VIRTUAL SOCIABILITY — BETWEEN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKED INDIVIDUALISM

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Abstract

Since the 2020 COVID–19 pandemic, the term virtual has become one of the most used in media and everyday speech. There is an increasing amount of research done on this new reality, and the results are still to be published. However, it is insufficiently known in scientific periodicals that the concept of *virtual reality*, enabled by information technology, has existed in the sociological literature since the 1990s when Castells introduced it to the theory of network society. Therefore, the paper's primary goal is to consider basic concepts such as *virtual reality, real virtuality, virtual communities, virtual sociability*, and *networked individualism*. We will also briefly look at the forgotten classical notion of *community* as a fundamental form of sociability defined by the sociologist F. Tönnies, which re–enters the focus of scientific interest, without a clear and sociologically known classical definition. Starting from this framework, the paper examines the key question of whether these new virtual communities are indeed communities in the classical sense of the term or whether it is a form of networked individualism.

KEYWORDS: COVID–19 pandemic, community, networked individualism, real virtuality, virtual communities, virtual reality, virtual sociability

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Introduction

Since the beginning of this global pandemic in 2020, the word, or the term *virtual*, has undoubtedly become one of the most frequently used words in academic and media discourse and everyday speech. More and more scientists are concerned with the subject from different scientific disciplines. Still, not enough is known, and seldom is it mentioned that the term *virtual reality,* which has been provided by information technology, has existed in sociological literature since the mid–nineties, when it was introduced by M. Castells in his theory of network society (Castells 2000). A search of databases with scientific papers, for example, in the field of sociology, reveals a very small number of papers dealing with the topic of virtual reality as the main subject of research, but is mentioned more often as a context of another main topic of the article (e.g. Nikodem 2003; Prapotnik 2004; Peračković 2010; Vertovšek 2012; Zelić and Felić 2020). Therefore, in the absence of papers that examine concepts related to virtual reality, the main goal of this theoretical work is primarily to give an underlying examination of sociological perspectives on the basic concepts that have now become almost self–evident, such as *virtual reality, real virtuality,* and *virtual communities*.

However, before exploring the idea of a *virtual community* as the central theme of this work, we consider it especially important to discuss the today already forgotten classic term *community* as the fundamental form of human sociability. The term is often used in the writings of various disciplines without a clear and in sociology known definition, but it increasingly reenters the focus of scientific interest to discuss the key issue: whether these virtual communities are indeed communities in the classic sense, or it is a form of virtual sociability that means just networked individualism. In addition, this paper wants to emphasize that this new and conspicuously current virtual reality, in which we are forced to live due to epidemiological conditions, is possible due to the widespread application of information technology, which has begun in the third industrial revolution in the 1980s.

Since then, information technology has been present in the industrial sector of the economy and has entered all spheres of human life in the last three decades. Today's generations of young people have grown up using various devices and applications from the earliest childhood, either for learning and school obligations or for playing and entertainment. With the development of communication technologies and social networks, a new type of virtual social relations was also emerging, which in many cases is known as the term virtual community (Rheingold 1993). Although in most members of the younger and middle generation such patterns of virtual social interaction are already quite ingrained (as shown by the data of the Cen-

tral Bureau of Statistics on the growth of information literacy[1]), the current global pandemic imposed it suddenly and quickly on the majority of the working population. With this "no choice" experience, we may say that life in virtual reality now also takes on its inverse dimension of which Castells also spoke: it becomes *a real virtuality*. Since the virtual becomes real, if we consider the experience of actors and consequences, and no longer just a space for occasional entertainment and communication of young people on social networks, this paper contemplates social relations in the conditions of forced spatial distancing, transformed, and even transported from traditional social ties in primary communities to new patterns of virtual interaction. That's why K. Evans finds it necessary to examine, and even re–think, community in the digital age (Evans 2013). Therefore, the key question is whether these new forms of computer–mediated communication have become a kind of virtual community and, if so, what are its main features.

This consideration necessarily raises another question of whether these virtual communities are in the true sense of the term community according to the classical sociological definition of F. Tönnies, and whether this new virtual sociability is the sociability we understood before, or these new patterns require a certain theoretical reconceptualization and redefining of classical concepts in the social sciences and humanities. Therefore, here we first start from the nowadays forgotten basic notion of *community* that Tönnies distinguishes from the notion of *society*. Moreover, we especially consider a notion he introduces, that of a spiritual community, as one in which members are not connected by blood or place, but by common mental life through cooperation in the same direction and the same sense (Tönnies 1969). In particular, this term can be related to the modern concept of virtual community as defined by H. Rheingold, which arises when people continue public debates via the Internet long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form networks of personal relationships (Rheingold 1993).

Thus, firstly, this paper will present the basic Rheingold's approach to the virtual community, which is barely known in domestic periodicals, and secondly, it will present a brief overview of Castells' terms *virtual reality* and *real virtuality* within the theory of network society, which is also not sufficiently known in the domestic literature. In contrast, it has already become a fundamental framework for understanding modern social processes at an international level and a starting point for empirical research on the positive and negative effects of new technologies on society and everyday life patterns.

