

The community and I in the extended field

o n - l i n e c o m m u n i t i e s

In recent years on-line communities have gone from the obscure exception to the predominant factor in the renewal of social "engineering" - an engineering of individuality with a multiplicity of I.

October 8, 2002

Report from the Stockholm Workshop: Communities - Culture in Real Time

By Mats Brodén

Technology has been a centripetal force in society. The propertied classes have, sooner or later, adopted innovations to invigorate the existing state. Lately, this movement seems to have changed direction, pushing power from center to periphery— a centrifugal force.

Online communities are one of the major driving forces. They are not, as some claim, sucked dry of meaning but need to be analyzed in dimensions of time, size, fulfillment, completeness— densities of meaning and membership thresholds. (Community- something in common)

Identity is a plastic construction that changes over time. The emergence of online communities has, by its inherent potential of identity abstraction, given way to what seems like an explosion of repressed "I." Many people extrapolate their emotional and intellectual lives into the virtual space and view it as a citadel for free thought. Most human activities can take place in this scaleless, potentially infinite space, and we do not have to put up with bugs.

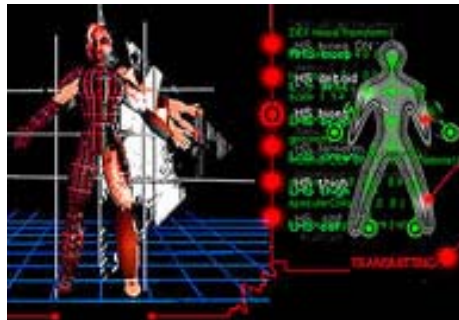
Perhaps it is possible to make this analogy: When man started to use money to make trade more practical, he made the concept of assets very abstract, laying on a foundation of trust. Today, money comes in innumerable forms. Is something similar happening with the concept of identity?

Why one signature when we can have several? Why are we so obsessed to

fix and isolate our own and other's identity?

We go from modernism (isolate) to postmodernism (dissolve) to what—a set of "I" modes or states of mind?

And in all this, what about our "bodiness"? Is the virtual space the extension of our body or the end of it? Body and soul seem to be sliding apart, although plastic surgery suggests something else. In any event, our body is, of course, an indispensable site for our will, experiences, knowledge and thought



Stelarc

to be distributed in the virtual. The present archaeology of our body, which is now in an explosive phase, fundamentally changes how we perceive and relate to it. The aesthetics of our inner body today, seen through the eyes of the micro-explorers, look very much like a banal, remote sunset, an inner virtual universe.

Our bodily experience, or "I"-substance, will perhaps rest within our thoughts only as nostalgia. Philosophers in the 1700s looked upon the body as something capable to render into almost anything (or nothing). The current split or opposition between body and soul is only proof of our limited thinking capacity.

The biotech field makes use of concepts from sociology and the

military to explain its findings. And it is very tempting to make use of the metaphors from the biotech field when one look at communities: membranes, cells, metabolism, etcetera.



The Internet is sometimes viewed as a continuation of the public sphere, the virtual agora. But is it? Is it public or private, or neither, or a junction of both toward the creation of something else? This kind of in-between is fertile soil for creativity.

The move from *gemeinschaft* to *gesellschaft* has, to some extent, closed our exchange of knowledge and experiences on a bump-into level. Our society has, in my mind, become an old malt whiskey that needs to be opened up with some liquid. This would have positive economic consequences, since quality



The Stockholm Town Hall

interaction between people stimulates economic growth. It took at least one generation before firms understood that with electricity, as with steam, there was no need to group machines around the power source. How long



Stockholm Town Hall
SIM City version

will it take before we fully comprehend that democracy has nothing to do with our Town Hall or Parliament, with its high towers gazing over its

subjects?

Governments and companies are having a difficult time tracking down subjects and make them accountable for action taken on the Internet. Are copyright owners and power institutions on the right track when they try to expropriate virtual space and make it into a virtual estate?

The next important development for the Internet is when real estate companies and city planners rivet the virtual in the physical, thus giving rise to a reciprocal movement between the two. It can surely create dynamics in city planning and urban curating—make the invisible visible in a city. Can we view Real Estate as Media?

One of the buzzwords in the new media landscape is REAL TIME. This is an opaque concept sometimes defined as “when machines render a task in the same speed as our senses register the world.” In entertainment, it is a narrative constructed as a front of “in the meantime”. In the business world, it is mostly about not having an alienating time lap between action and consequences: Real Time Economy, Real Time Accounting, Real Time Manager. Real time, combined with an online community, could create a present-participle knowledge society: agile, fluid, nimble and transparent. Thus make reports like this and “von oben” planning abundant. In Medias Res

The whole phenomenon is very much a “generation thing,” with the divide being situated at around age 40. Very few politicians realize the enormous significance this has for young people today. In Sweden, the Lunarstorm community, with about 1 million members, handles an entire

generation's life expectations. (Lunarstorm's database is a kind of sociological DNA.) A new kind professionalism is evolving, named spirits, moderators and hubs.

Europe is lagging behind; most analysts and visionaries are from the United States. We maintain our traditions in philosophy, poetry and literature, and when it comes to architecture and mobile technology, we have a chance to claim "avant garde." But then we have to make use of, and relate to, the "third space," not unlike New York City's site for the reconstruction of Ground Zero.

There is no doubt that democracy, public debate and the way we go about constructing our society are fundamentally going to change. In other words, what is going to change is how we relate to one another. There may also be an economic drive for online communities, in the wake of "sustainability," sooner than we think. And it will, despite the fact that the IT-bubble has already burst, continue to develop new businesses.

Take, for example, the game industry: With its online communities, it is becoming a major player in the business world with multi-billion-dollar sales. One limiting factor is the tendencies of oligopoly among operators—an unwillingness to share revenue with traffic generators.

The bottom line is that online communities are the ultimate clash between culture and technology. Online communities are cultures. Artists have played an important role in the development of new media, and will continue to do so. New media also changes art. It drains the concept of the permanent masterpiece and the lonesome genius cult of relevance. The final touch has no meaning, a work of art either continuous or slowly fade away.

August Strindberg perhaps best describes our virtual existence in the foreword to his "A Dream Play." (See Appendix.)

This is, of course, in many ways a fragmented and speculative introduction, but it could work as a starting point for a discussion. Last in this report, we will suggest some follow-ups and links. More material will later be available at www.commune08.st.

