# 3. IN SEARCH OF COMMUNITY

By arguing that the anarchic internet prairie has turned into a battlefield, the previous chapter has shown how over the last decade the utopias that digital communitarians inherited from libertarian cyberculture revealed their empirical inconsistency. The opposition between lay citizens and big powers that Rheingold and the WELL community inherited from cybernetic culture faced the hype of crowds voluntarily contributing their contents and personal data to internet corporations. Instead of aggregating and exchanging information on peer-to-peer networks, more and more people rely upon few corporations in order to socialize online. New Communalists’ decentralized organizational paradigm as well as the ethics of self-entrepreneurship and informal labour outsources content-production to amateurs, while shrinking resources for professionals. In this light, the gift economy fostered by academic networks and FLOSS communities has sustained the business model of new internet powers who gain revenues by promoting old brands through user-generated-contents. On a different level, early academic and hacker confidence about the uncontrollability of the Net faced geo-ID technologies for law enforcement, and sorting technologies that challenged privacy rights.

In summary, three early myths have been confuted by these developments: an imagined coalition between the rebels and entrepreneurs of the net, and related dreams of grassroots cultural alliances; the vision of the net as an uncontrollable space detached from the brick-and-mortar world, not subject to governments’ sovereignty; and the belief that the sharing of information would empower individuals and communities against governmental and commercial powers.

Such dystopic evidence has led many internet scholars to acknowledge that the utopia of an internet rooted in communitarian harmony has left room for conflicts and competitions not too different from the ones affecting the brick-and-mortar world. Many wonder whether we can still talk about internet communitarianism, and, if so, under what conditions.

This chapter attempts to engage with social sciences scholars and media theorists who have formulated different responses to this question. On one hand, there are those who highlight the structural variations in the wider notion of ‘community’ in late modernity. On the other hand, other authors argue for new forms of communal ties on the net, on condition that the communitarian effort gets rid of the libertarian paradigm.

## 3.1 From Groups to Networks

The conviction that communitarian ties have been facing structural changes is shared by two of the most influential social scientists shaping the field of internet studies: Castells and Wellman. Yet their position is not only focused on online communities, nor is it limited in time to the evolution of the internet, rather, it tackles deeper societal transformations.

By using the expression ‘networked individualism’, Castells and Wellman call into question the possibility of identifying communitarian ties online. More precisely, they both argue that the traditional notion of online community as bounded groups have been replaced by networks of individuals interacting online in one-to-one patterns of communication. In Castells’ ‘space of flows’, the individual is the hub of different kinds of streams that move from the place to the subject and vice versa.

According to Castells, social relationships are over determined by the technical organization of the means of production brought about by informational capitalism. That is, sociability is moulded in the shape that the dominant mode of production takes in the Information Age. Since the dominant form of organization of informational capitalism is the network, social relations reflect a similar structure.[[1]](#footnote-1) ‘Networked individualism’ is thus a specific model of sociability rooted in the relationship between labour and the networked enterprise typical of the Information Age:

Now the dominant trend in the evolution of social relationships in our societies is the rise of individualism, in all its manifestations. […] Social scientists, such as Giddens, Putnam, Wellman, Beck, Carnoy, and myself, have emphasized the emergence of a new system of social relationships centered on the individual. After the transition from the predominance of primary relationships (embodied in families and communities) to secondary relationships (embodied in associations), the new, dominant pattern seems to be built on what could be called ‘tertiary relationships’, or what Wellman calls ‘personalized communities,’ embodied in me-centered networks. It represents the privatization of sociability. This individualized relationship to society is a specific pattern of sociability, not a psychological attribute. It is rooted, first of all, in the individualization of the relationship between capital and labor, between workers and the work process in the network enterprise.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Me-centred networks can establish themselves offline and/or online: it is not the dichotomy of material vs. virtual that concerns Castells the most, rather the opposition between traditional (and somewhat mythological) territorial communities structured around dwelling proximity and social ties based on cultural affinity. According to Castells and other influential scholars he quotes, territoriality plays a less and less relevant role in shaping social relationships in advanced societies, being replaced instead by similarities of interests.[[3]](#footnote-3) [[4]](#footnote-4)In particular, Castells tends to associate the territorial type of relationship with the label ‘community’ and the cultural one with the term ‘network’. As a consequence, Castells argues, we are witnessing the substitution of communities with networks as the primary form of social interaction:

communities, at least in the tradition of sociological research, were based on the sharing of values and social organization. Networks are built by the choices and strategies of social actors, be it individuals, families, or social groups. Thus, the major transformation of sociability in complex societies took place with the substitution of networks for spatial communities as major forms of sociability. [[5]](#footnote-5) [[6]](#footnote-6)

