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Communitarian and Care Ethics: A Return to Community in the Digital Age

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**Communitarian and Care Ethics:
A Return to Community in the Digital Age**

By

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B.A., University of Missouri, 2006

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Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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Communitarian and Care Ethics: A Return to Community in the Digital Age
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has been approved for the Department of Journalism and Mass Communication

Paul S. Voakes

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we
Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Abstract

Donovan, Robin (Master of Arts, Mass Communication Research, Journalism and Mass Communication)

Communitarian and Care Ethics: A Return to Community in the Digital Age

Thesis directed by Professor Paul S.Voakes

This study investigates the role that communitarian and care ethics play in online user-generated content. As humans move through an ever growing “information age,” people’s ethical awareness and understanding of new media has come into question. New media includes on-demand audio and video, social networking sites, and mobile device technologies. The rate at which new media is being developed and the accelerating pace at which people implement it have left many ethical considerations unanswered.

The community-based website EdHat Santa Barbara was as the data source for this study. Messages were analyzed using communitarian and care ethics criteria because of their focus on human relationships and social connections. While the return to a sense of community is hoped for in the wake of generations that drew on a desire for individualism and the “autonomous self,” understanding the role that communitarian and care ethics has in contributing to community becomes increasingly important.

Through a content analysis of members’ posts and comments on the website EdHat, this study investigates the strengths and weaknesses an online community exhibits in creating the types of bonds needed for community building.

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I. Introduction

The human need to live socially coupled with the ability to reason has led to an ongoing debate of what is ethical and what is not, as people figure out their place in society. People's sense of self— of personal identity — must be reconciled with the whole of the society in which they live. Ethics penetrates almost every aspect of human life. What is ethically and morally responsible can create conflict in decision-making processes. Many types of ethics have been theorized and debated over the centuries. As citizens of the current era struggle to find balance between the autonomous individual and society as a whole, researchers and philosophers return to the idea of *community* and the ethical practices contained within.

Action, to be meaningful, must be for community building; the bonding of persons is the epicenter of cultural formation, its constitutive ambience. Given the primacy of relationship, unless I use my freedom to help others flourish, I deny my own well-being. Because fulfillment as persons is never achieved in isolation, but only in relation, our encounter inheres in our beingness. In order to maintain our existence, we are committed to the mutual existence of the others with whom our person is interconnected. (John Macmurray, 1993).

This thesis analyzes two ethical theories that hold much bearing on the concept of community: communitarian and care ethics. These two theories suggest that individuals are interdependent and will never truly be able to separate themselves from the types of relationships that tie persons together. The social and psychological needs of human beings can only fully be realized and met through the history of others that carries into the modern age. While history certainly repeats itself, the shared values, relationships, and moral understandings of communities will shift and change, however slowly.

The digital age has provided a means for studying the evolution of a community, as developing communities progress online. These online communities are not new *per se*; they can be seen more as an extension of members' offline communities. Online communities and social networking sites offer a place to share, confirm, and/or criticize thoughts and ideas. Online communities can offer a more diverse mix of thoughts and ideas as people are less likely to be limited by the time and space of physically located communities.

What values, whether shared or not, come into play within these online communities? What decision-making processes are used in maintaining the relationships that bond a community? Do members of the community employ ethical decision-making? Communitarian ethics stresses the importance that history, collective identity, and civic participation have on a community. Members of online communities may not share the same history. A member's online identity may vary from his or her offline identity. Civic participation becomes difficult to gauge online. But even with such diverse backgrounds, social networking sites have been shown to increase awareness of a community's needs and have helped to spark activist engagement in offline communities. Schrage (2001) has stated that the power of new media lies less in the information that it carries than in the communities it creates (Lievrouw, 2011).

Ethics of care stresses the need for responsiveness, empathy, and sharing (among others) as keys to a successful community. Ethics of care views people in the roles of caregiver and care receiver. People are dependent on one another for carrying out these roles in a respectful and thoughtful fashion. Responding to others' needs in ways that are positive and encouraging, empathizing with fellow community members to help build stronger relationships, sharing information, specifically personal information, all build trust within a community (Held, 2006;

Walker, 1998). This thesis asks how these concepts of care are carried out, if at all, in an online community.

