

Virtual Refuge

Adam Dachis

Documentation of Study

Strictly, this is an ethnographic study of a “digital community” called AVEN, or the “Asexuality Visibility and Education Network”. More broadly, this study interprets the nature of a community in which its members would find difficulty realizing together in a physical setting due to the inherent invisibility of the purpose (asexuality is not obvious and noticeable), small number of members, and scattered locations across the globe. This document will explore the study through an understanding of community, asexuality, the AVEN community, and how each affects the other. Below is a sectioned outline of covered topics.

- I. Section 01: Questions and Definitions
 - a. Defining “Community”
 - b. Virtual Community as a Solution
 - c. Minorities and the Internet
 - d. What is Asexuality?

- II. Section 02: AVEN – A Case Study
 - a. Introduction to AVEN
 - b. The Common Threads
 - c. AVEN as a Virtual _____?

Section One:

Questions and Definitions

FRAGMENT A: DEFINING COMMUNITY

Community is an interesting word, because no definition of the world tends to define it on the whole. One of my favorites belongs to the San Francisco Estuary Institute¹: “[t]he organisms inhabiting a common environment and interacting with one another”. I like it because it seems broad and fairly inclusive, but put it in a digital context. Online, we’re compelled to redefine words like “inhabit” and “interact” in order to express the environment. Online, interaction requires a device and we only inhabit the adjacent space. We join an online community to be with like-minded people yet our self-representation is not necessarily accurate and may not even be capable of significant verisimilitude. The idea of an “online community” is somewhat contrary and fragmented. It is best defined as a separate term, exclusively its own, from the definitions surrounding its physical homonym.

Darin Barney asks, “Can digital communication networks mediate the sort of relationships located by the ballpark and hockey rink? Do *virtual* reality and community also conspire?” (Barney 31). Barney argues a virtual gathering place is more commodity than community. People gather at a common setting, but the setting is nothing more than computer code. “[L]ocation”, he says, “is typically experienced as a material liability rather than a source of strength and meaning” (Barney 34). If Barney is correct to define an online community as a simple commodity, then all places of virtual gathering must exist as tools for useful practice or the fulfillment of want. He argues that physical communities differ from virtual commodities because of their physicality, but in effect they both serve to fulfill the same thing in very different ways. To say one is inherently more meaningful is to interpret meaning in a strict and narrow fashion. The problem is not the supposed inferiority of a virtual community but the manner in which we approach it.

As I mentioned earlier, characterizing a physical and virtual community using the same definition is nearly impossible. Still, when approaching a virtual community, many people hear the term and naturally seek the physical. With people-connecting technologies advertised as a way to “be there”ⁱⁱ, it’s reasonable to understand that is what many people are trying to achieve. Online, however, a person cannot “be there”. Virtual reality is a different experience, whether equal to or greater than physical reality in the mind of the participant or not. Barry Wellman coins the term “networked individualism”, which Barney describes as “sociability based on highly dynamic, spatially dislocated, nested networks of social ties constructed through individual choice and interests and maintained by communication” (Barney 37). I feel this is fairly accurate. I feel the subtle difference is, when ignoring space and time (or timelessness, as the case may be), a

physical community forms a whole whereas a virtual community remains individualized. In a virtual community, people come together, but at any given point in that interaction, each and every person remains as a representation of him or herself.

FRAGMENT B: VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AS A SOLUTION

Whether equal or not, what comes of the circumstance where a community can only exist in the digital realm? Many virtual communities exist where no physical counterpart can. For example, a community of collectors specializing in nineteenth century medical utensils might find their very few members scattered across the globe. Whether or not physical human interaction would be preferred, such a group could never exist without forming in a digital context. In a way, this may be seen as sad and unfortunate, as the members of a group are not given a choice but rather forced into what may as well be a “virtual refuge”.

Participation in a virtual community can be compared to living in a college dormitory. A resident has all of the privileges of living on their own with nearly none of the responsibilityⁱⁱⁱ (Barney 57). In an online community, a participant has no responsibility to the members of the community but is free to reap the benefits of the community nonetheless. For example, a Christian entering an online discussion board for Jewish singles can lurk and most likely participate (to an extent) with little resistance^{iv}. While most synagogues and Churches will welcome visitors, the physical communities don't permit outsiders the same way virtual communities can and sometimes do.

Albert Borgmann argues, however, that virtual communities thrive as a free entity if they can remain free. “Virtual communities”, he says, “are threatened from without as much as from within. A community in the normative sense needs a commons in at least the technical sense, a meeting place that is not under the direction of a corporation and not subject to profitability” (Barney 60). “[E]ven if a stable commons is assured, a virtual community, to be truly independent of commercial intrusions, needs a server and a staff to see to its technical and social well-being” (Barney 61). Even if a virtual community can maintain itself without commercial intrusion, Borgmann ignores the possibility of community downfall due to what Garret Hardin calls “the tragedy of the commons”.