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1   Source: Population aged ten and over by computer literacy, age, and sex, 2011 census. https://www.dzs.hr/Hrv/censuses/census2011/results/htm/h01_01_34/h01_01_34.html (accessed 20.4.2021).

1. *The quest for a community — the forgotten concept of F. Tönnies*

If we start from one of the broadest definitions of the term community[2], for example, proposed by the Encyclopedia, "one or several groups of people interconnected by work and other activities and/or by common interests and collective symbols of common belonging,"[3] we can see just the vital fact that it is a group of people connected by a shared space, or that they live in the same geographical area, and whose members know each other. In social science, the community is a quite freely used term that refers to a group of people who have something in common that differs from other groups because of "shared experience that results in the sense of belonging" (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 2008, 439). Moreover, the concept of the *original community*, which was based on economic self–sufficiency and natural exchange with other communities and social equality of its members, is used for referring to long–lasting forms of sociability of humankind in historical sciences.

Although it is inherent in pre–industrial and agrarian societies in predominantly rural areas, modern industrial and post–industrial cities also have elements of the community, especially in families and broader kinship, friendship, neighborly relationships, from which local communities and association based on work or occupations subsequently grow, such as the European medieval guilds. However, mutual rivalry and embryos of modern social stratification are generated due to a significantly larger number of inhabitants, the size and diversity of groups, the density of social interactions, economic growth, and more government and administrative functions in urban areas than in rural areas. As a result, communities are transformed and dissolved into complex social forms, which are based on property inequalities, on open but unequal social opportunities for individuals, narrow interests, and the hierarchy of power, and thus increasingly disappearing before these new forms of association and sociability.

Precisely this transformation was researched and studied by the German sociologist F. Tönnies in the late 19th century, who clearly showed the differences between the two forms of sociability and introduced dichotomy between community (*germ*. gemeinschaft) and society (*germ*. Gesellschaft).

2   Among rare contemporary literature focused primarily on this topic, it is essential to highlight the book *Introduction to Sociology of (sustainable) communities* (Geiger Zeman i Zeman, 2010). The authors first give a detailed review of the idea of community, with an almost bibliographic display of authors who showed the subject of community through classical and contemporary sociology and then thoroughly consider the concept of local communities in the age of globalization and the context of integrated sustainable development.

3   Source: Croatian Encyclopedia, online edition. Lexicographic Institute Miroslav Krleža, 2020. Retrieved April 19, 2021. http://www.enciklopedija.hr/Natuknica.aspx?ID=66736.

Tönnies defines community as a long–lasting form of pre–industrial or agrarian form of sociality based on economic self–permanence, family ties and cooperation among members, a sense of solidarity, community and destiny, and a clear division of labor and gender roles (Lukić 1987; Delanty 2006; Geiger Zeman and Zeman 2010). Examples of the community are families, households, clans, and medieval villages, whose elements were then still present in the German province of Schleswig–Holstein where he lived. It is a natural group formed spontaneously by a very long development; its beginning is natural, and the embryo is a blood kinship. It is dominated by feelings, love, customs, tradition, solidarity, intimacy, trust, fidelity, and inner strength that holds it. In it, individuals merge into unity because they are bound by custom and feelings, but in a certain way, they are not free and suffer a shared destiny, concludes Tönnies. The essential features of community are that it is a primitive (i.e., primordial), agricultural, rural, and cooperative form of sociability and its highest form is a nation (Tönnies 2002).

In contrast, Tönnies defines society as an impersonal and competitive relationship between people, based on individual, selfish interests and regulated by law, which comes with the modern industrial era and capitalism. Tönnies sees its embodiment in the then Prussia, and especially in the policy of industrialization and modernization of chancellor Bismarck (Lukić 1987). Society is created consciously and rationally, by planning and organizing. It is dominated by reason, account, selfishness and alienation of people, external sanctions and regulations instead of the customs and traditions of the community. The most important features of society are that it is civilized, urban, commercial, and industrial, it is dominated by a small family, and the highest form of society is a *state*. Therefore, comparing the two types of social life, Tönnies emphasizes that "community is a form in which a human lives with his family since birth, with all the joys and sorrows bound within it. Still, in society, humans go as into something foreign" (Lukić 1987, 235). However, it is less known that, at that time, Tönnies already noticed that a kind of community exists that was not related by blood or place, which he called a "spiritual community." He defines it as one in which "members are not associated by blood or place, yet by common mental life through the common cooperation in the same direction and the same sense" (Tönnies 1969, 187). And it is precisely this definition, as we shall see later, that provides an adequate framework for what will be called a virtual community in the late 20th century.

