

“Communities at a crossroads: Material semiotics for online sociability in the fade of cyberculture” by Annalisa Pelizza, Amsterdam, Institute for Network Cultures, 2018, p. 225, freely downloadable, ISBN: 978-94-92302-25-0

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It has often been noted that digital culture is heavily invested in the new, and in its own renewal, with a continuous stream of new initiatives, new terms, new formats, new scandals, and new targets of critique seemingly necessary to its very existence. However, historical reflections on digital movements from previous eras have long been a prominent genre, both in these movements themselves and among commentators, as a way of taking stock and enabling appreciation of foundational ideas and defining challenges, many of which prove remarkably stable. Annalisa Pelizza’s book “Communities at the Crossroads,” published by the Amsterdam-based Institute for Network Cultures, an organisation which itself emerged from this city’s renowned 1990s digital culture scene, fits squarely in this category. The book was recently published but written around 10 years ago, and in the new preface, Pelizza makes the case that the online communities of the mid- and late-2000s that form the focus of this book continue to present an important “case to think with,” as the challenges that emerged in that period continue to haunt digital culture.

Labelling this phase “the fade of cyberculture,” Pelizza’s study focuses on the moment in the 2000s when the flourishing of digital communities was challenged by the rise of corporate online platforms. As a consequence of this and related phenomena (who still considers the crashing of the “dot com” economy in the early 2000s as a defining cultural moment?), the ideal of techno-libertarian communitarianism no longer offered a credible alternative to the status quo: the idea of the Internet as the harbinger of a new communalism, a new way of bringing people together through digital communication and, thus, repairing the ripped social fabric of consumerist societies, was facing “empirical counter-evidence” (p. 31). Pelizza does not say this with so many words, but it seems to me this moment has played itself out again and again since the mid-2000s, with the mounting “counter-evidence” coming each time from different directions but taking similar forms: the appropriation of participatory media practices by powerful actors, in no particular order, the tech industry, the culture industry, the surveillance state, the nationalist right.

Importantly, however, Pelizza does not seek to offer a general diagnostic of the enduring economic and political challenges facing digital culture. Instead, real-world challenges to digital communitarianism in her view demonstrate a need for *conceptual re-construction*: they make it necessary to re-consider and re-formulate the foundational ideal of digital community as progressive force. As she puts it, we need to re-think the assumed relations between technology and society that the “techno-libertarian community rhetoric implies.” (p. 147). This approach sets Pelizza’s book apart from prominent digital culture critiques that have been published over the last

decade, such as Evgeny Morozov's *The New Delusion* and Eli Pariser's *Filter's Bubble*. Pelizza's aim is not to take down or expose internet idealism as misguided, but instead, to develop another way of thinking about digital sociability that would enable us to appreciate its progressive potential *on different grounds*.

To start off this re-constructive project, Pelizza turns to debates "at the very heart of the social sciences." (p. 15) Today this can seem an optimistic characterization of this field of knowledge, as Pelizza is referring here to general sociological debates about the defining problematics of "modern society", debates which are increasingly marginal in the social sciences. But her point remains valid: if we view the ideal of digital communitarianism in the light of these debates, this ideal turns out to be, conceptually speaking, not very new at all. The origin myth that accompanied the rise of digital culture in the 1990s, Pelizza argues, is not, in fact, very original: it repeats the origin story of sociology, the idea that the rise of modern technology has caused deficits of solidarity and bonding in modern societies, which needs to be fixed through a return to community. (This idea can be found in Marx, Durkheim and in the work of John Dewey, but for Pelizza it's most closely connected to Tönnies' classic, early 20th-century distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, between community and society.)

Influential conceptions of the digital community developed in the 1990s, such as those of Howard Rheingold and Manuel Castells, Pelizza claims, mimicked this foundational schema of early 20th Century social theories that pitches community against society. The schema, however, suffers from a key weakness: it does not allow us to account for the constructive role of technology in sociality. (Disclosure: I made a similar claim in my 2005 PhD thesis *No issue, no public*.) The schema only works as a descriptor of online communities as long as we can assume that the workings of digital technology are neatly alligned with social practices and processes, and the effects of the mediation of community by technology do not require critical attention. Precisely this has become untenable with "the fade of cyberculture."

But how does Pelizza move beyond this? To chart an alternative route for the analysis of digital sociability, she advocates an empiricist approach, drawing on actor-network theory and Science and Technology Studies. Rather than positing a general conception of digital community at the outset, the book proceeds through analysis of "one thousand communities" : at the heart of the book is a large-scale empirical analysis of 920 submissions to the Prix Ars Electronica's competitions in the Category "*Digital Communities*" between 2004 and 2007. Pelizza convincingly makes the case that Ars Electronica presented a key arbiter of digital culture in this decade, and can thus be regarded as a constitutive arena in which the definition of "digital community" was contested, and thus, defined by actors themselves. Pelizza then asks: what did the projects submitted to this prize mean with "online community"? Using methods of co-occurrence analysis - which detect relations between terms by measuring which words occur together in a text - within an interpretative framework, Pelizza then determined empirically which terms define digital community in this data set.