If a pasture becomes a commons open to all, the right of each to use it may not be matched by a corresponding responsibility to protect it. Asking everyone to use it with discretion will hardly do, for the considerate herdsman who refrains from overloading the commons suffers more than a selfish one who says his needs are greater. If everyone would restrain himself, all would be well; but it takes only one less than everyone to ruin a system of voluntary restraint. In a crowded world of less than perfect human beings, mutual ruin is inevitable if there are no controls. This is the tragedy of the commons (Abelson 334).

The same idea exists in a digital commons, or virtual community. For a community that must exist online, or a “virtual refuge” (as previously termed), its survival is determined

by its upkeep and fair distribution of services (if they exist). While grazing land is certainly a more tangible example than, perhaps, the emotional support of an online message board, if one person uses more resources than allotted or breaks a general rule, the other members of the community may suffer as a result. Hardin suggests that all common property should be privately owned and managed to assure it is not abused. Virtual communities often depart from the concept of a “commons” at this juncture. All virtual communities are privately owned and moderated. A person must buy the domain, pay for hosting space (or a connection and a server to host the domain themselves), and moderate its use. While Borgmann feels a virtual community thrives on its escape from private ownership, it is in fact that private ownership that allows it to survive.

A virtual community still is, essentially, a commons and can escape tragedy via moderation. While it may not be preferable to a physical community for some, a virtual presence is sometimes the only option for those who have no other outlet for their interests. Additionally, it is minority groups who often find the Internet to be an outlet for their individuality.

FRAGMENT C: MINORITIES AND THE INTERNET

While virtual communities may offer minority groups a meeting ground, many are still without Internet access. “According to the U.S. Department of Commerce...the 2000 study showed that minorities, senior citizens, rural residents, those with limited education and those who earn lower incomes were less likely to have Internet and computer access”^v (Cotter). Luckily, it appears that gap is narrowing:

Four years ago, the percentage of minorities online lagged behind whites. But a study issued this week by the Pew Research Center found that the gap has shrunk. Now, nearly two-thirds of whites and Hispanics and 61 percent of blacks use the Internet. The study also found that nearly one-third of Hispanics log on for news—a larger percentage than whites or blacks (Nelson).

Unaccounted for in this study, however, are the invisible minorities: the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and asexual population. Invisible, or sexual, minorities have the greatest need for virtual refuges. Under many circumstances, a virtual refuge is the only outlet or, on a lesser scale, “meeting place” for sexual minorities as members are few and far between. For this case study, we will look at a virtual community called AVEN, or the Asexuality Visibility and Education Network. Asexuality represents the smallest and most physically dislocated sexual minority group^{vi} and is therefore a prime subject.

FRAGMENT D: WHAT IS ASEXUALITY?

Before surveying a virtual community devoted to the visibility and education of asexuality, it’s important to understand exactly what asexuality is. AVEN defines asexuality as “a person who does not experience sexual attraction” (AVEN). Asexuality

is not to be confused with celibacy, as a celibate person chooses to abstain from sexual activity and relationships whereas an asexual person simply does not feel compelled to participate^{vii} in either (AVEN). For example, the amount of sexual attraction the high majority of human beings will generate for a tree stump is equivalent to what an asexual person feels not only for that tree stump, but also for human beings, animals, lamp posts—you name it. The desire isn't there.

Some may see asexuality as a disease, a disadvantage, or a terrible misfortune, but it's only a lack of sexual desire. Daily, minute-to-minute, we're confronted with advertisements trying to sell us the importance of a particular yogurt or fleece pullover. To a degree, we're resilient, but when a product appeals to our tastes, we're quickly compelled to buy it. Society, in the same way, sells the importance of sex. An asexual person is simply resilient to that particular sales pitch.

AVEN describes sex as a vehicle to express emotion, to boost an ego, to have fun, or for any number of things (AVEN). "It is those things which are important, not the sex itself, and all of those things can be done nonsexually [sic]" (AVEN). How we experience them is up to our us and our orientations, which may include a large sexual appetite or none at all.

Section Two: **AVEN**— *A Case Study*

FRAGMENT A: INTRODUCTION TO AVEN

The web site introduces itself:

While most sexual people are shown a multitude of ways to live a life which involves sex, most asexual people find very little information on how to live life without it. The Asexual Visibility and Education Network (AVEN), was created to address this discrepancy by encouraging dialogue among about about [sic] asexual people. We provide a safe space for asexual people to discuss our experiences in our online forum, and actively organize for the recognition and acceptance of asexuality (AVEN).

The web site provides a number of features, although the end user is immediately forwarded to the extensive forums (powered by the free phpBB software^{viii}, whose tagline is “Creating Communities”). Besides the forums, the AVEN site contains a small selection of general information about asexuality, an introduction to the site (see the quoted text above), a few links, and an e-mail address for contact.