For many 19th–century sociologists, the term community was also part of their critique of urban and industrial society (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 2008). But here is certainly worth mentioning that many researches during the 20th century showed that dichotomy *community — society* analytically isn't appropriate because both in traditional rural and in modern

industrial urban societies continuities and mixtures appear, rather than sharp contrasts between these two social forms (Delanty 2006). However, the concept of community has come into focus of various ideologies and movements during the 20th century, prone to idealizing community in the past (communitarianism) or in the future (communism). The ancient Greek *polis* and the rural and urban communes of the Middle Ages, or, for example, the first colonies of immigrants on the American continent, rested, unlike the original communities, on social inequality, which occasionally led to conflict and prevented the spread of collective solidarity or common destiny. Furthermore, ethnological research on family cooperatives conducted in Croatia by D. Rihtman–Auguštin revealed in these seemingly idyllic and harmonious family environments the sources of many internal frustrations, quarrels and conflicts, warning that the community should be distinguished between an imagined order on the one hand, and a real social practice on the other (Rihtman–Auguštin 1976). Similarly, sociologist R. Nisbet argues that a community is primarily an unrealized social idea that has a long history and that has inspired various ideologies, movements, and organizations: from political (classical Athens) and religious (early Christian communitas) to revolutionary communes (e.g., Paris commune) and ecological communities (e.g., *Utopia* of Thomas More), or anarchist communes based on mutualism (Nisbet 1953). Here we may also count some contemporary neo–rural communities inspired by the anti–globalization movement or by the ideas of social ecology and sustainable development (Geiger Zeman and Zeman 2010). Due to the dynamics of modern development, on the one hand, society is increasingly moving away from the model of the traditional community, and on the other, finds various substitutes in the form of occasional gatherings of citizens based on ethnic, religious, or native affiliation or friendly networks. However, in all these cases, the motives of socializing with each other are often confused with motives of an instrumental character, political or economic. In particular, it was observed by cultural anthropologist V.W. Turner in his field research. Turner introduced the concept of a *symbolic community*, which, he argues, occurs in all societies, visible through the practice of social ceremonies (carnivals, pilgrimages and other religious ceremonies, funerals, weddings, rock concerts, etc.) that influence some ecstatic or liminal experiences of unique connection among participants (Turner and Turner 1978). In recent years, this term also highlights a sense of identity and belonging that may or may not be associated with a geographical area. In this sense, a community is formed when people have a clear enough idea of who has something in common with them and who does not. Thus, communities are essentially mental constructs shaped according to imaginary boundaries between groups, for which the best example is a *nation as a community* (Abercrombie, Hill and Turner 2008, 438). That is, people will be perceived

as a nation united by common features and therefore different from other nations even when it is impossible to know the other members of that imaginary community in person. So, B. Anderson introduced this term of *imaginary community* for a nation because most of its members will never get to know each other, and yet they have a collective sense of belonging that is largely created in the imagination of participants who believe they belong to the same community and always share a common destiny (Anderson 1990).

Finally, a new form of community is also the contemporary concept of *a virtual community,* made up of networks of Internet users, who communicate with each other for leisure or business, for political or other reasons. Sociologist M. Castells argues that the modern global society is networked by narrow economic interests and activities in which a relatively small number of people succeed. In addition, it loses meaning for a large number of people, so they seek compensation in various movements with community elements: religious, fundamentalist, nationalist, ecological, gender or feminist, and the like. That is why the idea of community renews and continues to live as an association based either on traditional patriarchal or on liberal relationships, mainly through the concept of the local community that connects contemporary ideas of sustainable development (Geiger Zeman and Zeman 2010). Therefore, the research problem remains open, and so does the question to what extent social ties with community elements, based on solidarity and reciprocity, still exist in some other social form outside smaller groups, such as kinship networks or primitive communities, in large, developed and increasingly complex societies, and non–commercial and non–commodified exchange of goods and services. The question is further emphasized when the interaction of such kind is realized virtually, and eventually it is entirely legitimate to consider whether virtual communities are communities in this classical sense and what this ubiquitous word *virtuality* brings, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

2. *Development of the concept of virtual reality*

The very word *virtual* according to the Dictionary of Foreign Words (lat. *virtualis*: possible, achievable; according to lat. *virtus*: ability, virtue) has three meanings. The first relates to something that does not exist in reality: something unreal, fictional, or apparent (e.g., a virtual world, a virtual war). The second meaning of *virtual* is that it is created and operates with the help of a computer; computed, provided by the Internet (e.g., virtual library), i.e., it exists only in computer–mediated reality. Finally, the third meaning, according to Saussure's linguistic terminology, is that *virtually* stands in contrast to *actually*, which corresponds to the dichotomy of language (*langue*: virtual is all that is related to the language) and speech (*parole*; actual is all that relates

to speech) (Klaić 1978). The details in these three meanings of the term are crucial because it is evident that in the everyday meaning, the term *virtual* is nowadays taken as a combination of the first and second meaning: it does not exist as real, but the computer makes it so.

