UNIT 11 INTERNET AS A MEDIUM

Structure

11.0 INTRODUCTION

In the first year, you have learnt the characteristics of various mass media entities such as the newspaper, radio, television, etc. In the case of newspapers, it has a limited lifecycle, and there is a geographical boundary in terms of its physical reach to its intended readers. Similarly, the electronic media - radio and television - have their limitations of reach of satellite footprints. However, electronic media is better placed as compared to print media. On the other hand, we now have a medium that transcends all these boundaries and limitations along with a worldwide reach irrespective of geopolitical governance. The Internet is emerging as a dominant medium in the mass media milieu. Interestingly, the Internet has multiple dimensions - you can use it for personal interactions and professional tasks.

Every mass media needs a channel and a medium. The channel is the carrier, while the medium facilitates the communication exchange process. In the case of the newspaper - print is the channel, and news stories of newspapers are the medium; in electronic media - electronic waves are channels, and electronic media programmes are its medium. Similarly, bandwidth and broadband are channels for the Internet, and information pockets are its medium.

In this Unit, you will learn about the concept of cyberspace, the basic structure of the Internet through which all the digital/online communication

process occurs and computer-mediated communication - a term used for the types of communication associated with Internet-based communication. One of the unique qualities of Internet communication is its ability to gather several users into specific areas - not physically, but gatherings based on common interests. Such gatherings are called virtual communities. You will learn about the multiple communication dimensions of the Internet in this Unit.

11.1 LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- understand the complex structure of cyberspace;
- explain the different forms of computer-mediated communication;
- state diverse patterns of Internet-based communication; and
- discuss the various dimensions of virtual/online communities.

11.2 INTERNET AS A MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has given us a powerful communication tool through which we can merge many of our information and dissemination needs. About two decades back, we had only the mainstream media outlets for our society-wide communication purposes, which are still primarily vertical, i.e. we receive the messages in a top-down model and have limited participation options. The ICT platform has revolutionised how we communicate with one another and with society at large. Theoretically, this platform is cyberspace, including all digital and online media dimensions and platforms. Cyberspace provides a horizontal model of communication, and there is no hierarchy between the users. Every user can access the information, and at the same time, each user has the facility to communicate, not just with friends or relatives or colleagues, but with the entire globe. Such titanic changes in our communication platforms need to be understood academically.

11.2.1 Conceptual Framework of Cyberspace

Through computer or mobile, we usually immerse ourselves in various activities, and the platform through which we work and interact is called cyberspace. This term is not a new one. It was coined in 1984 by the science fiction writer William Gibson in his novel Neuromancer. While explaining the new term cyberspace, Gibson stated, “A consensual hallucination…a graphic representation of data abstracted from the back of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity lines of light ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters, and constellations of data. Like city lights receding.” We will see another definition from a famous scholar and pioneer in online community studies, Harold Rheingold. Rheingold's (1995) definition of cyberspace is "Conceptual space where words, human relationships, data, wealth, and power are manifested by people using CMC (Computer-mediated Communication) technology.”

The tools of ICT have created a platform for billions of people to gather and interact with each other. The core characteristics of fruitful interactions between humans are the primary components of cyberspace. One of the earlier scholars of cyberspace, Loader (1997), explains its unique features. He lists its characteristics as follows: "A computer-generated public domain which has no territorial boundaries or physical attributes and is in perpetual use. To date, its most potent manifestation is that matrix of electronic telecommunication and computer networks, usually referred to as the Internet, which links millions of people globally which is growing at a rapid rate daily and is taking new shape and direction as a consequence of the voluntary actions of its participants, and it is claimed that is not controlled by any single authority."

Communication through cyberspace is an extension of offline human-to-human interactions. We leave our physical presence, and we take different avatars in the online space. All these interactions are performed in the ICT-enabled and simulated environment.

In the virtual space, people still meet face-to-face but under new definitions of "meet" and "face." The cyber platform is the passage where physically separated people are bound together by common beliefs and practices. The essential element in cyberspatial social relations is the sharing of information. It is not sharing in the sense of transmission of information but binding communities in cyberspace. It is the ritual of information sharing that pulls it together.