The principal model of sociability is thus constituted by a centre – built around the household nucleus – that spreads in many non-territorial directions according to individuals’ interests. Castells tends to associate this kind of affinity-based ties with Wellman’s ‘weak ties’.[[7]](#footnote-7)

If networked individualism is the model for both online and offline sociability in the Information Age, according to Castells internet only provides a material support for the spread of networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability. While social networks based on weak ties are not new, ICT have allowed them to become dominant. In so doing, Castells distances himself from technologically deterministic explanations and introduces a multi-causality model. Only once online networks get stabilized into social practices, can they build virtual communities.[[8]](#footnote-8) However, stable virtual communities like the WELL or Nettime – Castells adds – are exceptions and it would be easier to understand them if we used the term ‘networks of sociability’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Wellman shares with Castells some insights on networked individualism that he further develops by focusing on the interplay between urban space and social practices enabled by mobile media.[[10]](#footnote-10) He suggests that research on online sociability should be carried on with attention to a wider context investigating the transformation of sociability patterns at large. According to Wellman, the proliferation of personal networks happened well before the advent of ICT: computer-mediated-communication (CMC) has only supported the emergence of individualized networks as the dominant form of social organization.

This approach allows Wellman to distance himself from cybercultural utopias, and to empirically examine the transformations triggered by computerized communication networks. Like Castells, Wellman carefully avoids mono-causality and technological determinism and outlines a retro-active mechanism to explain the relationship between technology and society:

the technological development of computer networks and the societal flourishing of social networks are now in a positive feedback loop. Just as the flexibility of less-bounded, spatially dispersed social networks creates demand for the world wide web and collaborative communication, the breathless development of computer networks nourishes societal transitions from little boxes to social networks. [[11]](#footnote-11)

In Wellman’s approach, technology does not ‘cause’ social transformations, but ‘supports’, ‘enables’, ‘allows’ them. Crucial in this regard is the introduction of the concept of ‘social affordances’ as ‘the possibilities that technological changes afford for social relations and social structure’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Notably, Wellman argues that portability, ubiquitous computing, globalized connectivity, and personalization are supporting the movement from place-to-place communities to person-to-person communities.

Place-to-place interactions[[13]](#footnote-13) are centred on the household, where visits and telephone calls are received. This pattern of sociability links households and family nucleuses that are not in the same neighbourhood: home is the base for relationships that are more selective than the neighbourhood communities of the past. Furthermore, being based on inter-household networks, place-to-place connectivity creates a fluid system for accessing material and cognitive resources: by switching among networks, people can use ties in one network to bring resources to another one.[[14]](#footnote-14)

The place-to-place model of sociability has enabled communities of affinity less constrained by territoriality yet it preserved some sense of social context. Conversely, person-to-person connectivity drastically reduces the sense of place. With ‘person-to-person connectivity’, Wellman indicates an emerging pattern of sociability enabled by innovations in communication technologies, notably by the development of mobile ICT centred on the individual:

when someone calls a telephone wired into the telephone network, the phone rings at the place, no matter which person is being called. Indeed, many place-to-place ties have connected households as much as individuals. By contrast, mobile phones afford a fundamental liberation from place, and they soon will be joined by wireless computers and personalized software. Their use shifts community ties from linking people-in-places to linking people wherever they are. Because the connection is to the person and not to the place, it shifts the dynamics of connectivity from places--typically households or worksites--to individuals.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The evolution from place-to-place to person-to-person connectivity introduces the second aspect which Wellman’s paradigm shares with Castells’. Like Castells, Wellman conceives of the dichotomy between territorial and de-territorialized social ties as the most pertinent category for analysis, that cuts across the material/immaterial dichotomy.[[16]](#footnote-16) He distinguishes, in fact, two main types of community: spatially defined community vs. a socially defined one. They roughly correspond to Castells’ ‘territorial community’ and ‘interest-based network’ respectively. Actually, Wellman identifies four main uses of the term ‘community’, but he concentrates on only one: ‘I define “community” networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

According to Wellman,[[18]](#footnote-18) with the shift to mobile connectivity it is the individual, and not the household nor the group, that becomes the principal unit of interaction. It is around the individual that communities providing support, sociability, information, and a sense of belonging aggregate. This is why they are named ‘personalized communities’.

A third aspect in common with Castells, relates to the dichotomies territorialized/affinity-based community and household/individual-centred community. On this, Wellman superimposes the structural distinction between group and network following his own early distinction between strong and weak ties.[[19]](#footnote-19) Networks are sparsely-knit (i.e., few people are directly connected), far-flung, loosely-bounded (i.e., few ties stay within the densely-knit cluster), and fragmentary. In networked societies ‘boundaries are permeable, interactions are with diverse others, connections switch between multiple networks, and hierarchies can be flatter and recursive’.[[20]](#footnote-20) Conversely, groups are densely-knit, tightly-bounded and multithreaded (i.e., most ties contain many role relationships).

