridiculed or rejected". In addition, virtual communities allow you to control "communication and presentation of self" as stated by Wellmann and Gulia (14). In face-to-face communication your body language is an important part of the discourse, thus nervousness, fears or uncomfortable ness is immediately visible and reveals significant information about your (emotional) situation.

There exist case studies which show that members of virtual communities are more willing to share (private) information with people they hardly know off-line. This can be interpreted as risky behaviour since you do not know about the others` biography and their social position. The question is whether this indicates that people have more trust in each other's profiles, or if it simply shows that members of virtual communities are careless, naive, and illusionary? Both ideas might be proven right by a significant number of supportive arguments and examples; I also agree upon the fact that the use of the internet and the engagement in virtual communities demands a certain responsibility from all members.

Again, we have to remember that technology can be both a blessing and a curse, but it would be unjust and too simple to put all the blame on technological development while the actual user is intentionally uninformed and unwilling to take over responsibilities. Face-to-face communication, for instance, demands a particular code of social behaviour and so does online communication. Though it might be easier to 'walk away' from a discussion in a virtual community by simply leaving the chat(room), the internet still demands certain codes of behaviour.

In contrast to face-to-face communication, members of virtual communities can reach a great number of people at the same time. In addition, members of the same virtual

community might live in different places and time zones, thus also the time difference can be an advantage, because theoretically you will find someone to talk to at any given time.

Another important aspect to consider is the question of mobility and accessibility. The regular Internet user might have access to the internet via his/her home computer, or at least he or she can use a computer at work. In addition, the increase of Internet and so-called cyber cafés make accessing the internet possible and convenient for millions of people. I would be careful though to generalize positions in this particular context since accessibility to technology is not a given in all countries; developing countries, especially rural areas, might have less access to the internet than say, highly urbanized areas in Germany, England or the US.

It is also not surprising that critics of virtual communities claim that the easy accessibility to the Internet binds plenty of people to their homes. This means that if you put it dramatically, the average member does not necessarily have to leave his or her house to look for communication. Social interaction, which usually takes place both in public and private spheres, can be drastically reduced to the privat sphere in case of virtual communities. Wellmann and Gulia point out that critics often "treat (virtual) community as a zero-sum game, assuming that if people spend more time interacting on-line, they will spend less time interacting in "real-life"" (13).

This argument weighs heavy one would assume; however, we have to make clear here that only "cyberaddicts" (13) spend all their time interacting online, and do not invest in any relationships in "real-life." In general, studies prove that members of virtual communities still interact with people in different situations and places (see Wellmann and Gulia). They still have a workplace, where interaction with colleagues happens frequently, and most of them would confirm that they spend time with friends and

neighbours. Wellmann and Gulia point out in their analysis of virtual networks that members have developed both close and loose ties to other members in the web, and, at the same time keep their already existing ties in "real life" (13).

It might be even difficult if not impossible to state if such close ties will be developed faster in virtual communities or in "real life;" on the one hand, the internet user might need more time to gain trust in a person he cannot see. On the other hand though, virtual communities favor the exchange of personal information, thus it might be possible to develop strong ties with people you are feeling comfortable with to share such information more easy and faster. In the next chapter, I discuss this issue in greater detail on the example of the popular virtual community Facebook; however, it should be mentioned at this point that the medium itself is not the important factor in developing strong ties to people in my opinion. Instead it is the significance of a relationship that counts both in a virtual community and in 'real-life' for people to develop strong ties or weak ties with other people.

Getting to know people in a virtual community might also lead to contacts with those members in 'real-life'. However, this is not meant to be the rule, as well as it is not necessarily common to meet your 'real-life' friends in virtual communities too.
Coming back to the critics who claim that virtual communities favor weak ties, but discourage to develop a large number of strong ties between its members. The counter argument which we can bring forward here is that hardly anyone today would claim to have developed strong ties with more than maximum 20 people in 'real-life' since the definition per se implies that the relationship has to consist of more than just randomness and a few shared interests. The same applies for virtual communities, too. Members might chat with each other for years, exchange information about families, friends,

hobbies and interests and see each other develop over the years. The level of intimacy and trust develops simultaneously.

However, "people on the net have a greater tendency to develop feelings of closeness on the basis of shared interests rather than on the basis of shared social characteristics such as gender and socioeconomic status" (17) as Wellmann and Gulia suggest. This would mark a difference to real-life communities or even contacts. We may not choose to be or not to be friends with a person particularly for his/her particular socioeconomic background or nationality; yet, these might be factors that influence our perception when meeting this person. Our judgement might be subconsciously influenced by the way a person looks or dresses, and thus relationships develop or will be avoided. In virtual communities though, this aspect is mostly neglected since face-to-face communication does not exist. It depends on the members of a virtual community if they want to share private information or withhold them.