Rather than incidental meetings, collective and common interest fuels the process of communication in cyberspace. Even before the invention of the Internet, Licklider and Taylor (1968) predicted that: "In most fields, they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters, and sometimes working individually. There will be communities not of common location, but of common interest. In each geographical sector, the total number of users will be large enough to support extensive general-purpose information processing and storage facilities. Life will be happier for the individual who is in online because the people with whom he/she interacts most strangely will be selected more by the commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity."

Interactivity is an essential element of new media. It eliminates the time barrier for users to access the contents conveniently anytime, anywhere. The time-shifting facility enhances a user's involvement in the online environment, and time becomes a crucial factor here. The virtual platform offers not only a multitude of topic areas but also the ability to participate at a convenient time. There is no weekly meeting to catch up after work. The meetings happen whenever the users have time to log in and read the new postings. This time-shifting allows users to ponder a particularly serious posting or article and write a coherent response. People from many time zones can participate in a discussion and have more control over their online experience, allowing them to participate at their convenience.

11.2.2 Functional Dimensions of Cyberspace

Cyberspace guarantees users the freedom to move along with the medium, which has dimensionality, continuity, curvature, density, and limits. It is a socially constructed and reconstructed space and essentially a re-conceived public sphere for social, political, economic, and cultural interaction. Cyberspace provides a new arena for public life in which a user can adopt any meaningful role like an author, public rhetorician, politician, or pundit, which is uncommon in the mass communication process. In cyberspace, says Benedikt (1991), “The common man and the information worker-cowboy or infocrat – can search, manipulate, create or control information directly; he can be entertained or trained, seek solitude or company, win or lose power indeed, can "live" or "die" as he will." cyberspace has two dimensions concerning the openness of its communication activity. It is "public space, at the same time it is private also," contends Fernback (1997), "where via email, two users can argue politics or fall in love, or several users on a private list server can strategise a meeting or discuss the finer points of a classroom lecture."

The CMC users’ relationships can range from the cold, professional encounter to the hot, intimate rendezvous. Rheingold (1995), while describing routine activities of this medium, says a user can “Exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and even engaged in a lot of idle talks. People … do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You cannot kiss anybody, and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. To the millions who have been drawn into it, the richness and vitality of computer-linked cultures are attractive, even addictive.”

Cyberspace is a multi-faceted environment where one can find immensely varied, amalgamated, and combined social relations. Fernback (1997) gives a detailed account of the inner view of cyberspace: "It is a repository for collective memory - it is popular culture, it is narrative created by its inhabitants that remind us who we are, it is life as lived and reproduced in pixels and virtual texts. It is sacred and profane, and it is workspace and leisure space; it is a battleground and a nirvana, it is real and virtual; it is ontological and phenomenological. Cyberspace is an arena of power; CMC users act every day on the assumption that the tyranny of geography can be overcome within cyberspace. It is smaller, more intimate, and almost more imaginable than “the public,” which can no longer fit into a stadium.”

The revolution in global networked communications has given rise to a new generation of social technologies, including mechanisms for forming and cultivating interpersonal relationships. The global reach of the Internet not only facilitates communication among members of existing distributed groups and teams but also provides a medium for forming and cultivating new relationships by providing virtually instantaneous access to thousands of potential contacts with compatible interests and spheres of expertise.

Urbanisation and industrialisation have resulted in a mass society in the urban context where the social relationship is highly fragmented. CMC is acting like a new cohesive force to build an online relationship. As Jones (1998) argues, "CMC allows us to customise our social contacts from fragmented communities and to plan, organise and make efficient and social contacts." Linda Harasm (1993) found that social communication is a primary component of CMC and can organise thoughts about using CMC around social situations rather than working areas.

Even though CMC facilitates tremendous information exchange power, it has its inadequacies. One prominent negative feature, cited by most CMC scholars, is that CMC occurs in cyberspace mostly with letters and words. This textual communication filters out demographic and socio-economic information about the user, such as sex and social status, which also limits relational meaning.

11.2.3 Characteristics of Cyberspace

Compared to face-to-face communication, which is considered the communication standard against which all others are found to be inferior, a CMC user cannot hear intonation that signals a joke or see puzzled expressions that convey confusion. Also, users often need help coordinating informal discussions due to the lack of information feedback, the absence of social influence cues, and depersonalisation due to the lack of non-verbal involvement. Research on spoken conversational interaction shows that simultaneous feedback plays a vital role in signalling listenership, timing turn-taking effectively, and maintaining continuous interaction. Also, the absence of simultaneous feedback may result in discontinuity and/or overlap within turn sequences, as well as generally making it more difficult for message producers to tailor their messages to respond to recipients' interests and needs. When the relevant responses are disrupted, CMC users may experience difficulty tracking sequential exchanges, making the interaction fragmented.