Many ethical theories emphasize human beings' ability to reason — to think and act rationally. Put into a historical context, this makes sense. With the rise in individual knowledge through science people no longer needed to rely on authority figures to distribute information, they could obtain it on their own. An early example of this departure from traditional forms of knowledge seeking and receiving occurred in 1517. At this time, Martin Luther, a priest and scholar, nailed his 95 reformation theses on the door of the All Saints Church in Wittenberg, Germany. His biggest disagreement with the church was that people needed priests to mediate their dealings with God. He wrote instead that “salvation is a matter of individual faith” (Shepherd, 2001). However, it wasn't until 1626 that the term *individual* came into common usage. The idea began to take hold that people were individuals. Modernity was resting on the belief that rational, reasoning beings were the “true source of significance, the seat of knowledge, and the site of identity” (Shepherd, 2001). If the resources did exist to find out truths independently, people were going to use them.

Events like this eventually led to contemporary ideas of the individual. Theory and practice of liberal idealism and liberal individualism were born. The idea that the individual was separate and autonomous meant a rise in individual rights and freedoms. The right to privacy, for example, became a social and relational convention used to maintain individual autonomy. Privacy was framed as an “escape” from others and the various roles one must take when interacting with others (Cocking, 2008). But there are other conceptions of privacy that are not so appealing.

Notions about what is public and private have led to considerable debate on what rights humans have in each of those spheres. The traditional view of the private domain is built on dominant moral theories of individual rights to privacy: that the household is a private sphere in which government should not intrude. But feminists have shown how this idea has cultivated power among men who end up dominating this “private” sphere. This disadvantages women, leaving them economically dependent on men and subject to inequitable division of labor in the family (Held, 2006).

Communitarians emphasize that privacy offers a degree of anonymity that facilitates antisocial behavior. This is in sharp contrast to liberalists, who view privacy as an important individual right. In the digital age, privacy has become more a concern over how to protect an individual’s data. Should people stop worrying about privacy because so much personal information is available online? Can Western democracies still afford the high levels of individual privacy that it has attempted to provide? Are there moral reasons to protect individuals from “Big Brother” and fellow citizens (Van den Hoven, 2008)? Communitarians would argue that all this privacy leads to free-rider problems by people who enjoy membership of a community without having to contribute to it (Van den Hoven, 2008).

But it is not the right to privacy that has communitarians and liberalists concerned. The “I” instead of “we” mentality started to worry philosophers and scholars beginning in the early 20th century. For William James and Friedrich Nietzsche the belief in science as objective, as being a “grand narrative” that provides individuals a concept in which to “hang everything for evermore,” was nonsensical (Shepherd, 2001).

Consider our current condition: Whereas the constructionism of James and Nietzsche has taken hold in 20th century thought, the individualism and mechanism of an earlier era remain. This set of uncomfortable relations is key to

understand, not the *ideas* of postmodernity (or whatever era is to come after the modern), but the *passions* of our current condition (or what often seems our collective angst), including our sense of community lost (Shepherd, 2001).

It is this “sense of community lost” that helps to drive the work of this thesis. Can ethical theories such as communitarian and care ethics provide a more comprehensive understanding of current communities? Are members of online communities already employing these ethics in some capacity? While liberal theory seemingly provides a way to put power and influence back into the hands of the individual, there is evidence of hope for a return to community. Part of this hope is seen through the proliferation of citizen or participatory journalism.

With emerging technologies making it easier than ever for users to produce and broadcast their own news and information, media institutions are having to rework traditional structures. So far, this has been done through stronger collaboration between amateur (i.e. citizen journalists, bloggers, social-media users) and professional media producers. Consideration for connectivity, interactivity, and community has become essential to the practice of news and information sharing and the journalism industry as a whole (Lievrouw, 2011). Similar to science’s role in providing individuals with a means to seek “truths,” so too does information technology provide a way for citizens to break from traditional forms of distributed information and in so doing become part of the information sharing process on a scale not seen before.

This is why it has become pressing to research the role ethics plays in helping to drive (or not) the decision-making process people use to create and distribute information on such a wide scale. Some fear that the digital age would cause “information overload” and that people would not have the tools to decipher fact from fiction as it occurred online. For others it is the loss in community participation that feels most pressing. These issues and many more are stretching

ethics to their limit as the questions about the nature of human beings — their identity, sense of self, connections, relationships, language — grow.

II. Literature Review

Media technologies such as mobile-device applications, on-demand audio and video, and social networking sites have driven a new global dialogue where anyone with access can participate. The multitude of ways to share information about oneself and others, about places and products, politics and economics, has challenged the way in which traditional media ethics shape communication processes. New media technologies aid in the development of human connections and relationships on a global scale resulting in the growth of diverse online communities. With this, it becomes important for these human relationships to cultivate through mutual understanding and responsibility that can be guided by ethical and moral standards.