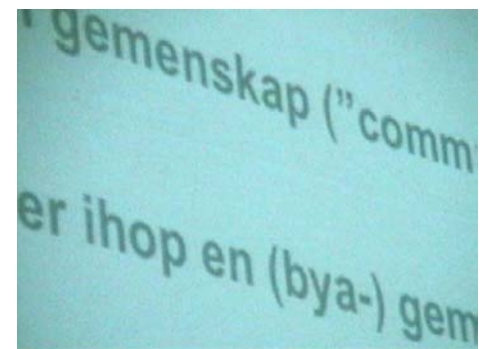
The workshop aimed to open up the concept of online communities to a range of definitions and to give some practical advice for how to set them up. I can see three cornerstones in the construction of communities: sociology, events and technology. Four words that keep popping up in my mind are boundaries, life span and incentive.

Speakers:

Bo Andér, the City of Stockholm Cultural Department
Daniel Pargman, KTH/The Royal Institute of Technology
Maria Forssén, Heart of Stockholm
Tage Widsell, Proppellerheads
Brian Manning Delaney, CR-society
Thomas Isacson, MGON, SIM Cities
Philip Ebbersten, Votia Empowerment

Bo Andér, the City of Stockholm Cultural Department, started out by placing the event in a framework of cultural policies. "This workshop is an important element in the build-up of a greater conference that will be held in Hague in December 12-13 on the theme: Culture and ICT (Information, Communication and Technology). The host for this conference is the cultural committee in a network called Eurocities."

He continues: "Cultural policies have,



as a rule, two different parts: One is to view the arts out of their intrinsic value, and the other is to view the arts as an instrument for social intervention. The emergences of online communities are opening up a new field, and it is important that we are keenly alive to what is happening. Is it even so that virtual communities can work as an instrument to make culture stronger in what for most is considered more central issues in our society, such as social and city planning? And in this perspective get such an important role that it supports the very foundation in our society—democracy. Which, in fact, takes us back to the core of cultural policies.

Daniel Pargman (DP), PhD at KTH/The Royal Institute of Technology, focuses his research on the intersection between computer science and the social sciences—the intersection between technology and society.

DP's work emanates from some basic



questions: What is a virtual community? What keeps it together? How does it develop over time? In order to answer such questions, he has applied methods and knowledge from several disciplines such as anthropology and sociology ("community studies"). To offer a background to issues about communities (both online and offline), DP called our attention to the fact that the 20th century has been an enormous migration from rural to urban areas. Two inspiring quotations that highlight his perspective are as follows:

"[Community], as we find it in much nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought encompasses all forms of relationship which are characterized by a high degree of personal intimacy, emotional depth, moral commitment, social cohesion, and continuity in time. Community is founded on man conceived in his wholeness rather than in one of another of the roles, taken separately, that he may hold in [society]"

Robert Nisbet (1967)
"The sociological tradition"

"To accidentally encounter a good friend or an old acquaintance in a big city that really is a big city seems to be an anomaly, a remarkable coincidence. To do the same in a small city or a village is on the contrary part of the fabric of every-day life. The norm in a big city is that stranger meets stranger; the norm in a small

city or a village is that an acquaintance meets an acquaintance. It can be just as remarkable to encounter a stranger in a small city or a village that is provincial enough as it is to encounter a good friend or an old acquaintance in a big city"

Johan Asplund (1991) "Essä om Gemeinschaft och Gesellschaft"
DP's translation

DP has concentrated his research on one specific online community, and especially on the people who in their leisure time are *managing* that online community as a hobby (e.g. without any monetary rewards). Some of them have been dedicated to this hobby for the better part of a decade!

The average age of the users/players of this online community has risen considerably in the past five years. Ten years ago, the community was

communities. Any person can do something (as a member or manager) out there, but there is a high threshold if one tries to set up a virtual community him- or herself (as an owner). That takes time, knowledge and money.

DP has studied a text-based, so-called MUD. The MUD—called SwedishMUD—is an online world that is a step behind in the online evolution compared to the current generation of communities/games. MUDs were "invented" almost 25 years ago and their interface is pure text, not graphics.

But the principal functionality and the evolving social structures that arise in these complex games are the same, no matter the interface. You can move around from place to place in the online world and meet other

players/people. The world can be infinitely complex, depending on the sophistication of the underlying computer code.

Since it is text-based you have to, as when you read a book, create your own images. The text-based community utilizes the most powerful graphical engine ever constructed—the human brain. DP's interests lie not in the interface but in the social structures and roles that emerge. The text-based and graphically-based systems generate, as said before, about the same kinds of social structures. There is a movement in the game community from periphery to the core of competence and acceptance. From novice to journeyman, to master to magician, to senior magician and finally to arch magician.



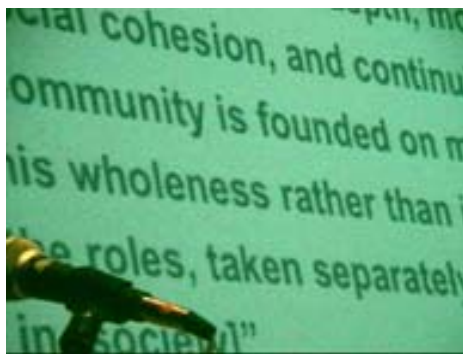
exclusively used by students at technical universities—the chosen few that at the time had Internet access. For the most part, it is men from ages 25 to 35 who are the primus motor today, even though a few women are also involved. They usually become surrogate fathers or mothers to the considerably younger members of the community (10-20 years old).

For the person who is interested in the interface between technology and people, many extremely interesting social phenomena are taking place today, inside or in relation to virtual

The world of SwedishMUD (see map) has about 6000 distinct "places" to visit. The geographical map is generated organically, with no master plan. Some of the cities are Muddvalla, Hobsala, etcetera. In the minds of the inhabitants, this is the discovered world; in other worlds, there is much yet to be discovered. The boundaries of this world expand over time, and the rate is dependent upon how much energy the creators have to carry on and program additional parts that are appended ("discovered") to the current map/world.

DP presented some examples of graphical game communities, the so-called "Massive Multi-Player On-line Games". To every figure in the game, there is a person behind the keyboard who "runs" or "owns" or "manages" that figure. The worlds can be very big or extremely small. There can be anywhere from hundreds to many thousands of simultaneous users in these virtual realms.

One of the biggest graphical adventure games is "EverQuest." It has 400,000 paying players, or subscribers who each have unlimited access to the game world. That means that Everquest has an income of roughly 4 million dollars per month—so it has the means to further develop the site.