To theorise this impersonal communication pattern in 1987, Culnan and Markus described it as the "cues filtered out" theory (also called "reduced cues"), which posits that the computer has a "low social presence" because it filters out important aspects of communication that participants in the face-to-face communication are privy to (paralanguage, pitch, stress, tempo, volume), leaving a conversation in a "social vacuum."

Ried (1991) exposes the failings of CMC in this regard as follows: “Words, as we use them in speech, fail to express what they really mean once they are deprived of the subtleties of speech and the non-verbal cues that we assume will accompany it. It is only the meanings of sentences that become problematic in computer-mediated communication. The standards of behaviour that are normally decided upon by verbal-users are not clearly indicated when information is purely textual.”

To take this argument further, Mackinnon (1995) states how CMC inadequacies overwhelm its success compared to the offline world social structure. "Lacking physical reality, [CMC] users must create an explicit

written language to convey meaning, emotion, physical qualities, and action. As a society based on language, it relies heavily on symbols, analogy, and metaphor to recreate or transfer physical matter and actions from the external world. But as these recreations are merely metaphors for, or "analogues" of, their physical counterparts, [CMC] can never be a mirror image of the external world."

Another striking feature of networked CMC environments is the anonymity crisis. A user potentially enjoys opportunities to conceal his/her real offline identity in the online world. Compared with other forms of communication, participants of CMC have substantially more control over their self-presentation. In face-to-face communication, each person involved in the communication process confronts the other, and obviously, they reveal their identities. In a telephonic mobile conversation, the speaker's gender, to some extent their age, and emotional reactions like fear, anxiety, happiness, and tonal difference help to gauge varied qualities of semiotic reference to a speaker's message framework.

Nevertheless, in the CMC, the textual form of message sharing bears a bare minimal imprint of social identities. The online message has the potential to confuse identity, which is counterproductive to those arguing that the content of messages reveals much about the nature of speakers (Lee, 1997).

The use of false identities, often of different sex, is widespread in electronic communities. Rheingold's (1995) comparison of the offline and online worlds is an apt example. "The physical world is a place where the identity and position of the people you communicate with are well known, fixed, and highly visual. In cyberspace, everybody is in the dark. We can only exchange words with each other - no glances or shrugs or ironic smiles. Even the nuances of voice and intonation are stripped away. On top of the technology-imposed constraints, we who populate cyberspace deliberately experiment with fracturing traditional notions of identity by living as multiple simultaneous personae in different virtual neighbourhoods."

The anonymity or the lack of clarity, single authorship condition has marred online-based research to a great extent. A researcher can never be sure of the demographics of site users, and according to the current level of technological improvements, there is no possible way to obtain identity confirmation. Most computer interfaces are either not designed to allow the user to question data validity or are designed so that anyone may change that data with moderate technical skill. Once there is a new set of social norms for validating computer information, there will be some uneasiness over the trust quotient of computer networks.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Explain the concept of time shifting with suitable examples.

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2. Write about the pros and cons of cyberspace.

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3. Compare and contrast face-to-face communication with online discussions.

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Activity – 1

Use any internet archives to visit the earlier generation USENET-based online community and observe its past activities. Based on your observation, write a brief report [400 words].

11.3 TYPES OF INTERNET-BASED COMMUNICATION

The World Wide Web (WWW) has re-arranged the basic tenet of a common person's communication activities in his/her day-to-day life. Even though electronic communication is not an alternative to face-to-face (F2F) communication, Internet technology has considerably overcome the time and space barriers between two communication points. Each fabric of social structure has established a meaningful connection with ICTs, ranging from e-business, online learning, e-governance, and e-shopping to online social movements.

The interconnection of multiple components of human society has increased information flow, cutting across national boundaries towards creating a "global village", as predicted by Marshal McLuhan.

Various forms and communication processes can be carried out on the Internet in the fastest and cheapest ways and, more importantly, the widest reach. The telegraph detached the concept of transportation of communication from one point to another; the Internet went one step ahead and abolished the middle person to deliver messages directly and instantaneously. Moreover, it has facilitated the free exchange of information, unfettered and unhindered by any censorship, which is another essential feature. The Internet profoundly impacts the day-to-day activities of the entire human social spectrum.