I was intrigued by Wellmann`s and Gulia`s observation that "the tendency of the net is to foster participation in multiple, partial communities. People often subscribe to multiple discussion lists and newsgroups" (15). These groups can be linked to each other or deal with the very same issues, but it is also possible that someone is joining different virtual communities (e.g. "Free Tibet" and "Cocoon Club Frankfurt"[13]) who have nothing in common at first glance. This is undoubtedly a reflection of our postmodern lifestyle; we join multiple communities and live a fragmented life. Interestingly, Wellmann and Gulia point out that the range of involvement in each group might vary drastically: "(members) participating actively in some, occasionally in others, and being silent "lurkers" in still others" (15). The question that arises from this observation is whether we can draw a

parallel to 'real-life' situations here. Is it possible to be just a silent observer in our 'real-life' communities? Does not active participation is required when you become a member? In virtual communities it is certainly true that the "lurker" will not be able to make strong ties with other members unless he/she is willing to participate in discussions and contact individual members directly. However, he/she can at least passively participate in form of solely 'listen' to exchanges between other members and thereby gathering information.

Thus, it is possible to have a relatively small number of strong ties with people in the net, and at the same time have up to hundreds of weak(er) ties with other members of virtual communities. Wellman and Gulia also mention that "the market metaphor of shopping around for support in specialized ties is even more exaggerated than in real life because the architecture of computer networks promotes market-like situation" (17). In contrast to 'real-life' communities, virtual communities offer easy access and allow people to be in various groups at the same time. An Internet user can log in into several groups simultaneously and participate actively or at least passively.

In addition to this, scholars suggest that the internet, in particular virtual communities, "may produce a counter-trend to the contemporary privatization of communities" (Wellmann and Gulia 18). The claim that "semi-public milieus" (18) have become less popular for community building in "real-life," and instead the privacy of homes replaces traditional spaces to meet and interact with people, might be justified to a certain extent. There are several reasons for this development to happen, among them certainly economic considerations since the fees for internet access are quite moderate in comparison to the amount of money you would have to spend when going to a café or restaurant. However, we need to have a more nuanced view on this issue since lounges,

[13] These information are taken from a friend's online profile at Facebook.

cafés and bars still frequently open up everywhere around the world. Leisure time might be reduced these days, but the little free time you have, people are still spending in cafés or going out. It is true though that the increasing urbanization is limiting the creation of open spaces, parks and other public places where people can meet and move around. Only very few megacities have managed to keep a balance between office spaces, residential areas and public spaces that can be used for recreational purposes. If this increases the use of the internet and the development of virtual communities has not yet been explored entirely.

While virtual communities supposedly encourage the internet user to spend more time at home instead of visiting public places, they also advertise global connectivity. It is quite common that virtual communities attract members of different nationalities who live in geographically different places. As a consequence, the importance of locality seems to play a minor role in building communities. This reflects the postmodern condition of our societies today since fragmentation and mobility enhances the ability to have multiple and complex community ties. Wellmann and Gulia reminds us that we should not get trapped in the "pastoralist myth of community" which glorifies strong ties to neighbours and relatives. Instead we need to acknowledge that "community ties are already geographically dispersed, sparsely-knit, connected heavily by telecommunications (phone and fax), and specialized in content" (Wellmann and Gulia 18).

Since I have mainly focused on enhancing the strengths of virtual communities, it would only be fair to reflect upon the negative aspects as well. Here, I find Trebor Schulz`s approach quite interesting since he examines how multinational companies take advantage of the user's willingness to share information in virtual communities. He claims that "the immaterial, "affective labor" of net publics produces data" (2). What

might appear as only a casual discussion with other community members online, could reveal essential data about your shopping habits, likes and dislikes, in general, your preferences when it comes to consumption of (material or immaterial) goods: "contributors comment, tag, rank, forward, read, subscribe, re-post, link, moderate, remix, share, collaborate, favorite, write; flirt, work, play, chat, gossip, discuss, and learn" (2), which gives a very good idea of the user's profile in real life too. In addition, many users show a transparent profile by adding their educational background, their workplace, even home addresses and phone numbers. Though having the option of choosing a more restricted profile and showing less private information, users do not always use this opportunity. The study done by Privacy International shows

> that a lack of education about the risks involved lead users to conclude that the benefits of socialization outweigh the potential harm. While users might feel like they have control over their personal information, in many cases the user content uploaded onto a social networking site becomes the property of that site.

Schulz and others make a good point by saying that so called third parties, such as advertisers and companies find an easy opportunity then to collect necessary data to promote their own products. Privacy policies have been hotly debated since the first virtual communities appeared in the net; the claim that providers such as Yahoo, MySpace and others alike need to guarantee a trustworthy privacy setting is understandable. Yet, the user himself needs to be aware of the fact that the private information, which he decides to make public by publishing in virtual communities, can be used for other purposes than only exchange of information.

If the user does not find any sufficient information regarding privacy policies, he/she should avoid uploading any personal information. Again, I would like to point out that both, internet providers, or those ones who develop virtual communities have a certain responsibility to make sure that all necessary information regarding site content, purpose, and linkages with other companies are given. In addition, the user needs to take over responsibility too by using the given information to either show a more restricted profile, or select only particular people with whom he wants to share rather private information.

Youth in particular are vulnerable to the flaws and dangers of virtual communities and therefore need more guidance. Privacy International points out that they "must be taught that indiscriminate sharing of personal information is dangerous and renders users vulnerable to spam, identity theft and stalking by unknown users."