Although the concept of virtual reality is often attributed to Castells, who reflects on it in his book *The Rise of the Network Society* (2000), the first author of this idea was Lanier back in 1986, who highlights how virtual reality offers a combination of objectivity of the physical environment and unlimited content similar to imagination and dreams (Lanier 1986). In: Nikodem 2003, 216).[4] The term is related to the development and merging of computer technology and new media, i.e., to artificial virtual memory and intelligence (Milardović 2010). Since then, it has been used in various terms such as *virtual communities, virtual culture, museums, policies, books, libraries and bookstores, virtual entertainment*, or, more broadly, *virtual reality*. Milardović, therefore, mainly emphasizes the existence of a series of interpretations of the term *virtual reality*. One meaning refers to computer visualization of reality, the other to an artificial computer–simulated image of the world or comparative reality. It is sometimes used more as an expression of second life to point out how it is parallel, competing with physical, sensory, and sociobiological reality. What is more, it means the reality of the networked world, so there is a deletion limit of parallel reality and real life. The following definition of virtual reality represents an artificial environment in which an actor or avatar of virtual reality has a sense of the real reality in an artificial environment achieved by a computer simulation such as an aeroplane flight simulation or ship navigation. Furthermore, virtual reality as a simulated world is a hyperreality that consists of various codes, signs, images, and cold information flowing through even colder cybernetic machines and alienated human heads. Finally, virtual reality is considered as a type of artificial construction of virtual cyber[5] entities, avatars in cyberspace, or a part of cyberspace. Also, it is the creation of a new image of the human body in cyberspace, then a simulated culture of the information society enabled by new media into which the old ones grow and contribute to the confusion of reality. Virtual reality is also our individual and collective virtual alter ego or mirroring in cyberspace. The last definition of virtual

4   Already in the late 90s of the last century and the beginning of this, there is little interest among sociologists to consider this term. However, we should certainly point out the paper of Nikodem (2003).

5   The English word *cyber* is a prefix derived from the original word *cybernetics* (Greek, kybernao = I govern, governments, I steer). It is a collective name (introduced in 1948 by N. Wiener from the USA) for scientific branches that study the laws of the rise and development of technology concerning the same phenomena in medicine, sociology, and biology (Klaić 1978, 686).

reality sees it as a type of jumping, or escapism from an orderly, normalized, institutional world, a world of responsibility and life, and into a world of imagination devoid of rules, punishments, a world of images, avatars or simulacra[6]. Ultimately, it represents that reality characterized by abandonment, running away from society, and solitude on social networks. Munitić and Jeličić use the concept of virtual reality[7] to refer to a simulated world within which a computer user can have a sense of "entering" by using glasses that cover 180 degrees "field of vision" and a specific interface for the whole body, or by using a simple animated representation of the three–dimensional world (Munitić and Jeličić 2008). But they stress that the core idea of virtual reality is much older and was realized already in the 1930s, when scientists made the first flight simulator for training pilots to achieve a maximally real impression of piloting a real plane.

All these meanings of the term *virtual reality* include primarily people who operate in that environment and the new media, where they create new and more original forms of communication and, above all, a new form of *virtual community*, whose characteristics will be discussed in the coming chapter. But the most important factor that connects people in the virtual world is precisely the main new medium — the Internet. Namely, the world of the Internet, which includes new information technologies, offers many possibilities that do not require special effort or work because just by clicking the mouse a person enters a world that changes according to their wishes. Also, no less important is the fact that information technology provides anonymity to the individual, who can do whatever he wants, having complete freedom and an exciting virtual world at his fingertips. Through this experience, a

6   J. Baudrillard, in his famous book *Simulacrums and Simulation*, concludes that the world we live in, has become a simulacrum, and all beings in it a hyper–real event in which it is difficult to distinguish what is real and what is imaginary (Baudrillard 1981). So, even the world of that time in itself is a simulation of reality even without that virtual moment brought by new technology. In other words, not only is the ontological difference between the real and the hyperreal, reality and its abstraction, the symbol or notion of reality, the imaginary, between true and false, but there is even a precession of illusion, in which the matrix precedes all phenomena. At the same time, logic simulations essentially determine the reality of modern society. The universal artificiality is thus extended to the original itself, and such a turn in the thinking of metaphysics necessarily leads to the conclusion that all possible interpretations have been left, even the most contradictory ones, and everything is equally true at the same time. In these experiments, Baudrillard applies his theory to various phenomena of the modern world.

7   Virtual reality connects to computer systems that build and establish the illusion of a three–dimensional environment, based on the user's input transmitted by moving sensors in clothing and gloves. Computer users see not only a computer graphically designed virtual world, but also their own hands or body as parts of the virtual world. There is a possibility of using a graphic representation of one's own hands and body, performing "virtual" actions, such as collecting objects, moving, forming new objects, exploring new areas (Munitić and Jeličić 2008).

person becomes increasingly indifferent to the real world, to the real society, and in the same space and time a virtual society occurs as an alternative to social interaction, i.e., other Internet users with whom he interacts through different platforms. With the Internet, information technology replaces face–to–face interaction, so there is a new form of communication and interaction that is mediated by the computer. Video cameras on laptops, mobile phones, tablets, etc., allow a type of interaction that simulates the characteristics of face–to–face interaction since people see the faces of others at the same time; moreover, they practically see the facial expression of another person on the screen. However, in this type of interaction, the category of space becomes irrelevant, interactions from one end of the world to the other are possible, and it is not necessary to share space with someone to communicate with them and to be able to see them. The category of time is also under question; although we still cannot send messages to the future, this interaction may not be current because social networks give people the opportunity to decide when someone will send feedback information. With these opportunities, we could say that virtual interaction can bypass both the category of space and the category of time. Nevertheless, this is not something new at all, as it was possible to achieve distance communication already through the first telephone conversations since the invention of the telephone. Contemporary communication via information technology provides not only the voice but the image as well, along with many other forms of social interaction, from games that can be played by multiple players around the world, to online classes and performing many tasks that only in this pandemic era we realized could be done online from home. Therefore, communication by voice, and then by image with the possibility of more complex social interactions, has its historical development, but whether this is the emergence of new forms of virtual communities, we will review in the next chapter.