Several layers of social structures are not immediately visual. There is an inherent conflict in these communities. It is possible to have commercial incentives, but there is a problem if one tries to make money from friends while if it is an obvious business contact, the same problems do not arise. Community, among other things, means FRIENDSHIP, and commercial interests can therefore infuse potential tensions, or even outright conflicts.

Anyone can participate, provided they have the technological equipment and know-how. There is always a need for driving forces within. There can be five or 50 people who carry the entire community on their shoulders. It is not always great fun. People join and put up fights and disturb the order. There are always people who want to test the boundaries. And if one acts as a police, one is accused of one thing or another.

Forced to provide some kind of definition, DP, says that virtual communities:

*"- Are groups that rather lean towards the small rather than to the big.
- Fill up a space between the individual and the family to a whole society.*

- Can metaphorically be said to represent "friendship written large."

The relation between people, in a virtual community, is of the same kind as between friends. It is important that some kind of acquaintance is established—friend or enemy. It's not anonymity! Which is the characteristic for the big city.

DP concluded by saying, *"You cannot buy membership, it is something you deserve. One has to provide in some kind of currency—it can be money, but more often it is, time, attention, engagement, and knowledge. The most important thing is to conform to values and adapt to the norms that are essential in the social architecture of these realms."*

You can't buy love!

Question: For how long does a community live?

- The community dies when everyone has run out of energy, become bored with it, doesn't want to dwell there anymore, can't relate to it anymore, etcetera. It is the same as with an art movement—there is no pre-set "expiration date."

Maria Forssén, Heart of Stockholm
Maria and her team have worked with online communities commercially from the very beginning. Every project entails cooperation with interested companies or organizations that pay for their efforts. Members in the different communities have only to some extent paid for membership.



Maria says: *"It is always difficult to decide whether one should charge people for membership or not. It is problematic because many of them are one's friends. It has happened that we have been accused for making money on friends. But that is, at the same time, partly what it is all about. The community we build derives*

mostly from our big network. It has to start somewhere! Usually it is on one's friends one tests new ideas/concepts. It starts there and then continues out like rings on water or echoes in the air."

They often get the question about what exactly they are up to. Is it about media, PR or what?

Maria's response to that is: *"However people want to label us, the most important thing is that everything stems from the individual. Whatever we do, it has to speak to a person and create a relationship with him or her. Either for the benefit of a company or for one's own sake."*

Their slogan is: "The People is the Message."

One project, called ETER is a joint community platform for free agents in the media and entertainment world, who can meet and exchange ideas, professional experiences or just to find a friend.

The reason why one starts an online community is that one has something of deeper meaning to communicate. In the ETER case, it was about bringing forth all the creativity and power these people possess, being a kind of catalyst. The idea was to bring media people together and give ground for a new big company, the next big thing after Microsoft!

It is often the case that members are doing business together. Sometimes they even start a company together.

Maria: *"In communities we have to be very open and not try to control people. When they meet, new things are put in motion out of reach from my organisation or company. New communities branch out. That means a lot for these people, and that openness and transparency pays back in the long run."*

When they construct communities, they usually build around a factor of competition. Competition is a very good way to activate a community, increase the level of engagement and widen the contact surface. People grasp an opportunity to be seen and heard. This is the reason why they started an annual competition for designers in different fields. It's also been a way to get outside the center of Stockholm and outside Sweden.

Shenet is another, completely different, community they have started. Shenet started out because a young generation of professional women wasn't attracted by all the "women are able" fairs and lectures touring Sweden at the time. But there was a need for a platform for these women.

Sponsors have financed both projects.

Maria: *So, how do they start a community? It takes a lot of energy and money.*

In the creation of communities it is participation one wants to invoke. PR and marketing want us to swallow a message. Participation comes in forms of chats and, of course, meetings in the real world. We have always worked in an interaction between the virtual and the physical world. In the case of ETER, we meet at least two times a month in real life. This interwoven interaction between the physical and the virtual vouch for an in-depth human exchange.

Through the production of seminars, competitions, newsletters, chats and monitoring of the world around us—all focusing on what is relevant for that particular community—they have been able to get people to participate and interact, and even invoke a willingness among members to pass on their knowledge, information and network. You cannot buy your way in! You are whom you deserve in the community.

Through their networks, they get a lot of good ideas and information. That means that they know what is going on and thus what needs to be done. A community is something one adds to what one already is doing. It is a way to have a deepening effect in the real world—almost like cultural projects (good citizen). It takes a lot of money to arrange physical meetings or events.

Maria: *"With this insight, we scan the market. Is there anyone interested in this area? It can be a company or organization that wants to relate to this particular target group. When or if we gather enough capital, competence and resources, we establish the community. Through the individuals we already have the content. It is always good to have a media partner. But the best marketing tool is the member. They carry the word around."*

The hardest part is usually to find a physical space for meetings. HeartofStockholm cooperate with schools and universities; educational organisations have good arenas for events and are also the settings for new knowledge and creativity.

In all projects there is a need for a technology partner. In order not to end up in a technology trap, they consult someone neutral to the project. Crossovers between closely related fields (cross-fertilization) are very important. When two worlds meet something happens—one thing benefits from the other. The different actors often provide that kind of crossover from the very beginning. One key ingredient for a lively community is **SPIRITS**.

Maria: *"These individuals are fairly*



easy to identify. They are very active, loud, want more, are more receptive, know the most, have a high level of empathy and they have the ability to attract other people. People turn to them to get advice and help. We call them the spirits, the hubs, etcetera. With the aid of them, we push the project forward. It goes faster that way and becomes much better."

Communities are very closely connected to CRM (Customer Relation Management). CRM is about how companies administrate their customer relations. Communities can be seen as being one step ahead toward relationship or emotional management.

Maria: *"In my mind, companies make a major mistake in calling individuals for customers. Do people want to be seen as a customer instead of a person? Our standpoint has always been that everybody wants to be seen as person. Everyone wants to participate in discussions, almost to the point that it can be regarded as research. We are part of the community; we act within the community, so whatever happens in that community we expose ourselves*

to it as well. We are surrounded by the culture that evolve and develop similar values and knowledge."

Today, Maria works with "Founders Alliance." She thinks it is very important to have some insight into the heart of the matter. They almost never get involved with things that they are not in command of. Founders Alliance is a community for Swedish entrepreneurs—"For entrepreneurs to entrepreneurs." It is also about strengthening the entrepreneur's position in the Swedish society, and creating growth within it. We recently had a big happening in the City of Stockholm. Everyone that has a company of his or her own should become a member.