In the Internet medium, a user can explore various possibilities independently. McLaughlin (1995) explained that it is an opportunity to " exchange electronic mail, transfer files, search databases, and retrieve information from remote libraries, take part in real-time conferences, run software on distance computers, and participate in discussion groups on varied topics."

Computer-mediated communication is one type of communication facilitated by computer technologies. It is defined as "synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from sender's computers to receivers." There are two distinct types of CMCs existing over computer technologies: synchronous and asynchronous, and the difference between the two CMCs is temporal. Synchronous CMC is produced when communication occurs simultaneously between two or more users, as in any normal telephonic, face-to-face, or live video conferencing conversation. Asynchronous CMC is produced when communication is not simultaneous.

The most prevalent asynchronous CMC is electronic mail, where a user can drop and receive a message at his/her convenience. Another popular category is social media postings (non-live messages), where the sender and receiver use a commonplace to read and post messages. In both cases, time is not a constraint for sending and reading the messages. On the other hand, in synchronous CMC, both the partners of the communication process must be available online. One-to-one or group, text/audio/video-based chat/discussion via messenger software are popular forms of synchronous CMC.

Whether synchronous or asynchronous, "The CMC, it is claimed, will

1. create opportunities for education and learning;
2. create new opportunities for participatory democracy;
3. establish countercultures on an unprecedented scale;
4. ensnarl the already difficult legal matters concerning privacy, copyright, and ethics; and
5. restructure man and machine interaction" (Jones, 1998).

Initially, it was thought that CMC technology would overcome time and space barriers without having a centralised control authority to monitor the system. Besides, the universal spread of CMC has provided a facility to access unlimited data and reach other people. In the context of CMC's capacity to create a global pattern of linkage, Lee (1997) elaborates on its potential power as follows: "The information highway makes possible unprecedented forms of mediated communications. Never before has there been a means of communication which have provided so many individuals with the ease and ability to engage in instantaneous, interactive communications with a broad and diverse public. The import of these new technologies, however, lies not simply in the novel forms of communication. What is also of profound significance is the ways in which these communicative possibilities lead to new types of identities and social relationships. Previously unimaginable, millions of individuals are increasingly interacting across time and space and forming mutual bonds

with others, most of whom they neither have met nor will ever meet face-to-face."

Due to its global reach and rich multilingual context, the Internet has the potential to influence social relations. Unlike traditional mass media, the online medium has an open architecture that restricts the efforts of legal authorities to regulate its activities. This, in turn, has facilitated greater freedom and space for its users and members to express their feelings on the net on issues that interest them. Thus, the Internet provides a technological infrastructure for CMC across both time and space to create a group communication environment in which virtual co-presence is established due to an individual's online interactions. This has created a potential platform for virtual communities to flourish on the net. However, interconnected computers do not by themselves provide a congenial space for a group of people to float an online community in cyberspace; it is necessary to have sufficient human relationships.

11.3.1 Dynamics of Communication Process in CMC

Irrespective of its modality of presence, online or online, overlapping with offline, any meaningful discussion in the CMC forum is determined by the quality of communication and its message. The very nature of CMC has abolished social and cultural domination in group dynamics. The computer medium inhibits users from transferring the social structures to CMC, and this inhibition results from the absence of or limitations on physical proximity, face-to-face interaction, and non-verbal use.

People with strong articulation skills rather than social status play a dominant role in the text-based community. While analysing the social role of CMC technologies, Jones (1998) indicates two prominent usages: "Computers cut across or break down boundaries and break down hierarchies." Similarly, Perrolle (1991) outlines the power and status structure of the communication process in the CMC milieu: "Computer-mediated communication changes the nature of conversations between people. Research indicates that it alters the social norms governing conversation by removing elements of emotion and social control. It also provides the possibility of equal participation by obscuring the visual and verbal distinctions of status that gives high-ranking or aggressive people an advantage in face-to-face speech. Designs for cooperative work seek computer network support for circumstances in which opportunities for participation are enhanced and opportunities for one speaker to control another are reduced. But computer-mediated communication can also embody inequalities in social relationships and can limit conversational participation."

