# 8. CONCLUSIONS: DROPPING FOUNDATIONAL DISTINCTIONS

At the end of this book, let me recall the question we started with: ‘under what conditions is it possible to conceptualize online sociability in the first decade of the 21st century?’. After the fade of the ‘golden age’ of online communities, in mid 2000s, many of the seeding possibilities for online sociability of techno-libertarian culture’s utopias have come to a crossroads. Myths about the internet as an intrinsically ungovernable machine, about the creative coalition between knowledge workers and internet companies, and about the spontaneous online interactions of millions of individuals worldwide producing diffuse wealth, stronger participation in political processes, reduction in social inequalities, and empowerment, are facing counter- evidence.

Despite this, instead of claiming the ontological demise of online communalism, this book has suggested an empirical, anti-essentialist approach to techno-social digital assemblages. Such an empirical research has asked actors positioning themselves as community spokespersons what they mean by ‘online community’. By analysing the whole data set of submissions to the oldest competition for art, society, and digital technology, *Ars Electronica*, I have analysed how actors speaking for digital communities describe the theories of actions underpinning techno-social collaboration.

From this analysis, three conditions can be highlighted: in the first decade of the 21st century it is still possible to conceptualize online sociability, provided that, first, we abandon the techno-libertarian communalist rhetoric; second, we recognize the role of social theory’s foundational distinctions in the online communalist rhetoric, and move beyond it by adopting a material semiotic approach; third, we are willing to give up the effort to devise definitions of online/digital communities, and rather engage in a more encompassing mapping exercise.

As to the first condition, we should realize that if many – although not all – of the ‘memes’ that characterized digital communalism were rooted in the U.S. cyberculture paradigm, this was not by chance. Rheingold’s virtual communitarian framework was not only rooted in, but also contributed to *perform* the U.S. cybercultural, libertarian paradigm. His early book can be conceived of as a rhetorical effort to merge multiple cultural traits and experiences in a coherent account of online sociability, along the lines of the dominant U.S. libertarian paradigm. The virtual communitarian framework was crafted as pliable enough to allow this converging effort.

Despite this, two elements mark the limits of this effort. On one hand, not all forms of online sociability can be traced directly back to New Communalism and the North-American libertarian tradition. Critical internet culture, new media art practices running on mailing lists, political movements commonly subsumed under the umbrella term ‘No/New Global’, and media activist movements imbibed by hacker ethics have been suspicious of the idea of harmony, consensus, and order entailed by the term ‘community’. The notion of ‘organized networks’, for example, has acknowledged that instability, conflict, heterogeneity, passivity are the norm, and collaboration, unity and cooperation are exceptions. On the other hand, when it comes to explain how digital communities are upkept and reproduced, the virtual communitarian paradigm falls short of convincing explanations, and materialist perspectives have to be mobilized.

I will come back later to the need to consider digital communities’ material-semiotic character, in order to understand what they have become. For the time being, it is important to stress the black-boxing nature of discourses *on* online communities. Indeed, the analysis of Ars Eletronica’s Digital Communities’ data set has returned a definition of digital/online communities considerably overlapping with digital communalism á la Rheingold.[[1]](#footnote-1) In chapter 4, we have seen that when ‘digital community’ or ‘online community’ is sown, the data set returns topics like the distinction between real world and virtual life, communitarian localism, focus on individuals as agents of change, suspicion towards institutions and hierarchical forms of reputation. Few paths were abandoned in the 2004-2007 data set with respect to early original cyberculture. However, among these the absence of any reference to the cybernetic discourse and its reliance on technology, together with any explicit reference to the role of technology, are revealing. In discourses *on* online communities (i.e., the seeded analysis), the role of technology appears black-boxed, and artefacts are conceived as mere tools.

