

# [I am writing this essay on a macintosh computer, a essay](https://assignbuster.com/i-am-writing-this-essay-on-a-macintosh-computer-a-essay/)

machine that replaces the gears and levers of a typewriter with a microprocessor, electronic circuitry, software, and a display screen. On the floor is amodem, which lets my computer talk to other computers over the phone lines. There are more than 30million people on the Internet whom I could reach via modem if I knew their electronic-mail address. Icheck my E-mail; Im carrying on several electronic conversations about this essay, and about other topics. I check a few bulletin boards (there are tens of thousands I might look in on; I keep up to date with a halfdozen), looking for interesting information about computers and communications that might enliven myessay, and keep it current. Occasionally I broadcast requests for information. On top of the modem sits the telephone, and that, too, ties me in to an information network. There are morethan 500 million phones in the world, and if I knew the number and were willing to pay the bill, I couldreach any of them. And as I do my work, I almost always have the radio on, picking a station from dozensof possibilities of broadcast entertainment and news. There is an astonishing electronic informationinfrastructure surrounding me – surrounding us all.

But the electronic part of the information infrastructure is only a tiny fraction of whats available to me. Every morning the newspaper is thrown into the driveway. The paper is an amazing achievement, morethan one hundred pages of news, data, photographs, and advertisements pulled over electronic threads fromaround the world, processed, organised, and delivered. Every day at about noon the mailman brings mail tothe box at the end of the driveway. It has been collected, sorted, moved, and delivered: a traditionalinformation stream, but an important one.

Behind me as I sit in my bedroom is a wall of books. Each of them has its own story – each one written, edited, designed, printed, distributed. The author of each has spent months or years collecting informationthough all of the channels mentioned here, and more, deciding whats important, and figuring out how bestto state the facts, and how to make the case for his or her interpretation of them. Many of the books arechecked out of a library – an enormously effective information distribution mechanism, every bit asimpressive an achievement as the most modern computer network. Some have been obtained throughinterlibrary loan, a system that moves thousands of books around the country every day. I swim in an oceanof information. We all do. In this essay, I will be discussing about the communities that were developedthrough newspapers and television. I will then discuss the communities that have been brought about byhypermedia and how it has affected and constructed comm! unities.

The terms communication and community share the same Latin root as the word common-communis. Thiscommon denominator is important to the understanding of the process of communication on two levels. First, the quality of the communication process is understood to be higher among participants who havecertain things in common, such as past experiences, values, and beliefs. These are also attributes of acommunity of individuals. Second, the process of communication, mass or otherwise, requires encoding(by a sender) and decoding (by a receiver), which can be achieved successfully only by participants whoshare a common set of codes or language (Berger, 1995).

Mass communications comprise the institutions and techniques by which specialised groups employtechnological devices (press, radio, films, etc.) to disseminate symbolic content to large, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed audiences. As each new medium developed, existing media declined in use or adaptedto more specialised functions, but the overall tendency seems to have been for a steady increase until thepresent, in the amount of time actually devoted to attending to mass communications. McLuhan (1995)states that the railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of citiesand new kinds of work and leisure. This happened whether the railway functioned in a tropical or anorthern environment, and is quite independent of the freight or content of the railway medium. Television is stated to be the dominant mass medium in almost all advanced countries (McQuail, 1969). Justas the telegraph and the railroad brought people of the world closer together – with all the diverse andequivocal effects that such propinquity breeds – so TV introduces the inhabitants of one nation to those ofanother, thereby establishing a certain measure of common experience. TV allows us to share theexperiences of those who live at a great distance. However, a genuine village community exists, as Miller(1971) points out, only through the local institutions which embody the shared interests of its inhabitants. Such institutions more or less effectively exclude the participation of outsiders who do not contributedirectly to their upkeep. Confronted by dozens of channels to watch, the spectator becomes confused, frustrated and finally, in self-protection, isolationist. One almost deliberately exempts oneself from theconcern which these programmes would otherwise se! em to solicit.

In a study of community newspapers, it was shown that these tended to have flourished rather than to havedeclined under the pressure of the national media and, in view of this, it became arguable that the media, rather than destroying local communities, often played a vital role in their maintenance (Bennett, 1982). Newspaper reading became a community ritual as early as 1848, as Lubar (1993) states. In fact, the readingof newspapers have even been likened to a mass ceremony, a substitute for morning prayers. Anderson(1993) has suggested that the activity of reading newspapers is performed in silent privacy, in the lair of theskull. Yet each communicant is well aware that the ceremony he performs is being replicatedsimultaneously by thousands (or millions) of others of whose existence he is confident, yet of whoseidentity he has not the slightest notion. Furthermore, this ceremony is incessantly repeated at daily or half-daily intervals throughout the calendar.

