**Babeș-Bolyai University**

**Faculty of Sociology and Social Work**

# Digital Anthropology and Virtual Societies

## An interdisciplinary study on the anthropology of informational networks

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## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to define the anthropological characteristics of the digital network, also revealing how electronic media change mentalities creating new social structures and reversing flows of information. This research explains and elaborates on the term digital anthropology making it clearer, more understandable and suitable for academic use.

Since the dawn of mankind, community has been the key concept for evolution. Resource sharing and communication between the members of such social structures have empowered the human race to be what it is today. However, traditional communities have always been geographically oriented in a so called space of locations, as Manuel Castells puts it. Nowadays, digital or virtual communities are based on an informational flux continuum and have new rules and social patterns that need to be researched in depth in order to define how they function and what are the main characteristics that define them.

In this perspective, the most involved individuals will tighten up their relationships by means of electronic communication and form the social center while others will gradually distribute along the informational network according to their level of interest and involvement. Conceptually speaking, the digital community is not determined by a geographic location, but rather by a certain set of common interests. In this respect, virtual communities have their own dynamics and structure, much like the physical ones.

The Internet, regarded as the framework for virtual communities, may be defined in this respect as the sum of all the informational human interactions achieved by using the interconnected network systems. Even though this definition may seem simple, it contains some key elements that must be underlined. Firstly, the information in itself: the whole network is pointless without the content. Secondly, the exchange: the reason to be of

communicational networks is the exchange of information. Thirdly, the human side: there is no point in having technology and informational networks without the human beings that send and receive information. There is no exchange of information between machines just for the sake of disseminating certain types of content.

The freedom of the individual to contribute in any way in such a vast system has two opposing effects at a conscious level: uniformisation and individualization. These are the two sides of one coin that is the meaning of the Internet as a ever developing perspective. In real life, the process of individualization occurs when one is better and better informed and has the possibility to acknowledge cultural elements and ideals that are foreign to the other members of the community situated at the same level in terms of status and role. In virtual communities, individuals have the opportunity to be anything they want to be, as unique as one's personality and conscious mind may fathom. In a digital projection of one's self any kind of content is allowed, ranging from simple iconographic avatars to complex personalities with physical and psychological traits, especially when it comes to games where virtual people interact with one another. Of course, there is a very wide range of in-betweens like personal Web Pages, blogs, social network profiles, so on and so forth. On the other hand, within the uniformisation process each individual gathers information in the sum of traits, principles and standards that are common to all users in this environment. All these may vary from specific common language to behaviors and perception of certain situations and contexts.

This so called "freedom" to interact and change the system perpetually, gives a voice to any individual. Not in few occasions it has been stated that digital communication in Internet forms represents a certain type of right to speech "guarantee". Of course, since anyone can say anything, the drawback is that this right to express one's self is also guaranteed for antisocial or criminal groups such as terrorists. One must never leave out that this is all about human communication, just that it is in a different environment.

This thesis is focused on three main directions that follow the development of this field of research that is constantly changing:

1. The understanding of the digital world and the psychology of the virtual through a new anthropology.

In virtual or electronic worlds information, social structures and the concepts of individuals and community acquire new meanings that need to be understood and defined.

2. The enrichment of our understanding of the digital and the virtual by means of concepts from individual psychology.

This work draws on some of the central issues of contemporary psychology: the archetypal structure of the collective unconscious, the aspects of the human psyche, the dialectics of the ego-self axis, and the relationship to the other, as well as the structural characteristics of the community and its cultural, social and technological development.

3. A groundbreaking, interdisciplinary study of the digital and the virtual from an anthropological and sociological perspective.

This implies direct involvement of the researcher in most of the actions and interactions that are characteristic for virtual space, outlining a new methodology that can be applied in these social environments. In order to be able to research new social structures and systems, one requires new methods to carry out the research.

## Structure of the paper

Chapter 1: Theoretical approaches on digital anthropology

As the name suggests, this chapter defines key concepts for a sociological field of study that can be named digital anthropology. Starting from clearly defining concepts such as publics and networks, adding elements of ethnography that wrap around the phenomenon that we call nowadays Internet and stating a few general guidelines concerning networks and identity, this section covers a lot of ground in bringing anthropology as a science into the digital realm. Considering that in this realm communities form just like the ones in the real world, another valid theoretical approach contained her is that coming from the field of socio-psychology, especially when it concerns social aggregation at this level.