3. *Virtual communities and (or) networked individualism*

Although the concept of virtual communities was first defined as a sociological concept within the theory of virtual reality by M. Castells (2000) in the aforementioned book *The Rise of a Networked Society*, the very concept of virtual community is attributed to H. Rheingold, who defines and analyzes it in the book with the same name, *The Virtual Community — Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Rheingold 1993). According to Rheingold, a *virtual community*, *e–community,* or *online community* is a group of people who interact primarily through communication intermediaries such as newspaper brochures, telephones, e–mails, social networking, or instant messaging, rather than face–to–face, professional, educational or other purposes. If the mechanism is a computer network, it is often called an *online community*.

But it is vital to point out that virtual and online communities have also become a complementary form of communication between people who know each other primarily in real life, regardless of the formal and informal degree of interconnectedness. However, some recent papers also use the term *cyberspace community* to denote the same phenomenon (Evans 2013). Virtual or online communities are used for various social and professional groups that interact on the Internet. This does not necessarily mean a strong connection between members, even though Rheingold mentions that virtual communities arise when people continue public debates long enough, with sufficient human feelings to form networks of personal relationships (Rheingold 1993). We argue that Rheingold uses the term *community* too nonchalantly, without referring to the meaning of the term as defined by earlier sociologists. Therefore, the question is how many elements of classical term community remain in such a new form of computer–mediated communication and virtual social interaction. Nevertheless, Rheingold's article and his book are often cited as the foundational works on cyberculture studies[8]. Many subsequent commentators have criticized Rheingold's use of the term *communitie*s and some terminology to describe the techno–social phenomena of persistent computer–mediated relationships because they question if he considers what online interactive communities will be like. Most fields will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually, so they will not be communities of common location but of common interest.

Nowadays, social media and participatory media are also used to describe a wide variety of human social interactions online. It is important to at least look at Milardović's more contemporary and wider definition of the virtual community, which means "the cyber–mediated communication or online community" (Milardović 2010, 80), that is imagined as a communicative community with plenty of actors, who communicate through computers and social networks. So, an important feature of the virtual or simulated

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8   Maybe the best source for the history of the development of the term *virtual community* is a chapter written by Rheingold in Encyclopedia Britannica. There he also reminds that the first predictions of communities of computer–linked individuals and groups were made in 1968 by JCR Licklider and R. Taylor, who were research administrators for the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), set in motion the research that resulted in the creation of the first such community, the ARPANET, which was the precursor of the Internet. But, even before the ARPANET, emphasizes Rheingold, in the early 1960s, the PLATO computer–based education system included online community features. D. Engelbart, who ran the ARPANET's first Network Information Center, had grown a "bootstrapping community" at the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), located at Stanford University in California, through the use of his pioneering online system (NLS) before the ARPANET was launched (Source: Rheingold, Howard Lee. "Virtual community". Encyclopedia Britannica, 15 Mar. 2021, https://www.britannica.com/topic/virtual–community. Accessed 6 May 2021).

community is not only that it is not related to space or territory, but also that it is not related neither with the language nor with some particular culture. As a result, it can be easily established both at the level of small social groups in the local city district, city, or state, and at a global level. Information and communication technology ignores geography, summarizes space and time, and represents a virtual response to the almost real communities of the real world. Such communities may represent a sort of compensation for some broken social interaction within the real world/life, or simply establish a new community of information age in cyberspace.

Early users of computer networks created just this kind of virtual community that later became a source of knowledge, experiences, practices, and values that determine the behavior and social organization of the virtual world (Rheingold 1993). Particularly, it was users involved in the first computer networks, such as *Usenet, Newsgroups, Fidonet*, and systems of computer bulletin boards. They have also developed and expanded forms and options for using a network, designed message exchange, chat rooms, dimensions for multiple users, etc. However, as Rheingold mentioned, some of the roots of online communities are also close to subcultural movements and alternative ways of life. In the 1970s, several online communities developed in the San Francisco area that experimented with computer communication, such as the *Homebrew Computer Club* and *Community Memory*. At that time, biologist, artist, and computer amateur Stewart Brand, together with the co–founder of Woodstock, Lary Brilliant, started probably one of the most innovative systems for meetings called *Well*. The managers, hosts, and supporters of that *Well* system were people who lived in rural communes, as well as hackers, and fans of the rock band *Grateful Dead*. Many early online conferences stemmed precisely from the human need to build a sense of community after countercultural projects failed. As virtual communities grew and expanded, the connection with counterculture weakened. Values and interests stemmed from computer networks, even though there is no such thing as a unique culture of Internet communities in empirical terms. Social movements of all kinds, from environmental movements to destructive racism, have exploited the flexibility of the Internet to express views and connect across the country, and even the world. Such a virtual community, whose members are linked by personal interest, is not automatically some system with coherent values and social rules. However, Rheingold points out that there are still two basic common cultural characteristics. The first characteristic is non–hierarchical free communication with global freedom of speech, and another is self–directed networking, which implies the possibility that everyone can find their destination on the Internet and, if they find it, to create and publish their information and encourage the networked person in the same act (Rheingold 1993).