Audience: Where does a community end in terms of time past and in social extension?

Maria: *It ends when one is out of money, out of energy or out of steam. It is like trends, waves. It ends when it needs to end. It's like a relationship. Usually they just end, unfortunately! The life cycle of a community is about two years. Then the energy is drained and one wants to move on. If not, a new spirit enters the scene and spark new life in to it, that is. It ends like an organic clock.*

Comment: It seems like [within] all communities exist social thresholds that include or exclude, like a social cell membrane.

Comment: I've been thinking about the heydays of the so-called "new economy." One characteristic was that no one really knew for sure who should pay or get paid. The borders were blurred between the customer and the vendor of a service or product.

Tage Widsell, Webmaster at Propellerheads, a software company that produces software with which you can compose music, starts out by saying: *"Our company hasn't really anything to do with communities. It was just something we stumbled upon—a big community that happened to be associated with us."*

Tage gives us the story: Our company makes music programs for composers and started in 1994. Internet became, first of all, a very

important distribution channel for us. Especially when it comes to information on updates. Everyone interested in our product are very technically driven.



In 1997, we published a software that immediately became very popular. We had not thought anything about communities and didn't really know anything about it. It just happened because people became so fascinated by our product. The fact that it was possible to do all this with computers was something new for most. Our program could, for only \$200, perform the same tasks as other programs did for 10 times that amount. So the people that used our software developed a great need to communicate and share what they discovered with others.

Initially we got a lot of affirmative emails. And to be able to handle all this traffic, we set up a chat forum. So instead of us replying to all mail, our users started to communicate with themselves. This created a dense sense of a community, and consequently we realised that—there is something in this that we have to take a closer look at—these must be the kind of communities we read about in *Wired!* This was in 1997.

People started to mail songs and sequences to one another. And we published the songs on our site. This became a huge success; people were sending in more and more songs. It became hard to handle all this, so we had to build administrative tools to deal with it. So we set up a program for automatic publication of files instead of us publishing them by hand.

People started also to hack our program. They altered it partly because they didn't want to pay for it, partly just to improve it. They changed the design in order to get a personal touch.

Some were prepared to spend hours changing our program just for having his name and his soundtrack on it. They wanted to create an identity as artists. This is something software companies try to discourage; it is usually not allowed. But we realized that there is an enormous force in this. This is a creativity we can benefit from. So, instead of hitting down on this, we started to distribute their versions, and also built in a support for changes in the next version.

Our Music Studio looks like and works like real-life versions of music studios. It is possible to connect components and they function the same way as the "real" ones. It is possible to do entire productions. What we experienced the first year was very interesting. We were fortunate to be able to see how a community evolves. Although a business plan didn't exist, we weren't taken off guard. From an economic viewpoint, it's very good if we make use of unpaid ambassadors and marketing people for our software. It has been an enormous marketing tool for our company and products. People visit our web site and engage themselves. Visitors who want to get information on our products, encounter fanatically devoted users. We have now started to strategically consider what is this good for? How much money and effort shall we put into community functions?

There are also bad things about our community. Our competitors have adopted another approach. To let people freely express themselves, also means that if someone is displeased with something, it will be flashed to everyone. We have around 1,000 very tough critics that criticize everything we do immediately.



But still, this feeling of belonging to a group of people that makes use of and creates things on our software are also a kind of protection against pirate copying. Pirate copying is problem for all software companies. We think that

for every program we sell, there are about 10 illegally in circulation. Our goal is, of course, to sell more. We have noticed that our community put a pressure on all users to be an owner of the software. It has become a "cool" thing to be able to say, "Yes, I have a paid version of the program." They who have bought the program get a little symbol connected to their nickname. It costs about \$300 to be a valued member in this community. So we reached this fortunate situation that to own our products has become the same thing as being part of the community. We do not own and we do not shape the community. It has come into existence through the fact that people want to exchange ideas, create, and solve problems together.

The outer boundary for this community is users need to be someone on the Net. This is something that all communities on the Internet have in common. What defines the community is the kind of person people wants to be. They want to be musicians, they create songs others like or they have created a set of sounds or sound tools. They construct an image or reputation of who they are.

It is very interesting to see how people develop their online identity. The online identity is usually something completely different than their identity in real life. That is one of the charms of the online world; it doesn't have to be a correspondence between the two. Every community requires some kind of law and order. Otherwise it is impossible to keep the community together. In every village there is a set of norms. But on the Net, people feel anonymous. In other words, they tend to break the rules because they do not think they have to face the consequences. So the only way keep up order is that members in the community put social pressure on each other. The community becomes self-regulated. The ultimate punishment has been to get one's real address and portrait published.

What is so special with our community is, compared with other corporate communities; we allow these violations of the rules. One has to give them plenty of robe. Open community boundaries make people feel more at home in the environment. In the future, the concept of communities will gain importance for businesses. In 1997 I went to a seminar and got a definition on

communities. And it seemed like the community was a tool for members to make money. That was what members should gain from a community. We have not helped our users to make money. They buy products from us. The driving force is that people want to be seen and give their ego some space. Companies that get their products associated to such a site and personality have succeeded.

The people in our community vouch for us. It's much better than having a slick presentation. We give references immediately. For us, it is extremely important to have credibility in the underground music world. It is a great danger for us to be perceived as too corporate. The trick to get something for free if you find us a new customer would not work in our community.

Audience: The record companies are now planning to destroy our hard drives. Are your activities a reaction to their way of doing business? Your approach is rather the opposite, transparency, a culture of sharing, etcetera.

- No, it is not a reaction. It's two different points of departure. We have a coping protection using a carrot; they use a whip. Record companies have a lot to learn when it comes to that.

Audience: In the world of music, it seems like people are more inclined to exchange creative ideas. In the visual arts, that are seldom the case—everyone wants to be the genius. Can you give examples of cooperation in your music community?

- Yes, we have several examples of that. Sometimes members publish half-made songs and ask if anyone can finish them. There are also virtual bands with members from Sweden, England, USA and Colombia. They compose extremely good music. They have never met but discovered each other on our site. Someone makes a basic structure, someone else adds a bass sequence and fades down the vocal; finally he or she calls this file number "one." And then others continue the work and name it number "two." It works similar to Linux, a kind of version control system.