One of the biggest challenges to ethical frameworks is new media. New media are not controlled by the mainstream press and have become known as the Fifth Estate. Many media observers have hoped that new media, including social networking websites and mobile technologies, will revitalize traditional journalism, the Fourth Estate (Ward & Wasserman, 2010). The Fifth Estate presents a need for new media ethics. As access grows to emerging media technologies, the type and frequency of news and information accelerates, providing users more *diverse* perspectives on a local and global scale not typically seen through mainstream media. The Fifth Estate thrives through online communication. When many mainstream media companies struggled to transition from television and print to online platforms, Internet users started relying on each other to produce news and information (Ward & Wasserman, 2010). This

introduced, amplified and transformed numerous ethical issues and social effects without users truly understanding their implications or consequences (Cooper, 1998).

One way to explore media ethics in new ways is to apply ethical frameworks not typically used in media. Communitarian and care ethics offer a departure from traditional media ethics, which seldom address the human need for relationships. Communitarian ethics emphasize the importance of the group, or community, and how individual members are shaped by and contribute to the community (Etzioni, 1995; Christians et al, 1993; Cochran, 1989). Ethics of care is a practice of responding to material, psychological and cultural needs that develop over time using principles that are enhanced when carried out with appropriate attitudes or character (Walker, 1998; Held, 2006; Christians, et al., 2005).

Both communitarian and care ethics seek to provide frameworks for mutual understanding, through shared values that may be applied more inclusively to all media users and not just to professionals in the field. This is especially relevant to online communities where membership is driven by user-generated content and vice versa. While traditional media ethics can offer a foundation for new media ethics, communitarian and care ethics can be used more deeply and specifically.

The communitarian approach

Communitarian ethics emphasize the importance of the community and how individual members are shaped by and contribute to their community. The historical context and traditions from which communities stem are central to a communitarian ethic and to understanding. Individual identity is created in part by the identity of the collective and is solidified through members' shared values (Christians, et. al, 1993). How individuals use community tradition to

shape their experiences and, more specifically, their experiences with others, will help in interpreting personal identity. This identity will continue to shape and be shaped by the community, often through some level of civic engagement.

Communitarians argue that membership in a community is linked to citizenship, history, story and character. Thoughtful participation becomes critical to a community's success, as *shared understandings* are what communities are composed of (Cochran, 1989). But the communitarian approach has, in the past, been contradicted by the notion of individualism. As some theorists believe, the emergence of individualism over the last few hundred years developed through new understandings in science and a departure from religion that left the individual feeling more in control of his own destiny (Teske, 2002). As access to information grew, individuals began to feel a sense of liberation from religious and governmental factors and no longer needed the communities in which they originally relied. As Teske proposes, this move away from community has become even more apparent in recent decades:

The twentieth century saw an acceleration of the process by which individuals became increasingly secular and secluded, forsaking even the isolated nuclear family... Despite the increases in the potential for communication concomitant with greater population density and the contribution of improvements in medical technology to health and life span, the scale of community has increased from a manageable level of approximately two hundred to the unmanageable scale of populations in tens of thousands. At the same time, the loss of community, family, and tradition has continued as we attempt to resolve the resulting alienation with the consumption of nonessential goods, experiences, and the construction of "life-style enclaves" (Bellah et al. 1985)

Now, with the emergence of social networking sites and community-based sites driven by user-generated content, a possible return to community and connection may emerge. It has become common for members of online communities to engage in the public exchange of information and support (Jones, 1997). If users are participating in these communities — sharing

values, creating mutual understanding, identifying as members of the online community and perhaps even requesting action within the community — then communitarian ethics is already at play.

The care approach

Ethics of care stresses the importance of responsibility between caregiver and care-receiver. Walker uses Robert Goodin's "responsibility ethic" to describe how individuals have special responsibilities toward those in need. Goodin states (and Walker agrees) that the responsibility ethic is not meant to be a universal moral norm, that there will be special relationships that may come across as more obligating. But the basic principle is that people are responsible for protecting those who are vulnerable to their actions and choices (Walker, 1998).

Care is meant to provide for physical, psychological, or cultural needs (Walker, 1998). Physical needs tend to be those basic needs such as those for which children depend on their parents. Ethics of care recognizes that in the early years of human development, dependence is especially pressing and that morally, the force of responsibility a parent or caregiver has for a child is exceptionally pressing. This becomes true again in later years when people fall ill or disabled (Held, 2006). This is not to say physical dependence on others only occurs during these early and late stages in life- this type of dependence will repeat itself throughout one's life.

