Online Communities

“While mass-mediated communication technologies have empowered the institutional, participatory media offer powerful new channels through which vernacular can express itself.”
-Howard

Political communication theorists have defined community as “a system of social relationships based on a perceived common identity” (Zarefsky, 1995). These social identities are created online through a special mixture of online characteristics that include a sense of space, shared practice, shared resources and support, shared identities and intrapersonal relationships.

Space
An online community offers a virtual version of Schuler’s (1996) “third place.” Neither work nor home, third places are locations of informal social gatherings and cohesion. In digital context, third places provide sites for “neutral ground, equal status, sociable conversation, easy access, known regulars, playful interactions, homely aesthetics and a homelike atmosphere” (Baym, 2010).

Practice
Routine behavior, especially in language patterns, enact & recreate a cultural ideology. They are also markers of insider status and indications of group core values.

Shared Resources and Support
Networks of mutually beneficial relationships increase social capitalism, which is measured through bonding or bridging support. These obtainable resources can take the form of social support, emotional support, esteem, informational support, tangible aid or feeling that members are needed.

Shared Identity
Digital communities are created through shared space, rituals of shared practices and exchange of social support. Users accept personalities and roles that are consistent and systematic toward a particular group function.

Interpersonal Relationships
Digital connectivity is displayed through the interactions between community members via public discussions, language that denotes sufficient human feeling, and shared personal content.

For more information, read Electronic Hybridity: The Persistent Processes of the Vernacular Web (Howard, 2008) and Ch. 4 of Personal Connections in the Digital Age (Baym, 2010).

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