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# Virtual Communities, A Challenge for Today's Concepts of Identity and Citizenship

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## Abstract

The period of the '90s was called by Ralf Dahrendorf the decade of "citizenship", due to the historical transformations that influenced the evolution of civil consciousness and education for citizenship. In opposition with the depreciation of the fundamental values of modern epoch, actual period is characterised by the rebirth of civic virtue. Under these circumstances, education for citizenship may be considered among the most efficient means for establishing a new social contract, based on citizens' rights and duties, which could reinstate social cohesion and solidarity. European Council also underlines that the contemporary educational system plays a crucial part in individuals training as independent and responsible citizens.

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## 1. Introduction

Virtual communication represents the product of contemporary society, of informational and electronic society. It is the communication generated by the Internet, by the world of virtuality, world understood by some as the space of unreality, and by others as the space of a parallel, but artificial world. But perhaps one of the fundamental traits of virtual communication consists in this very profound relation generated with the very original meanings, significances of the concept of communication. We refer here to the original significance of *comunis, comunitate*. Thus, virtual communication, by means of the Internet, is the only modern communication way regenerating the communities. It is one of the most important criticisms that can be brought against all the theoreticians who predicted contemporary society's stripping of significations, the loss of humanity and of the individual in the technologic and information jungle around him. Reading a book or a newspaper, watching a TV programme is

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processes that take place mainly individually, finding the individual alone in most cases. In exchange, in most cases surfing the net aims not only at seeking information, but at searching for the “others”, irrespective of the geographic area they inhabit. It is a communication characterised, first of all, by interactivity. Thus, we consider that probably the most important product of this type of communication refers to virtual communications. Consequently, we understand by virtual communication the totality of communicational processes and manifestations taking place in the virtual space of the Internet, of new media, as a result of the individual’s relation of immersion into a world potential and actual at the same time (Rotaru, 2010).

## 2. Methods

Most of CMC takes place by text communication (there are also imagologic significant of web pages, for instance). In this type of communication, people are stripped of their social status, grace exactly to a text-based communication, mainly, that cannot contain information about the tone of voice or facial expressions (and thus the aspects of the non-verbal communication get minimised). The “fatic” aspects of the face to face conversation are minimum in CMC, and sometimes they are characterised by a certain exacerbated anxiety of the sender then he has no feedback (Aoki, 1994). One of the advantages of such a text-based communication is that it reduces the sources of certain discriminating *patterns* such as gender, race, social-economic status, physical traits and at the same time it increased the degree of mutual interaction. It is a reality that since medieval times written communication has not undergone such a great reviving until today, with the help of the computer. Thus, CMC destabilises certain hierarchies that become irrelevant now. Moreover, CMC’s written communication determines an enhancement of interactions among ideas born from discussions, as it is known that attention in CMC is drawn by the message rather than the sender, and focused on ideas and concepts, dedicated to formulations. An extremely important psychosociologic aspect determined by the computer-mediated communication refers to the higher degree of self-image control exhibited to the others. In most cases, the only identity made known to the other is the “ID” or “user name”, which in many cases is fictional. Thus, CMC is characterised by an almost absolute anonymity of communicators and a process of re-construction of a functional self. They can compose their character in the process of written communication, reinvent their experiences, sensations, needs, ideas, family status, social position etc. – their entire humanity. Consequently, due to the anonymity character of CMC, communicators can manipulate their self-image better than in face to face communication and can introduce themselves in whatever light they choose to. It is an achievement due to CMC of a burning desire to become the person each of them wishes to be. It is an absolute existential freedom that CMC creates to individuals, freedom that some could call noxious due to the very absence of control, both from the interlocutor's part, and self-control. The issue of control was studied in relation with the social norms and social contract. Such researches (Bicheri & Lev-On, 2007) aimed at highlighting the main differentiations between the effect of face to face communication (FtF) and computer-mediated communication (CMC). In FtF communication persons tend to keep the promises and commitments assumed in view of observing the rules and imposing social norms, through three processes: identification (humanisation), discussion, commitment. In CMC one remarks a decrease of commitment observance due first of all to the substantial size of the group (their number is not exactly known in most cases) and also due to the geographic dispersion. Bicheri and Lev-On (2007, p. 150) realised a synthesis of the main results and studies related to the differences between the two types of communication from the perspective of communication effects: The effect of communication is present in the context of mediated communication: CMC exhibits higher rates of co-operation, in comparison with other communicational media; The effects of communication vary by different degrees in direct proportionality with the richness of the communication channel. Videoconferences have effects similar to those of FtF communication, whereas written communication produces much less co-operation. In general, the effects of CMC communication approximate the effects of FtF when the traits of FtF communication are approximated; When CMC is used for solving certain social dilemmas, and the content of communication is normatively charged, the CMC effects are more powerful than those of FtF communication. This can be explained by the need for compensating the conceptual indices in mediated communication; Compared to FtF communication, it is much more difficult to establish co-operation within CMC, as the CMC channels are weaker. In FtF communication, this co-operation deteriorates in time because of the lack of continuous, periodical communication, but once it is revived, the co-operation rates increase again; Especially within asynchronous communication, it is much more difficult to establish social contracts through CMC, and when such agreements are reached, they are much more often breached than in FtF communication.

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