Psychological needs stem from feelings and emotions such as loyalty, compassion, and empathy. Ethics of care draws from Humean theory to describe how emotions are cognitive processes necessary to decision-making (Held, 2006). The position one takes on a belief is not merely an idea but a "manner of conceiving" an idea, an attitude toward (and that shapes) the representation of that belief. This gives it certain attributes that affect an individual's thought and

action (Railton, 2006). For example, relationships with loved ones will be perceived at a higher level than that of a relationship with a stranger. The belief that a loved one's actions are based on love or compassion makes the receiver perceive something they would not, say, if a stranger were to take the same action (such as lending money, for example) (Held, 2006).

In turn, betrayal by a loved one creates a greater psychological impact. This is why caring is seen not just as an *act* but as an *attitude* that accompanies the act of care giving. Paying attention to another's feelings, needs, desires, and thoughts requires empathy and intuition on the part of the caregiver. Ethics of care is less concerned with rational cognition and instead emphasizes the natural impulse to care for others that stems from a cognitive "receptive-intuitive" attitude (Held, 2006).

Evidence has shown that those having sustained certain forms of brain damage resulting in the inability to feel emotion become incapable of making ethical decisions (Ess, 2009). Emotions can be seen as just as important in the ethical decision-making process as, say, analyzing all of the objective facts about something (if that is even achievable). Eastern ethics often incorporates emotions as part of shared human understanding and has been doing so for centuries. Confucian ethics, widely accepted in eastern ethical practice, uses the merger of heart and mind in decision-making (heart being the emotion one feels), which, it is argued, allows for a stronger sense of connection among members of a community. This principle opposes a disembodied or objective way of thinking that emphasizes the individual (Ess, 2009).

The cultural needs addressed by ethics of care include connection and relationships, perhaps a culmination of physical and psychological needs discussed earlier. A culture is made up of history and tradition and the people who carry with them the values and beliefs of a culture require certain integrity of character and responsibility toward others to maintain the culture in

which they find themselves. However, culture is likely to suppress certain discourses and influence others. The credibility of “storytellers” may vary depending on class, gender, and race. Moral histories (or stories) will take shape in response to specific constraints such as intelligibility. Standards of intelligibility may come to rule informally if they cannot be challenged by those unequipped with socially recognized credibility (Walker, 1998).

Ethics of care attempts to shed light on such dynamics as subordination and exploitation that can occur within a culture. Representational practices can exacerbate certain prejudices in a culture and lead to identity formation that appears “natural” or “necessary.” This conditions people’s sense of what signifies or identifies certain human features including who is deserving of what, and it shapes attitudes and habits of perception such as racism, homophobia, age and other status distinctions (Walker, 1998).

Ethics of care questions the authority of previous moral theories that have placed premiums on impersonal claims of justice that trump important relationship values (empathy, care, cooperation, etc.) (Plaisance, 2009). Because there are so many ethical factors to consider, including historical, psychological, ethnographic, and sociological understandings, it becomes difficult for moral and ethical frameworks to truly gain authority, especially when trying to apply universal norms which so many theories attempt to do (Walker, 2006). With ethics of care, *creating an awareness* of the many factors guiding ethical decisions in relation to others is paramount.

Liberal Idealism and Rational Human Being

Alternative to communitarian and care philosophies are theories that draw on liberal individualism. Liberal individualism is found in many dominant ethical theories such as Kantian ethics and virtue ethics. It is used to explain how humans are individuals with individual rights and that social society (and the communities contained within) is an impediment to the individual's autonomy and ability to think rationally. The concept of the liberal individual has been entrenched in Western thought for the past two hundred years. As science began to explain phenomena traditionally explained by religion, people believed the idea of "truths" to be verifiable by science. Communication became a mechanism that allowed ideas of truth to be passed from individual to individual, thus sharing and verifying these "truths." A society of individuals emerged, bound together by what people knew rather than by identity. (Shepherd, 2001).

For both communitarian and care ethics, relying too heavily on the idea that humans are rational individuals is problematic. For the communitarian, social and political processes are seen as taking a loss with the "romanticization of deliberation" (Etzioni, 1995). Ethics of care views the idea of human beings as self-sufficient, independent individuals as detrimental to human relationships. Rather, persons are relational and tied by familial, social, and historical contexts. This is not to say that the individual cannot think independently and rationally, just that to do so requires an ideal rarely achieved (Held, 2006).

Ethics of care views liberal individualism as creating a false picture of society and the persons in it: Individualism maintains an impoverished ideal that devalues the ties people have to one another. Shepherd argues that modern society continues to operate in an individualistic way but that it is not sustainable, that Western culture needs to return to identity-based interpersonal

communication in order to build and maintain strong communities. This type of interpersonal communication can be defined as the “constant creation and recreation of relationships with which something communal is made” (Shepherd, 2001).

