

## **CYBERSOCIALISM**

### *Group Consciousness in Transnational Communities*

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An important new type of community is emerging with the rapid advances in communication technologies: communities that cross cultural and political boundaries to engage in a commerce of information exchange. While there has been much research focused on the technological development of computer-supported collaborative work, less is known about sociocultural attitudes and an understanding of how people perceive “belongingness” to a community in an environment where interaction is mediated by shared computer resources.

What, for example, defines a group whose members communicate in a “vacuum” unrestrained by time and space and never meet face-to-face? Can there be a sense of shared identity? Marx writes that the development of “class consciousness” - an *awareness* of an identification with a group of people who share like interests - is a precondition for a class existence. Weber writes that a “community” can exist for geographically dispersed individuals if there is a sense of meaningful identity and shared experience. I argue that for members of so-called virtual communities who are culturally diverse, geographically dispersed and temporally asynchronous, there must exist a sense of group consciousness in addition to, inter alia, shared identity, purpose, communication style, cooperation and cohesiveness.

In this paper, I use a case study of a distributed collaborative group of more than one hundred researchers whose goal was an examination of selected quantitative characteristics of computer-mediated communication. The collaborators proposed a research study to satisfy a shared desire to understand more clearly the nature of communication, culture and community on the network. The group used asynchronous computer-mediated communication as a tool for project management and for the distribution, collection and verification of data. Participant recruitment, distribution of information, coordination, formulation of policies, decision making, encouragement and data exchange took place through public and private email. The group was heterogeneous in age, qualifications, affiliation, research experience, culture, and nationality.

After the two-year project was completed, a survey questionnaire was distributed to and collected from the participants of the collaborative group via the Web and email. The survey included seven open-ended questions and 37 closed-ended questions which were constructed to determine if group consciousness exists, using the following criteria:

- the collaborative process
- task delegation
- interpersonal relationships
- participation patterns
- formal management
- informal management
- the medium

The closed-ended questions were presented in a Likert-type scale, yielding ordinal measures. Qualitative analysis and quantitative statistics are applied to open-ended and closed-ended responses respectively to find support for a number of hypotheses.

From the findings related to the hypotheses, collaborative group processes in a computer-mediated environment can be predicted, thereby integrating, facilitating and coordinating distributed communities. The results of the study impacts on the research in another emerging phenomenon of present globalization, that of transnational communities and their behavioral patterns. Contrary to collaboration in virtual communities, this form of group collaboration emerged from the globalization of capital and the differentials of advantage created by political boundaries, thus exploiting cultural differences as an organizing foundation of community activities. Paralleling Marx's description of the proletariat as created and placed into the historical scene by its future class adversaries, so today's roaming capitalist ventures have given rise to the conditions and incentives for the transnationalization of labour. Research on these communities points to potentially serious social and economic problems based on cultural differences and entrenched inequalities. The findings in this research suggest that information and communication technologies can amalgamate cultural and economic diversity, thus giving birth to a truly global culture.