Audience: This about anonymity on the Internet is very deceptive. When you act on the Internet, your identity is connected to an IP number, which is something constructed for computers

to find and identify themselves. In the real world, at least in Sweden, we have a personal number connected to one's self as a subject. So the reason that one can have multiple identities on the Internet is because IP number is about identifying machines. But still it is pretty easy to find the person who acts behind an IP number.

- Yes, many people think that it is easy to hide behind a hotmail address—that the mail address is the only thing visible. It is very easy to track someone down. You combine to search through IP numbers and cross-search on names. I do that quite often to find people that have copied our program, or someone that behaved badly in our community. It takes about 10 to 15 minutes and it is not very qualified work to find someone's home address and/or telephone number. Everyone gets very surprised if we call them up, they even think that we have violated laws to find them. But you can only trace a computer; you never know who have been sitting in front of it.

Brian Manning Delaney, Philosopher and President of CR-Society. Brian attended in two roles: one as an academic working in the humanities, one as a leader of a research group in the natural sciences. One of the things he wanted to do here is to question the term "online community." In his view, most online groups are not communities at all, but rather associations of individuals. But there are certainly exceptions. He started out with how people come to identify with a group and the "Who am I" question:



"Who am I?" The self-definition question is one we all pose at some point in our life. This is perhaps a luxury question in the Western world. Elsewhere, fundamental life-and-death questions tend to be more central: "How do I get food on the table?" Either way, it is other people who define us—our

parents, family, friends, groups, a neighborhood, a country. What is interesting for me is that there are large differences even within Western countries, for example between the United States and most European countries.

In the U.S. there is a nearly fanatic need to pose the "Who am I?" question. And we in the U.S. try to answer it not by discovering who we happen to be, but by shaping or creating what we believe we want to be, want to become. This is why the commune, or, as it's called now, "intentional community", has always been so popular in the U.S. It's a group of people who *choose* to be together because they want to be, not just a region you happen to be born into, like a neighborhood.

If you talk to Americans (when he or she isn't traveling outside of the country at any event) about who they are, with the people-oriented definition above in mind, they tend not to say, "I am an American." If they use the word "American" at all, it's more likely to be hyphenated with something else: "Jewish-American," "Irish-American," etcetera. To be simply "American" is not really saying something determinate, since the country is so new. (And when the indigenous population describes themselves in terms of the country, not their tribe, they also would tend to use two words: "Native American," "indigenous American," etcetera.

But if you grow up in Sweden, you are a Swede. You may of course be a number of other things, all of which play a part in your identity, just as in the U.S.! You might be a musician, a parent, but you're Swedish in a much more clear-cut and powerful way than an American is an American. It is a more significant, stable part of your identity. Comparisons done about how many memberships or groups an American believes, perhaps falsely, he or she is a member of, show that Americans tend to believe they are members of an extraordinarily large number of groups, compared to the number of groups someone from Sweden or France tends to think he or she is a member of. This is partly a result of the newness of the country that its self-definition is so fluid, indeed scarcely exists. Thus we Americans look for self-definition elsewhere than in our "American-ness." This mania for group-joining can often be something

childish, almost desperate. Americans are constantly trying to establish new associations to other people, to find out who they are or, more often, actually create who they are. But it can be something good too, a kind of energy source. One well-known example of an attempt to create some kind of self-defining association with other people is, of course, communes.

The commune, most famously known as a kind of hippie collective, is in some ways the most natural—at least the most complete—result of this need to answer the question of “Who am I” by an act of creation. Communes are still abundant in the U.S. today. Interestingly, the few other places in the world where communes are still found are also relatively new countries: Germany and Israel. I visited many of these when I was younger, some 15 to 20 years ago, and was disappointed. These groups are not utopias. It is, indeed, difficult to create a community, even when you share goals, land and a large house. The “Who am I?” question already has been partly answered by the new members of the group, and these answers—the already existing differences among people—can make it difficult to create a community *ex nihilo*. And where the commune does succeed, the influences of the outside world tend to drive it apart. (To say nothing of all the internal psychological and sociological forces that can create rifts.) A number of early American communes became, for example, successful business (Amana, for example).

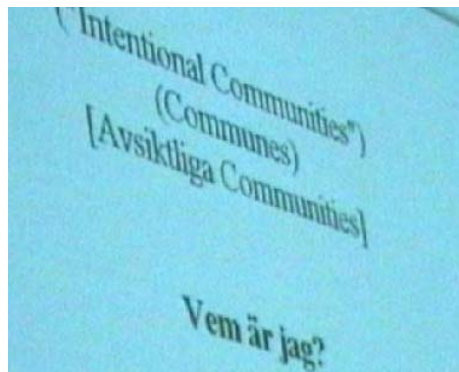
Group Size

If the group is too big, it can't be a community in a sociological sense, because there is no *Gemeinschaft* (*gemenskap*). The U.S. is not a community. The “world community” is not a community, because there aren't enough things in “common” (*communitas*).

Group “Completeness”

The totality, or completeness, of a community refers to the number of needs met, or the number of elements of one's identity that are reflected in other members of the group, where these needs or these elements are salient with respect to the “Who am I” question. A community, as opposed to an association, is a group where the number of these needs is relatively high.

But if the number of needs met is high, do we have a community or a cult? This is an extraordinarily tricky question. A cult is often defined as a group where the individual loses too much autonomy. But this definition seems highly flawed to me, because it presupposes that loss of autonomy is a bad thing. Many societies exist where autonomy is not valued as highly as in the West. Are these societies cults?! A better definition, in my view, would be a group where the needs met (or the axis along which individuals feel they relate to others in the group) are not the authentic needs, yet where these needs are made to seem fundamental, are made to seem like answers to the “Who am I” question. This definition is, of course, not perfect either, since determining what an “authentic need” is no easy matter (and may amount to the first definition: “authentic” is that existing independently in the individual).



But “authentic needs” is nonetheless a useful concept. Consider “the mob.” I consider the mob a “time-limited cult.” It's a cult because, for example, killing Liverpool soccer fans is not an authentic need, and yet the need to kill them seems like a fundamentally self-defining need. But after 15 minutes it doesn't seem that way anymore.

So the mob *seems* “complete,” and, in a sense, *is* complete, with respect to the needs met, as they are perceived. On a much smaller scale, we could also consider a pair of people in love to be a mob. The needs met by romantic love can easily be considered in authentic! (Do you mean “authentic” or “inauthentic”?) And if the pair stays in love for a long time, it goes from being a two-person mob to a two-person cult. If they fall out of love but still “love” each other enough to stay together, and they buy a house, start a business together, do art together, etcetera, then they are a two-person community. Or so one could say.