In my perspective, all parties, Internet provider, parents, and users have certain responsibilities to fulfill, and we need also be clear about the motives why virtual communities are created and maintained. It is naive and careless to simply trust that your personal data will not be used for any other purpose, if you have not restricted your profile and limit the chance for other people to see private information. The user needs to take the opportunities given for individual privacy options instead of developing a blind faith towards technology and the people behind it. Once again, Privacy International reminds us that "a motivated user base with a strong conception of its rights can, in the context of social networking, help change the online privacy landscape."

To come to a conclusion we can say that virtual communities are not very different from 'real-life' communities since their aim is also to connect people and to create ties between them. These ties can be both weak and strong, depending on the active

participation and needs of the Internet user. Virtual communities are neither eliminating 'real-life' communities, nor do they eventually replace them. Yet, they may offer an alternative for people who are either hesitant when it comes to face-to-face communication, and/or who appreciate the efficiency of the network's multiplicity. The diversity and richness of virtual communities attracts more and more Internet users, and we can imagine that the number of virtual communities and their members will increase steadily in the future since the developing countries increase their investment in technology and communication means.

Advocating for the benefits and advantages of virtual communities should not be misinterpreted here; we shall be fully aware of the risks, which eventually come with the use of the Internet. The user has to develop certain skills and knowledge in order to use the Internet properly, thus misuse can be prevented to a certain extent.

Though we have investigated the development of virtual communities in broad, there may be still questions left to answer. We lack sufficient theoretical material and data that explores the importance of virtual communities for the individual user, for instance. We still have not found an answer to the question whether virtual communities are "real" communities. But we can say that simplification and generalization, demonizing and glorifying of the net is neither fruitful nor usable. We have to accept that virtual communities might help some, and frighten others. We also need to acknowledge that we should invest into research and education about the internet and the function of virtual communities. What we should do in the future though is to avoid drawing a black/white picture which implies that 'real-life' communities and virtual communities are mutually exclusive.

In the following chapter, it shall be exemplified how virtual communities work. I chose to have a look at one of the most popular virtual communities that exist today, Facebook.

Chapter Three: Virtual Communities: Facebook unlimited...

I. What is Facebook? An Overview

The first step to give an overview on Facebook, its founders and history, is to have a look at the website. Here you find information organized in paragraphs, such as, "Facebook factsheet." The first definition given here by Facebook`s founder Zuckerberg is the following:

> Founded in February 2004, Facebook is a social utility that helps people communicate more efficiently with their friends, family and coworkers. The company develops technologies that facilitate the sharing of information through the social graph, the digital mapping of people's real-world social connections. Anyone can sign up for Facebook and interact with the people they know in a trusted environment. (http://de-de.facebook.com/).

Summing up these information, we can identify three main issues here: firstly, Facebook supposedly helps to communicate more efficiently. Secondly, Facebook is about the "digital mapping" of already exisiting contacts, so called "real-world social connections." Thirdly, and this is most interesting, the founders claim that "anyone" can join Facebook. Without beeing too critical, a certain vagueness in formulating the principles of Facebook can be acknowledged. Hence, all three issues mentioned in Zuckerberg`s statement actually force us to ask for a detailed explanation. It would be interesting to know how "efficient communication" is guaranteed; is it only because Facebook provides the technological tools to increase the speed of communication (see Facebook Chat Application), or does the fact that a member can join groups and discuss issues with several other members at the same time proof of efficient communication? Unfortunately, Zuckerberg and Co. do not further comment on this issue. The second issue brought up by Zuckerberg is slightly misleading in my perspective. This is because more and more

members use this "social utility" in order to get to know new people whom they probably will not meet in real-life. One of my friends who is using Facebook for over a year stated that he has more than 1100 friends on Facebook. Most of them are people whom he has not met in real-life, but got to know in groups and because they share the same interests. It is true though that most members communicate online with friends whom they know from their "real-life." Nonetheless, a great number of people would have plenty of friends on Faceboook whom they have never met. Thus, it is suprising that the founders of Facebook put much emphasis on the formulation "real-life social connections," yet knowing that people also use Facebook exactly for the pupose to get into contact with people from around the globe.

The third issue mentioned in their statement let us at least raise an eyebrow. The statement "anyone can join" is not only misleading, but also dangerous. Only later, in the paragraph on Rights and Responsibilities, do we get to know about certain restrictions. This is, for instance, that children under the age of thirteen are not allowed to beome members, or that convicted sex offenders are restricted from opening up an account. However, there is justified doubt if the mechanisms to check people`s profiles are sufficient in order to control those restrictions about age or particular criminal backgrounds.

Summing this up, we can say that Zuckerberg and Co have given a poor statment that can be misinterpreted easily. In addition, many issues are not well defined and thus cause confusion, or at least raise more questions.