Group and networks are not necessarily opposed: ‘formally, a group is a special type of network’.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, Wellman prefers to simplify and fix an opposition: ‘in practice, it is linguistically convenient to contrast groups and networks’.[[22]](#footnote-22) Wellman also tends to identify the group/network dichotomy with the territorial/affinity-based community dichotomy: he basically uses the term ‘group’ to indicate neighbourhood-bounded door-to-door connectivity while the place-to-place and person-to-person models of interaction are structured as ‘network’.

On one point Wellman’s and Castells’ positions differ. According to Wellman, community can resemble groups or networks or both, while for Castells it is opposed to networks and corresponds rather to Wellman’s definition of ‘group’. Actually, for Wellman ‘community’ does not refer to a specific social structure, but it seems to be related to a particular type of substance that characterizes social ties through a sense of belonging.[[23]](#footnote-23) As a consequence, given the current trend towards networks, Wellman concludes that nowadays we do not find community in bounded groups anymore, but rather in loose networks: ‘arguments and evidence converge in thinking about the transformation of community from solidarity groups to individualized networks’, today there is a ‘predominance of networks (rather than groups) in communities’[[24]](#footnote-24)

Castells’ and Wellman’s arguments are of merit in developing the crucial intuition that society and technology are intertwined in ways that are much more complex than simple causality models would imply. In Wellman, the multi-causality explanation model allows him to take distance from cyberculture’s utopias underpinned by a simple cause-and-effect theory of action, and to introduce more variegated forms of interaction between technology and society. Yet in these authors’ approaches these two dimensions are conceived of as distinct domains.

From another perspective, their approach set binary types of aggregation (‘territorial community’ vs. ‘affinity-based community’, ‘collective’ vs. ‘individual’, ‘group’ vs. ‘network’) that are to be used as starting points for sociological inquiries. However, it is not clear whether these categories only partially overlap, or whether one overlays/excludes the others. In Wellman’s argument, for instance, bounded groups made of strong ties characterize door-to-door neighbourhood communities (‘group’ overlays the ‘territorial community’ category), while loose networks made of weak ties characterize communities based on common interests (‘network’ overlays the ‘affinity-based community’ category). Furthermore, networks as a structure characterize also person-to-person networks of individuals as well as place-to-place household-based communities. That is, ‘network’ overlays the ‘individual’ category and it also overlaps with ‘collective’ as far as household communities are concerned, but not as far as neighbourhood communities are concerned. In other words, while the ‘territorial vs. interest community’ dichotomy corresponds to the ‘group vs. network’ one, the ‘collective vs. individual’ dichotomy seems to be transversal to the previous ones.

On a different level, it is not evident why territorial, neighbourhood communities should be completely identified with bounded groups, while studies have usually shown that street corners and coffee shops are the ‘third places’ where mainly weak ties proliferate.[[25]](#footnote-25) Similarly, it is not obvious why the intersection between ‘group’ and ‘affinity-based community’ is not taken into consideration. After all, it is at least as much likely that strong ties emerge from cultural affinity and similarity of interests as that they emerge from mere physical dwelling proximity.

Such a terminological ambiguity is probably partly due to the two, divergent meanings that are associated with ‘social’: ‘social’ as related to human beings and thus opposed to ‘technology’, and ‘social’ as ‘collection of human beings’, thus opposed to ‘individual’.[[26]](#footnote-26) As to this point and to the notion of ‘community’ as a peculiar type of substance, we shall see in the next chapter how a shrunken meaning of ‘social’ could lead the researcher astray.

On the relationship between technology and society, Wellman’s argument seems to lack logical consequentiality in its conclusions. Wellman acknowledges that internet facilitates the maintenance of weak ties and that mobile technologies’ affordances enable the individual to be the hub of different flows of communication. However, this does not logically imply that ‘networks of individuals’ are the dominant type of aggregate making up the social world, nor that they can be seen as the best type of grouping with which to start a sociological inquiry. Logically speaking this is an inference that does not follow the premises. Apart from the fact that it minimizes the constraints related to the digital divide,[[27]](#footnote-27) this inference follows a linear evolutionary model according to which dominant forms of sociability progressively replace non-dominant ones. Yet, as we shall see in section 4.3, different models of sociability do not need to be mutually exclusive, but can co-exist and fulfil different functions.

The point here is understanding whether ‘group’, ‘network of individuals’, ‘territorial community’, ‘personalized community’ are conceived of as ideal types that intertwine in the actual world, or whether Wellman looks at them as macro-structural trends that sharply cut society in terms of ‘groups’ or ‘networks’, place-to-place or person-to-person connectivity according to an evolutionist model that sees bounded groups withering in favour of me-centred loose networks.

