Networked individualism:
The community paradigm change (2006)

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INTRODUCTION

Globalization as a process is in no way something new. Although now also a notion of great debate, globalization, seen as interaction of peoples across the globe, has been going on for centuries. Since the early days of international trade, people have exchanged goods, services and ideas across borders – and thereby exchanging culture, lifestyle and ways of thinking.

In modern times, we have seen the emergence of the industrialized society, the post-industrialized society and now the information society. With every stage, interaction and the speed of cultural exchange have increased, fuelled by technological advances and the search for mutual benefits through interconnectedness. In the words of David Held, famous globalization scholar, "globalization may be thought of initially as the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life." (Held et. al., 1999: 2). Today technological development, transnational business and politics - as well as cosmopolitan mentality and trends - are pushing forward the idea of 'one nation, one people' as the inevitable outcome.

As a result of globalization, transnational thinking has made its mark on our identity, especially in the western world. We are living in a network society where information is the most valuable commodity and our entire political and economical world structure is a network of agents ranging from the individual citizen to governments of nation-states.
As such, our lives are intertwined with those of others through the communities and networks of which we are parts of – privately, professionally and socially. We mirror ourselves in the other individuals in these communities and whether we like it or not, our identity is shaped by the influences and inputs that we are constantly exposed to. Our specific culture is constantly influenced by others cultures, just as our culture is influencing them. As a natural process, the cultures are seemingly becoming more and more alike, moving inevitably towards a transnational mainstream of culture.

Until recently, however, the communities that we belong to – although increasingly being influenced by outside cultures - have been geographically limited. Although being linked to other similar entities and thus creating transnational connections, the community notion itself has been an entity based mainly on the social element of interpersonal interaction, much like a neighborhood, in

order to be classified as a community (and perceived as one) - and in order to carry the identity-shaping abilities as described earlier.

This paradigm, however, has changed in the last few years due to new technology that has facilitated the emergence of a new digitally based social order, efficiently making transnational identity take a quantum leap. The main catalysts are, on one hand, portable communication devices and the mainstream spread of broadband connection and on the other, the so-called virtual communities, a term describing webs or grids of computer users connecting in cyberspace in digitally programmed facilities resembling real life societies. Although non-existent in traditional terms – since based and situated solely as bit and bytes in cables between computers – they arguably still carry some, if not all, of the identity-shaping characteristics formerly attributed exclusively to the physical "real-life" community and context.

Today Internet-users chat, discuss, date, play, shop and even simply hang out together via cable and more often than not are situated thousands of kilometers away from each other. Though online acquaintances may also often lead to real-life meetings, this is far from essential when the average "new-paradigm-community-citizen" socializes and finds new friends and like-minded in their social life. In other words: Where people in the days of the old paradigm were members of geographically limited communities, people now bond instantly across continents, entering into communities that is shaped solely by the shared convictions and values of its members.

Manuels Castells, famous scholar, pin points even more accurately: "Information and knowledge are indeed essential in the economy and in society at large. But they are not specific as dominant components of our kind of society" – information has been a source of power for ages. "What is specific is that, on the basis of a new technological paradigm, a new social structure has emerged, a structure made up of electronic communication technologies – powered, social networks. So, what is different? It is the technology, of course. But it is also the networked social structure, and the specific set of relationships implied in the networking logic." (Castells, 2004: 41)

In summary, I propose the hypothesis that the community notion has undergone a paradigm change. Establishing and discussing this paradigm-change in terms of social transformation and community structure and perception will be object of this project. The following problem formulation will be the point of departure:

What characterizes the social change of recent years? Are these changes significant enough to imply a community paradigm change, and what implications does it have on the shaping of identity?

METHODOLOGY & DELIMITATIONS

The project will contain a theoretical section leading to a discussion of the project topic.

THEORY				DISCUSSION		CONCLUSION
Prerequisite		*Contextual setting*		*Social entity*		
Identity		**Network Society**		**Community**		
Construction of identity Social context Collective identity	→	Historical perspective Transnationality and cultural exchange Space of flows and timeless time The Internet New technological advances	→	Community characteristics Social institution Cultural influences Community building Networked individualism Virtual community	→	**Traditional community paradigm** vs. **New community paradigm** **+** **Implications on identity shaping**	→	**Summary and conclusions**

Theory section methodology

The theoretical section will contain a thorough outline of the three main elements, namely Identity (prerequisite), Network Society (scope) and Community (social entity). This section will build the theoretical framing for discussing the community notion - giving the necessary insight into making firm argument about the paradigm shift.

The main building brick of all three theoretical parts will be Manuel Castells' epic trilogy about the network society consisting of volumes 'The Rise of the Network Society', 'The Power of Identity' and 'The Network Society'. I deem them perfect for this project, as their scope is the intertwining dynamics of identity and network society. Castells is a professor of sociology at the University of California in Berkeley, has published more than 20 well-esteemed books and achieved several literary awards for his dedicated work.

Further to his comprehensive research, I will mainly draw upon the relevant works of:

- Anthony Giddens – Professor, author and Britain's perhaps most famous sociologist
- David Held – Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics
- Anthony McGrew – Professor of International Relations at Southampton University
- Peter Day – Senior Lecturer at School of Computing at Brighton University
- Douglas Schuler – former chair of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility.
- Imma Tupela – Doctor in Social Sciences and Professor of Theory of Studies of Audio-visual Communication
- Nicol Turner-Lee – Founder of the Neighborhood Technology Resource Center
- Randal Pinket – President and CEO of BCT Partners, a company dedicated to consulting ao. within fields of technology
- Patrick Purcel – Senior Research Fellow and Visiting Professor of Electrical and Electronic Engineering

Further, a wide range of brief commenting and quotes from various scholars will be used, most prominent of which are virtual reality guru Howard Rheingold as well as Barry Wellman, Lifetime Achievement Award winner of Canadian Sociology & Anthropology Association.