However, in his book *The Internet Galaxy* at the beginning of this millennium, Castells states that there are some contradictory claims about virtual communities (Castells 2003). The emergence of virtual communities based on online communication is regularly interpreted as the culmination of the historical separating of location (space) from sociability in shaping the community[9]. On the other hand, it is argued that the Internet's spread leads to social isolation and the breakdown of live social interaction and family life, as individuals increasingly abandon face–to–face interaction. On the contrary, Wellman and colleagues have shown in a number of studies that the frequency of Internet use and the number of social connections have a positive relationship (Wellman 2001). Probably the most significant results are based on a survey conducted on the National Geographic website in the fall of 1998, in which forty thousand users from North America participated. The results revealed that the use of the Internet has a positive effect on sociability and is more important for interacting with friends than with family, especially for keeping in touch with friends or relatives who are more distant. Research has also shown that people with higher education use e–mail more frequently to contact friends who live far away, that younger people connect more with friends, and older people with family members. Furthermore, the communication patterns mentioned above were the same for women and men.

Other studies show opposite results, in particular, the isolating effects of the Internet. For instance, an online study by Stanford University involving four thousand users, conducted by Nie and Erbring in 2000, shows a pattern of weakening of face–to–face interaction and loss of social environment. However, the stated decline in live social interaction referred only to frequent Internet users, which could imply a threshold for Internet use after which online interaction has a negative effect on the so–called "offline" sociability. In fact, in this early period of Internet use, there was no evidence of a decrease in social activity and an increase in social isolation, but there were indications that under certain circumstances it can replace other social activities in the real world (Nie and Erbring 2000). Furthermore, these studies have been conducted at different times and in other conditions of the prevalence of Internet use, so it is difficult to make conclusions about those

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9   Yet long before the universal application of the Internet, in the article *The Constitution of Society* from 1984, A. Giddens defines temporal–spatial separation as a "stretch" of the social system in space–enabled different mechanisms of social and system integration. According to his theory of structuring, the organization of social time–space should be understood as one of the types of authoritarian organization of society (Giddens 1984). But the questions that remain to be explored are whether this separation that virtual reality allows us has influenced authoritarian organizations and to what extent the flexibility of space (e.g., working at home) has increased an individual's autonomy from institutional control.

fundamental effects of the Internet on sociability. It is necessary to place the specific effects of virtual interactions within the general evolution of patterns of social interaction and within their relationship with the material support of the mentioned interaction, that is, with space, organization, and communication technology.

Consequently, there is a mindset that is necessary to analyze new forms of social interaction in the age of the Internet, which may begin with (re) defining the term *community* to diminish the importance of its cultural components and to stress the importance of the support it gives to individuals and families. Thus, virtual communities are described to be those communities, i.e., networks of connections between people who give us sociability, support, information, and a sense of belonging and social identity (Wellman 2001). The key process is shifting from community to network as a central form of organizing interaction, affecting friendships and especially family ties, since the extended family has shrunk, and new forms of communication have made it possible to maintain contact with fewer family members at greater distances. The pattern of sociability has developed according to the core of sociability that is built around the immediate family in the household, from where networks of selective relationships are built according to the interests and values of each household member (Castells 2003). Therefore, Castells concludes that the new form of sociability is also maintained in new forms of urbanization by expanding suburbs and of individualization and fragmentation of spatial context of life. The Internet thus does not create a pattern of networked individualism, but provides adequate material support to networked individualism as the dominant form of sociability in the virtual space. The consequences of those two different impacts of the Internet on sociability were considered and described by S. Turkle in her very popular book with significant title *Alone Together*, where she concluded that we are so focused on establishing some virtual relationships that we neglect each other (Turkle 2012). These connections do not bring too much risk and are always near us in the form of friends on Facebook, characters in games, interlocutors in chat, etc. Therefore, networked individualism is closer to the type of sociability that Tönnies defined as *a society* than it is to *community*. Castells also agrees, choosing the concept of *networked society* instead of *virtual communities*, with which we will conclude this paper.

This paper only mentions that early research that dealt with the first experiences of using the Internet at the turn of the millennium and the emergence of this new virtual interaction. However, since then, a number of theoretical directions have developed in various scientific disciplines that explore this issue. For example, social psychology has explored the main socio–psychological processes in virtual communities and online behaviour (Walther and Parks 2002). In communication science, the research focus was

first on computer–mediated communication (Waskul 2005) and then soon on the growing emergence of social media (Madden 2005), which carries on to this day. To review the current and contemporary knowledge of empirical research on social media, social networks, new smart technologies, online experiences and virtual reality, a detailed bibliography of scientific papers would be more appropriate, with which we have not dealt in this paper. Therefore, the paper will remain focused only on the review of these few theoretical concepts, considered classic in this field today, but which were not more adequately examined in scientific papers as a separate topic. However, it is also a major limitation of this work.