## 3.2 Towards Organized Networks

Not all scholars who have addressed the question on whether digital communities are still relevant actors of the virtual world have turned to focus on the individual as the hub of contemporary computer-mediated models of sociability. Different solutions (and questions) come from the domain of media studies and software development.

Internet commentator Clay Shirky, for instance, has pointed out that the de-coupling of groups in space and time[[28]](#footnote-28) allowed by the internet has ushered in a host of new social patterns which are embodied in social software. According to Shirky, what makes social software different from other communication tools is that through social software *groups* are brought into existence as entities in their own right.

A group of people interacting with one another will exhibit behaviours that cannot be predicted by examining the individuals in isolation, peculiarly social effects like flaming and trolling or concerns about trust and reputation. This means that designing software for group-as-user is a problem that can’t be attacked in the same way as designing a word processor or a graphics tool.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Since the software interface rearranges the regimes of access and visibility, ‘social software is political science in executable form’.[[30]](#footnote-30) This argument is a key one, as it draws an interpretation of ‘the political sphere’ which is immanent to digital media: handling the procedures and protocols whereby people aggregate, social software always embodies political decisions.

From a similar perspective, Geert Lovink and Ned Rossiter’s ‘organized networks’ combine the efforts to assemble collective agents with that of addressing organizational impasses typical of digital communities, such as accountability, sustainability, and scalability. We have already seen how Lovink re-examines the notion of virtual communities as social networks and focuses on how they reflect society as well as anticipate new forms of social interaction.[[31]](#footnote-31) Making a step forward, Lovink and Rossiter argue that online forms of cooperation are still possible, on condition that communitarian efforts distance themselves from the libertarian ideology.[[32]](#footnote-32) [[33]](#footnote-33)

First, Lovink and Rossiter specify that ‘organized networks’ are not a new type of social actor resulting from statistical analysis, but should be read as a proposal or guidelines aimed at replacing the inflated term ‘virtual community’. Albeit on a theoretical level, the authors try to address many of the impasses we reviewed in the previous pages. The notion of ‘organized networks’ recognizes the limits that virtual communities and tactical media have been unable to deal with, and tries to figure out new strategic directions for techno-social assemblages that aim at experimenting forms of social interaction.

To do this, organized networks first need to acknowledge that instability, conflict, heterogeneity, passivity are the norm, and collaboration, unity and cooperation are exceptions. Freedom of refusal and ‘notworking’ are put at the very heart of any collaboration:

organised networks are “clouds” of social relationships in which disengagement is pushed to the limit. Community is an idealistic construct and suggests bonding and harmony, which often is simply not there. […] Networks thrive on diversity and conflict (the notworking), not on unity, and this is what community theorists are unable to reflect upon.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Despite claims for participation and interactivity, in the digital society passivity rules: activities like browsing, watching, waiting, surfing and long periods of ‘interpassivity’ characterize online life. Total involvement would mean billions of replies from all to all and the implosion of any network. Therefore – the authors argue – networks are kept together by a ‘shared sense of potentiality’ and at the same time are kept by the fact that this potentiality is realised only in part.

Furthermore, disagreement and distrust do not imply the disruption of the flow of dialogue. Rather, they act as productive principles, as ‘disputes condition […] internal to the creation of new institutional forms’.[[35]](#footnote-35) To explain this point the authors introduce the notion of a ‘constitutive outside’ as a ‘process of post-negativity in which rupture and antagonism affirm the future life of the network.[[36]](#footnote-36) The tension between internal dynamics and external forces comprises a new ground of “the political”’.[[37]](#footnote-37) [[38]](#footnote-38) In other words, in organised networks the ‘outside’ always plays a constitutive role in determining the direction, actions and shape of the network, which is always situated. The ‘other’ is visible, present and active.

Similar to the approaches reviewed in the previous section, organized networks are made of loose ties, forms of collaboration are always temporary, voluntary and subjected to disengagement: ‘networks foster and reproduce loose relationships. They are hedonistic machines of promiscuous contacts. Networked multitudes create temporary and voluntary forms of collaboration that transcend but do not necessary disrupt the Age of Disengagement’.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Here is where Lovink and Rossiter meet Wellman. Yet there is a relevant difference between them. On one hand, while he disregards conflict, Wellman conceives of networks as structures and considers community as a sort of psychological substance – characterized by ‘sense of belonging’ – that nowadays is embodied in networked structures rather than in bounded groups. On the other hand, Lovink and Rossiter abandon the structuralist distinction between form and substance and, with it, the idealist construct of a community kept together by solidarity, harmony and support: conflict is as constitutive for networks as inner harmony is. In addition, the two authors specify that organised networks ‘are specific in that they are situated within digital media’.[[40]](#footnote-40)