Last, but not least a handful of Wikipedia-references will be used, but for broad definitions only.

Discussion section methodology

The discussion section will juxtapose the theoretical findings with more pragmatic testimonials extracted from literature, case-studies and newspaper articles from leading Danish newspapers including Politiken, Jyllands-posten & Information, accounting for pros and cons and thus creating a nuanced discussion of the topic.

Further, selected statements are substantiated by extracts from interviews with Nanna Ward, managing director of Inconcert.dk, a professional recording artist-fanclub hosting company that daily engages in chat and virtual community interaction with thousands of Danish youths. Further, Anne Marie Jørgensen, virtual community member has contributed through an interview.

Delimitations

In order to maintain focus and due to size limitations, I have chosen to make the following delimitations:

Cultural implications - Although not exactly cut out, culture is touched only briefly herein, as an appropriate account would be far too space-consuming.

Uneven technological distribution – popularly referred to as 'the digital divide'. When scrutinizing topics in which Internet is central, one must account for the so-called "digital divide" – the term describing that more than half of the worlds population has no online-access. Therefore, any reference made to identities of the broad masses are referring only to those with information communication technology available.

Impact of mass media – When dealing with transnationality, culture and globalization in general, it is highly relevant to account for mass media's impact on some level. Due to the size limitations, however, this has been left completely out.

Political and economical perspectives – have been left out. Again due to spatial concerns.

IDENTITY

As a basic definition, Castells writes that "by identity, as it refers to social actors, I understand the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities." (1997: 6).

The construction of identity

Most fundamentally, he distinguishes between a person's identity and a person's roles. Where roles are constructed by the institutions and organisations of a given society (creating role-settings within religion, politics, businesses, the family etc. defining roles such as workers, mothers, football players, smokers etc.) whose "relative weight in influencing people's behaviour depends upon negotiations and arrangements between individuals and these institutions and organizations." (1997: 7). Identity, on the other hand, is "sources of meaning for the actors themselves, and by themselves, constructed through a process of individuation." (1997: 7).

Identities represent the stronger entity of the two because of its significance in the process of self-construction and individuation involved in this process. In other words, "identities organize the meaning, while roles organize the functions." (1997: 7) Castells also argues that in this context, "meaning is organized around a primary identity, that is an identity that frames the others, which is self-sustaining across time and space." (1997: 7)

So how is identity built? The construction draws upon elements from history, geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, collective memory (which will be explained further on), religious streams and many other sources. As an individual, you constantly process the influences you are exposed to, thereby subconsciously building your individual identity.

But also transnationality and globalization plays a significant part: "The construction of identity has to be shaped in relation to the rapidly changing circumstances of social life on a local and global scale where the individual and the collectivity must integrate information and knowledge from a diversity of communication-mediated experiences. (…) The new approach to identity building works through the interaction of places and flows (as described later), through the interaction of

language, culture, history, and territory, with the ability of integration, cooperation, and networking. (Imma Tubella *in* Castells, 2004: 398)

Social context

There is no general theoretic way of encapsulating the possible outcome of identity construction alone, as it is clearly a matter of social context. This context will automatically act as a frame and subconsciously permeate and constantly influence the construction process.

Anthony Giddens describes perfectly how "one of the distinctive features of modernity is an increasing interconnection between the two extremes of extensionality and intentionality: globalising influences on the one hand and persona dispositions on the other. (…) The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options. (…) Reflexively organised life-planning (…) becomes a central feature of the structuring of self-identity." (1991: 1, 5)

Collective identity

"Collective identity refers to the sense of oneself as a member of a social group or collectivity. It is a sense of belonging, a sense of being part, an action system, a mode of praxis that makes sense of the world and one's place within it", forming the foundation of one's identity (Imma Tubella *in* Castells, 2004: 397).

Speaking of this foundation, Tubella also puts perspective towards the global and local elements by emphasizing that "in a changing world, experiencing the double process of globalization and localization, collective identities are a stable point of reference, even if we consider identity as something that is never finished, never being, always becoming." (2004: 391)

The most conspicuous kinds of collective identity embracing the world today up until recent years, according to Castells, have been primary basic groupings. The four main ones he points out are religious fundamentalism, nationalism, ethnic identity and territorial identity (1997: 13, 30, 56, 63). These main types of collective identity, which Castells refer to as *cultural communes*, all largely share the feature of being defensive reactions – against eg. globalization (1997: 69). The psychological mechanics of these notions, according to Castells, is that "when the world becomes

too large to be controlled, social actors aims to shrink it back to their size" (1997: 69). When time and space is dissolved, "people anchor themselves in places, and recall their historic memory." (1997: 69).

The paradigm change of which I argue in this project becomes even more apparent when looking at these cultural communes of collective identity through the glasses of globalization and transnationality.

Because even though the basic character of collective identity is still the same, providing refuge, solace, certainty, and protection, it is no longer geographically limited – and that is indeed what constitutes the recent social transformation of society.

In the next section I will look at our society today as the frame of the project.

NETWORK SOCIETY

As the framing entity in the theoretical foundation of this project, I will describe the basics of the network society.

Castells explains that "a network society is a society whose social structure is made of networks powered by microelectronics-based information and communication technologies." (2004: 3) By social structure, he means the organizational arrangements of people and their relations to each other, including the settings for production, consumption, reproduction, experience and power distribution, all of which, he emphasizes, is coded by culture.