Differently, outside the online community discourse there seems to be more room for artefacts to be unpacked. The analyses conducted in chapter 5 and 6 have shown that once the hegemonic cyberculture is set apart, and the rhetoric about ‘online communities’ is abandoned (i.e., when ‘digital community’ or ‘online community’ is *not* sown for analysis), richer accounts of the role of software artefacts emerge. Networked individualism and the physical/virtual separation, for example, are part of the discourse *on* digital communities, but they are not part of current accounts *by* online assemblages. In other words, it is only when the rhetoric about online communities is dropped, that new relations can be accounted for, and artefacts can appear in their role as mediators keeping human relations going. Historical continuities can even be traced between specific software architectures and spatial communitarian arrangements. The neighbourhood-based spatiality entailed by *Telestreet*’s integrated broadcasting technologies since 2002, for example, recalls early experiments with mainframe clients like *Community Memory* (see section 1.2.1).

Moreover, in discourses *by* online communities, early narratives survive in more articulated ways. Indeed, in the tricky task of identifying relevant topics and narratives in the data set without postulating ‘online community’, we have come to understand what distinguishes narratives associated with ‘free software’ from those with ‘social software’, narratives associated with ‘local information through ICT’ from those with ‘locative media’, those associated to ‘work as an economic activity’ from those with ‘work as a voluntary act’, those associated with ‘public space-based art’ from those with ‘engaged art’ and ‘political art’. By so doing, we have witnessed how issues that are central to the digital communitarian heritage (see chapter 1) hit the ground in a much more multi-faceted way in our data set.

The second condition required conceptualizing online sociability and asks to recognize the role of social theory’s distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* in online communalist rhetoric. As anticipated in the Introduction, this distinction was foundational to modern social theory. Social and political theorists like Durkheim, Tönnies, Adorno – together with more recent ones like Beck, Putnam, Giddens – legitimated the new sociological discipline by rising concerns about the industrial, technological society being responsible for the demise of traditional forms of sociability. Modern, technology-driven society was conceived by the ‘fathers’[[2]](#footnote-2) of social thought as suffering from a scarcity of commitment and solidarity.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It is not difficult to find the echo of this dystopic understanding of modern relations in contemporary theorizations of online sociability. By coining the expression ‘networked individualism’, Castells has questioned even the possibility of identifying communitarian ties. While for Rheingold communitarian ties are a specific kind of social relationship characterized by sense of belonging, structuralist approaches like Castells’ connect them to the decentralized form of network organization, which fosters individualism and entrepreneurship as characterizing features of sociability. Wellman has further extended this distinction to computer-mediated communication supporting the spread of individualized networks as the dominant form of sociability. While face-to-face interaction characterized ‘groups’, in contemporary ‘networks’ geographical vicinity has been replaced by interest-centric forms of interaction (see section 3.1).

In contrast to such binary theorizations, my analysis of 920 applications to Ars Electronica revealed that loose networks are not the exclusive form of sociability when it comes to communal ties online. Rather, they co-exist with other models of sociability that actors label as ‘groups’. ‘Network’ and ‘group’ are not even seen as mutually exclusive by actors speaking for techno-social communities. From these results it looks like the relationship between information technology and social forms is definitely much more variegated than expected, and social change cannot be linearly inferred from technological evolution. Rather than a situation where dominant forms of sociability (i.e. loose networks) progressively replace older ones (i.e. bounded groups), the results draw a scenario where co-existence has the better of exclusive binary distinctions. For what above discussed, these results question not only the ontological character of ‘online communities’, but also the foundations of 21st century social theory on the demise of social engagement and sense of community prompted by technological societies.

With this acknowledgment, I suggest that it is possible to undertake the *pars construens,* and focus on the artefacts whereby communities are enacted and kept assembled. Ars Electronica’s accounts show that empowerment, engagement, and eventually communal ties are only possible through situated material-semiotic entanglements, of which those same accounts are part. This evidence further questions social theorizations postulating the demise of sociability and communitarian bounds. More than marking the end of social and political commitment, information artefacts, and digital platforms mediate different types of relationships and enact different types of communities. From case to case, information technologies, knowledge, and infrastructures can be conceived of as tools, goals, supporters. They can empower established social actors in rather deterministic ways, become almost invisible tools, or trigger new actors.