The digital encoding of sound, text and image, the introduction of fibre optic lines replacing copper wire, the ability to transmit digitally encoded images and the subsequent ability to compress this information, thevast expansion of the frequency range for wireless transmission, innovations in switching technology, and anumber of other advances have so enlarged the quantity and types of information that may soon be able tobe transmitted that a qualitative change in culture may be imminent (Poster, 1995). The Internet takesadvantage of and harnesses the above technology. Rheingold (1993) states that virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Internetwhen enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form websof personal relationships in cyberspace.

The Internet is home to many virtual communities . These communities are based on commercial, professional, and social ties rather than geographical proximity (see Appendix A and B). Since no twopeople will have identical set of interests, these virtual communities interlock and interpenetrate in complexways. The rapid growth of the Internet has been accompanied by a corresponding growth in the number anddiversity of Net communities. Dery (1996) states that as many as a million people join the Internet eachmonth and there are no signs of abating the delirious pace. This expansion is due in part to the novelty ofthe Internet, but it also reflects the real desire of people to interact and share experiences, knowledge andcompany.

A sense of community is profoundly enhanced when members of a group are able to assemble in a way thatgives them a sense of place. Online technologies which allow people to interact in a shared, persistent placefoster the strongest social bonds. Usenet newsgroups, which is a large set of discussion groups that arecomposed of the collected contributions of its readers, develop a sense of community. This sense ofcommunity arises because newsgroups have persistence, and because the group of people who participatein a newsgroup changes much more slowly than the content of the discussion (HREF 1).

Robbins (1996) suggests that virtual communities represent flexible, lively, and practical adaptations to thereal circumstances that confront persons seeking community. They are part of a range of innovativesolutions for the drive of sociality. The online community both demonstrate a friendliness of a goodneighbourhood in the midst of an ever growing world, along with showing the active character. To be partof the online community one must become a part of the discussion, otherwise that which is discussed willbe less helpful, and the online lurker will not be in touch with anyone else (HREF 2).

Sharing a virtual place is not quite the same as thing as sharing a physical place like a room or a bed. Bodies need not be in close proximity, and they need not be enclosed by the same architectural or naturalboundaries. The crucial thing is simultaneous electronic access to the same information. On the Internet, programs for broadcasting electronic mail messages to all the “ subscribers” on specified address lists called“ list servers” sprout. They are like electronic Hyde Park Corners – places in which anybody can stand upand speak to the assembled crowd. Electronic “ newsgroups” were also quick to develop. Newsgroupsoftware allows participants to “ post” text messages (and sometimes other sorts of files), much as youmight pin printed notices to a physical bulletin board. Shared “ rooms” on the Internet often announcethemselves by descriptive or allusive names (like the signs on bars and other hangouts) – The Flirts Nook, Gay and Lesbian, Red Dragon Inn, Cybersex, Romance! Connection, Teen Chat, Thirtysomething, Born-Again Onliners, and so on (Mitchell, 1995).

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is one such system where “ rooms” are entered and discussions are carried out. Itis a multi-user synchronous communication facility that is available to all users of the Internet. Communication using the IRC program is written, and users are spatially distant, but it is also synchronous. It is a written form of communication that is transmitted, received and responded to within a time framethat has formerly only been thought relevant to spoken communication. Users of IRC have devised systemsof symbolism and textual significance to ensure that they achieve understanding despite the lack of moreusual channels of communication. Furthermore, a variety of social sanctions have arisen amongst the IRCcommunity in order to punish users who disobey the rules of etiquette – or netiquette and the integrity ofthose shared systems of the interpretation. Commonly known as smileys, IRC users employ alphanumeric characters and punctuation symbols tocreate strings of highly emotively charged keyboard art:: ) or : – )a smiling face, as viewed side-on; ) or ; – )a winking, smiling face: ( or : – (an unsmiley face; an unhappy face: -( \* )someone about to throw up8 – ) someone whose eyes are opened wide in surprise: – P someone sticking out their tongue>: – 0someone screaming in fright, their hair standing on end: – &someone whose lips are sealed@}-`-`,-`–a roseThese smileys and symbols are many and various. There are also many commands that can be used tonavigate yourself on IRC (see Appendix C). The users who can succinctly and graphically portraythemselves to the rest of the IRC usership will be most able to create a community with that virtual system(HREF 3). Access to the Internet has even empowered disadvantaged communities within society as shown at HREF4. It was discussed how a group of African-American women from a low-income housing development inNorth Carolina used online communication to attempt to challenge not only the immediate issue ofadequate housing but their position within the unequal power relationship between African-Americanwomen and white elite-dominated institutions. Use of online communication afforded the women anopportunity to operate outside the local and exclusive pathways of information, discourse and social actioncontrolled by the institution of the housing authority. In a broader sense, their grassroots networkingactivities online subverted longstanding local articulations of power.