Despite all this I would be unjust not to acknowledge the fact that Facebook is one of the most successful utility tools that have been invented by students. Within four years of

existence, Facebook has over 150 million users/members all over the globe, "even in Antarctica" as Zuckerberg posts on his website. He adds that Facebook is "the fourth-most trafficked site in the United States," and apparently less than 200 Facebook engineers "serve over 50 billion page views a month." Furthermore, Facebook`s founder claims that they are also "the largest photo-sharing site in the United States; we have over a billion photos, and our users upload over 14 million new photos every day" (Zuckerberg, http://de-de.facebook.com/). For the 70% of members who are living outside the US, Facebook is currently available in 35 translations, though English is still widely used for communication[14]. Furthermore, the fact that "2.6 billion minutes are spent on Facebook everday (worldwide)" documents that Facebook is extremely attractive as a social tool to interact with people.

These are undoubtedly impressive figures which underline that the founders of Facebook know how to promote their product.

The question which follows logically is whether they also know how to protect their members from misuse of (private) information. Therefore it is crucial to have a look at the Statemt of Right and Responsibilities.

The Statement of Rights and Responsibilities (http://www.facebook.com/home.php?ref=home#/terms.php?ref=pf) contains of more than 3.300 words and several paragraphs. This should make the impression that the designers of Facebook are concerned about the user's safety and the proper use of the site's content. Like any other statement of Rights and Responsibilities, Facebook explains what both parties, provider and user, have to agree upon in context to exchange of information and services offered. Surprisingly though, we find the most elaborate

[14] The information is taken from Facebook factsheet. (http://de-de.facebook.com/).

paragraphs addressing third parties, in particular advertisers or "developers" who can use Facebook for commercial purposes. This is in fact most important since developers design and promote applications which are used by 95% of Facebook users[15]. Since there are currently more than 52,000 applications available on Facebook and "140 new applications are added everyday", as Zuckerberg points out, the founders of Facebook have to introduce certain guidelines for dealing with these third parties offers. At the same time Facebook makes clear that applications are mostly third party offers, and that Facebook itself is not responsible for the content and customer support. In paragraph number 9, Special Provisions Applicable to Developers/Operators of Applications and Websites, Facebook advises third parties to inform the user about how his/her data will be collected and used: "You will make it clear to users what user data you are going to use and how you will use, display, or share that data." (9.1.2.).

Facebook apparently demands a certain transparency from application developers and advertisers in order to ensure proper handling of data. However, there are still certain paragraphs that need to be explained more comprehensively; a statement such as: "You (the developer/avertiser) will not transfer the data you receive from us without our prior consent." (9.1.8.), raises questions about Facebook`s ability to control or at least observe the transfer of data.

Coming back to the user`s responsibility, we find a number of suggestions for using the Facebook privacy settings which enables the user to restrict his/her profile. Facebook wants to make clear that the user "owns" the content posted on his/her profile, and in addition, it is said that he/she "can control how this content is used by Facebook thru privacy setting and application":

[15] The information is taken from Facebook factsheet.

> For content that is covered by intellectual property rights, like photos and videos ("IP content"), you specifically give us the following permission, subject to your privacy and application settings: you grant us a non-exclusive, transferable, sub-licensable, royalty-free, worldwide license to use any IP content that you post on or in connection with Facebook ("IP License"). This IP License ends when you delete your IP content or your account (except to the extent your content has been shared with others, and they have not deleted it).

This paragraph reveals the most important information for any Facebook user. Bluntly speaking it says that if you do not restrict your profile properly, Facebook automatically acquires an "IP Lincense" which justifies the use of private content not only by Facebook, but also third parties. You do not have to be obsessed by privacy issues in order to ask why Facebook would be interesting in collecting and transferring your profile pictures, or photos you have taken at a family dinner or any other occasion. To be less ironic, we might ask the question why this IP License is important to Facebook, when data such as information on gender, age, educational background, profession, hobbies or taste in music are sufficient to reflect upon possible consumption habits of Facebook users.

Summing this up, we can say that Facebook informs its users about their responsibilities in context to privacy settings, and it also explains that third-parties might use the given data unless the user restricts his/her profile. In fact, this information is sufficient for every Facebook member to understand that if he displays data (address, education, profession) and IP content (pictures and videos), he needs to 'protect' them in order to avoid that they might be used for commercial purposes. However, the question remains whether

Facebook uses a language that is understandable for everyone. Since also children (above 13 years), are allowed to become members, the language used in explaining the privacy setting should be simple and easy to understand. Furthermore, it would be positive if Facebook avoids vague expressions that might be misleading. I would also like to point out that certain vagueness is implied when explaining for which purposes IP licenses are used. Ultimately, we cannot criticize Facebook for a poor privacy policy since the settings are properly installed and theoretically, all users can use them. When we express privacy concerns, we should first off all ask ourselves, whether we read the statement of Rights and Responsibilities carefully, and then secondly, if we restrict our profiles properly.