Factors like power and social status are not meaningful in online activities. The virtual space in which people meet is neutral ground. Cyberspace belongs to everyone, yet no one. The conversation is the primary activity there, but it favours people who are good with their words rather than just *fast* with their mouths. The conversation is often much more thought out, and it is easier for everyone to express their opinion and not be dominated by one or two loud people. In an online community, every participant is in charge of his/her involvement. Online communities are entirely participant-driven, and

the conversation is about what a member has written.

A group of human beings settled in a new environment tends to formulate norms and values for the smooth conduct of the social processes of their new community. Likewise, virtual members also establish group-specific rules in the online environment. Participants in CMC develop forms of expression that enable them to communicate social information and to create and codify group-specific meanings. Conformity with created norms also serves to socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships and organise interaction, and maintain desirable social climates. In CMC, as in real life, relationships take time to build. The social information not available in the immediacy of face-to-face context can be gained verbally through computer-mediated interaction; the social penetration process takes longer. People who meet online may then take that relationship offline if an opportunity arises.

There could be several reasons for a member to be associated with a virtual world. The loss of casual gathering places in our lives is one of the reasons why many people have turned to virtual spaces where they can achieve some feeling of community. The virtual environment fulfils a unique need for many people that they cannot find elsewhere in their lives. Although many special interest groups exist in the physical community, there is not always a forum located nearby to discuss the particular topic in which each person is interested. Virtual platforms provide a forum for such discussions.

There is no topic under the sun left aside by these communities. Due to its worldwide reach, a group of enthusiasts joins together to stay abreast of the latest developments in their area of choice by having meaningful discussions on digital forums. Suppose the discussion area is important and sensitive, where a cross-section of human society has a sentimental touch. In that case, it corners massive attention from a relatively large number of members.

11.3.2 Cohesive Force of Online Group Communication

In cyberspace, people can roam freely and create a virtual community far from the legal and nation-state purview. It comprises members distributed in all 24 time zones, which are equal in all possible social spheres regarding shared belief in the principles of free speech, individualism, equality, and open access.

Ananda Mitra (1997) applies theoretical concepts of offline community to online communities and states that the online community setup has a profound impact on the way we interact and the way we are going to interact with one another. Further, he adds that "In the electronic age, particularly in the age of the Internet, the organisation of human activities has become more complex with the availability of fast, efficient, and powerful means of communication that can have a significant impact on the way we organise the communities we live in and interact with. Moreover, that effect need not be restricted to specific geographic spaces but can be widespread as the tentacles of computer-mediated communication (CMC) reach across the globe."

With this background information about the community and its rules that govern people's interaction, it is clear that replicating existing offline cannons

does not apply to virtual communities. At the same time, it is essential to note that the emergence of online communities based on different principles does not occur in a social vacuum.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Differentiate the communication process between synchronous and asynchronous modes of online interactions.

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2. Differentiate the basic features of an online community from the offline community.

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Activity – 2

Enrol yourself in an online community that exists through any popular social media platform. Observe its activities for a fortnight, and give your assessment - reflecting your understanding of the theoretical concepts [400 words].

11.4 FORMS OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

One of the classic studies in the area of CMC was done by Joseph Walther (1996, 2015), in which he classified three types of CMC - 1] Impersonal CMC, 2] Interpersonal CMC, and 3] Hyper-personal CMC. These three-forms of CMCs show the historical growth of research and understanding of the human relationship through computer-mediated interactions. The advent of technology has played an equally significant role in shaping and theorising human relationships through CMC.

11.4.1 Impersonal CMC

In the early stages of CMC, around the early 90s in the last century, available technologies mostly allowed rich-text-based communications between people, like emails, text chat, and Usenet groups. Many early-stage research findings discussed the scenario of 'scant social information' and its implications in computer-mediated human communications in which non-verbal cues are minimal, if not absent. However, many early-stage findings argued that the group tasks had better achievement rates in the impersonal

CMC due to the lack of space in establishing social power structure in the textual CMC. However, in further research findings, the impersonal CMC concept was challenged in multiple dimensions.

11.4.2 Interpersonal CMC

The interpersonal CMC mainly equates online discussion with face-to-face communication settings. In interpersonal CMC, all CMC participants use all efforts to replicate the f2f settings and various cues commonly adapted in interpersonal CMC (smileys are some of the adapted cues in interpersonal CMC). Since the efforts are employed to equate to f2f, usually, interpersonal CMC requires more time to meet the expected outcome of communication settings.