The information flow on the Internet is controlled by those who use it. People actively provide theinformation that they want personally and other people want. There is a much more active form ofparticipation than what is provided for by other forms of mass media. Television, radio, magazines are alldriven by those who own and determine who will write for them. The Internet gives people a media theycan control. This control of information is a great power that has not been available to the commoneveryday person. The Internet helps to make the information available more accurate because of the many-to-many or broadcast and read and write capability. That new capability, which is not normally veryprevalent in our society, allows an actual participant or observer to report something. This capability givesthe power of journalism to the individual. This new medium allows everyone on-line to make acontribution. The old media instead controls who reports and what they say. Th! e possibility of eyewitness accounts via the Internet can make the information more accurate. Also thisopens up the possibility for a grassroots network (HREF 5).

In the very near future, we expect to see many more Internet villages and communities, and these will beenriched by even more powerful and exotic tools that enable people to interact with and relate to oneanother in new and unique ways. Already we see programs like Net2Phone and CUSeeMe (pronounced C-U-See-Me) that enable people to view each other (or other people) whilst even hearing them. Fujitsu andCompuserve have recently announced a plan to create a graphical chat environment where users will beable to construct their own individual persona or “ avatar” from a menu of body parts, and that image will beable to move around rooms and other virtual spaces and interact with the images of other members of chatsessions. We can expect that projects such as that will use 3D effects, live video, and virtual reality –whatever technology and bandwidth will allow to help people interact and collaborate with one another(HREF 6).

The emergence of cyberspace challenges the horizons and the habits of print-based culture. It is now morethan five hundred years since the printing press was introduced, and with it came a social revolution in theWestern world and the foundations of contemporary society (Spender, 1995). As Marshall McLuhansuggested in the 1960s, the content of any new medium is precisely the old medium that it has replaced; and so, in McLuhans sense, we might say that cyberspace remains fixated on the traces of the word that itostensibly renders obsolete. It is thus a by-product of a tradition of metaphysics which bears us backrelentlessly to our past (Markley, 1996).

We all need a sense of place, whether it be bounded territorially or in the “ placeless” realm of cyberspace. However, the bounded nature of virtual community can indeed be a transnational, transculturalphenomenon. Perhaps the reconceptualisation of community derived from our increasing participationwithin the realm of the Internet will guide us to a clearer picture of public vs. private life within the globe. Although computer mediated communication offers some advantages over face-to-face communication, e. g., no preconceptions of another person based on appearance, ease of coming together, and equal accessto the conversation among those participating, we find the disadvantages outweigh the advantages. Indeed, each of the “ advantages” could be construed as a disadvantage: appearances do matter; conversation shouldnot be based on solely efficiency; and some ideas are more useful than others. Even such proponents ofvirtual community as Rheingold (1993) maintain that face-to-face meetings can be valuable in theformation of a true sense of community. Indeed, it seems most likely that the virtual public sphere brought about by hypermedia will serve acathartic role, allowing the public to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation. Communitiesseem more likely to be formed or reinforced when action is needed, as when a country goes to war, ratherthan through discourse alone. Citizenship via cyberspace has not proven to be the panacea for the problemsof democratic representation within any society; although communities of interest have been formed andstrengthened and have demonstrated a sense of solidarity, they have nevertheless contributed to thefragmented cultural and political landscape of the world that we live in that is replete with identity politicsand the unfulfilled promise of a renewed vita activa. If nothing else, the expressions of hope and desire for new modes of communication such as the Internetspeaks volumes about the failures of present and past technologies to help create a just and equitablesociety. Perhaps these failures should prompt us to re-examine why we continue to place so much hope intechnology after so many disappointments. Ultimately, the hope placed in hypermedia is misplaced becausechange will occur not by altering the technology but by reforming the political and social environment fromwhich that technology flows. Finally, I suggest that the term virtual community is more indicative of an assemblage of people being“ virtually” a community than being a real community in the nostalgic sense that advocates of the Internetwould seem to be endorsing. The main concern is that the public is more likely to forget what it means toform a true community. If, on the other hand, virtual communities can lead to action, that may be the basisfor the formation of real and lasting communities of interest. But until then, any change in thecommunications structure, such as the widespread use of the Internet, is likely to be unsettling. Therefore, we must agree with Cooley (1983), who wrote in 1909:“ A rapid improvement in the means of communication, as we see in our own time, supplies the basisfor a larger and freer society, and yet it may, by disordering settled relations, and by fixing attention toomuch upon mechanical phases of progress, bring in conditions of confusion and injustice that are theopposite of free.” (p. 55)BibliographyAnderson, B., Cultural Roots in Imagined Communities, London, Versa, 1993.

