

The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier

Douglas B. Hindman

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The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier

Abstract

A review of *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, by Howard Rheingold.

***The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, by Howard Rheingold. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993.) 325 pp.**

The Virtual Community, a book about the social aspects of computer networks, was written by a self-described "uncredentialed social scientist" and participant in the political protests and social upheavals of the late 1960s. The book's author, Howard Rheingold, a keynote speaker at last summer's International ACE Conference, is a San Francisco-based freelance writer, multi-media columnist, and editor of the *Whole Earth Review*. The tone of the book is set by the author's enthusiastic belief in the potential of computer networking as a tool to be used to build a better world for future generations.

Rheingold has organized the book around reviews of various types of computer networks. The first two chapters of the book are a case study of a low-cost computer network in the San Francisco Bay area created by the founders of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. The third chapter is an authoritative and readable history of the "Internet." Chapters four through six introduce readers to what the author calls "groupmind systems" including Usenet, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDS), and Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Chapters seven and eight review computer networks in Japan, France, and England. The ninth chapter begins with a review of successful applications of computer networking to political organizing projects in Colorado Springs, rural Montana, San Francisco, and Santa Monica. The final chapter builds on the theme of the threat of network domination by private enterprises, and provides a readable critique of new technology based on the writings of Jurgen Habermas, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard.

As with all books about timely topics, the strongest parts of the book are those that will endure as the world changes. The historical reviews at the beginning and the theoretical critiques at the end of the book will continue to be useful. The rest of the book is limited by the 1993 copyright date.

Newsweek magazine declared 1995 the "Year of the Internet" in response to significant growth in users that occurred during the year and because of the emergence of the

multi-media-rich World Wide Web as the fastest growing segment of the Internet. *The Virtual Community* was published before the World Wide Web began its exponential growth. As a result, the book falls short of the author's stated purpose of clearly presenting information about the state of the "Net" in order to help citizens of democratic societies make wise decisions about how the "Net" ought to be governed.

Although Rheingold anticipated the vast increase in use of the "Net," he did not anticipate some of the consequences of that increase. Universities across the country have instituted local bans on the use of IRC's and MUD's, making the book's detailed discussion of these types of systems generally moot for readers who access the Internet through university accounts.

In spite of these shortcomings, Rheingold provides potent and enduring critiques of the state of computer networking. His discussions of anti-social behavior associated with use of the Internet are particularly relevant.

Rheingold's critique of network domination by corporate giants is also relevant to recent developments in the telecommunications and computer industry. Perhaps owing to his roots in the San Francisco counterculture, the author is critical of the commercial model of computer networking. Recently merging corporations tend to view the Internet as a new way of capturing the attention of audiences rather than as a relatively unrestricted public forum to be used for political activism and community betterment.

Although *The Virtual Community* contains much dated material, it is clear that the author is an authoritative voice in the debate about the social impact of computer networks. Readers intrigued by Rheingold's penetrating analysis and engaging writing style may visit his homepage on the World Wide Web: <http://www.well.com/usr/hlr/> Rheingold is an active Web publisher who uses his homepage to review the current state of the Net and to provide links to many of the sources mentioned in his book.

Perhaps the strongest evidence that the emergence of the World Wide Web has been the undoing of this book is the fact

that the author uses his Web site to provide readers with full-text version of *The Virtual Community*—free of charge.

Douglas B. Hindman
North Dakota State University