At this point it is crucial to come back to chapter two, which deals with the question of virtual communities as 'real communities'. We have said that virtual communities make it easy to communicate with people whom we do not know in 'real-life'. This is certainly positive to a certain extent since it gives you the opportunity to find exciting options for information exchange. However, Facebook documents how important it is to follow up a strict privacy policy as a user. We need to be extremely careful whom we befriend in this virtual community, and with whom we want to share private information about ourselves. An "average user has 100 friends on the site" is written in Facebook`s factsheet. This does not seem to be very unusual considering that part of it might be family members, friends from school or university, and colleagues. However, it is interesting to realize that a lot of Facebook users have more than 500 contacts (which are considered friends). It is highly unlikely that the user has established strong ties with all of them, and sometimes the only common interest might be a hobby, or particular political interests, for example. Any contact in your friends list is able and allowed to not only view your information, but also download any IP content. This is a crucial point considering that the Facebook

user might fall victim to serious data misuse. Unfortunately, there is no study available that provides information on the misuse of data, and, in particular, the misuse of IP content.

As a consequence, the user seems to be less protected than in a 'real-life' social context; since virtual communities make it much easier to transfer information, but also to misuse them, it is difficult to say whether they are overall more dangerous. The responsibility of the user is obviously that he/she needs to take care of privacy setting and frequently check on the contacts he/she makes. It is not wise anyways to befriend an unknown person only because she/he sent a "friend request". You would also not show your childhood pictures, or videos that show you dancing and drinking at a party to a total stranger whom you just happen to meet at a bus station, thus it is surprising that virtual communities, such as Facebook, apparently manipulate our instincts in this regard.

Though I advocate for an awareness that users have the responsibility to take serious interest in privacy policies, and only if it for their own safety on Facebook, I also support the argument that Facebook is at least morally obliged to make any change in their privacy settings transparent and easy to understand. In this context, Privacy International criticizes that Facebook introduced a new feature called "news-feed" in 2006, which "shows what has changed recently in an individual's profile and what content (notes, photos, etc.) they have added" (2). More than 740,00 protested this feature and claimed that Facebook did not inform its users properly about how the news-feed works and how users need to adjust their privacy settings. This poses a serious concern to many Facebook users, since it indicates that changes in privacy seetings are made constantly, thus the user needs to stay informed all the time. This is only possible if sufficient

announcements are made and the information provided by Facebook is easy to access and transparent for all users.

II. Using Facebook: entertainment and companionship?

The second paragraph of this chapter serves to illustrate how Facebook members use Facebook, and what features of Facebook they use the most. It is crucial to get familiar with all the options offered by Facebook, such as Facebook chat, for example. Furthermore, it is important to know what kind of information you reveal on your Facebook profile or how many applications you are actively using.

Again, this might be primarily documented by anecdotes and observation since there are only very few studies available that examine user habits. I am all the more grateful for Pavica Sheldon`s and James Honeycutt`s comprehensive research on Facebook, in which they document how users communicate with each other. It needs to be added here that Sheldon and Honeycutt imply that members of virtual communities might be more hesitant to engage in face-to-face communication, and, thus, preferring the anonymity that facebook communication may offer. Though I think that this theoretical approach is legitimate to a certain extent, I do not share the idea that the fear of interacting with people in 'real-life' is the only or dominant reason why users enjoy facebook.

It would be thoroughly false to treat the Facebook community as a homogenous group; the many individual motives for using Facebook need to be considered too in order to evaluate why Facebook turned into one of the most attractive and fastest growing virtual communities worldwide.

The uses and gratification model which is applied by Sheldon and Honeycutt illustrates "how different people use the same media messages for different purposes to satisfy their psychological and social needs and achieve their goals" (2). Since its first implementation in the 1940s, this model has been constantly adjusted, and researchers try to include new gratifications. There are four main categories in which the user's needs and gratifications are classified:

> diversion (escape from problems; emotional release), personal relationship (social utility of information in conversation; substitute of the media for companionship), personal identity (value reinforcement, self-understanding), and information (McQuail, Blumler & Brown, 1972)". (Sheldon and Honeycutt 4)

Applying this model to Facebook enables us to find the following results: the main motive for Facebook use was "relationship maintenance" with already existing contacts in "real-life." Besides this, users stated that their motives were: "*passing time, virtual community* or going on Facebook to develop new relationships, e*ntertainment*, *coolness*, and *companionship*" (Sheldon and Honeycutt 5). So far, the motives for joining Facebook indicate that users are keen on both keeping in touch with exisiting contacts and also getting to know new people. The search for companionship does not necessarily imply that you are an introverted person who faces difficulties with face-to-face communication. A Facebook user who has 500 online contacts could be an extroverted type in "real-life," too. Unless we conduct large surveys with Facebook users we might not get sufficient information on the relationship between online bahviour and "real-life" behaviour.

However, it is interesting that online communities offer different ways to express yourself and communicate with others. There are hundreds of applications which allows the user to express sympathy and love for a person; you can send virtual flowers, for instance, notes, you can "bake a cake together," you can even send a kiss to someone or smile at him/her. Communication happens in a form of a click, and the receiver does not necessarily have to answer.

Besides, posting messages or items such as videos and photos, on your friend's wall, can keep communication more openly. The receiver and the receiver's friends will be able to see it, but only the receiver and the sender are technically in the position to change the content or delete it. However, friends might comment on the posted item, and a thread of messages develops. This is probably a rather unique feature of communication in online communities, since the 'real-life' situation would restrict the possibilities of "deleting messages", for example.