## Chapter 2: Network specific social structures

When one considers studying communities, reaching out for the structural side is a must, focusing on the framework, or the platform that holds such a community. In this case, since there are no forms of geographical location, even more, not even spatial organization, the environment in which participants communicate is one of the most important factors in this equation. Social media and social networking offer a wide array of platforms for computer mediated communication that are capable of supporting such social dynamics. From simple blogs to enhanced/augumented reality on mobile devices, all these services ac as a catalyst for virtual socialization.

Technological development has altered massively the way in which we communicate, and accordingly, the perspective through which we perceive society. This paper also deals with the concepts of social web and social media, with all the implications that they bring in a contemporary vision upon sociology and digital anthropology.

All these communication channels and, ultimately, social aggregation have a strong impact on contemporary society. Basically, one can state that this development of various means of communication is being continuously modified by the individuals, and, in turn, it shapes social structures accordingly. The web as it is today does not change us into something better overnight but it does work like an amplifier of human nature, be it bad or good.

## Chapter 3: Typologies of the individual in virtual societies

This chapter covers the general types of individuals involved in virtual communities, dealing with certain patterns that start with their own projection into the digital realm through various methods, go through a lifecycle and achieve a certain role that they play within these electronic worlds. Moreover, this section reaches the topics of *social norms*, *values* and *behaviors* defining deviant and pathologic behavior with relevant examples both in online and in offline.

As the number of individuals that join these virtual worlds is steadily increasing, the correspondent social structures become more and more complex, typologies become more

diverse and behaviors or interactions vary infinitely. Even the base structure of the community gets as close as possible to a real, physical social system in terms of complexity. Considering the most complex and immersive platforms, such as Second Life or Entropia Universe, that have their own economy and currency that can be converted into real money, one can predict that soon enough the complexity of the virtual social groups is bound to overcome that of the real physical ones, especially in terms of cultural diversity unrestricted by any geographical issues.

Chapter 4: Case study - Starwake – a template of a virtual world

In order to better understand the social phenomena that take place within virtual communities, this section contains a study on such a community, that is used as a template for others. This study involves mapping the whole community defining all the links that form between members and outlining groups both formal and informal, in other words covering the whole social network based on this platform. The individual within this community is defined by means of a certain parameter called Spectra that exists in each player's profile and allows others to define someone. Also the evolution of the general population is covered within this study through more than three years of study. As it is not a standard research, using standard research methods, the methodology used is also clearly described in this chapter.

Studying this community, with the help of the Spectra analysis has revealed both formal and informal leaders, along with basic rules that constitute the social norm of the group and what makes a member of this platform deviant. Correlating all these with formal groups, namely declared alliances certain groups will stand out as role-models and patterns for future research.

Chapter 5: Overall conclusions

The final part of this paper gathers general conclusions merging the theoretical part with the actual research and structuring the final ideas into different fields: phenomenology, methodology, ethics, sociology and psychology. Although each chapter has its concluding ideas, this final section is a synthetic analysis of the results of the research, correlated with the general directions of study stated in the introduction. Furthermore, in the segment dedicated

to methodology, a new research algorithm is described, an algorithm that can potentially solve some of the methodological drawbacks identified in this paper.

**Conclusions**

Digital anthropology is an emergent but fascinating field of study. The transfer of social structures from physical reality to the virtual realm is continuous and carried out at a rather constant if not slowly accelerating rate. Social norms, and not only, are always changing, this also applies to the general rules of conviviality in a given community. From the perspective of the individual perception if virtual worlds would remain in the state of a game, this kind of research would seem insignificant, but the impact and influence that the Internet, the Web and all undergoing technological developments on contemporary society is massive.

Traditional social structures go through a process of metamorphosis, and identity becomes a more and more vague concept as the boundaries between the real and the virtual slowly dissolve, as do the ones separating the public from the private. Virtual projections of real individuals grow to be more complex and along with the explosive development and increase in popularity of social media alter the way one relates to the social environment, in the case of augumented reality, even to the surrounding physical space.

Approaching these phenomena strictly from a network analysis point of view is already insufficient. New ways of communication emerge, geolocation and geotagging mark every bit of information that one sends to others. Community aggregation has not been conditioned by geographical constraints for a while now and the lifecycle of the members is progressively accelerating as the quantity of available information increases an the interests of each member change more easily.