I have read the differences among discursive roles attributed to artefacts by recovering the distinction between mediators and intermediaries. This step has allowed me to include spokespersons’ accounts in the chain of translation that brings communities into existence, and upkeeps them.[[4]](#footnote-4) The resulting and unexpected correlation between type of community (expressed by source of boundaries, role attributed to artefacts in upkeeping groups and degree of black-boxing of community’s roles and boundaries), and type of account (expressed by length of the chain of action and ratio mediators/intermediaries) shows how powerful ‘fiction’ can be in enacting social actors.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The third condition in conceptualizing current online communalism requires abandoning the goal of devising univocal definitions, and rather undertakes a more inclusive mapping exercise. A similar insight was already developed by Patrice Flichy who – bypassing both Rheingold’s converging account and Castells’ dismissive perspective – had proposed not a univocal understanding of online sociability, but a taxonomy of early virtual communities (see section 1.2.1). Results reported in chapter 6 show that theories of action constitute a multi-faceted landscape, and no univocal definition, nor relationship between technological and social elements, can be singled out. Despite this heterogeneity, one should not renounce to make sense of techno-social assemblages that self-declare as ‘digital communities’, for example by mapping them. I have thus proposed ‘length of the chain of action’ and ‘degree of visibility of the Outside’ as two meta-criteria for a similar mapping exercise. They indicate the degree of permeability of the distinction between Addresser and Addressees, Members and Outside, and have allowed distinguishing several types of digital communities according to the porosity of their textual and software boundaries.

Indeed, not only accounts, but especially software enacts and upkeeps communities that would otherwise fade. The way it does so is conducive to different kinds of techno-social assemblages. Notably, software embodies regimes of access and visibility which enact specific community boundaries and roles. Software architectures can help to dilute the distinction between ‘membership’ vs. ‘otherness’, ‘inside’ vs. ‘outside’, or they cannot. Software can locate the ‘constitutive outside’ by allowing the ‘Other’ to be visible and present, or it cannot.

The different types of digital communities mapped by those two meta-criteria could be reconnected to Paul Ricœur’s distinction between utopia and ideology. According to Ricœur, utopia and ideology constitute the two extreme poles of the social imaginary.[[6]](#footnote-6) While ideology tends to preserve the identity of a given social group, utopia aims at exploring new possibilities. Therefore, ideology and utopia are involved in a continuous tension between stability and change. A similar tension affects the techno-social aggregates mapped in chapter 7 (see Table 16). Communities included in the second cell on the third row could be considered as having reached the stage of ideologies. Their goal is to assure their same preservation: few mediators appear in their accounts and software establishes impermeable boundaries. On the contrary, communities included in the fifth cell on the second row might be seen as lingering at the stage of utopias. They keep including external elements as mediators and have not yet closed their digital boundaries to the Outside. If we consider Latour’s definition of innovation as a process in which elements move from one aggregate to another, we may conclude that these projects are those more likely to innovate.[[7]](#footnote-7) They are those that not only remain open to welcome new elements, but that also face the risk of losing some of their existing elements. Of course, both ideological and utopian projects correspond to two extremes, and communities in the other cells participate in the tension, as well.

All in all, the classification system here proposed may help trace innovation. Innovation, in fact, is hardly traceable through traditional categorizations like those based on focus of interest, online vs. offline interaction, weak vs. strong ties, profit vs. non-profit business model. As they require to postulate well-defined classes before starting empirical research, those categorizations are intrinsically unable to trace innovation. Indeed, innovation is about contaminating existing classes by adding, subtracting or mixing elements. The argument that conceives of weak ties and unbounded networks as the dominant form of contemporary sociability, for instance, hinders the observer from noticing the innovative potential of those aggregates wherein weak and strong ties coexist and fulfil different but complementary functions.