Instead of conclusion: virtual communities or networked society?

If we take a closer look, we can conclude that virtual space, conceived by the aforementioned Rheingold, Wellman, and Castells, has become an increasingly common meeting place for individuals and social groups over the last two decades. However, in the last year of the pandemic, it may have been the predominant place in some industries, some jobs, and in the education system as well. Although Čaldarević noted almost ten years ago that through the Internet more and more people bring to their living spaces the part of the world that they like the best and they want more than any other, "thus creating the kind of simulation that suits them" (Čaldarović and Šarinić 2010, 4), today we could say that, almost without choice in the matter, the pandemic imposed an enormous demand of the virtual world to everyday life, whether for work, study or entertainment. However, this was possible because of the already–established connection between technology and everyday life, whereby Šuran emphasizes the fact that "the computers are in all of our homes, the mobile phones are in everybody's pocket and that all these devices are interconnected and in interaction with the environment" (Šuran 2015, 7). As a result, we are able at any time to post a picture, send a message, check certain information, or do some lectures, business meeting, make a purchase, visit the virtual museum, download the documents from the platform of e–citizens, and anything else that is provided by the Internet. Facilitating everyday communication virtually leads to its increasing use, so the growing popularity of computer–mediated communication can be attributed to the increasing use of e–mails, various video chats, and today's increasingly popular social networks (Grbavac and Grbavac 2015). Suppose we accept Wellman's conclusion that virtual communities are networks of connections between people who provide us with sociability, support, information, and a sense of belonging and social identity (Wellman 2001). In that case, we may conclude that the mediation of technology changes how people socialize and creates a new form of sociability and communication

that is not conditioned by common space and kinship networks. However, such virtual communities do not include the most important elements of the notion of communities in Tönnies' sense, that they are necessarily connected by physical space and family ties, which makes it reasonable to question whether the notion of communities is adequate in conceptualizing this type of virtual sociability. In addition, since the end of the last century, when mobile phones entered everyday life more significantly, arrangements for coffee, cinema and restaurant have been made via mobile phones and social networks. Even the meeting at the coffee house with our friends includes the presence of technology. We remember those meetings before the 2020 lockdown period, where people would stand or sit with their cell phones in their hands or on the table, wincing at every sound, interrupting the conversation and checking to see if there are any social media deals on the screen, text messages, e–mails, etc. Therefore, people do not only have a live mutual interaction, but also with a few other people through applications on mobile phones, tablets, or whatever. It is about maintaining simultaneous interactions with a larger number of people, with whom we do not meet face–to–face, but through technology, which results in simultaneous involvement in the virtual world in which we use new media, which, among other cultural forms, creates new, original, and completely different forms of communication (Munitić and Jeličić 2005).

Thus, virtual sociability, as the word itself says, refers to human communication through a virtual world that is no longer an illusion or a simulacrum thanks to information technology. On the contrary, it becomes a *real virtuality*, because the virtual becomes real with regard to actor experience and consequences. Furthermore, Castells introduces the notion of a culture of real virtuality that has become a system in which the reality itself (i.e., human material / symbolic existence) is fully encompassed by and completely immersed in a virtual set of images, in a fictional world in which phenomena do not exist only on screen whose experience is communicated, but they themselves become an experience (Castells 2000, 400). The very phenomena found on the Internet or on tv–screens are transformed into a subjective experience of individuals. These types of technology allow us to convert virtually placed images from the screen into our own real world, which can be especially associated with the multitude of mentioned human activities from learning and work to entertainment in today's pandemic age. Also, this way of communicating with others allows manipulation of reality because people can use fake names, profiles, and other personal information, which also represents virtuality that becomes real and true for them.

Thus, discussions about virtual communities necessarily lead us to an empirically more acceptable concept of networked sociability based on the aforementioned networked individuals, which better describes the con-

sidered topic because, while communication is a prerequisite, it is an in-sufficient element to make some form of interaction that the community proclaimed in the classical meaning. In his thesis, Evans noticed how the debates about community were current again during the 1990s, when the Internet began to create new ways to connect people who were geographically distant. Even then, traditionally close interactions that necessarily involved physical proximity were losing importance to this new connection through the Internet, and communities of the place started to disappear together with the disappearance of real places (Evans 2013). Therefore, Castells concludes that sociability founded on the place, or place–based sociability, gave way to a network society in which the Internet was becoming a central place. What is more, he warns that the empirical data provided by Wellman's studies show more the emergence of networked individualism than some new communities (Castells 2003). However, Evans argues that it is the new social media, i.e., social networks, that have reintroduced some elements of the community with their closeness and connection that have disappeared with the loss of a place–based community, though in reality, new media tend to reflect rather than transform existing social relations. On the one hand, Evans sees the community as a viable concept to describe the relationship of trust, locality, and shared experience. On the other hand, she argues that the present moment of transnational capitalism with its superficiality and consumer orientation, which is also evident on social media sites, is detrimental to the development of the community in its full sense. In this sense, some pseudo expressions of virtual communities are created, for which the best example is the so–called Facebook friendships[10] (Evans 2013). Therefore, virtual or online interaction is a form of communication, and whether it is in the background of communities is highly questionable. People in real life connect in some interest groups or associations of civil society. As a result, there is a whole range of forms of human association and connectivity, which is precisely one of the main topics of general sociology from the beginning, but those forms are not necessary and do not have to be a kind of community at all.