He continues: "A network is a set of interconnected nodes. (…) A network has no center, just nodes. (…) Nodes only exist and function as components of networks. The network is the unit, not the node." (2004: 3)

In other words, nodes are people and the apparatuses of people, all together constituting the innumerous networks permeating our network society.

Historical perspective and network dynamics

Networks are not specific to modern society. Historically, people have formed networks for centuries, even long before the modern ages. Back then it happened mostly as one-way flows of information due to the autocratic society structure and power balance created by the influence of states, religious apparatuses and other bureaucracies up through time.

The flattening of power balance "increased over time with technological change, and, more precisely, with the evolution of communication technologies." (2004: 5). In the beginning, communication technology did not have the power to give autocracy to all of it's nodes, but the development shows how technology is a necessary condition for social change in a network society.

The emergence of the network society (also known as the information society), succeeding industrialism, came about as a result of three independent processes (2004: 22):

- The crisis of the industrialized society
- The rise of freedom-oriented social movements

- The revolution in information and communication technologies

Although all interconnected, the last two are the most relevant for this project.

Starting from the bottom, and in simple terms, the third process was constituted by the philosophy of networking (as a basic, philosophical idea), and facilitated by a technological quantum leap within the areas of telecommunication and information technology facilitated logistics.

The second item, however, needs a little more thorough commenting. The most significant movements included those in favor of peace, environmental improvement, women liberation etc., all of which were cultural movements oriented towards a transformation of the values of society. These cultural movements collectively held three key values (2004: 19) that are significant for the social transformation central in this project:

- The value of freedom and individual autonomy vis-à-vis the institutions of society and the power of corporations
- The value of cultural diversity and the affirmation of the rights of minorities, ultimately expressed in terms of human rights
- The value of ecological solidarity, that is, the reunification of the interest of the human species as a common good, in opposition to the industrial values of material growth and consumption at all costs

Based on these, Castells addresses one of the underlying notions that takes direct precedence of the mechanism of the social transformation of today; namely that "the culture of personal freedom that originated in the university-based social movements inhabited the minds of the innovators who designed the actual shape of the technology revolution"(2004: 21) – that revolution being the shift from industrialized society to network-based information society.

What I would like to pinpoint by accentuating this, is that technology also back then had a significant influence in the social transformation.

Transnationality and cultural exchange

One of the main notions brought about by the network society is transnationality; describing globalization's diminishing effect on national borders and the increasing interconnectivity of people and nation-states, especially in the western hemisphere.

This ties the network society, identity and community together: "Individuals increasingly have complex loyalties and multilayered identities, corresponding to the globalization of economic and cultural forces and the reconfiguration of political power. The movements of cultural goods across borders, hybridization and the intermingling of cultures create the basis of a transnational civil society with overlapping identities – which progressively finds expression in, and binds people together into, transnational movements, agencies and legal and institutional structures." (Held & McGrew, 2002: 95) Helmuth Berkins makes a good metaphor by saying that "these approaches are coming more and more to see national space as a 'leaking container' (*in* Schuerkens, 2004: 56).

Aside from the economical and political aspects mentioned here, perhaps the most significant feature of transnationality is the social and cultural exchange: "The global circulation of cultural artifacts is leading to a permanent de- and recontextualization of spatially bound cultural knowledge, lifestyles etc. This means that while integrated in global circulation, they are at the same time permanently (re)defined by an incorporation of images and scripts from this field" (2004: 58).

Space of flows and timeless time

One of the most basic notions of the network society is what Giddens and Castells call the 'space of flows', which describes a new perception of the link between space and time.

Opposite to the 'space of places', which simply put refers to traditional physical space, "the space of flows refers to the technological and organizational possibility of practicing simultaneity without contiguity." (Castells, 2004: 36)

In more simple terms, "wireless connections and portable access devices create continuous fields of presence that may extend throughout buildings, outdoors, and into public space as well as private. (…) The new spatial structure associated with informationalism (network society), is not placeless, but is made up of networks connecting places by information and communication flows." (2004: 11-12)

Also the perception of time itself has undergone significant change. "Time, in social terms, used to be defined as the sequencing of practices." (2004: 37) In the network society, on the other hand, "emphasis on sequencing is reversed. The relationship to time is defined by the use of information and communication technologies in a relentless effort to annihilate time by negating sequencing. This is done, on the one hand, by compressing time, and, on the other, by blurring the sequence of social practices, including past, present, and future, in a random order, as in the electronic hypertext (Internet), or in the blurring of life-cycle patterns. (…) In the network society, the space of flows dissolves time by disordering the sequence of events and making them simultaneous, thus installing society in structural ephemerality." (2004: 37)

The Internet

The biggest proliferation of the network society was – and still is – the Internet. Continuing the advances of the emergence of microelectronics that facilitated the network society, came the "interlinked, electronic hypertext, formed by television, radio, print media, film, video, art, and Internet communication in the so-called 'multimedia system' (…) characterized by global business concentration, by diversification of the audience (including cultural diversification), by technological versatility and channel multiplicity, and by the growing autonomy of an audience that is equipped with the Internet and has learned the rules of the game: namely, everything that is a collective mental experience is virtual, but this virtuality is a fundamental dimension of everybody's reality." (2004: 30). Terranova continues: "The Internet (…) seems to us to capture (and reinforce) a feature of network culture as a whole – the way it combines masses, segments and microsegments within a common informational dimension in which all points are potentially even if unevenly affected by all other points." (Terranova, 2004: 153)

The implications of the Internet on society, community and identity are so comprehensive that anything other than just a brief description would take up way to much space in this project. Therefore, in short, let me summarize by mapping that the Internet gives "access to a large, heterogeneous population, facilitates the ability of individuals to form relations that were previously inaccessible" and that it makes it "increasingly possible to seek out social ties based on shared interest and mutual identification, but not necessarily place. Freedom from the constraints of place provides Internet users with the opportunity to explore aspects of individual identity and interest that previously may have been repressed or lacked a critical mass of others." (Castells 2004, p. 218)

Wellman suggests that "similarity of interest is more important in forming relations than similarity of setting. Indeed, most of the social support that people require to function day to day comes from sources outside the local setting" (2004, p. 218) – exactly as portrayed in the identity section.