11.4.3 Hyperpersonal CMC

In the hyper-personal CMC environment, each stage of communication tools - sender, channel, receiver, and feedback - are employed carefully and optimally, more importantly, selective self-presentation in order to create an idealised perspective about the sender by the receiver. Since the communication between the participants is a continuous process, channel-receiver feedback is conducted continuously in order to maintain the idealised perspectives and impressions of each other.

11.5 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

An online or virtual community is where people gather together and exchange messages through digital networks. More importantly, these people gather into virtual communities based on their areas of common interest, and they may come from different geographical locations. Even many members might not have met each other in their lifetime.

Harold Rheingold (1996), considered the father of virtual community studies, defines virtual communities as "Cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. It is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. We do everything that people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens leaving our bodies behind."

A virtual community has its advantages compared to its counterpart in the offline world. CMC will do, by way of electronic pathways, what cement roads could not do - connect us rather than isolate us, put us at the controls of a "vehicle", and yet not detach us from the rest of the world. Unlike face-to-face interaction, in which relationships are initiated, and topics of mutual interest are sought, Internet users can go directly to the topics that interest them and pursue interaction with like-minded people.

In furthering the concept of the virtual community, Rheingold puts forth the very purpose of online meetings. He proclaims it as "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."

Unlike the traditional mass communication setup, where central authority controls the selection and production of messages consumed by millions, virtual communities offer a more democratic apparatus where access is broadly distributed and brings the option of interaction, offering new possibilities for community formation in the online platform. In electronic communities, a set of shared practices helps produce conditions similar to traditional communities outside of the realm of computers and virtual spaces defined by the "bit"-based technology of computers. Here, the community becomes central because technology has now provided the ability to communicate across boundaries and has removed limitations that the traditional community imposed.

Cyberspace technology's support for the formation of virtual communities is a mere structural one, and it does not have any meaningful role in sustaining the group for an extended period. Human interaction and the spirit of commonality are vital to fostering virtual communities. The commonality that holds virtual community intact is the subject line criterion of togetherness, a feeling of connectedness that confers a sense of belonging.

Interconnected computers do not by themselves provide congenial space for a group of people to float an online community in cyberspace. Moreover, virtual communities of interest can be formed only if everyone adheres to a standard set of guidelines for organising the groups, subgroups, and topics. According to Baym (1995), temporal structure, external contexts, systems infrastructure, groups' purposes, and participant and group characteristics are the most salient pre-existing forces in developing the computer-mediated community.

Even though members of virtual communities come from diverse geographical points, they share certain common traits. According to Lave and Wenger, participants of virtual communication can be classified into Peripheral (i.e. Lurker) – external, unstructured participation; Inbound (i.e. Novice) – a newcomer interested in the community and heading towards full participation; Insider (i.e. Regular) – fully committed community participant; Boundary (i.e. Leader) – a leader, sustains membership participation and brokers interactions; and Outbound (i.e. Elder) – in the process of leaving the community as a result of new relationships, new positions, new and outlook.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: 1) Use the space below for your answers.

2) Compare your answers with those given at the end of this unit.

1. Explain the relevance of impersonal CMC in contemporary social media-dominated online scenarios.

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2. Discuss the emergence of virtual communities on the Facebook platform.

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Activity – 3

Visit any YouTube-based channel with more than 1000 subscribers and analyse the type of participants it has. Categorise them as per the points mentioned on the previous page.

11.6 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed the concepts related to cyberspace. This online platform exists in digital networks through which we communicate our ideas, using various media elements such as text, photos, smiley, audio-video content, etc. Unlike the offline world's social hierarchy, we have gone through the conceptual frameworks of cyberspace in which knowledge matters in digital networks. Similarly, we have discussed various formats of computer-mediated communication - synchronous and asynchronous, and different forms of CMC - impersonal, interpersonal, and hyper-personal. With the help of digital networks and computer-media communication, an online community emerges by aggregating like-minded and common interest-oriented people gathered in cyberspace. This human settlement is a unique form of social relationship that exists within ourselves.

11.7 KEYWORDS

Asynchronous CMC is the opposite of synchronous CMC, yet another form of Computer-media communication. This form of CMC happens with time constraints, which means that the people involved in this communication process are not necessarily available in real-time. The sender and receiver exchange information at different times. There is a delay in feedback and responses. Email-based communication is one of the examples of asynchronous CMC.