AVEN’s discussion board holds a range of topics separated into two categories: Community and AVEN. In the Community category, the three most popular topics are *General Asexual Rantings*, *Welcome Area*, and *Off-A* (a board for non-asexual-related topics). The category also includes sections for poetry, politics, and even one to arrange physical meetings. The AVEN category has a number of far less popular options^{ix}, the most popular of which is the Asexual Q&A.

Browsing doesn’t require an account, but posting does. Of course, account registration is free.

FRAGMENT B: THE COMMON THREADS

I communicated with people on the message boards as well as kept up on posts past and current. As a result, I was able to find enough information to understand what sorts of similarities and differences exist in the community^x. Some were fairly surprising and others were expected. For instance, I expected that everyone I spoke with would live significantly far from the others. I was correct. A little over half reside in North America, but none live in reasonable proximity to any of the others. On the other hand, I expected to find at least three vegetarians. Of the people I spoke with, none were full-fledged vegetarians or vegans. A few eat very little meat and one only eats fish.

However, a recent thread shows that a few people from the community are indeed vegetarians, but the majority seems to lie with people who are for the ethical treatment of animals but are not opposed to eating them. One user had an interesting comment:

“I also have no problem with a non-human species killing and eating me. I may not want it, but my desires shouldn't prevent other life from existing. We're all interdependent and need to recognize that.”

Earlier the same user spoke about plants and their ability to feel spiritual pain. There are a significant number of religious asexual people in the forums—many more than I'd anticipated. Within the group of people I spoke with, there were only Christians or (reluctant) Catholics. Even among the religious, politics were almost always liberal. Some preferred to define themselves simply as a liberal while others found themselves solely on the left but unwilling to associate with a specific group. Only one person found herself on the radical right and she identified as a Libertarian.

Every person I communicated with lives with a pet besides the one person who has an allergy-stricken roommate. Most people own cats, if not multiple cats, and 36% have more than two pets (18% with five or more!). A few people, when describing their living space, mentioned posters of animals (in place of celebrities or mostly-naked women). I asked about pet ownership is because, as a society, we associate domestic animals with either families or single people. While I certainly don't mean to exclude unwed couples from pet ownership, generally an animal is depicted with a happy family or lonely single female. I wondered how that depiction transferred to people who identify as asexual.

About half are fans of the sci-fi genre and nearly everyone likes action movies. This majority is unlikely specific to AVEN in any way. While I'm simply making an assumption, in my experience online, I've found that the majority of participants in forums where the average age range is 17 to 24, most will have an obsession with sci-fi, fantasy, or Japanese anime of the same genre. Interestingly enough, everyone I communicated with was under 24, the youngest a 15-year-old transgender female.

Aside from one woman, everyone described his or her living space as “messy”. Many live with their parents or in a dormitory, although the only tidy person is a dorm resident as well.

As for the statistics that relate specifically to asexuality, I didn't ask for too many. To begin, only one person engages in sexual activity with a partner and only two more are interested in dating and are currently in long-term relationships. About half found AVEN via either an article in New Science or the Wikipedia, while the others came across it through other methods (one being a web comic).

Lastly, I tried to gauge how emotional each respondent was based on their answers to my questions. While I'm not necessarily qualified to make such a distinction, I'd say it's fairly obvious that each person's emotional stock is very different. What may be, perhaps, more telling is how each person thinks of AVEN. A little under half consider

AVEN to be one of their emotional outlets whereas the others generally go to family members if anyone at all.

To its members, it seems that AVEN is mostly a supplement to their physical, “real life”. Newer members, however, seem to view AVEN as more of a place for support than a leisure activity. The two most popular forums on the AVEN site are *Welcome Area* and *Off-A*, so it isn’t a surprise that people generally treat the community in one of these two ways.

Many members look at AVEN as an escape from a general reality with frequent innuendos and pick-up lines. Many of the members I communicated with complained of being “hit on” often. As a result, I couldn’t help but imagine the AVEN community as a networked group of supermodels. Perhaps I should have asked the members if they consider themselves attractive.

While a member’s purpose for using the board may be fairly straightforward, I spoke with no archetypes in the forums. Everyone seems to be a unique human being where the only major similarities could be found politics, pet ownership, and sexual identification.

FRAGMENT C: AVEN AS A VIRTUAL _____ ?

Hailing AVEN outwardly, I made the general assumption that it certainly fit the term “virtual refuge” as it was defined in this document. After closer inspection, however, I feel differently. It seems as if the people who make use of it understand it as a resource more so than a community. Hardly any respondents considered anyone in the forums a friend. It’s as if AVEN exists for a purpose and that purpose is fulfilled. If people would simply come and go, I’d say AVEN was indeed a commodity, but because it serves as a gathering point and fulfills a need for those who choose to stick around, I believe it is indeed worthy of the term “virtual community”.