New technological advances

Having established the dynamics of the network society, I will now look upon the recent development in information technology and some of its social impacts on society. Development mainly brought about by the spread of broadband Internet, portable devices and the rise of virtual communities, causing social transformation and, in my argument, inherently a community paradigm shift.

The turn of the millennium saw a technological quantum leap, "characterized by the explosion of portable machines that provide ubiquitous wireless communication and computing capacity. This enables social units (individuals or organizations) to interact anywhere, anytime, while relying on a support infrastructure that manages material resources in a distributed information power grid. (…) Networks extend their interaction from our inner self to the whole realm of human activity, transcending barriers of time and space" and reprogramming "the communication networks of living matter. It is on this basis that a new social structure is expanding as the foundation of our society, the network society". (2004, p. 6). In other words, technology is increasingly becoming more and more integrated in the way we interact with each other. Technology is now part of communication, rather than the means of it.

Inarguably this development is affecting our patterns of community building and thereby our identity, which is the very core of my argument that I will discuss later.

COMMUNITY

After having established the structure of the network society, I will now move on and look at the dynamics of the community notion as a social institution and look at community mechanisms in both traditional and new terms (the latter of which being the new 'virtual community' concept) - for comparison in the discussion section.

Community characteristics

"Descriptive and non-evaluative characterizations of the term 'community' start with locality: in it's most basic sense, a community is physically definable and tied to a particular geographical location." (Venkatesh et. al. *in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 194-195)
"Such an entity is also a social entity to the extent that it supports human residents and their day-to-day needs. A sociological view of community encompasses these dual meanings of the term: a community is a physical location with the necessary support structures – physical, social – to sustain ordinary social life." (2004: 194-195). By community is meant the structure of activities in day-to-day living in social terms. And so the argument goes, that "if a community is socially constructed, a community network, as a technological artifact, is also socially constructed." (2004: 194-195)

In mapping a community, H. Butcher distinguishes between three distinct senses of the notion (Butcher 1993 *in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 11-12):

- *Descriptive community* - dealing with the need for belonging, this sense describes community-members as being tied together by having something in common.
- *Community as value* - the requirement of certain values; solidarity, participation, and coherence.
- *Active community* - the activities of a community's members, embodying the essence of the community itself.

Simply put, these three senses are basic to and necessary for labeling collective efforts a 'community'.

Social institution

Communities are "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity." (Wellman, 2001: 228). A community's members "have a common socio-cultural identity; that is, they share an understanding, explicit or implicit, of a distinctive culture, tradition, language and homeland, which binds them together as a group and forms a basis (acknowledged or unacknowledged) of their activities" (Held & McGrew, 2002: 91). Areas of belonging can emerge simply from the sharing of interests, if you ask Day & Schuler, who points out that "identity – a sense of belonging – with a locality or with areas of interest/practice are (…) acknowledged as crucial elements in determining community." (2004: 11).

Day & Schuler then adds the term 'member loyalty' to the list of bedrock elements of community (2004: 11), and is supported by Imma Tubella, yet another community-research scholar, who pin points this even more accurately by stating that community basically only exists in the minds of its members. She based this part of her research on the works of Renan, French religious philosopher, the famous words of whom were that 'the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite'. If we "abstract the centralistic considerations and just take the definition, I (Tubella) think that we shall be on the way to rethinking the identity-building process and that we will be able to find systems of integration rather than ideas of exclusion. According to Renan, what counts is the desire and the will to live together, to form together a collective consensus that is renewed daily." (*in* Castells, 2004: 387).

Her words describe the term 'social cohesion', the inherent sense of harmony in a given community. More specifically, it has been defined as "the capacity to live together in harmony with a sense of mutual commitment among citizens of different social or economic circumstances." (Balka & Peterson *in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 142)

Summarizing the social perspective of community brings us to the firm conclusion that while community members' identity is shaped by the community (or several communities) of which they are part of, these communities are also shaped by the members will to be a part of them – in mutual symbiosis. There are of course also many other shaping factors tied to this argument, one of most important ones being cultural influence.

Cultural influence

The immensely broad topic of culture and its effect on any given community will be touched only briefly here, due to the size limitations of this project. As a result, I will not deal with basic definitions of culture at all, but establish in the following only, that culture has a significant role in the shaping of community.

Sociocultural constructivism viewpoints (a synthesis of the theories of cultural constructionism and social constructionism) argue that "individual and community development are reciprocally enhanced" (Turner-Lee & Pinkett *in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 173) as also mentioned above, but then further adds that it is also enhanced by "independent and shared constructive activity that is resonant with both the social environment of a community of learners, as well as the culture of the learners themselves". The theory sees "community members as the active producers of community content rather than passive consumers or recipients" and as such member's culture plays a significant role in the shaping of both their own identity as well as the communities of which they are members of.