It is quite interesting that apparently "more than 13 million users update their statuses at least once each day" (Facebook factsheet). This can be in order to describe the emotional status, likes and dislikes, or even illustration of the activities done. However, this is not very different from what we do in 'real-life' everyday. We also tell our families and friends how we feel or what we did and are planning to do. Nonetheless, changing the Facebook status is visible to the entire list of contacts, thus the user reaches a bigger audience. Also the possibility to update your status literally every minute is not given in "real-life." Oftentimes, online friends will be informed about such changes via news-feed, and they might comment on the status, too.

unique dynamic. Those ones among my friends who use Facebook chat, for instance, state that they appreciate the speed of communication. They can communicate with several friends at the same time, sometimes for hours and often just to say hi and exchange brief information about the other's well being. What all of them have in common is that they frequently use abbreviations, such as, "brb" (be right back), "tc" (take care), "lol" (laughing out loud), "ttyl" (talk to you later). This is mainly because it saves time when communicating with different people at the same time, they mention. Thus, speed of communication is a significant feature of Facebook communication.

Coming back to Sheldon`s and Honeycutt`s thesis about the relationship between users` unwillingness to communicate in 'real-life' and the use of Facebook as an alternative way to communicate and interact with people, it needs to be said that the results presented by these two scholars show no sufficient evidence for their original assumption. What can be acknowledged though is the fact that Facebook offers different ways and options to communicate (e.g. Facebook chat, messaging, wall, group discussions). The actual use of all these features has to be proven with large statistical techniques and, in addition, more diverse samples need to be examined.

Furthermore, the use and gratification theory delivers information on user habits, but says little about the development of strong or weak ties between individual Facebook members.

Finally, I would like to present parts of a survey that was conducted by Casey in real life- - a blogger with apparent links to the academia. His/her approach to the use of Facebook

members. The findings underline that Facebook is used for different purposes; surprisingly though, the female members spend more time on Facebook than male users: "out of the twenty female users, 70% of them check and spend time on Facebook on a daily basis whereas only 53% of our male respondents do so."[16] There was also a difference between students and employees in terms of how much time is spent on using Facebook, for example: "63% of the registered full-time students take part in Facebook activities daily compared to 61% of registered full-time employees." The common denominator was that both groups log on Facebook daily, though some of them invest less than 30 minutes. The arguments brought forward here were intriguing; first off all, we would assume that full-time employees might not have the opportunity to visit Facebook as frequently as a student. However, the counter-argument would be that students do not necessarily have the financial means to own a computer, thus, they need to rely on public computers, which might not be available 24/7. What I found most interesting though was the fact that both students and employees stated that online communication via Facebbook was still less popular than personalized communication: "full-time students prefer to use Facebook as their 3rd and 4th (tied at 32%) means of communication but full-time employees use it as their 4th (47%) and 5th (21%) ranked means of communication."[17] These results underline that online communication via Facebook is valued by its users, but it is still not ranked first among the means of communication.

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[16] The full version of the blog can be found at <http://webupon.com/social-networks/facebook-communication-necessity-or-fad/>.

[17] The information was taken from the survey done by Casey. Full results are published on her/his blog <http://webupon.com/social-networks/facebook-communication-necessity-or-fad/>.

gathered that most of the motives for becoming a Facebook member are identical to those reasons why people in general interact with each other in "real-life." Moreover, studies have shown that personal (face-to-face) communication is still preferred by a majority of Facebook users.

III. Postmodern aspects of Facebook

While the first two paragraphs explicitly deal with the structure, history, and development of Facebook and its implications for online and 'real-life' communication, the third paragraph serves to examine the question in how far we can describe Facebook as a postmodern phenomenon. Since we have given the definition of postmodernism in an earlier paragraph, I now present the postmodern key elements which I could find by analysing Facebook.

Our perception of Facebook might strongly depend on our perception of the postmodern era. As the paragraphs on postmodernism and community building suggest, some of us find information technology and thus virtual communities rather disturbing than helpful inventions. However, appreciating the fact that instant messaging, chats, and online group discussions are a useful addition to our social lives, we also need to accept that by this our ways to communicate and interact with others may have changed to a certain extent. Facebook and other virtual communities demonstrate that time and space can be interpreted to your individual needs; you will always find someone online, and you can also easily cross rivers and mountains by logging in to online groups from abroad. Your

Facebook status, by adding new applications and deleting others, you make your profile (your online identity) more complex. At the same time, your profile and also lots of your conversations become depthless. Our priority is not to build something for eternity, we rather look for constant adjustments and changes it seems.

Mychele Byers, an American university teacher, made an interesting comment when she first got to use Facebook. To her, Facebook is both ironic and promotes a certain nostalgia:

> Is this type of postmodern cultural production/immersion (as we are both in it and, in a sense, co-producers of it) simply a reification of a mythic past, a giving in to longing for something unrecoverable, or do we engage with Facebook via an "ironic distance," or both?[18]

The "mythic past" in this context is probably best documented by searching for friends you went to high school or university with. It is true that these times are "unrecoverable" since this period in your life is over. However, by keeping contact with former classmates or joining groups which are dealing with your school or batch, you manage to go back to the past or at least keep these memories alive.