The EU is not a community. Of course, if a word gets used in a new way often enough, the meaning of the word changes. In this newer sense of the word “community,” it is of course a community. But it is not a community in the sense that it is a group of people who have a lot in common, a group that meets a large number of self-definitional needs. EU is indeed intentional, like an “intentional community”: It is a planned group. But it has very little to do with having one's self-definition socially mediated.

People who are completely gonzo about the EU, like people who are gonzo about chess and start a chess club, might have fundamental needs met through the EU. But is it a community, a cult, a mob, or what? The U.S. is in the middle, somewhere between the EU and a completely “non-intentional nation.” It started in a more intentional way than most countries. It was a whole bunch of separate communes going over on boats 350 years ago. Then they formed a little association together. (Then things went bad!) Modern-day Israel, conceptualized through its Zionistic origins, can be thought of as similar to the U.S.: quite intentional at its inception, but now something else entirely.

Sweden was not so very intentional in its origins. A bunch of people were going north, and they just kept going all the way to present-day Sweden and stayed. But it has been in existence long enough for the completeness of the needs being met by the identity one gets by being Swedish to be much greater than the identity you get by being American. You have to move to Sweden to become a Swede. It's like moving to a neighborhood that already has a well-defined character: You can “join” it, but it takes time.

Picture: Human Groups

This is a practical tool to get a quick grasp of how to place a group with respect to the question of whether it's a community.

Avsiktighet
Intentionality

Fullständighet
Completeness

There are two axes, internationality, and completeness. (We could also, by the way, add two other dimensions: size and time, but we don't have time for that here.)

The CR Society

The "other hat" I wear here is as the president of a nonprofit research organization known, rather non-creatively, as the CR Society. "CR" stands for Calorie Restriction, which is a diet known to reduce aging in research animals. The group consists of people on the diet and/or researching the effect of the diet in humans.

An early form of the group was the Usenet group, Sci.life-extension, which I started around 10 years ago. I was looking for people to discuss CR with, and to help with a research study. We then started an email list, which grew dramatically, and recently led to the formation of a nonprofit organization.

So what is our group? A community? An association? A cult?

In many respects, it is actually a cult—at least to many members. I have tracked the contributions to the email list of certain members. They post nearly 20 hours a day! It seems that it's *all* they do. If they define themselves primarily in terms of this diet, that would seem to be cult-like behavior.

Yet the question is more complicated. Many of their posts to the group are chatty, having nothing to do with the diet itself. They have a relation to the other members of the group that's much like the relation one would have to one's neighbors. Indeed, these other dimensions of the group are taking up so much time on our main email list that we've created a separate forum for "off-topic" discussion. With respect to the question of the group's status, it's not,

of course, clear at all that these are off-topic, because the essence of the group may indeed have become something other than its original stated purpose.

The forces binding people together are rich and enigmatic. I have only touched very lightly on the topic. A thorough exploration of the topic is in Rosabeth Moss Kanter's book, *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective*. Kanter began as someone with an interest in communes but then moved into the business world. She has been extraordinarily successful. Why? Because the knowledge of the forces behind the workings of relatively complete groups (such as communes) can easily be applied to the workings of less complete groups, such as a group of employees in a large corporation. The workings of "corporate identity" are a subset of the workings of a commune.

One force at play in certain groups that is, by definition, very difficult to fathom, is *charisma*. This is a force that all sociologists have had difficulty conceptualizing. Many workings of groups can be seen as mechanistic. Indeed, one can almost take a deterministic view of social groups—for example, the "engine of history" which some thinkers have said drives large groups forward in predictable ways. Charisma, however, is the wild card. The roots of the word mean "rejoicing" (and, more distantly, "singing," "chanting"). It's a magic force that certain individuals can have, and also certain groups.

I believe the biggest challenge for those who wish to understand communities, and for those who wish to create them, is to understand charisma. The CR Society put out a call for donations from its members recently. Money flooded in. Why? I don't know! It's definitely not because of the practical needs of the group. Everyone knows we can get money from grant organizations for our studies. It's something else. There is a collective charisma in the group that seems to bind people in a fundamental way to the group and its needs. It's more than cult behavior, it's more than anything practical.

Part of what's fascinating here is that the vast majority of these people have

only had interactions with one another via the Internet (private email, a chat room, or an email list). Yet a very strong bond among them has developed.

Interestingly, however, the desire among members of the group to meet in the physical world is growing. Is this a holdover from the pre-Internet expectations most of us grew up with, or is it a natural tendency that will also exist in future generations?

Furthermore, must the need be met directly, or can video conferencing or the use of "avatars" suffice?

At the moment, it seems that the collective charisma of the group is strong enough that, unlike many online groups, the CR Society will not collapse, even if we don't move onto the physical plane.

Many books have been written recently about the influence that the "logo" can have on us, the non-rational ways we come to identify with certain products and not others, etcetera. And even more recently, books dealing with "online communities" have tried to give blueprints for the creation of successful online "communities" (though they often mean simply "group").

But these books haven't been able to capture the mysteries of charisma. If we are to understand why some communities last and some don't, why some so-called online communities are not communities at all, but rather associations, we need to think more about charisma. Above all, we need to think about how the need to "find/create ourselves" and the need to answer the question "Who am I?" can be answered in ways that go far beyond the brand-identification analyses so popular today. We need to ponder more deeply the mysteries of socially mediated identification.

Thomas Isacson, MGON International/The Sims Resource set up and operated game communities on the Internet. MGON International is one of the biggest companies in the world in this field. It is based in Sweden, but most of their members come from North America and Europe.

The biggest game is "The SIMS," where you construct your entire virtual life. Everything takes place here, from

getting a job and decorating your living room, to setting up routines for eating and drinking. In a way it is an ultimate escape from one's real life. The game is incredibly popular. It is the best-selling game in the world: There are about 20 million people worldwide who play it on a regular basis.



"The SIMS" has a set of tools with which you can design objects like furniture, pets, wallpaper, greenhouse, new cars—whatever you desire on your virtual premises. You can jump into any identity: Darth Vader, Madonna or whoever you prefer to be. This is one of the reasons the game works so well with the community idea.