Community building

In summary, the very notion of active role (as mentioned above) is what builds community, Turner-Lee & Pinket argue, saying that individuals' capacities are the building blocks of any community. In exercising those capacities, thereby reaching their limitations, people seek other's talents to realize their goals. This leads them to join with others who will work with them towards a common goal – thereby forming a community in the word's most basic configuration.

Networking and interaction produce 'social capital' – a product of social interaction in general, but of networking and community in particular:

Social capital

Defined as "the advantage created by a person's location in a structure of relationships", it explains "how some people gain more success in a particular setting through their superior connections to other people." Further, according to Robert Putnam, the concept's leading proponent (though not its

originator), social capital "refers to the collective value of all social networks and the inclinations that arise from these networks to do things for each other."[1]

So far, this section has dealt with theory concerning the traditional universal meaning of the community notion in the scope of the network society. In my argument, this constitutes the "traditional community paradigm".

Now, however, I will move on and add hereto the theory of the dimensions recently assigned to the notion. The implications of which are – as I will argue – of such a groundbreaking character, that they have caused a paradigm shift. The following lays the foundation for what I – in the next section - will argue is the "new community paradigm".

Networked individualism

Facilitated by the recent technological advances first described in the network society section, spawning the mainstreaming of broadband connectivity and portable devices, interaction platforms have multiplied.

The social implication of this development is indeed grave, as "there has been a shift from place-to-place networking to person-to-person networking. This is not a shift towards social isolation, but towards flexible autonomy using social networks." (Purcel, 2006: 165). The position and significance of the individual networked user is increasingly acknowledged as 'networked individualism' by scholars in general. Purcell also uses the term 'personal community', describing how each individual's many different community memberships constitute very diverse configurations, where not two are alike.

Value is inherently assigned to these memberships and "the very presence of a large, active, and resource-filled set of ties has become an important resource in itself." (2006: 164-165). In other words, social capital, as described earlier, has a great significance in this new setting as well. Linking further to the importance of an active role in sustaining community, as also mentioned earlier, Purcel points out that "with networked individualism, people must actively network to thrive or even to survive comfortably."

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[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_capital

The prime proliferation of the technological advances and shift towards networked individualism is the emergence of the virtual community – the dynamics of which I will now describe.

Virtual community

Virtual communities come in all shapes and sizes (I found 72 networks on Wikipedia[2], ranging from 5,000-130 mio users – and this is only the tip of the iceberg). This emphasizes the diversity and span of the plurality of virtual communities' meaning, purpose, use and structure, but overall a simplified definition is that a virtual community is a group of people that primarily or initially communicates or interacts via the Internet.

Howard Rheingold, pioneering scholar of the subject, mentions that a virtual community is formed "when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships." (1993)

"The virtual community has done much to highlight the potential for communities to form beyond the confines of geographic space. Enthusiasts argue that electronic spaces (…) provide a new realm of public space." (Castells, 2004: 219)

It is important, however, to remember that social relations – and thereby virtual communities - are usually more complex, and may move across several platforms, both on- and offline. Castells explains that "social networks are cross-cutting and multi-stranded. People use multiple methods of communication in maintaining their communities: direct in-person contact, telephone, postal mail, e-mail, chats, and other online environments. Relationships that originate on the Internet can move off-line and existing friendship and kinship relations can be supported online." (2004: 220)

It is in this light that it can be argued that the boundaries of what is real and virtual are somewhat eroding.

Of the innumerous types of virtual communities in existence today, I will now present the categories that I find most relevant for this project, and list some of the most significant communities within each genre:

MUDs (Multi-user dimension)

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[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites

A cyberspace where users can take on an identity in the form of an avatar and interact with one another (…) - also known as 3-D worlds and chat worlds."[3] Most significant community is Second Life (130 mio. users), with real economy and currency exchangeable into real-life currencies.[4]

MMORPGs (Massive multiplayer online role-playing game)

A multiplayer computer role-playing game enabling thousands of players to play in a virtual world.[5] Most popular are Calypso, The Sims 2 and above all World of Warcraft (10 mio. users).

Social networks

Portals offering a community in which users provide all content in order to share knowledge, information and views. Usages include listening to music, watching movies, dating, discussing, blogging etc. (Hansen, 2006). Most significant communities include Youtube.com and MySpace (130 mio. users, adding 230,000 per day).[6]

Instant messaging

Gives access to sending instant messages to any other user having the same software on either computer, portable device or mobile phone and having accepting the sender as a "friend" beforehand. Most significant services are AOL Instant Messenger (unknown number of users) and Microsoft MSN (approx. 30 mio. users). Worldwide, instant messaging services include 800 mio. users sending more than 20 billion messages a day. (Christensen, 2006)

SMS'ing (Short Message Service)

A service available on most digital mobile phones (and other mobile devices) that permits the sending of short messages between mobile phones and other handheld devices.

Having established the key notions of the new community paradigm, networked individualism and virtual communities, I will now proceed to the actual discussion of the project topic.

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[3] http://www.webopedia.com/TERM/M/MUD.html
[4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life
[5] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MMORPG
[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MySpace

DISCUSSION

I will now discuss my hypothesis of a paradigm shift within the community notion, and further discuss how that change is shaping identity in a different way than under the traditional paradigm. I have divided this section into two parts:

First, in *Part A*, I will discuss the paradigm change in two perspectives. First in the societal perspective of the development we see today and secondly in a social perspective, comparing on one hand the findings from the theoretical section and on the other hand pragmatic testimonials taken from contemporary literature, case-studies, newspaper articles and interviews, both presenting views in favor of the paradigm and arguing against it, thus building a nuanced discussion of the hypothesis of a paradigm change.