Finally, summarizing the above and having in mind the literature we have considered here, we can conclude that an adequate basic theoretical starting point is Castells' theory of network society, which also includes already operationalized notions of virtual community, virtual reality and virtual social relations. He was among the first to explore the effects and possibilities of computer–mediated communication, which is also an indicator of the operationalized concept of virtual sociability provided by the Internet.

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10 Over time, Facebook has developed different categories of social connections to grade the notion of friends according to the degree of connection, so it is possible to label some people as close friends.

The key concept he introduced is that of a network society, and as a theoretical construct for this topic, it is very useful. It implies a society in which key social structures and activities are organized through communication and media networks, mediated through information technology by supplementing and replacing face–to–face communication and changing real relations in local communities, which is particularly present today in the pandemic period. Due to its limited theoretical reach, this paper cannot answer the question whether these new types of social interactions actually change human sociability itself. For more concrete answers, more comprehensive sociological research is necessary, which could also reveal whether virtual interactions became a form of virtual community and how they have replaced face–to–face interaction. Furthermore, a particularly important insight is whether people in these interactions feel more socially isolated and alienated or if it is really a form of community. It would also be useful to consider, especially in this pandemic era when online life is imperative, what the advantages and disadvantages of these new long–distance encounters are through the experiences of people, especially young ones. Because it is obvious that, while the development of technology has enabled long–distance communication, which led to the emergence of a new type of interpersonal interactions or virtual encounters, it has also led to dehumanization due to the lack of those elements that only live encounters can provide, whether it is just socializing, having fun, working, or teaching.

From this theoretical discourse follows another research problem, a set of questions about the impact of the Covid–19 pandemic. In particular, physical and social contacts were significantly limited, as well as the mobility of people, impacting some social values and actions, the behavior of people, and the kind of experience they had due to the imposed virtual reality, which has now become real virtuality. It would also be prudent to examine experiences in times of limited movement and spatial distancing, both in the work area (i.e., online education or work) and in the free time. Of utmost importance are the experiences of virtual relationships because of the imposed epidemiological measures, which resulted in a new way of life associated with the daily use of new technologies and new communication possibilities in human relations. Therefore, we believe that this theoretical work, which summarizes and discusses the basic theoretical concepts, can also be useful as a conceptual framework and a starting point for some future empirical research on the experiences and meanings of traditional (live) and virtual (online) relationships between individuals, especially in the pandemic age of imposed virtuality. Finally, research could be done on the advantages and disadvantages of virtual encounters compared to traditional ones, and about the differences in the experience and evaluation of traditional and virtual relationships regarding different socio–demographic groups.

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Sažetak

VIRTUALNA DRUŠTVENOST — IZMEĐU VIRTUALNIH ZAJEDNICA I UMREŽENOG INDIVIDUALIZMA

KREŠIMIR PERAČKOVIĆ, HRVOJE PETRINJAK

Pojam *virtualno* je pojavom COVID–19 pandemije 2020., postao jedan od najkorištenijih u medijskom prostoru i u govoru svakodnevice. Sve je više i istraživanja o novoj stvarnosti, čiji rezultati se tek očekuju. Međutim, nedovoljno je poznato u domaćoj znanstvenoj periodici da koncept *virtualne stvarnosti* koju omogućava informacijska tehnologija, postoji u sociološkoj literaturi od devedesetih godina, kada ga u teoriju umreženog društva uvodi Castells. Stoga je glavni cilj rada prikazati i razmotriti neke osnovne pojmove kao npr. *virtualna stvarnost, stvarna virtualnost, virtualne zajednice, virtualna društvenost* i *umreženi individualizam*. Kratko ćemo se osvrnuti i na zaboravljeni klasični pojam *zajednice* kao temeljne forme društvenosti definirane od sociologa F. Tönniesa, koji ponovo ulazi u fokus znanstvenog interesa, bez jasne a u sociologiji poznate klasične definicije. Polazeći od tog okvira, u radu se propituje ključno pitanje, jesu li te nove virtualne zajednice uistinu zajednice u klasičnom smislu značenja pojma, ili je riječ o nekom obliku umreženog individualizma.

Kʟᴊᴜᴄ̌ɴᴇ ʀɪᴊᴇᴄ̌ɪ: COVID–19 pandemija, zajednica, virtualna stvarnost, stvarna virtualnost, virtualne zajednice, virtualna društvenost, umreženi individualizam

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