In the post-modern era, the individual autonomous self is harder to conceptualize. Communication has become better understood through its simultaneous experience of self and other. This is especially true of social networking opportunities and distribution of information by diverse groups on a large scale made possible through communication technologies. The belief that communication alone can provide verifiable truths is waning, instead becoming known for its ability to join people together in shared understanding of self and others (Shepherd, 2001).

While the communitarian approach is more concerned with civic life in a community, ethics of care goes deeper into interpersonal relationships of dependence. Held stresses that those who conscientiously care for others are not necessarily seeking to further their own individual interests. Their interests are intertwined with the persons they care for. (Held, 2006). The liberal individual however, *is* self-interested, in an effort to reach a certain state of autonomy.

Communitarian and care ethics give precedence to social relationships and responsibility. Care is about reciprocity and caring relations (Held, 2006). Walker, taking a consequentialist perspective of care states that holding each other responsible plays a fundamental role in securing certain states of affairs that could have both positive or negative impacts on people or beings (Walker, 1998). Again, the importance of character and how one carries out moral responsibility is just as important as the act itself (Etzioni, 1995; Held, 2006; Walker, 1998).

Communitarians depart from liberal individualist theories in that communitarians feel people must be tied to their communities in some way through social and political institutions.

These ties are in the form of shared values and are often passed down through tradition and held together through social relationships. Institutions help establish rules that are useful in community development (Etzioni, 1995). Contemporary communities offer memberships to several communities, removing pressure that people may feel in traditional communities that are more homogenous and/or authoritarian. Communitarians believe communities can function without turning into an authoritarian regime to work out differences and instead establish value through democratic and morally substantive processes. These processes are meant to offer citizens *choice* in how their community will be shaped rather than being subjected to changes in the community (Etzioni, 1995).

For the liberal theorist, defending freedom of choice and protection from social domination is primary to an individual's success while living in a socially constructed community. Liberal theories emphasize the importance of individual rights and freedoms and the ability for the individual, through self-realization, to reach moral autonomy and moral equality (Cochran, 1989). Individuals are seen as capable of using their ability to make rational decisions to create their own identity and decide when or if they need to participate in the community. The community is viewed as harboring societal pressures that take away from the individual's ability to rationalize. This is an obvious departure from communitarian and care ethics.

Brief definitions of community

In order to better understand how communitarian and care ethics can be used to build communities of mutual understanding and responsibility both on and offline, the concept of community deserves discussion. Community is sometimes referred to as a network of individuals in social relations with one another that both help to define individual identities and provide the

basis for action and expression regarding shared values and goals (Plaisance, 2009). For communitarians, this can be defined as *participatory* community — people making decisions together through conversations and mutual respect in a setting that is as egalitarian as possible (Fowler, 1995). Community building is an ongoing process that uses social agents, practices, and institutions to help articulate what a community is and will become (Howley, 2005).

From a care perspective, community acts as a base of knowledge that maintains the resources for “acquiring and certifying methods, procedures, instruments, and technologies, and social interactions in which evidence and reasoning are interpreted, qualified and disqualified. Resources are used and interactions take place in the context of specific relations and practices of cognitive authority. Some people, more than others, are assumed to know, or know how” (Walker, 1998, 57).

Internet ethics

In the mid-1990s researchers started exploring the Internet and its capacity to connect users in ways not originally intended. This is when shifts in social movements began to occur with the aid of Internet technologies. Researchers declared that a technological revolution was creating new social movements and they pushed to understand the implications (Lievrouw, 2011). Eid and Ward describe the consequences of the technological revolution of the last decade (referred to as Web 2.0):

Social networking sites, video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, among many others, have evolved as a result of Web 2.0 concepts and new media technologies. Millions of people around the globe, through social networking (internal, external, or mobile), are recently building online local, regional, and global communities to communicate their shared interests and activities, disseminate information, and interact through a variety of web-based tools. The use of new media and social networks (e.g. MySpace, Facebook, LinkedIn, Habbo, Twitter, Nexopia) has implications for society, culture, and politics that has encouraged researchers to

investigate a variety of related issues such as: social identity, privacy, distance learning, social capital, socio-psychological effects of the web, misuse of cyberspace, Diaspora, social status, and access to information. (Eid & Ward, 2009).