Second, in *part B*, I will circle in on the implications on identity shaping caused by the paradigm change – while still using the sources mentioned above.

PART A: Societal perspective

Most people still distinguish between real world outside the windows and the virtual one in cyberspace. That is only natural, so in order to account for the influence of networked individualism on contemporary society, I will look at examples of youth behaviour today – as they are the main embracers of new currents.

In a newspaper article Lund writes that for many youths the barrier between real world and virtual reality is diminished or even gone. E-mail is already obsolete technology for them, and they communicate instantly via Messenger, MySpace and similar virtual communities. They live much of their lives online and the barrier between online and offline is non-existent for them (Lund, 2006). As presented earlier in the theory section, this shift has been brought about by networked individualism. Patrick Purcel points out that the shift "has been accompanied by a shift in theorizing about interpersonal behavior. Rather than seeing society as driven by individual norms or by the collective activities of solidary groups, social network analysts focus on how people's connections – to each other, groups, organizations, and institutions – affect possibilities and constraints for their behaviour." (2006: 166). This behavior includes heavy computer usage and high social dependency

on mobile phones. As pointed out by Nanna Ward, managing director at Inconcer.dk, youth today would feel socially disconnected without their cell phone – an assertion also found in newspaper articles. (Conradsen, 2006)

Also the transnational tendency described in the theory section is emphasized by looking at youth social conduct. Ward explains how she experiences a plurality of nationalities in her daily work with young pop music fans, all intertwined and exchanging culture and communicating heavily across borders using English as the main language.

The virtual communities are changing the norms for social interaction. Sociologist Henrik Dahl says that the only difference between real society and a virtual society such as MySpace is that in the latter, the space has been lifted. In other words, he says, "you are now able to be close to someone who is actually far, far away. And then is does not matter what clothes you are wearing, how you look etc.". Going to the core of the matter, he continues by pointing out that "youths seek the same as everywhere else, namely experiences of community. You meet people with whom you share interests. On top of that, a new dimension in virtual communities is that you can play with your own identity."

Seen from Dahl's professional view, MySpace, for instance, constitutes a fascinating experiment in the way that is resembles a real society, but without state, authorities or police – built alone on initiatives and self discipline of its own members. (Hansen, 2006)

Having touched social patterns in societal perspectives from different professional approaches in the above, I will now go through the social perspectives more systematically in the frame of the theory section, before looking at the implications for the shaping of identity.

PART B: Discussion of a community paradigm shift in social perspectives

As pointed out by Venkatesh et. al., community is both geographically rooted and socially constructed. Held & McGraw's addition was that members have a common socio-cultural identity, made from either geographical closeness or simply shared interest.

While geography surely plays a significant role in traditional sense of community, testimonials from contemporary media shows that virtual community – while refuting the geographical element – still shares the other characteristics perfectly.

One example tells the story about Bjarne Siemens, who has an address in the virtual community of Calypso, where he enjoys high status and considerable wealth as the avatar 'Hally', ao. making money from sales of artefacts. "A lot of people enjoy success in Calypso that they would never dream of in real life", he explains. After moving (in real life) most of his friendships died out. "That is why I enjoy being Hally. He fills the social role that I miss in real life" he says. In Calypso he speaks to around 200 friends on a daily basis. (Milsgaard, 2006)

Also, another Dane, Mona Bünning Sørensen, 19 years of age, sits by her computer several hours every day playing World of Warcraft and The Sims 2 – while still also attending sports and spending time with her boyfriend and friends.

"I play to spend time with my online friends. It is a social thing for me. I also play the games to get away from the real world. It is a break from reality. I put on my headphones and microphone and speak to the others, who share my interests." (Sabroe, 2006)

As portrayed here, day-to-day community activities can indeed exist in virtual environments as a social construction, equal to traditional communities. Unlike the latter, however, they are not geographically rooted whatsoever.

Also, as described by Butcher, a community – in order to be officially labelled one – needs to fulfil three dimensions, namely being a descriptive community (creating a sense of belonging for members), being a community as a value (create solidarity among members), and being an active community (through its members activities).

Does networked individualism and virtual communities comply with these dimensions? Turner-Lee & Pinket argues, that "from a utilitarian viewpoint, advanced technology networks can augment and extend a community's social support structures for meeting residents' day-to-day needs." (*in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 196). An example is how the tsunami disaster of 2004 immediately made people join virtual communities. The Internet was used not only for passing practical information about rescues and casualties, but also for people to express their grief and support for those having lost people dear to them (Grothen, 2005).

Further, Katz & Rice published a report of the Syntopia Project in 2002 (a project outlining Internet habits) showing an substantial rise in e-mailing sharing worries, seeking support and advice, especially among the younger generation. (*in* Castells, 2004: 224)

That virtual communities are made up of active members can best be pointed out by looking at dating-communities. In a newspaper survey, many users even said that they had a hard time backing off from the virtual dating-activities, even after having found a partner. The survey also showed, however, that net-daters ended up setting their standards too high. (Tougaard & Carlsen, 2006). This statement also concur with the main extracts from the short interview with Anne Marie Jørgensen, a 40-year old Danish women who found her soul mate on the Danish website dating.dk. She explained that many of her net-dating experienced friends actually had a more difficult time finding partners because their demands were unreasonably high. In net-dating as in real life, they now searched with sense of reason, rather than with their heart (Jørgensen, 2006). Although definitely a downside of net-dating, I find it safe to say that these behavioural testimonials exemplify how activity is central to virtual community activities.

In summary, above examples show how virtual communities carry the three senses – or dimensions – that is also eminent in traditional community contexts.