What I’ve gathered from AVEN is fairly simple: what makes a community is not determined by its structure, but more so how people interact within it.

Bibliography

AVEN. <<http://www.asexuality.org>>.

Bogaert, Anthony F. "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample." Journal of Sex Research 41.3 (2004): 279-288.

Campbell, Kevin M., Al Cooper, and Irene P. McLoughlin. "Sexuality in Cyberspace: Update for the 21st Century." CyberPsychology & Behavior 3 (2000): 521-537.

Community in the Digital Age: Philosophy and Practice. Ed. Darin Barney, and Andrew Feenberg. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2004. 31-141.

Cotter, Meghann. "Majority of Americans are online." The Free Lance-Star 5 Feb. 2005. EBSCO. 18 Apr. 2005

<<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&an=2W61807266584>>.

Ethics for Modern Life. Ed. Raziel Abelson, and Marie-Louise Friquegnon. 6th ed. Boston, Massachusetts: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2003. 332-347.

Godson, Suzi. "It's a free choice." The Times 17 Mar. 2005: 4-4. EBSCO. 18 Apr. 2005 <<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&an=7EH3603152740>>.

Gott, Merryn. "Sex and Intimacy in Older People." Sexualities, Evolution & Gender 5.1 (2003): 41-45.

Lambiase, Jacqueline. "CODES OF ONLINE SEXUALITY: CELEBRITY, GENDER AND MARKETING ON THE WEB." Sexuality & Culture 7.3 (2003): 57-79.

Milius, Susan. "LIFE WITHOUT SEX." Science News 163.26 (2003): 406-408.

Milligan, Maureen S. "The Myth of Asexuality: A Survey of Social and Empirical."

Sexuality & Disability 19.2 (2004): 91-110.

Nelson, Colleen M. "Ethnic Gap on Internet Narrowing, Study Says." The Dallas

Morning News 10 June 2004. EBSCO. 18 Apr. 2005

"No sex please, it's boring." The Australian 15 Oct. 2004: 8-8. EBSCO. 18 Apr. 2005

<<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&an=2004101510087051>
14>.

Rheingold, Howard. Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution. Cambridge,

Massachusetts: Basic Books, 2002.

Sam, Lister. "The new (lack of) sexual revolution." The Times 14 Oct. 2004: 11-11.

EBSCO. 18 Apr. 2005

<<http://search.epnet.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nfh&an=7EH3153370599>>.

Tepper, Mitchell S. "The Missing Discourse of Pleasure." Sexuality & Disability 18.4

(2000): 293-241.

notes

ⁱ Visit SFEI's glossary of terms for a closer look:

http://www.sfei.org/rmp/glossary_new.html

ⁱⁱ "Be there" is coincidentally one phrase used to entice consumers to buy Apple's Mac OS X, which includes the text/audio/video chat application iChat.

ⁱⁱⁱ Albert Borgmann writes, "[The internet] declassifies human beings into purely moral agents. And then it seems to reconcile the notions of freedom and obligation. A person is free to assume whatever obligations come with being a member of a chat group, a mailing list, or a Multi-User Domain (MUD)" (Barney 57).

^{iv} Whether the community is welcoming to outsiders or not (outsiders defined as someone who does not fit within the category that is the basis for the community), the internet allows a person to conceal their identity and therefore they can easily infiltrate (whereas this would be nearly impossible in a physical setting).

^v "Thirty-nine percent of rural households had the Internet, compared to 42 percent in urban areas. Eighty-six percent of households with a computer had an income of \$75,000 or more, compare to 19 percent of households with an income of \$15,000 or less. Thirty percent of people with a high school education had access to the Internet, while 70 percent of those in the highest education bracket did. People with a disability were half as likely to have Internet access as someone who didn't. Individuals age 50 and older were the least likely to be Internet users" (Cotter).

^{vi} The definition of "sexual minority group" used here is not inclusive of sexual fetish (i.e. bondage, domination, sadomasochism, feet, fat) or criminally deviant (i.e. pedophilia/hebophilia, zoophilia) communities.

^{vii} One woman writes, "I have never been interested in sex nor enjoyed it. It literally hurts me somewhere in my brain. If I am asexual, I am very fine with that, it's not something I wish I could change" (Godson).

^{viii} The software is available at <http://www.phpbb.com>.

^{ix} Based on total number of posts and topics.

^x The statistics that will follow are not necessarily an accurate depiction of the community as the community is far too large (3,733 registered users) to speak with everyone, or even the majority. However, I most likely spoke with the most vocal members of the community, which should be taken into account. Additionally, none of this information should be used to stereotype people who identify as sexual. These generalizations are representations of my findings in this study and are not applicable outside of their immediate purpose.