Researching virtual communities brings about new fields of study that, in the future, will have more and more scientific precision combining disciplines such as sociology, psychology and economics and overlapping these over exact sciences such as physics and mathematics. Moreover, regarding social sciences, this kind of research is a point of convergence as the

understanding of the relationship between the individual and the virtual representation of self broadens.

This paper has reached in all three directions stated earlier, defining certain key concepts of digital anthropology for further use in research, adapting and combining research methods, not necessarily specific to this kind of study and last but not least raising new questions for more researchers in this field to answer, especially in Romania, where there is little interest in this field.

Obviously, as with any research, there are certain limitations, especially on a methodological level. For example: automated data mining is a unique opportunity to have an overview of an entire social system, but computer generated models of social groups have their drawbacks. The lack of nuances for the nature of the links in the network, and absolutely no reference to the experience and psychological profile of any individual in the system are just two such drawbacks.

Adding long term participative observation to the equation is a good solution for it broadens the boundaries of understanding of the social phenomena as it adds a certain amount of detail and experience of being an active member in a digital community. The blending of statistics and anthropology was a perfect solution, at least for this paper, to get as much relevant data as possible.

This type of research design in which more methods meld and the results are correlated with external data such as examples both in online and offline has granted this paper a unique way to balance the need to describe mathematically a social system and the drive to convey nuances and meaning to the social interactions at the level of the individual engaged in the system.

In the section that explains the methodology a new kind of sociology was mentioned, that of the virtual society, it is only fitting to bring about a new methodology for future research. Even if it seems easy to navigate virtual world, charting them from a socio-anthropological perspective is by no means an easy task. One of the reasons for this is the state

of flux that these worlds are in, but not only structurally speaking, even the rules that define these spaces change frequently. Another factor is that the data sets are enormous, and by the time they are processed the reality in the field has already changed. In this respect, using only statistical data for research is questionable, since it can only define trends and very general overviews on most phenomena.

Clearly, adding traditional anthropological methods to the research is a plus, observation is not to be neglected, and even more, certain sets of external information that the users bring along but does not belong to the community per se, such as input from mashing up information that is not a part of the researched virtual space, but rather adjacent, yet a sine qua non condition to understand the ever-changing digital realm.

Researching online phenomena is about to became the hot subject for numerous ethical debates. Although virtual worlds such as Second Life or World of Warcraft are considered public places and most platforms do not explicitly encourage users to state their real identity, one can not deny the fact that, in the end, an avatar is basically a projection of the self, of a real individual, a kind of a second-self, and the reputation of that second self and its experiences may be just as important as those in real life for certain people. Also, some areas of social interactions, such as guilds or alliances have a more private connotation and for scientific accuracy, certain ethical norms should be implemented in the near future.

There are voices regarding the Internet such as Sherry Turkle, stating that online identity is not consistent throughout more virtual contexts and that it is just an artificial construct, the same individual having several or more iterations in virtual space. Still, nowadays the Web and its technologies are the most convenient and efficient way to communicate. Of course individuals present in digital space will attempt to project their selves in as many ways as that specific space will allow them to gradually gaining complexity as the supporting platform develops. This can easily explain the ever-growing popularity of social networking services, especially among those technologically savvy and the rate at which socio-artistical information such as memes is distributed to become ubicuous cultural references.

The more people identify themselves with their projections, sharing information, experience and influence in virtual environments, the more researchers will have the opportunity to observe new emergent social phenomena, many of them covered in this paper. However, one must not forget that every social group has its unique characteristics, just like every individual and in researching these subjects there will always be information that is left out of the method.

In this context, avatars, as the projections of self do not become deindividualised by adhering to a certain group, on the contrary, the user behind the screen becomes more and more motivated to express his or hers personality traits to the best of his abilities, thus seeking acceptance and recognition in the whole community that he chose to be a part of in the first place. Social models specific to a particular group are not imposed on anyone and do not degrade in any way the level of self-awareness, rather they confirm the idea that many of the conceptual traits of virtual identity are similar to those in real life both sociologically and psychologically speaking.

Last but not least, even though the participants in virtual communities interact with each other by means of avatars, or other methods of communication, the human being behind the computers form real social links, relationships that change their perspectives and values both in tangible reality and on a conceptual level affecting principles, ideas and visions on everyday life.