Researchers began asking what prospective uses the Internet held for rearranging social orders both on and offline (Cooper, 1998). It was becoming clear that the rapid rise in the use of Internet and mobile technologies was far exceeding users' ethical understanding. This new technological infrastructure offered a means of expression and promoted social change. It became a powerful tool for activism in political and commercial arenas with new ethical commitments and considerations (Lievrouw, 2011). With Internet users taking an active and collaborative approach to building an online repertoire, they have become a critical force in society as they directly participate in media conversations traditionally reserved for professionals (Eid & Ward, 2009).

As Western culture expanded its use of Internet technology, a "digital divide" was created. This divide explained the inequalities that seemed to grow from those with access to Internet technology and those without. Complications arose when introducing technologies into different countries, producing a kind of "ripple effect" through cultural, social, political, and economic systems (Cooper, 1998). The divide was seen as a product of globalization where there became an "intensification" of worldwide social relations that linked distant communities in ways that allowed them to be affected by events happening many miles away (Giddens, 2006).

At the turn of this century, Teske points out, many people in developing countries were more likely to turn to mobile phones rather than personal computers as their point of access to technology. In the United States, university students without access to personal computers would turn to public access ones. This also created a divide in the early development of communication

technologies and people's sense of self, relationships, and even a sense of location in space and time (Teske, 2002).

Before the arrival of the Internet, or more specifically, social network sites (SNS) and other user-generated content websites, it was thought that a strong democracy could be thwarted by such things as socioeconomic inequalities and lack of public vision without proper foundation in political knowledge (Barber, 1984). But with emerging technologies, it became more apparent that people were (and are) able to create and establish democratic environments online.

This sense of democracy online began a counter-movement to company ownership of media content. Websites were developed to allow users to create and use their content freely. This led to a plethora of blogs as the newsprint industry began its rapid decline. The online citizen journalist was born and people began looking for and creating sites that allowed for more transparency without traditional editing processes that big news and information sites use.

Early researchers had fears that with free-form content not being controlled by experts (or editors), "mind control" stemming from virtual realities would become actual reality for some (Cooper, 1998). Cooper asked the question: "How are epistemology, consciousness, literacy, and general thought modes changed in an age when we see over 5,000 ads before we enter kindergarten, when journalism becomes brain surgery without a license, when point and click replace read and write, and when virtual becomes associated with reality?" (Cooper, 1998). These questions have dominated much of the communication research of this century.

Technological revolutions that drove some of the questions listed above have now become common practice in many countries for many users. The 1999 World Trade Organization conference held in Seattle was met with huge protest largely organized by users of Internet technologies. This was one of the first times mobilization through media technologies

became so influential. Since then, countless protests and activist groups have been arranged and supported through Internet and mobile media. 2011 saw an increase in communication technology use in activist events. Mobile phones used to capture and broadcast photographs of Libyan protesters to the Occupy Wall Street movement that was mainly organized through social media and had its own website and Twitter account. These types of movements reveal a host of ethical issues that examine how communications that can be quickly and easily distributed around the world force people to take into account often very diverse cultural perspectives (Ess, 2009).

Over the last few years, it has become apparent that this type of political and social involvement is sporadic rather than sustained (Lievrouw, 2011). What does this mean for genuine social, political, or cultural change? How can or should new norms be established through such sporadic developments and how can ethics act as a guide, introducing and promoting norms (Ess, 2009)? Eid and Ward, through their analysis of several new-media cases, shed light on the tension between “instrumental and dialogical forms of communication,” demonstrating that although there are cases of effective online communication (using an example from Greenberg and MacAulay’s study on environmental nonprofit organizations, 2009) most are not leveraging the potential these technologies afford for constituency engagement, relationship building and conversation (Eid & Ward, 2009).

Howley’s research on place-based online communities revealed that there could be hidden agendas contained within such sites. When Victoria, Australia implemented VICNET (Victoria’s Network) it was cast as a community computer network that was hoped to “improve community relations, revitalize civic life, and support cultural production and economic development efforts on the local level” (Howely, 2005, 226). However, Howely discovered that

the term “community” in this case was used to garner support from locals who then became part of a larger economic scheme developed by the Victorian government. While not necessarily bad, Howley points out that the “communitarian impulse” behind projects like VICNET becomes questionable when it obscures “far less egalitarian motives and conceals assorted agendas” (Howley, 2005).

Recent research has attempted to capture what alternative and activist new media (Lievrouw, 2011) mean for ethical understanding and has applied numerous ethical theories in order to explain and promote moral understanding and awareness when using these technologies (Ess, 2009; Lievrouw, 2011; Drushel and German, 2011; Ward & Wasserman, 2010). Ward and Wasserman look at how new media technologies have created a need for “open media ethics” on a global scale. An open ethic goes beyond the “closed” ethics traditionally reserved for media professionals such as journalists and is inclusive of largely diverse groups of people one would find on social networking sites, for example, those providing relative ease of entry or membership. This places fewer limits on meaningful (media) participation, including the ability to influence changes to media content (Ward & Wasserman, 2010).