Computer-Mediated Communication: A human communication process of sharing words and ideas between people over digital networks. The information exchange may be on a real-time basis and delayed patterns, and the communication process uses multiple media elements.

Cyberspace: It is an electronic space or medium that exists in the networks of various networks. Cyberspace facilitates communication between human beings through computing devices and within/between computing devices. This conceptual electronic space is not constrained by distance and physical limitations.

Online/Virtual Community: There are many names associated with Online Community/Virtual Community/Digital Community/Web Community - but

all refer to a group of people who aggregate themselves based on common interest, and they may come from any geographical place but use mostly asynchronous modes of computer-mediated communication. In the longer run, these communities tend to develop their social norms for their members.

Synchronous CMC: It is a form of Computer-mediated communication where the information exchange happens in real-time, which means the people involved at both ends of the communication process should be available in the computing networks but not necessarily in the same location. Virtual/video conferencing is one of the examples of synchronous CMC.

11.8 FURTHER READINGS

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11.9 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

1. Two types of communication processes are part of a digital platform - synchronous and asynchronous. Asynchronous communication does not require people to be involved in real-time while exchanging ideas and information. Interactivity is an important element of new media. It eliminates the time barrier for users to access the contents conveniently anytime, anywhere. The time-shifting facility enhances a user's involvement in the online environment; hence, time is a crucial factor here. The virtual platform offers not only a multitude of topic areas but also the ability to participate at a convenient time. There is no weekly meeting to catch up after work. Email is one of the popular examples of the asynchronous mode of computer-mediated communication.

2. Cyberspace is an electronic conceptual platform that exists in a network of networks. This platform facilitates communication exchanges between people, people, and digital devices and among digital devices. The main advantage of cyberspace is that it cuts the physical distance between two communicating people, irrespective of their time zones. The quantum of the exchange of information will be huge and equal, and it might be in multiple modes of communication. The central negative dimension of cyberspace is that it reduces the exchange of non-verbal cues that might alter the length of the discussion and the complete exchange of ideas.

3. Face-to-face communication takes the topmost position in any ranking of communication settings. It is not comparable to any other alternative mode of personal interaction. However, cyberspace has provided a platform to interact with each other to overcome physical constraints and different geographical locations. F2F is rich in cues and non-verbal communication, which strongly influences the course of communication between the persons involved. It is instantaneous, and the person involved takes a quick turn in his/her role. Whereas in computer-mediated communication, particularly in the synchronous CMC, there is a scope for instantaneous feedback and role change, personal communication over cyberspace tends to lack non-verbal cues and signs, which might delay the information exchange.

Check Your Progress 2

1. Synchronous-based computer-mediated communication is being carried out on a real-time basis. The people involved in these activities must be present in the process in their respective places and participate in the LIVE communication exchange. Whereas in asynchronous mode, as the name suggests, the communication process does not require the active presence of its participants.

2. An online community is a collection of people from diverse geographical backgrounds. However, they join the online platform (be it a social media group member or email listserv group member) based on their

common interest. In the online community, there are no physical or time constraints. In the case of an offline community, it is primarily the location specified, and members usually come from the nearest places. However, the common interest could also be a binding factor here. Regular meetings or gatherings are the few options available to them to meet each other, and time is the biggest constraint here.

Check Your Progress 3

1. Impersonal CMC refers to the communication exchanges that happen entirely in textual mode, which generally lacks non-verbal behavioural cues. These cues are crucial in routine face-to-face communication settings. Hence, impersonal CMC tends to be inferior to f2f settings. The scholar Joseph Walther gave critical inputs on impersonal CMC; however, later research findings gave critical assessments. In contemporary settings, the impersonal CMC is rarely noticed due to many technological advancements - audio-video conferences, smiley expressions, and more multimedia-oriented online information exchanges that give ample scope to replicate non-verbal cues.

2. Virtual communities can exist on Facebook platforms - either the users are following an individual or a particular page or a group (it can be private as well as public; some of them are unmoderated while most are moderated). Being members of this group or page or an individual page, they tend to exchange ideas with other members; over some time, the group or page or member of an individual develops its social norms. Thus, a virtual community on the Facebook platform is possible.