By blurring the distinction between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ models of organization, organized networks aim at constituting themselves as new hybrid formations where tactical media encounter institutions: ‘all forms of techno-sociality combine both horizontal and vertical forms of organization. Our argument is not so much that a hard distinction separates these modes of organization, as a degree in scale.’[[41]](#footnote-41) As in Turner’s concept of heterarchy, their hybrid nature would allow organized networks to obtain benefits from both the tactical and the institutional domains. In particular, in order to develop their own form of organisation, emergent organised networks must address three crucial aspects: accountability, sustainability, and scalability.

As to accountability, Lovink and Rossiter do not leave room for much ambiguity: ‘networks disintegrate traditional forms of representation […] it is time to abandon the illusion that the myths of representational democracy might somehow be transferred and realised within network setting. That is not going to happen’.[[42]](#footnote-42) Nor do process-oriented forms of governance like those experimented by hackers seem to be sustainable in the long haul. According to the authors, the issue of accountability and transparency are crucial and need to be addressed starting from a set of questions: ‘Where does it [i.e., the organised network] go? How long does it last? Why do [sic] it in the first place? But also: who is speaking? And: why bother? A focus on the vital forces that constitute socio-technical life is thus required’.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Another major issue is sustainability. Here is where organised networks distance themselves the most from their precursors of the 1990s – lists, collaborative blogs, alternative media[[44]](#footnote-44) – that rarely put business models on the agenda. Lovink and Rossiter on the contrary break some taboos associated with early independent digital communities. The first is planning. According to the authors, current independent digital networks must overcome their self-destructive tendency and accept the challenge of cautious planning. Defining a collaborative value system that is able to address issues like funding, internal power management, accountability, and transparency constitutes the first step.

The second taboo to be faced is legal status. The constitution of an organization with legal status should not be excluded. Third, as work has to be paid, it is necessary to face economic reality and to outline how networks can be funded over time. The economy of the free can work for free software geeks that develop their own coding projects, but not necessarily for cultural, artistic, activist projects, content editors, and web-designers. Fourth, as attracting funding from private philanthropy, governments and business tends to be a hard task, complementary currencies need to be devised.[[45]](#footnote-45) Devising alternative currencies would also allow organised networks to refuse the cybercultural logic of free labour and free contents.

Lastly, another issue that organized networks have to face is scalability. It tackles a well-known aspect of online communities: the tendency to split up in myriad micro-conversations when they reach a few thousand participants. According to Lovink and Rossiter, this issue lies at the convergence between software architecture and internal power structures. In this regard, the notion of the ‘constitutive outside’ is crucial: it is exactly because organised networks need to open up new horizons within which ‘the political’ find a space of expression that the requirement of scalability has to be addressed. If in the digital organised network the ‘outside’ has to play a constitutive role in determining the actions of the network, then software needs to embody this principle by allowing the ‘other’ to be always visible and present.[[46]](#footnote-46) However, addressing this demand for scalability means to overtly recognize internal informal power structures and to go beyond the dominant assumption of decentralization that prevents the discussion about new forms of organization – the authors argue.

Once the taboo of decentralisation has been called into question, for Lovink and Rossiter it is easy getting rid of the last legacies of the techno-libertarian cyberculture. First, they point out how blogs and social networks are based on software that refuses antagonisms. Similar software does not leave any other choice than accepting an inflation of friends: ‘this is New Age revivalism at work, desperately insecure, and in search of a “friend”.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Second, the authors observe that while wiki software allows the collaborative creation of ‘collective intelligence’, this specific social-technical model will probably not work in all cultures and countries, as, for instance, those where public work and full visibility are not appreciated. Despite free culture’s claims, sharing knowledge is not a universal value.

Third, Lovink and Rossiter point out the naivety of those initiatives, like the Creative Commons, that seek to conquer institutions and cultural industries to their cause by recalling their ‘non-political’ character, while, on the contrary, ‘there is no escape from politics’. According to the authors, the rhetoric of openness hides the political motivations and economic interests at work in these projects: ‘the provocation of organised networks is to unveil these mechanisms of control and contradiction, to discuss the power of money flows, and to redirect funds […] the organised network has to break with the “information must be free” logic’.[[48]](#footnote-48)

## 3.3 The Proliferation of ‘Community’

At the end of this long *excursus*, the reader might feel puzzled, wondering whether in the first decade of the 21st century talking of communitarian ties being developed online makes sense at all. She would have good reasons to be justified in her puzzlement.