Social capital, the term advocated by Robert Putnam, maps the advantages created by a person's location in a structure of relationships – ao. in a community. I think we can safely say that networked individualism and virtual community membership potentially facilitates contact to many more individuals than traditional community. But are these relationships worth anything as social capital?

Keith N. Hampton says that it does – and actually that in some ways, the social capital of virtual communities is stronger than that of the real world: "Weak (social) ties have been shown to be a valuable form of social capital. They provide access to diverse social circles that are separate from more 'homophilious' strong tie networks. At an individual level, they provide a bridge to resources that would otherwise be unavailable. (…) At a group level, they are an important factor in the ability of communities to mobilize collectively." (*in* Castells, 2004: 228).

That quantity weighs heavier than quality in many virtual relationships is supported by Nanna Ward, director of Inconcert.dk. Ward explains that "in major communities such as MySpace and Arto.dk, users put the largest emphasis on quantity. Whoever boasts to have the most friends on their list will gain the most admiration from other users. The same goes for the amount of numbers you have in your mobile phone directory" she says.

Purcel's Networked Individualism-term is one of the central mechanisms for describing the new tendencies that show a shift from place-to-place networking to person-to-person networking, not causing isolation, but instead individuals of flexible autonomy in social networks. But is networked individualism based communities a valid social institution or is it just trendy short-term proliferation of the network society, eventually leading to social decay?

"I thought it was only lonesome people playing, but many of the players here have extended and very developed social networks. Some meet physically here in front of the computers, while others meet online," says Kim Sanneman, owner of the Boom Town net café in Copenhagen (Pinholt, 2006).

Not all look at the perspectives with such a positive angle. Castells mentions that "the fear of many pundits is that the Internet, mobile phones, and other forms of computer-mediated communication withdraw people from the public realm, exasperating the trend towards home centeredness and privatization." (Castells, 2004: 219) Newspapers write about the Hikikomori-syndrome: Youths in Japan living hermit's lives in their rooms, playing computer games and surfing the net without any real-life social contact (Boutrup, 2006).
Also thousands of Danes are addicted to the Internet, Niels Oe Finneman, professor and leader of Center of Internetresearch at Aarhus Univerity, argues. One percent of Denmarks 4 mio. Internet users are unable to control the amount of time spent in virtual communities, he estimates, "and the number is six percent in the US." (Finnemann, 2006).

Contrary to these bleak scenarios, here are a hand full of arguments that refute the examples of isolation, abuse and addiction presented above.
Hampton, the conductor of the Netville-experiment that mapped the development of social activities of both wired and non-wired families, came to the conclusion that the first mentioned gained more

social bonds, both in real-life and online, than those not wired. (*in* Castells, 2004: 226-227). He explains that by saying that "it is a misnomer to label online ties as insufficient and incomplete in comparison to ties from the 'real world' as they are part of the same social system." (2004: 229).

Also Turner-Lee & Pinkett, after having conducted and monitored an Internet community development program concluded that "community technology upholds the true power of building community online as enhancing rather than supplanting face-to-face or offline interaction." (*in* Day & Schuler, 2004: 184)

Also Oldenburg is convinced of the soundness of online bonding: "As public spaces, online communities may become the street corners of the twenty-first century, but as yet there is no evidence that the Internet will reduce the importance of existing public places or 'third places' such as cafés and bars (1989 *in* Castells, 2004: 229)

In summary, many skeptics will say that the virtual worlds constitute an unhealthy escape from reality, while proponents argue that virtual communities as such gives you enhanced social and recreational opportunities, both supporting and enhancing real-world social life efforts rather than replacing them.

PART C: Identity perspectives

In the name of Castells' statement in the theory section, that identity is an ever-changing and an ongoing process, I find it safe to say – without further support of argument – that identity has changed more or less as a result of networked individualism. In this discussion I will seek to determine to which degree, and argue that the change is so significant that it highly supports my hypothesis.

Castells explains that the building of identity draws upon innumerable dimensions, including elements from history, geography, collective memory, religious streams etc. How does networked individualism and virtual communities affect this?

As explained in the network society section, the notions of 'space of flows' and 'timeless time' alter our very basic senses of place and time. This has its affect on the building of identity: "New understandings, commonalities and frames of meaning are elaborated without direct contact between people. As such, they can serve to detach, or disembed, identities from particular times,

places and traditions, and can have a 'pluralizing impact' on identity formation, producing a variety of hyphenated identities which are less fixed or unified." (Held & McGrew, 2002: 29)

The affects are far-reaching, especially for the next generation. "The openness implied in being young, and the experiments you make in that period of your life, is part of the development that leads to a firmly anchored identity in adulthood. This means that you know who you are." (Henning Bech *in* Sørensen, 2006). In other words, the inputs, values and structures you are exposed to as a youth, are shaping who you will become as an adult. In this frame, the new streams brought about by networked individualism and virtual communities are indeed changing the very social foundation of the next generation.

Further, in the words of Castells, identity is often plural. Is this feature affected by networked individualism and virtual community?

The youth culture that exists today is significantly different today than what it was just 10 years ago. The main difference is, of course, the new technology and the social implications it has brought about. Today, access to chat rooms and the number of friends obtainable are important factors influencing how the youth defines itself and its social identity. Having friends that you have never met in real life is no oddity. (Jegind, 2006)

So how do you attract virtual friends? Nanna Ward from Inconcert.dk explains how the children she monitors in virtual reality often invents new identities for themselves, to meet the demands of those they would like to obtain friendship with. If the relationship runs "of track", she says, they simply pull the plug, cutting contact. Last, but not least, Ward emphasizes that youth often act very differently in real life compared to how they behave as their virtual alter-egos. In other words, they have a plurality of identities to choose from (Ward, 2006) – an accelerated path of the ideas of negotiating lifestyle and reflexive life-planning as advocated in the theory section by Giddens.