Journalism ethics provides a foundation to how people are producing and using content online (Blanchard, 2008; Robinson & Deshano, 2011; Ward and Wasserman, 2010). Journalism ethics holds close many of the values most people share including accountability, trustworthiness, and credibility. Journalism ethics will continue to be beneficial to online communication practices in helping to produce more reliable and credible news and information but will need to adapt to *digital media ethics* (Ess, 2009). Professional journalists usually feel it is their job to use shared values accordingly- in ways that allow citizens to make responsible and reasonable judgments on personal and community issues (Christians, et. al, 2005). Now, with

emergence of citizen journalism, those without a background in journalism or perhaps even ethical understanding can produce and distribute content without oversight heightening the need for ethical considerations in new media.

One known side effect of the digital age has become quite clear: the commoditization of information. While many feel information should be “free,” corporations argue that information wants to be profitable and seek to control it by trademark, copyright, access, and distribution (Cooper, p. 77). Because of this, many Internet users have begun creating community websites where they can freely share information and software tools that can benefit online and offline communities (Ess, 2009). Ess describes this as the “free software” movement, which uses a more communitarian sensibility that is inspired in part by a “deep conviction that the potential benefits of computer software (and information more generally) should be shared as broadly and equally as possible” (Ess, 2009, 76). This falls in line with the communitarian view that action taken should benefit the whole community and not just the individual taking action.

The earliest online community networks began with computer users posting information on bulletin boards. Community issues could be broadcast by users and action could be requested, if necessary, for the benefit of the community. This led to civic action and the development of social capital obtainable online. Information technology was being used to revitalize economic and civic institutions within local communities. Social relationships were being formed and communal, rather than individual, ties were being made (Harrison, et al., 2001)

Social capital has become a signature sign for the strength of a community (Adams & Hess, 2001; Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011; Eid & Ward, 2009). “Social capital” was first used by Robert Putnam in 1995 to describe the concepts of democracy, participation, civility, and public welfare (Adams & Hess, 2001). More recently, it has been used to describe

these and similar activities online that help to build relationships and community online. Online, social capital goes beyond who's connected to whom, to how these connections lead to trust on an individual level and perhaps collective action by the group level (Rohe, 2004). This strikes a chord with communitarian ethics that relies on civic participation to help build communities. For an ethic of care, how this participation is carried out through appropriate (compassionate, empathetic, caring, etc.) attitudes and character will be a test of strength of the relationships such civic action can create.

The continued complexities of online participation have prompted philosophers and academics to explore how this form of mediated communication (communication through computers) affects what is known to be "true." How are realities shaped and perceived if online communication can come from anonymous users whose true identities go unrevealed? It is argued that in order to have a sense of community, knowing the identity of the person with whom interaction is taking place becomes vital to feelings of trustworthiness and connection (Blanchard, 2007).

In 2007 Blanchard examined the sense of virtual community (SOVC). This study compared SOVC to offline community members' sense of community (SOC). It revealed that members of the virtual community felt they had less influence on and were less influenced by other members of the online community. Members also reported that being able to recognize others in the community (as opposed to remaining anonymous) and having relationships with specific members of the community were important to their SOVC. A significant finding revealed the establishment of norms online through members' observation of one another. Blanchard suggests that "observing others exchanging support increases perceptions of norms of behavior and increases members attachment to the group" (Blanchard, 2007).

Robinson and Deshano investigated the relationship between online and offline participation in communities and start with the concept of “third places.” A third place lies somewhere between a person’s private life and their public one. By defining third places, Robinson and Deshano create groundwork for examining online communities that echoes communitarian and care principles. For example, a third place allows for communication and relationships to form through a culture of equality and familiarity. Members will be “regulars,” that keep low profiles in order to maintain warm feelings of belonging and help build alliances and identity.

Robinson and Deshano wanted to investigate whether or not it is possible to have a third place online, virtually. They found that citizen journalists who participated in information-sharing online developed a stronger tie to their community both online and offline (Robinson & Deshano, 2011). Feelings of connection and empowerment within the community (in this case, the online community was tied to Madison, WI) urged regular contribution of news and information by some users. However, Robinson and Deshano point out that the effort required to participate as a citizen journalist actually dissuaded some members of the online community from participating. When given a structure and guideline to how members could or should contribute as citizen journalists, some members felt overwhelmed and ended up not contributing at all. For those who did decide to take on the challenge of following the guidelines (reminiscent of traditional news and journalism structures/principles), they were rewarded with the feelings and connections described above (Robinson & Deshano, 2011).