Despite the radical ongoing transformations discussed in chapter 2, nowadays references to ‘community’ are more numerous than ever. According to the *2007* *Digital Future Report* elaborated by USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future, 67.2 percent of members of online communities[[49]](#footnote-49) answer their community is very or extremely important to them, while 46.1 percent of members say they benefit a lot from their community and only 3.8 percent find no benefit from their online community.[[50]](#footnote-50) Under different forms, online communities are recognized as key social aggregates in diverse fields of activity. While ‘cyber-communities’ are disappearing from the top of the digital culture’s hot concepts list, articles about ‘social networking sites’ colonize high-tech magazines’ columns, ‘communities of practice’ constitute the backbone of corporate knowledge management policies, while almost every venture capitalist and internet marketer invokes participation through ‘Web 2.0 community tools’ as a strategic component adding value to internet companies’ investments.[[51]](#footnote-51)

While the cyberculture paradigm underpinning the notion of online community is showing its limits, other domains are taking over this concept. As a consequence, its boundaries have become fuzzy. In late 2000s, online communities are becoming more and more difficult to identify, and the relationship between access to digital media and empowerment hard to disentangle. It is not clear anymore whether there exist ties that are specific enough to be called ‘communitarian’ and that can be assembled together in constituting a special assemblage. ‘Community’ seems to be watered down: it is diffused everywhere and yet nowhere in particular.

To a phenomenological observation, one can see three currents that are rippling the apparently flat ocean’s surface of digital communities. First, to the new popularity of digital communities an ever-widening meaning of community corresponds. There is a clear etymological trend in the successive variations of this expression. It goes from the most specific and context-related meaning of the 1980s’ underground scene to the most generic one. As a matter of fact, the definition of digital communities has been ranging up to include almost every form of aggregation through ICT: RSS feeding, tagging, blogging, bookmarking associate multimedia objects as well as digital *personae*.

What is thus at stake is not only the possibility to identify communities, but the meaning of the same notions of collaboration and the nature (human/machinic) of those actors supposed to collaborate. Can individuals using the same tags in order to organize and share their own pictures through a web platform be considered a community or, at least, a network? Which kind of collaboration is conveyed by a video posted in order to critically respond to a previously published one? Are the bonds arising from blog cross-linking similar to those originated through USENET? Ultimately, these questions lead to ask whether it is possible to extend agency to technological artefacts.

Second, it might be affirmed that the term ‘online community’ has been growing in popularity as the range of potential shared interests has widened. The Berkshire Encyclopaedia of Human Computer Interaction indicates that digital divide reduction, open access to ICT, local communities’ empowerment, and revitalized democracy were the issues that were mostly addressed by ‘cybercommunities’ during late 1990s and early 2000s. With social networking sites and Web 2.0 the identification of an explicit interest focus – beyond sociability itself – has become increasingly hard. If early digital communities were glued together exactly by a common mission, this doesn’t seem the case anymore. In her effort to classify text-based virtual communities, for instance, Mascio recognizes that ‘since it is usually very generic, the interest focus cannot be considered a prolific category for research’.[[52]](#footnote-52)

Likewise, echoing Wellman’s vocabulary, boyd and Ellison argue that social network sites mark a shift from interest-centred networks to me-centred networks and that this shift ‘mirrors’ a new organizational structure of online communities:

the rise of SNSs indicates a shift in the organization of online communities. While websites dedicated to communities of interest still exist and prosper, SNSs are primarily organized around people, not interests. Early public online communities such as Usenet and public discussion forums were structured by topics or according to topical hierarchies, but social network sites are structured as personal (or "egocentric") networks, with the individual at the center of their own community. This more accurately mirrors unmediated social structures, where "the world is composed of networks, not groups".[[53]](#footnote-53) The introduction of SNS features has introduced a new organizational framework for online communities, and with it, a vibrant new research context.[[54]](#footnote-54)

Third, we are witnessing the explosion of the *gemeinschaft* well beyond the domain of sociology and computer science – towards economics and management, as well as beyond academic institutions – towards market and corporate media. It has crashed the boundaries of social sciences and urban planning to shore on the crowded coast of business, internet companies and media discourse. Amin and Thrift argue that while the concept of ‘community’ is called into question inside its native urban studies domain, paradoxically it seems to gain new relevance as a key element of success for economic systems.[[55]](#footnote-55) In order to explain why some cities have turned out to be more competitive than others, for example, scholars like Storper and Scott have stressed the role of community-based non-economic ties in economic processes of adaptation and knowledge sharing.[[56]](#footnote-56) Similarly, a number of works have argued that the key to success with online businesses is the development of virtual communities.[[57]](#footnote-57)