An example is 23-year old Mariann Bodilsen. In Second Life she socializes and even sometimes brings a partner to her virtual home. She says: "It's an opportunity to do all the things you cannot do in real life." (Mosbech et. al., 2006). In another interview she adds: "It's like a game. If you are bored in real life, you can have another life, where you can be exactly as you like." (Eising, 2006)

Also accentuated by Castells are the roles that we all carry – formed by institutions of society, but also shaped by collective identity. How do they comply with the new social agenda?

Scholars argue that while we still see ourselves in certain roles, the rules and boundaries of those roles are changing. Garcia Cancline puts it this way: "We live in a time of fractures and heterogeneity, of segmentations inside each nation and of fluid communications with transnational orders or information, style and knowledge. In the middle of this heterogeneity, we find codes that unify us, or at least permit us to understand ourselves. These codes are less and less of ethnicity, class or the nation into which we were born." (*in* Castells, 2004: 386)

Tupella supports: "The new power lies in the codes (and) the sites of this power are people's minds. If we understand this, we will understand the role of communication in the construction of individual and collective identity." (*in* Castells, 2004: 387). In other words, the four major streams of collective identity pointed out by Castells become less and less significant. Whereas collective identity beforehand rested mostly on large-scale values, such as nationalism or religion, nowadays we find collectivity in smaller groupings through transnational channels.

To round up the discussion of identity in general terms, we can conclude that we have never before been able to experiment this much with our identity as now. Vigild makes an interesting perspective by stating that the complex dynamical processes in the virtual communities stem from the social interaction among individuals, not the worlds as such. The virtual communities are only the grid through which individuals can express themselves, customizing their personality.

T.L. Taylor from Copenhagen IT-University and other scholars state that virtual communities have changed social roles of conduct remarkably. Especially by causing that "beautiful eyes, George Clooney-charm smiles and big muscles or breasts mean nothing. Only social abilities, sympathetical behavior and empathic flair does the trick." (Vigild, 2005).

CONCLUSION

I will now summarize conclusions from the discussion, and add a little post-research perspective.

Community paradigm change

The first element of support of my hypothesis comes from the societal perspectives presented in the discussion. The facts presented by journalist Lund, pragmatist Ward, professor of electronics Purcel and sociologist Dahl all represent different approaches towards the same topic, namely a dramatic social transformation of society. A transformation caused by technology in general and virtual communities in particular.

Secondly, I established that both traditional and virtual communities are socially constructed. In that sense virtual communities form an eligible social institution that matches that of traditional community, supported firmly by the fact that virtual communities contain all three social dimensions, namely 'descriptive community', 'community value' and 'active community'.
What makes virtual community step thoroughly out of traditional community's footsteps, however, is that it is not geographically rooted. This implies the second element in support of my hypothesis. A support that is further enhanced by virtual community's stronger social produce, in the form of larger output of highly usable social capital than that of traditional community.

Third, I went through many opinions for and against networked individualism as a valid social structure: Sceptics talking about abuse, decay and isolation, while proponents talked about how virtual community is both supporting and even enhancing real life socializing.
Historically, it is probably too early to conclude who is right, but to do so anyway, I will rely on Barry Wellman, who comments that "the personalization, portability, ubiquitous connectivity and imminent wireless mobility of the Internet all facilitate networked individualism as the basis of community." (Purcell, 2006: 6-7). My findings and Wellman's assertion together constitutes the third and final element of support of my hypothesis.

Combined, these three elements make a convincing argument of a paradigm shift, as they express a dramatic multi-stranded change of community's basics: Societal and social perspectives and most

significantly in the shift towards networked individuality – place-to-place networking shifting to person-to-person networking.

Implication on the shaping of identity

Though already traditionally shaped by many sources, identity has still undergone significant changes with the emergence of networked individualism and virtual community – and still does. Most significantly, it has started the detachment of resting solely on factors that are geographically close, as it is now exposed to a transnational plethora of sources. According to writers and scholars alike, this is a major upheaval and inarguably plays a significant role in identity building, especially for the next generation. Features such as negotiating of identity and reflexive life-planning have become highly accentuated through virtual realms.

A major change in identity shaping is also symbolized by the diminishing focus on basic collective identities such as nationality, ethnicity, territoriality and religious fundamentalism and a rise in a tendency towards finding collectivity from a plurality of sources in our networks. One could argue that this assumption is downright wrong, seen in the light of the for instance contemporary debate about the increasing polarization of western and Islamic cultures. However, I will argue that this polarization is not a symbol of an Islamic bubble of regressive development in this field, but instead a political construction biased by a combination of historical events in the middle east in the latter part of the 20th century and the political climate set by the current political administrations of major western countries.

To summarize, I proposed the hypothesis that the social changes of recent years are of such groundbreaking character, that it constitutes a community paradigm change. Based on the three summarizing elements presented above, I will conclude that it does. The social changes are so comprehensive, that the traditional community paradigm is no longer eligible.
Further, I asked what implications this paradigm change have had on the shaping of identity. Most striking is that we are no longer just exposed to the world through globalization, but instead interacting instantly with people from other continents as easy as with our neighbor. This aptness has created an "identity-playground" into which we consciously throw ourselves without any fear, choosing the identity-of-the-day – knowing that any other identity is only a few clicks away.

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