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As some of my resources were from the Internet, my Hypertext References are as follows: Hypertext ReferencesHREF 1http://www. communities. com/company/papers/commerce\_n\_society/commerce\_society. htmlHREF 2http://www. columbia. edu/~rh120/ch106. x15HREF 3http://www. ee. mu. oz. au/papers/emr/electropolis. txtHREF 4http://www. sscnet. ucla. edu/soc/csoc/cinc/melebio. htmHREF 5http://www. columbia. edu/~rh120/ch106. x01HREF 6http://www. samizdat. com/build. htmlAppendix APlaces and Communities on the Internethttp://www. well. com/user/hlr/vircom/index. htmlThe WELL, Rheingoldian home turf, hotbed of gnarly individualismThe River, a virtual community owned and governed by the users. FreeNets Home Page leads to lots of resources for community networkersBlacksburg Electronic Village, a state-of-the-art community network. TWICS, a virtual community in TokyoCOARA, a virtual community in Oita, Japan — far from Tokyo; less bicultural than TWICS; I’ve visitedthem four times IRL. COARA members are starting to put uplots of cool web pages. OTIS – an online caldron of creativityCobra Lounge is one of the weirdest, wackiest, art-troupes in cyberspace, part of TheSan Francisco Telecircus Scroll down a ways and you’ll come across Mamie” Minispoon” RheingoldClick your way into a whole nuther world, ChibaMOOVincent’s Hollow, a “ text-based virtual reality” (MUD-like place). CTD MOO is a virtual community for the Center for Talent Development. Ubique is a commercial outfit that creates tools to add human presence to the Web. Mix your real reality and your virtual community: A global guide to Cyber Cafes. TurnPike Metropolis will publish, at no charge, up to one megabyte of yournon-commercial WebpagesThe Spring is a young virtual community flesh-based in Austin, Texas. Station Rose, my zanyAustrian artist friends, are online from Frankfurt, via the WELL in California.

Appendix BVirtual Communitieshttp://www. unik. no/~markus/bib. html1. The Stone-PapersIf you like to be taken on a journey not only through the net, but also like to know your culture better, embark on a trip to Allucquere Rosanne Stones small, yet brilliantly written ftp archive and find out howto go on a Magical Mystery Tour, even Anno 1995.

2. The WellThe Whole Earth ‘ Lectronic Link is the legendary mother of all BBSs. Though many on line communitieshave made BBS-hopping quite familiar these days, the aura remains. A quality selection of some of thefinest materials on Cyberspace and Virtual communities. Namely Howard Rheingold with “ VirtualCommunities”, Bruce Sterling, and David Ronfeldt with opinions on Cyberocracy and “ Cyberwar &Netwar: Warfare between Networks”.

3. PARC at XEROXIf you are into MUDs and MOOs, Xerox`s PARC probably is the right place for you to stay a while. Awhole world of interesting papers at their ftp-archive. Working a little slowly lately. But once you get in, you are likely not to leave before to soon. Try it! 4. WiReDFor those who dont wish to go through a registration procedure, there is a mirror site with older backissues of WiReD-Magazine in Singapore. You never can tell til you try : WiReD-Magazines service has –in fact – dramatically improved. I found out only after overcoming my reservations of registering real-namewith the editors.