As a consequence of these movements, it is by no means certain that nowadays what is meant by the term ‘online community’ in all these domains relates to the same thing. As we have seen in chapter 1, Rheingold’s foundational book can be conceived of as a rhetorical performative endeavour to merge multiple streams in a coherent account of online sociability. Such an endeavour converged along the lines of the dominant U.S. cyberlibertarian paradigm, and conceived communal ties as a sort of ‘substance’. This explains why early researchers in the 1990s could quite straightforwardly not only postulate specific definitions of digital communities, but also classify them on the basis of their kind of interface (text-based/graphics) or of time modalities (synchronous/asynchronous).[[58]](#footnote-58)

However, when it came to explaining how digital communities are upkept and reproduced, the digital communitarian paradigm fell short of convincing theories. Scholars and practitioners have thus attempted to explain sense of belonging not as a substance, but in terms of the structural form of the network,[[59]](#footnote-59) as a shift from an aesthetics of representation to an aesthetics of interaction,[[60]](#footnote-60) as a form of consensus building embedded in software platforms,[[61]](#footnote-61) or even by negating any predetermined sense of belonging.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Some of these attempts were justified in the backdrop of recent developments in the economy of the internet and in the politics of information (see chapter 2), which have called into question the utopias that the digital community paradigm inherited from cyberculture. The shift from the prairie to the battlefield has been acknowledged by scholars and commentators who have renounced to acknowledge peculiar social aggregates kept together by communal ties. Influential sociologists discussed in this chapter, for example, have even replaced ‘communities’ with ‘networks’ of individuals.

Other scholars – like Lovink and Rossiter – are more optimistic towards the renaissance of communitarian ties online, provided that the collaborative perspective gets rid of the libertarian paradigm that postulates harmony, stability, homogeneity, and proactivity as the norm. Along this same line lies the main proposal of this book. Instead of claiming the ontological death of digital communitarian ties, it suggests that in the face of contemporary developments an anti-essentialist, materialist perspective has to be mobilized. Such an epistemological perspective entails the refusal of a priori definitions of ‘community’, and rather privileges asking actors themselves to provide accounts of what ‘community’ means for them.

Drawing on the developments accounted for in chapter 2, but avoiding swift conclusions, this book in other words suggests that such developments can constitute an opportunity to answer an open question by means of empirical analysis. Under what conditions is it possible to conceptualize online sociability in the first decade of the 21st century? Answering this question would liberate the communitarian perspective from many of the misunderstandings that dragged it into such a blind alley.

The chapters that follow answer this question by avoiding a macro account and by investigating the theories of actions that have underpinned the development of techno-social assemblages for online collaboration after the fade of the ‘golden age’ of digital communities. In so doing, it returns a multi-faceted picture of contemporary sociability online. The next chapter starts with an analysis of the notion of ‘digital communities’ in the words of their spokespersons.