Thomas: *There are on the Internet several gigantic communities around this game. This is very much because of us. We were one of the first "SIMS" communities and we started out 1999, shortly after the game was launched. We realized that a game like this needs a meeting platform. Since the game itself does not provide this. (It isn't presently possible to play the game online.)*

The community has an enormous archive of uploaded virtual artifacts. Hundreds of new submissions are uploaded every day, and roughly 100,000 downloads every week. Visitors browse the archive and download objects or identities of choice on their computers and then insert them into their virtual realm—the SIMS. This is only one community; there could be as many as 400 similar sites on the Internet.

Why do people so freely share objects? They want to be seen in this community. They want to be perceived as the best creators and designers in this world. They want to be the most prestigious house constructor, the best furniture carpenter, etc.

Thomas: *We tried for a long time to figure out a way to make money on this. Internet communities are still very*

skeptical when it comes to being charged money for services. Everything on the Internet is usually for free. We found a golden middle way. The logic of this is very simple. In our giant database with about 40,000 files, uploaded by users who wants to be seen, are 3 percent free to download. The rest you have to pay for. These 3 percent change every third day. In about 300 days, all files have, at some point, been out there for free.

So, we can say that everything in our database is free of charge. But we decide when. This way, we have bypassed the predominant attitude that if you charge money on the Internet, you are greedy and make profit on what others create. All files in our database are uploaded by members and they consist of everything from human skins to medieval shower curtains.

He continues: We have talked today about important components in a successful online community. One of these components, the spirit, is something we have worked with quite a lot. The star designers are lifted up in the limelight. It is necessary to bring them out in order to keep the spirits high. We call this sector "The Creators Spotlight." In the spotlight we present artists and their creations. By doing so they become the spirits or the stars of the community. They create the myths. Some of the spirits/stars have later become employed artists and work full-time together with us.



Discussion forums are very important in a community. We have today over 700,000 contributions. It is a text-based virtual meeting spot. You cannot see the person who is logged in at the same time as you are, but you can communicate. Either you discuss in an existing theme, or you make one up by yourself. It is a non-interactive chat. This is of course a very delicate matter; we always run a risk that someone writes offensive things. In

order to deal with this, we have a number of "policies" that help us to monitor and erase offensive material or off-theme contributions. To keep a community going, it is very important to give space to questions, thoughts people have, and to work out solutions together. In the same way as the music community, Propellerheads, members in our community do collaborative work.

For example: Someone starts out with a skin and wants someone else to choose color. Or, "I'm stuck—can someone help me out with this nose?" We also provide help tools and have a "get started" section." It is important that our site is a one-stop shop. If you never played before, you will be taken care of. If you are a professional user, we stimulate you with the world's biggest archive of virtual objects. If you are an artist, this is the best marketing site in the world. Nowhere in the world are you more visible than here.

We are, in other words, the hub in the big SIMS community. And we have actually been able to run a business. It's tough, but it works. Today we have three subscription levels: 2 months \$6.95; 6 months \$16.95; one year \$26.95. The more time you buy, the cheaper it gets.

Question: *If I design a chair and upload it on your platform, is it then possible for others to buy my chair and use it in other virtual environments?*

- Not really. People download it but do not pay for it. There are sites for artists/designers who are specialists on designing furniture. If you want to download from them, you have to pay for membership. We could have done that but we are not the designers, we just supply with the platform. We do not own the files, we just provide them. That is why we need to find this golden middle way. We charge money for bandwidth, servers and tools. And that costs a lot of money. The download rate is 18,000 gigabits per month.

Philip Ebersten at Votia Empowerment works with the concept of democracy and e-democracy. Votia started out at the peak of the "new economy" with an aim to empower people in the democratic process, to take an active part in decisions that influence their everyday lives. The vision is to make this possible via new channels (new technology) as well as

traditional channels. Over the last three years, Votia has generated a lot of know-how and experience in how to make this happen.



Their business idea is to manage the whole process when an organization needs to reach a higher involvement and greater participation among its members, employees or citizens. That includes everything from methods, events and tools for handling large number of people's opinions and experiences. It is all about giving people a chance to have their say, thus creating trustworthiness and long-term relationships.

A lot of their projects are traditional information campaigns, but they always add an element of new technology. New technology makes it possible to distribute people's will and knowledge without actually being at site—telematics. In all projects it is very important with social inclusion, i.e. not to exclude people - technically or in any other way.

They see to it that politicians also are visible and reachable in between elections. The task is to open new arenas for citizens to take an active part in society, and the Internet is one such arena. Votia works with municipalities, political parties, trade unions, other interest organizations and corporations.

The most well-known case is Kalix Municipal, with its so-called, "Rådslag" (local public consultation--a very old meeting form in Swedish culture), organized by Votia. Kalix has carried through two "Rådslag." One dealt with the reconstruction and the redesign of downtown Kalix; the other dealt with the question of the level of local tax.

Last year, Kalix was appointed the democracy and IT region of the year by Microsoft. Kalix did its first Rådslag at the same time as Florida tried to count the voting papers. *The Wall Street Journal* heard about this and wrote, in big headlines, about a small

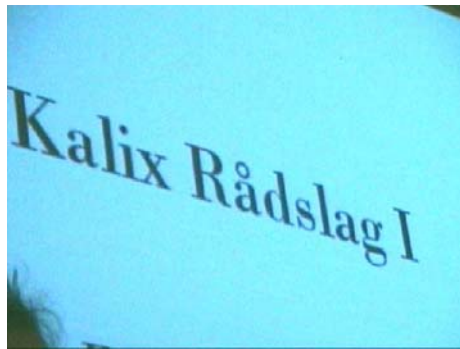
town close to the north pool that utilized the Internet to vote and to bring in suggestions. Microsoft thought this was so interesting that it invited Votia to its global leadership conference to present the Kalix case. (See the video: [www.votia.se/Better dialog between citizens](http://www.votia.se/Better_dialog_between_citizens))

The two "Rådslag":

Rådslag One

Kalix was the first municipality in the world to undertake an extensive media-independent, e-democracy project. The local politicians wanted to involve all inhabitants in the process of redesigning downtown Kalix. The city center was built in the 1960s and is considered an asphalt jungle; discussions on how to renew it have been going on for quite some time.

The traditional way is to take the matter to the city architect and ask him or her to work out a prospect and then pass it on to the local committee. Thereafter it is passed on to the Municipal Council and finally presented, more or less as a *fait accompli*, to the public. The site for this is usually the local library, in the form of a paper model. In the library it is possible, in writing, for citizens to comment on the prospect.