What we have to consider here I suggest, is that "the ironic distance" which Byers describes, is less perceivable to the actual user. We need to ask whether Facebook users are aware of their own "ironic distance." In most cases, the "ironic distance" happens to be subconsciously I would propose. In particular younger users probably have less experience with this concept and hardly apply it consciously.

virtual communities or the postmodern condition. Intertextuality or an almost playful engaging with the past is theoretically possible in both virtual communities and 'real-life' situations. However, the openness of the www, and thus, virtual communities makes it easier to fulfil these needs. This should not be misinterpreted then as the fulfilling of escapist fantasies. The search for old friends and a shared past basically documents that people are keen on community building or the preservation of old social ties. This issue can be debated from different ankles though; Linda Hutcheon`s approach towards nostalgia and the postmodernism debates the importance of the past. She also discusses arguments which support the idea that virtual communities might create escapist fantasies among users. Her theory suggests that

> nostalgia exiles us from the present as it brings the imagined past near. The simple, pure, ordered, easy, beautiful, or harmonious past is constructed (and then experienced emotionally) in conjunction with the present--which, in turn, is constructed as complicated, contaminated, anarchic, difficult, ugly, and confrontational.

Nostalgia presents us with a clear dichotomy between past and present, whereby the present is perceived as less enjoyable. This means consequently that the past needs to be not simply remembered, but it has to be glorified and idealized. Hutcheon continues by claiming that in times of advanced technology "nostalgia may be particularly appealing as a possible escape" from the less pleasant 'real-life'. This argument reminds us on those ones used by traditionalists who claim that communities today are decaying. Technology, in particular electronical reproduction of images, allows "easy access" to the past, and

[18] A full version of her article can be found at <http://flowtv.org/?p=392>.

however, I would like to add though that this is not the only or most important feature of virtual communities since they also promote the idea of building a bright future with new contacts and friends. Facebook in its very own ways might be promoting both, a nostalgic feeling as well as the promise of an even better future.

It is crucial to consider though how Facebook plays with the idea of nostalgia. Hutcheon's suggests that postmodernism is "aware of the risks and lures of nostalgia, and seeks to expose those through irony,"[19] and since Facebook is both product and reflection of postmodernism, it follows the same logic. The "promise of a better future" is nothing more or nothing less than a comment on the past, the present, and the future alike.

For once Facebook manages to erase the distinction between high and low culture since first of all, diverse groups of people join Facebook. Secondly, it allows kitsch, trash and sophistication to co-exist. Trashy applications, advertisement and poetry share the same space here.

Coming to a conclusion, we can say that Facebook is both product and reflection of the postmodern condition. There are many particularly postmodern aspects that we can find in Facebook, though the actual user might not always be aware of it. However, we need to acknowledge that Facebook simply responds to our social condition, which indeed is fragmented and to a certain extent depthless.

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[19] Linda Hutcheon's full article can be viewed at <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>.

Ultimately, we need to conclude this thesis with a discussion of my findings. Though the conceptual framework for this thesis was kept simple, the findings have proven to be not as easy to interpret. Since different issues, such as the postmodern condition, community building, and communication in virtual communities, were investigated, my conclusion shall pay tribute to the complexity of this endeavour.

In addition, my findings demonstrate that larger and more comprehensive research has to be done in the field of virtual communities and their impact on societies. It was certainly wishful thinking that my findings would be sufficient to make a just evaluation of the impact of virtual communities on societies. After facing major difficulties to provide necessary data for specialised examination on internet users (distinction between gender, age, educational background, profession, political views, etc.), I had to rely on findings of other researchers. As a consequence my thesis shows certain limitations and might lack an in-depth analysis. On the other hand though I think I could provide a nuanced view on issues such as Facebook since both sides, the provider and the user, were equally given voice.

I would like to present my findings according to the structure used for their examination. Hence, an evaluation on the postmodern condition shall be presented next. It is most important to me to point out that though scholars struggle to find a definition of postmodernism, we can agree upon the fact that an open interpretation of it turned out to be helpful for my analysis. This is why I decided to chose Collins' idea about postmodernism as a theoretical framework for my work:

> the term (postmodernism) is used to describe: (1) a distinctive style; (2) a movement that emerged in the sixties, seventies, or eighties, depending on the

> throws into question the givens of philosophical discourse; (5) a very particular type of 'politics'; and (6) an emergent form of cultural analysis shaped by all of the above (375).