1. Castells, The Rise of The Network Society. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Castells, *Internet Galaxy*, p.128. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See among others, B. Wellman and M. Gulia, ‘Netsurfers don’t ride alone: virtual communities as communities, in B. Wellman (ed.) *Networks in the Global Village*, Boulder, Col.: Westview Press, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See among others, Wellman and Gulia, ‘Netsurfers don’t ride alone’. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Actually, this argument’s logical consequentiality is not fully deployed, as it can be noticed from this quotation: it is not clear why community’s ‘values and social organization’ should be seen as opposed to network’s ‘choices and strategies’, as if networks were not built on common values. After four pages, in fact, Castells himself asserts that ‘individuals build their networks, on-line and off-line, on the basis of their interests, values, affinities, and projects’, Castells, *Internet Galaxy*, p. 131. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Castells, *Internet Galaxy*, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Castells, *Internet Galaxy*, pp. 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This latter point is evidently in opposition with Rheingold’s biological (and deterministic) understanding of virtual communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Castells, Internet Galaxy. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’,p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Household-based place-to-place connectivity evolved from neighbourhood-based door-to-door interaction. ‘Community interactions have moved inside the private home--where most entertaining, phone-calling and emailing take place--and away from chatting with patrons in public spaces such as bars, street corners and coffee shops’, Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace, p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. We have already seen in section 2.1 that Turner, *From Culture to Counterculture*,calls the structure arising from this behaviour ‘heterarchy’. Yet Turner refers only to online communities like the WELL. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, pp. 8-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ‘The cyberspace-physical space comparison is a false dichotomy. Many ties operate in both cyberspace and physical space, used whatever means of communication is convenient and appropriate at the moment. […] Myopically fixating on the rapidly-developing internet, hypesters, pundits, and wired scholars have all wrongly proclaimed it to be a place apart. Yet systematic research shows that physical space and cyber space interpenetrate as people actively surf their networks online and offline’, Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Apart from Castells, this argument is shared also by other scholars like, for instance, T. Kopomaa, *City in Your Pocket: Birth of the Mobile Information Society*, Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 2000. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. B. Wellman, ‘The Community Question: the Intimate Networks of East Yorkers’, *American Journal of Sociology* 84: 1(1979): pp. 201-31; ‘Structural analysis: from method and metaphor to theory and substance’, in B. Wellman, and S. D. Berkowitz (eds) *Social Structures: A Network Approach*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988; B. Wellman, P. J. Carrington and A. Hall, ‘Networks as personal communities’, in Wellman and Berkowitz (eds) *Social structures*; B. Wellman and B. Leighton, ‘Networks, Neighborhoods and Communities: Approaches to the Study of the Community Question’, *Urban Affairs Quarterly* 14 (1979): 363-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p.26. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Wellman’s definition of ‘community’ above. Actually, the way Wellman uses the term ‘community’ is fluctuating and sometimes contradictory. While most times it seems to refer to a substance that characterizes social ties based on solidarity and not to a structure, in some occasions it is used as synonymous of neighbourhood-based bounded group. For instance, ‘where high speed place-to-place communication supports the dispersal and fragmentation of *community*, high speed person-to-person communication goes one step further and supports the dispersal and role-fragmentation of *households*’, Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 9*, Author’s emphasis*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Oldenburg, The Great Good Place. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Wellman, ‘Physical place and cyberplace’. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. ‘The "digital divide"--the income/locational/cultural gap between those comfortable with computerization and those not--is shrinking within the western (sic) world; the gender gap has already disappeared’, Wellman ‘Physical place and cyberplace, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. While Shirky does not mention him, it should be recalled that one of the first scholars that focused on space-time decoupling as a feature of ‘late modernism’ was Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity.* [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. C. Shirky, ‘Social Software and the Politics of Groups’, posting to Networks, Economics, and Culture mailing list, 2003, http://shirky.com/writings/group\_politics.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Shirky, ‘Social Software and the Politics of Groups’. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Lovink, My First Recession. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Lovink and Rossiter ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. N. Rossiter, 'Creative Industries, Comparative Media Theory, and the Limits of Critique from Within', *Topia: A Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 11 (2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. As well as for other scholars like Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights,* for instance, ‘the political’ is a very wide concept that transcends the formal political system made of parties and political institutions. An example provided by the authors is the activity of linking in blogs (see below). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, p. 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, pp. 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See sections 1.3 and 1.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *Note added during the 2018 revision*. It is striking to note how Lovink and Rossiter’s intuition was to become one of the most disruptive innovations, even well outside internet cultures, almost ten years later with cryptocurrency experimentation and successive hype. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Contrarily to what happens with blogs – the authors argue, where the ‘enemy’ is invisible and only friends are present. This is possible because the logic of blogs is that of the link. It is links that enhance visibility through a ranking system, and links correspond to ‘friends’, to the blog’s cultural enclave. All what is outside the zone of affinity simply does not exist. With blogs ‘the political’ corresponds to the moment of linking. ‘The fact that I do NOT link to you remains invisible. […] Blogs can thus be understood as incestuous networks of auto-reproduction’, Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, 7. Blogs are not organised networks because they are not open, they close themselves to the potential for change. See also Lovink, *Zero Comments.* [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. The Digital Future project defines ‘online community’ as ‘a group that shares thoughts or ideas, or works on common projects, through electronic communication only’. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Jeffrey I. Cole et al., ‘The 2007 Digital Future Report: Surveying the Digital Future. Year Six.’ USC Annenberg School Center for the Digital Future. 2007. https://www.digitalcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/2007\_digital\_future\_report-year6.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Bazzichelli, ‘Stalder’. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. L. Mascio, ‘Le comunità virtuali *text-based*’, *Versus*, numero monografico sulla semiotica dei nuovi media, 2003, p.157. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Wellman, ‘Structural analysis’, p.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. boyd and Ellison, ‘Social network sites’, p.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. A. Amin, and N. Thrift, *Cities. Reimagining the urban*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. M. Storper, *The Regional World*, New York: Guilford Press, 1997; A.J. Scott, *Metropolis*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. L. Downes and C. Mui, *Unleashing the Killer App: Digital Strategies for Market Dominance,* Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1998; J. Hagel, and A. G. Armstrong, *Net Gain: Expanding Markets Through Virtual Communities*, Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 1997. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Jones, Cybersociety; Cybersociety 2.0; Smith, Voices from the WELL [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Castells, The Rise of The Network Society, Volume I: The Information Age. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. See section 1.3 [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. See section 1.4, Shirky, ‘Social Software and the Politics of Groups’. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Lovink and Rossiter, ‘Dawn of the Organized Networks’. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)