The usual outcome of this, at the best, is that 10 people make any kind of comment. The local authorities thought that this time we try something else. They opened up "nämnsammanträden" (the local committee meeting) and gave the citizens the right to put forward "förslagsrätt" (right of initiation) to kommunfullmäktige (the Municipal Council).

Everyone age 11 and older was contacted. The citizens received a letter stating that they could answer a set of questions either on the Internet or by a regular paper questionnaire. It was made a little more complicated to pass on the answers via paper,

because they wanted them to try out the Internet. On the Web, citizens could access information, graphics and designs of different plans.

This resulted in politicians meeting for the first time in organized chat groups on the Internet as well as in meetings in the physical forums, the physical agora. It had the effect that 1,200 persons became engaged in the planning process—roughly about 7 percent of the Kalix population. If 1,200 people gather in the town hall to have their say in how the city's center should be developed, everyone would talk about a democratic chaos. These 1,200 had quality views on the development of the city, and about 4,500 visited the homepage during that period. And this is only one municipal matter.

All this considered, the most important thing was that people started to interact. Now, when the new center is built, citizens refer to it as "their" center, feeling that they made a difference.

Philip: *"Several didn't participate (92 percent) and we wanted to know why. So we phoned people up and asked if they knew about this Rådslag. Almost everyone knew that this was going on. Those who did not participate said it was because 'the politicians do as they want anyway.'"*

Rådslag two

The next topic was the level of local tax. This was a bigger and more complex project. The local authorities invested more time and money on the information that was handed out. They had much higher security awareness. Votia opened up an Internet arena for those who wanted to put questions forward, in addition to other media such as newspapers and billboards. People met in town hall according to a schedule.

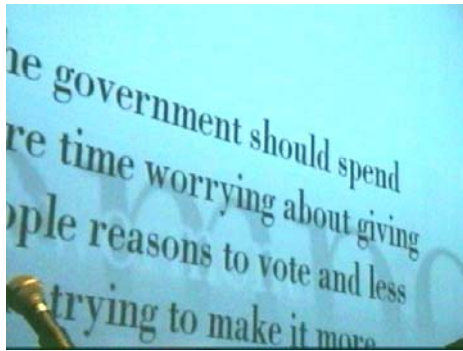
In this rådslag, 52 percent participated, and of that 52 percent, 30 percent (2,000 of 7,000) participated via the Internet. Most people used the Internet since they could be anonymous there, perhaps because of Swedish shyness. That is an extremely high figure. Most of this is due to the earlier pilot Rådslag: People were already familiar with it.

The second rådslag became more or less an educational project. Kalix municipally believes it has the most

firmly established support for its tax policy of all regions in Sweden. Everyone knows where the money goes. People are responsible and make decisions out of a great range of information. Discussions and dialogue are the prime goals with the projects. One key prerogative is to be able to infuse a sense in the citizens that they make a difference.

Audience: Did anyone break rules?
Philip: No, everyone took it very serious.

It was very hazardous to ask a question about local taxes. There were two views on this issue. Some had the position that people only think about themselves and want to lower their taxes. Others thought that people only want to increase the public sector. But people took a great responsibility.



Some politicians were initially very negative toward the whole thing, but afterward, they were very positive because people started to ask them for advice. If you want a dialogue, you have to show the people that they make a difference. Otherwise, what's the point! In many ways, one could get similar results for decision-making via marketing surveys with about 300 persons involved. But people like to be asked. And that is the way you create a community.

The result has been that the percentage of active voters has risen. The negative migration trend has slowed down and reversed. The political leader who took the initiative has been re-elected with an increase from 12 percent to 44 percent in this year's election. This dramatic increase is quite interesting. The benefiting party's most important issue on the agenda was democracy.

There are two camps in Sweden on this issue today. One has the position that we are elected for four years and we have to take the responsibility as peoples' representatives. We cannot go around and ask people what to do.

The other camp is saying we cannot close the doors around us anymore. Today, we only ask for feedback every fourth year.

The political parties in Sweden lose members. The structures are about to change. In 1918-19 and even 10 years ago, it looked very different. It is not so much that present routines are wrong; structures get stale and are the solution to an old problem. The Internet is one tool to infuse new life and vitalize the process, and people want to use it. But one has to be loyal to the very idea of democracy. It is not a good idea, as many politicians believe, to ask people in the municipal IT department to take care of the whole matter. It has nothing to do with IT. They are political decisions and must be treated as such. And then the Internet is only one of our smörgåsbord of tools and nothing else.

The development of e-democracy, to make use of new technological tools, happens in varying speeds. In England it happens very fast. They are pushing people to vote on the Internet. There are still some security issues to be solved. And the governments should invest more money in how people should vote, not only create comfortable solutions. There is a need to almost force politicians to meet people and to cooperate over party boundaries. It will take some time for the Internet to work out on the democratic area. Paper and the Internet will work together for quite some time.

It is also a question of power and responsibility. If you ask for advice and get answers, you cannot just leave it open. You expose yourself to a responsibility. It is also a question of maturity among politicians--they have to dare.

Philip concluded by saying: *This is very short presentation. Democracy is a huge topic. We have detected a great will to participate. Everyone has heard about the fundamental problem with the democracy, low participation and an increase in contempt for politics and politicians. The Internet is one of many arenas for public debate, and its role will gain in importance.*

Suggestions on follow-ups, literature and links:

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Links

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- <http://esplanaden.lysator.liu.se/svmud/pargman> - Daniel Pargman
- www.foundersalliance.com, www.heartofstockholm.se - Forsén, Maria
- www.propellerheads.se - Widsell, Tage, Webmaster at proppellerhead.se - a virtual music studio
- www.lunarstorm.se
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- www.votia.com - Votia Empowerment Ebbersten, Philip
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- www.kalix.se - Kalix Municipally:
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New events and texts

- About Identity and the Subject
- Our Bodily Extension
- City Planning and the Virtual Space - The WTC Case
- Mobility, Services and New Media
- Visualizing Activities on Web
- Technological Aspects on Virtual Communities.
- Contemporary Art and On-line Communities

- A parallel track, readings from Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*.

Appendix

In a short foreword to "A Dream Play", August Strindberg explained his intention with the play (1901):

"... Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality, the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble.

But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer; for him there are no secrets, no scruples, no laws. He neither acquits nor condemns, but merely relates; and, just as a dream is more often painful than happy, so an undertone of melancholy and of pity for all mortal beings accompanies this flickering tale."