5. HIT LabGetting slightly more technical, you might want to take a look at the HIT Lab, especially in what concernstheir development of a VR-display, using retinal projection. 6. Meckler on the WebYet another magazine on the web, this time more technologically and bussines- (as compared to Zeitgeistand culturally, as in WiReDs case) oriented. No time has gone so far into finding out whether this is morethan an appetizer-site, though its first appearance is quite promising, not as promising as WiReD though.

7. CyberneticsLet alone the fact whether it is a lucky word creation or not, it might be convenient to ask the question ofwhat cybernetics is all about. 8. Encryption and Network MoneyEveryone uses the buzzwords, cyberspace and VR are being reported everywhere around the globe, inalmost any kind of medium. The problem does – however – seem to be: Is there a commercial applicationfor all this? Carl Loeffler, in “ The Virtual Reality Casebook”, seems to suggest “ eventually yes”. Thequestion is, however more complicated for VR than for other usual products being introduced to amarketplace. This is because VR cannot only be a product on the realworld market, but because of itsquality as an almost all (reality) embracing tool has the capacityto become a market itself, reflecting onto the realworld economy or becoming an n-dimensional economyof its own. The question then is: on which currency will this new economy run? Gather some perspectivesby one of electronic cash’s inventors, David Chaum. For a quite comprehensive overview, see thecompilation on electronic payment systems, by Trinity College (Dublin). 9. The Brussels G7 Mini-Summit on Information SocietyFinally, the Governments are gearing up to create the Global Information Infrastructure (GII). With the GIIfirst having been proposed in 1994 by Vice President Al Gore in Buenos Aires, the Summit in Brusselsseems to be an important milestone towards its implementation. Though there is no saying for how long, for the time being you can find a comprehensive documentation about the meeting on the Net. 10. The TofflersWhilst I don’t exactly wish to discredit this selection as being random in its approach, future-gazingToffler-style has won a new importance in connection with Newt Gingrich’s writing the forword to theirlatest book “ Creating a New Civilization”. Whilst this text is not available on-line, you might want to take alook at an older interview with Alvin Toffler from the New Scientist. 11. Carl E. LoefflerHard to find on the Net, but – so I guess – nobody escapes Lycos, the searching system at Carnegie-Mellon. See: Distributed Virtual Reality: applications for education, entertainment and industry from 1993. 12. Web Stars in VR (NASA)It seems to be a good site. Since I have just picked it – and it seems to be quite comprehensive – find outmore yourself. 13. The MIT media-labFind out more about what’s going on at the Lab with the support of 20+ of the world’s mega-corporations. 14. Bibliography of VRVery good! Compiled at the HitLab and available online. 15. Morten Soby on Virtual RealityPossessed by Virtual Reality by Morten Sby, Research Fellow Institute for Educational Research, University of Oslo. 16. Virtual Communities Sources List by Howard RheingoldA good collection on the social aspects of VR and Telecommunication, available at the WELL Website. 17. Niemann Foundation at Harvard University. “ Toward a New Journalist’s Agenda” (conferenceproceeds)Assembled in these proceedings from the conference are some very interesting thoughts on the future ofmedia and communications in the networked world. Find a file with an abstract of the most interestingcontributions (as from this bibliography’s author’s viewpoint). 18. CTHEORYCTHEORY is an international, electronic review of books on theory, technology and culture. Sponsored bythe Canadian Journal of Politicaland Social Theory, reviews are posted periodically of key books incontemporary discourse as well as theorisations of major “ event-scenes” in the mediascape. 19. Bruce Sterling’s Short History of the InternetQuite elementary reading about the coming about of the Internet. Before going into the real comprehensivematerials, it is probably a good idea to start take a look. 21. Roberto Bisso on “ Cyberespace et dmocratie” This article is taken from Le Monde diplomatique in July 1994. It shows some of the applications ofmodern networked computing in the domain of NGO-cooperation.

22. Hypertext – anticipatedJust as most will be amazed by the fact that the notion of cybernetics the way we understand this termtoday retraces back to Norbert Wiener’s book, some might be surprised to actually find out that the notionof hyper-documents has been crafted as early as 1945 by Vannevar Bush, then Director of the Office ofScientific Research and Development. No doubt, Hypermedia play an important role of forming a virtualcommunity’s future media-landscape. An online version of his Article “ AsWe May Think” is available.