To conclude, let me return to the first condition and suggest that putting in perspective the foundational distinction between *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* allows to conceptualize not only online sociability, but contemporary techno-social relationships *tout court*. If indeed there is no specific substance that characterizes solidarity ties online, then digital communities are not distinct from other technologically mediated forms of sociability. They are specific only insofar as software plays a role in bringing them into existence – along with other artefacts contributing to the chain of action (like, for example, accounts submitted to a competition). In this light, it is not clear why concerns about the demise of sociability should be imputed to modern technologies, nor why digital technologies should constitute from time to time the cause or the therapy of the individualistic pathology. As we have seen in the previous chapters, software artefacts can contribute to enacting multiple, different types of techno-social aggregates, actors and communities, and their influence is not exerted along a univocal direction.

While anti-determinism is a long-standing achievement in Technology Studies, it has been more ambiguously adopted in digital media studies, which sometimes still propose either the causal or the therapeutical argument. I suggest that here is where digital media studies and Technology Studies can face each other: in questioning the foundations of 21st century’s social theory starting from the material semiotics of technologically-mediated sociability. To prompt this encounter, let me finally juxtapose Latour’s use of the puppets metaphor to overcome deterministic explanations and media theorist Tetsuo Kogawa’s use of the lines metaphor to distinguish interactive media from broadcasting ones:

Given what [sociologists of the social, as opposed to sociologists of associations. NoA] meant by ‘outside’, namely the constraining power of context or the causal determination of nature, there was not the slightest chance for plug-ins to deposit anything positive inside the actor. Structural forces had to do most of the work – give or take a few small marginal adjustments by the individuals. In their fanciful theory of action, this was the only way sociologists [of the social] had imagined that the string of the puppeteer’s hand could activate the puppet. But […] the relationship between puppeteers and their puppets is much more interesting than that. […] Something happens along the strings that allow the marionettes to move. […] What was wrong with the metaphor of the marionettes was not their activation by the many strings firmly held in the hands of their puppeteers, but the implausible argument that domination was simply transported through them without translation. […] The puppeteer still holds many strings in her hands, but each of her fingers is itching to move in a way the marionette indicates.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The Internet and cable media depend on lines. Lines relate to binding, weaving, and streaming. They can bind audience up into a tightly integrated "network", a marionette-like circuit. However, lines are not always tight but loose. Loose lines weave webs. In the weaving-weaved web, the signal does not cast itself but streams by itself. Casting is an one-way process while streaming is interactive: streaming in and back.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Despite the differences in language, both authors aim at overcoming approaches according to which action is transported from one point to another along ‘strings’ or ‘lines’ where nothing happens. Conversely, by affirming that ‘something happens along the strings’ or that ‘lines are not always tight but loose’, the two authors argue for the necessity to think of action as a ‘chain of encounters’.

1. This might not be surprising, if one considers that Howard Rheingold was involved in the design of the competition since the beginning, and part of the first jury board. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Although, the fact that they were only ‘fathers’, without any recognized ‘mother’, might well work as a self-sufficient explanation of the scarcity argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Note to 2018 Edition. Three years after the completion of this book, a similar argument was raised by Marres (2012), who argued for an ‘object turn’ in understanding contemporary forms of social and political engagement. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Sometimes literally, in the case of winning communities who received financial support as part of their award. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Haraway, Primate Visions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. P. Ricoeur, *Lectures on Ideology and Utopia*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Latour, Reassembling the Social. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, pp. 214-216. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. T. Kogawa, ‘Minima Memoranda: a note on streaming media’, in Waag Society for Old and New Media (ed.) *Next Five Minutes 3 Workbook*, Amsterdam: De Waag, 1999, p.104. Author’s emphasis [↑](#footnote-ref-9)