This type of analysis can seem a bit basic in the current context, marked by the growing popularity of similar but more complex statistical and computational methods like topic modelling and deep learning. But as an early application of automated textual

analysis in relational sociology, Pelizza's methodology has several strengths. Most importantly, whereas in current applications of topic modelling the construction of a model is largely delegated to software, and is thus to a significant extent obscured by it, Pelizza's empiricist account has the merit of *narrating* the gradual surfacing of conceptual models through an iterative analysis of the Ars Electronica data-set. This *iterative* account is accompanied by a series of really nice "co-word" network visualisations for different themes, from community to social software, and allows her to problematize the thematic compositions that she surfaces from the data. Pelizza finds that digital community, here, is primarily inter-articulated with terms like local, training, change, development and youth, and references to technology are strangely lacking, leading her to conclude that in "discourses *on* online communities[...], the role of technology appears black-boxed, and artefacts are conceived as mere tools." (p. 148)

Not just social theory, then, but the descriptions of online community projects submitted to Ars Electronica suffer from the shortcoming Pelizza identified in the sociological idea of *Gemeinschaft* as progressive force. The constructive role of technology in sociality remains under-articulated in the analysed materials as well, and it is then not just authors like Rheingold and Castells who transpose classic sociological schemas onto digital practices, so do the accounts produced by "the actors themselves".

The book is somewhat short on methodological reflection on findings like these. We can wonder, for example, whether the pedagogical discourse about digital communities that her analysis detects are an artefact of the Ars Electronica context, with its strong orientation towards the US digirati scene? Such methodological questions are not really addressed. Furthermore, the repetition in the empirical discourse of a theoretical problem – that of the role of technology in sociality remaining under-articulated – could be taken as pointing to the limits of the empiricist approach adopted here. Might it be that shifting epistemic authority - the power to define "digital community" - from the movements' theorists (Rheingold, Castells) to project descriptions produced by movements themselves is not sufficient, if the aim is, as Pelizza puts it, to surface tensions between society and technology, to bring into view the socio-technical assemblages in which sociality is articulated in digital societies?

However, in other chapters Pelizza offers more detailed, interpretative accounts of individual digital community projects and these reveal a more varied picture. Her Ars Electronica data analysis is preceded by a brief historical account of the rise of digital communities, which nicely demonstrates the innovative potential of these projects in practice, and highlighting aspects that are easily forgotten today. She notes, for instance, that 1990s. She notes that 1990s experiments in digital community, like the Amsterdam Digital City, were not strictly subcultural, in the sense of limited to an avant-garde, but were marked by "an orientation towards society at-large" (p. 38), seeking to make technology available to citizens, non-engineers and non-scientists. She reflects on the inter-sectoral nature of early online experiments in sociality like the discussion list net-time, which brought together, through its members and styles of expression, "visual arts, social movements, journalism and academic research." (p. 46). And more recent projects, like *The World Starts With Me*, a community project in Africa which combined sexuality education with learning IT skills, very much involved an explicit orientation towards what theorists would call, the inter-articulation of sociality and technology. Here, as Pelizza puts it "Public schools, foundations, clinics, NGOs, counselling services

are assembled with software, students, artists, peer facilitators, people from the slums in an aggregate that blends formal institutions with informal ties.” (p. 118)

On the basis of this descriptive work, Pelizza makes the case for the inherent diversity of the modes of sociality practised through digital community projects. Her interpretation of individual digital community initiatives reveals that “digital artefacts mediate different types of sociability,” and that online sociality is a multi-valent phenomena, of which the value and capacities change from context to context. The tracing of this variation Pelizza identifies as the task of “material semiotics” which recognizes that “empowerment, engagement, and eventually communal ties are only possible through situated material-semiotic entanglements.” (p. 150) Although she continues to reject the need for a general, singular definition of digital sociality, in the last chapters Pelizza does arrive, in this way, at a kind of alternative account of online sociality. Digital communities do not so much present a restoration of early forms of belonging (*Gemeinschaft*), but present a search for ways of creating different and new connections between actors – they present forms of stranger relationality, seeking to enable new types of social and public action that takes the form of “chains of encounter” (p. 152)

Reflecting on Pelizza’s book, I am struck by how it grapples with a problematic that I believe rarely has been articulated as such: that digital culture has significant difficulties with the appreciation of multi-valence, with the fact that “digital artefacts mediate different types of sociability” (p. 131), that the forms of society or culture that it enables cannot be captured in a singular social “code” on the aggregate level. What we might call the digital cultural imagination somehow lacks the resources to envision the technologically-mediated community not just as an “ideal”, which is either realized or betrayed, but as a lived ecology of practice, which is normatively ambi-valent, patched together from elements that are bad, elements that are good, and those that are problematic and those that are difficult to decide upon. This insight continues to be of great relevance, not least because this presents not just a problem for progressive social and cultural movements, but for wider societies: the popular imagination of social media like Facebook seems to suffer from a similar poverty of the imagination (as technology is envisioned schizophrenically, as either perfectly aligned with a communitarian ideal of “being connected with loved ones,” or as its nemesis in the form of authoritarian manipulation). And, as Armen Avanessian has argued, something similar can be said of right-wing populism, with its vision of a return to a grounded community, with the technological society reduced to a mere, silent backdrop.

Of course, the inability to acknowledge technology as a practical reality is not the only shortcoming of the communitarian imagination in the “*Gemeinschaft* vs *Gesellschaft*” mold. For one, it also leaves us unequipped for a positive appreciation of more complex forms of inter-dependency that cannot be contained within, or framed through, “belonging”. However, reading Pelizza’s book in the midst of Covid lockdown, I am struck by the continued relevance of her project of imagining online sociability “in the fade of cyberculture.” Pelizza writes, “Computer-mediated social groups [...] represent an instance of that ‘third place’ – besides the living space and the workplace – of informal public life where people gather for conviviality.” (p. 28). Perhaps it is simply that I am romanticizing an earlier era of the flourishing of digital culture in 1990s Europe, but it seems to me that this notion of a “third space” – the gathering of actors

beyond familiar social and economic spheres - continues to have great relevance for the envisioning of techno-sociality. It not only resonates with our practical needs to carve out spaces for a progressive imagination in the face of on-going societal challenges, crisis, problematics. It also highlights just how intimately connected digital communities are and have been to core ideals in political and social theory, in this case those of civil society, and the public.