Despite the overall confusion about how to define postmodernism, scholars can be united in the idea that "postmodernism signals a move away from the self-enclosed world of the avant-garde back into the realm of day-to-day life" (Collins, 376). This is a crucial point since it marks one of the most significant differences between modernism and postmodernism. While modernism emphasises the dichotomy between high and low culture, postmodernsim deliberately plays with it and erases this distinction. Furthermore, due to its preference for intertextuality and eclecticism, postmodernism challenges our traditional notion of consumerism and the manipulation of society by signs and signals. Though Jameson, Baudrillard or Eco views the 'implosion' of 'real-life' and image with suspicion, I would suggest that the energy that is set free in this process can be liberating for the consumer. As I have argued in chapter one, we have to be careful by judging the postmodern condition as one that only favors image saturation and simulacra; it actually offers variety and multiplicity, too. The consumer is indeed confronted with images and simulation in his every day life, however he/she is still capable of "decoding/encoding" messages to his/her own needs. Hence, I accept the idea that media manipulates us in consuming images (and thereby being confronted with ideologies), yet, I would argue that the modes of resistance are not eliminated. Perhaps it becomes more challenging in postmodern times to filter images and messages, however this only emphasises that we as consumers have a certain responsibility to consume more consciously. Faith in

The second chapter of my paper continues with the idea that industrial and technological advancement brought along societal change. It is most interesting to see that the "community question" is as hotly debated today as it was centuries ago. As Wellmann suggests, we can see "contemporary Western communities (as) rarely tightly-bounded, densely-knit groups of broadly-based ties. They are usually loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit, ramifying networks of specialized ties" (Wellmann 16). As a consequence, the traditional concept of community based only in a certain local context (e.g. neigbourhood) has been challenged. Though scholars such as Wellman claim that societal changes and shifts in the formation of communities are visible, they do argue against the idea that the traditional forms of community have been eliminated. However, the (forced) mobility of people in the era of industrialization and urbanization had a crucial impact on community building. It favoured multiple networks, both consisting of strong and weak ties, for instance, and created the necessity to have different circles of friends.

I continued my analysis by asking whether and how the development of the internet affects social networks and community building. Again, I had to come to the conclusion that conventional, "territorial perspectives" (Wellmann 13) might be insufficient to bring the community question in relationship to the Internet. This is because the simple logic of the Internet as a tool to connect people without paying attention to locality denies an analysis that defines "personal ties as organized by locality" (Wellmann 13).

It turns out that the network analytic approach which is proposed by Wellmann is helpful for examining how community building works in times of increased internet use. The

differences in virtual communities and 'real-life' communities based on the fact that the internet provides a particularly technology driven kind of communication and interaction, we also need to acknowledge that both types of communities show lots of similarities. Thus, the user's motivation to join an online community is the same than searching for social networks in "real-life." The longing for entertainment, emotional support, or exchange of information is a motif to join a "real-life" community as well as a virtual community.

Yet, it needs to be said that the Internet's anonymity stimulates self-disclosure and might reduce the fear of being rejected or ridiculed by others. This theory underlines that Internet users experience a different kind of communication in virtual communities since face-to-face communication does not take place. The way you communicate with others or how you present yourself can be controlled better in a virtual community I would suggest.

In addition, virtual communities also encourage users to develop both strong and weak ties with other members, just as it happens in 'real-life' social networks; this obviously depends on the active participation and needs of the internet user. Besides, joining multiple virtual communities mirrors our postmodern lifestyle, which is truly driven by fragmentation.

Since postmodernism contests the meaning of 'real,' the question whether virtual communities are 'real' communities is actually less legitimate and posed a challenge to my thesis. However, having a look at the similarities between virtual communities and

Furthermore, I would like to argue that the popular idea that virtual communities substitute for or replace 'real-life' communities, cannot be supported by convincing arguments. Sheldon`s and Honeycutt`s analysis on virtual communities has shown that online communication ranks only third or fourth in terms of social interaction. Thus, we can suggest that virtual communities might serve as an addition to 'real-life' networking and interaction; it will be interesting though to examine this situation a decade from now and investigate if online communication has managed to become the primary source for interaction between people.

As the example of Facebook shows, virtual communities necessarily have to reflect the postmodern condition. Facebook in particular makes the impression that the past is still vivid; internet users often join Facebook in order to stay or get connected again with childhood friends or former classmates, hence they satisfy their longing for a nostalgic past with the help of virtual networks. Interestingly, I could agree with Hutcheon's thesis that nostalgia and irony, two distinctive features of postmodernism, are common aspects of virtual communities. Facebook documents that a nostalgic longing is simultaneously an ironic view on the past and the longing for the past itself.

I have put forward arguments which promote Facebook as a useful social utility for interaction with people from all different walks of life. However, I do understand that critics warn of certain risks which might be linked to the membership in virtual communities. When I advocate for the benefits and advantages of virtual communities I do not ignore the flaws or possible dangers. We as users shall be fully aware of the risks, which eventually come with the use of the Internet. As a consequence, the user has to

Coming to a conclusion we can say that the diversity and richness of virtual communities attracts more and more internet users, and we can imagine that the number of virtual communities and their members will increase steadily in the future since the investment in technology and communication means is increasing rapidly.

Unfortunately, I have to end this paper with the statement that I did not find sufficient proof to claim that virtual communities are "real" communities. However, it is also impossible for me to suggest that they are not "real." The dilemma posed here might be solved in the future, when further research investigates the relationship between user and online community.

Ultimately, we need to acknowledge that virtual communities might seem beneficial and helpful to some, and scaring to others. With proper research and sufficient education about the advantages and disadvantages of virtual communities though, we eventually can agree upon the fact that "real-life" communities and virtual communities do not have to be necessarily mutually exclusive.

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