Summary of literature review

Communitarian and care ethics can help explain and guide the development of human relationships. These relationships rely on a community's history and traditions, which help foster shared values and facilitate mutual understanding among members. A communitarian approach to community requires civic participation founded on the belief that action should be taken when it can benefit all or most members of a community. However, avoiding authoritarian control in a community is a concern of communitarians — in direct contrast to liberal individualism theory, which fears authoritarian control of communities if individuals are not viewed as separate, autonomous beings. Communitarians counter that democracy, if used properly, provides citizens with choice rather than being subjected to authority and the rules and laws that stem from control.

An ethic of care relies on the interdependence of a community to meet certain needs. These needs can be physical or material, psychological, and cultural. People cannot separate themselves out from dependence on each other to provide these things, at least in part. The roles of caregiver and care-receiver will always exist in human relationships. To ensure these roles are carried out in ways that truly satisfy the dependent's needs, appropriate attitudes and character should be in place, including considerations of compassion, empathy, thoughtfulness, and above all, responsiveness.

Responsibilities between caregiver and care-receiver are maintained through responsiveness. This can be found in the simple act of saying “thank you” for an act of kindness bestowed. Applied to digital media ethics, Ess argues this responsiveness can occur when one uses their mobile phone to check in on a friend or loved one “just to say ‘hi,’” or through sharing

songs, videos, and images thought to be enjoyed by the receiver (Ess, 2009). In this case, both the giver and receiver of these acts are responding to the dependence they feel for one another in maintaining a positive relationship. It is this kind of responsiveness that is considered a responsible use of a care ethic.

By the mid-1990s researchers began investigating new media and their effect on community. Could communication technologies aid in human engagement, relationships, literacy, and a more global understanding of societies and cultures? Or would communication technologies lead to further division in knowledge and understanding as a digital divide began to create shifts in human perspectives of the world? How would new media come to be used in ways not considered and how could ethical considerations catch up with current use of technologies such as the mobilization of activists during times of protest?

Citizen journalists have been subjected to traditional ethical considerations found in the professional journalism field. But, as in Robinson and Deshano's study on third places suggests, providing certain guidelines or frameworks to participation will dissuade many from sharing or contributing information to online communities (Robinson & Deshano, 2011). Less traditional forms of ethics such as communitarian and care provide insight into the relational and emotional aspects of community participation that may become more applicable to online participation as the sharing of information continues to grow and online communities continue to form.

Research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to learn more about how individuals exhibit ethics in shaping online communities. The approaches of communitarian and care ethics were chosen for their emphasis on community and relationships, something for which the users of the online local

news and information website EdHat Santa Barbara seem to be well suited. Based on the above literature review, it is clear that the role these two ethical theories play in online community building is lacking sufficient attention in the study of online ethical practices. Ethics of care has been mentioned only a few times in relation to media use but remains primarily focused on the physical relationships humans have as caregivers and care-receivers. Communitarian ethics have been applied a bit more to online communities as a way to compare against traditional dominant moral theories such as liberalism.

This thesis attempts to apply salient features of communitarian and care ethics to users' interactions on the EdHat website through a content analysis of user posts and comments. In order to examine these interactions, the following research questions were asked:

RQ 1 To what extent do users of EdHat exhibit a communitarian ethic?

RQ 2 To what extent do users of EdHat exhibit an ethic of care?

(Communitarian ethics)

RQ 3a) How do the users of EdHat convey the *history* of either the EdHat or Santa Barbara community?

RQ 3b) How do the users of EdHat *identify* with the community?

RQ 3c) Do the users of EdHat take or *promote action* that benefits the whole community?

(Ethics of care)

RQ 4a) How do the users of EdHat *respond* to one another that reflects an ethic of care?

RQ 4b) Do users of EdHat *empathize* with one another?

RQ 4c) Do the users of EdHat *share* personal information?

Research Methods

This study uses content analysis of user posts and user responses on the website EdHat Santa Barbara. Posts and responses were coded separately in order to help organize the data. EdHat was chosen because it is one of the top user-driven community websites in the United States. While EdHat consists of six community-based websites (San Luis Obispo, Ventura, New Haven, Sonoma, Mid-Peninsula), the Santa Barbara edition was chosen for its high level of traffic. Each month, EdHat Santa Barbara receives over 1.6 million page views, 500 citizen-submitted articles, and 10,000 user comments

(<http://www.edhat.com/site/tidbit.cfm?nid=52557>). EdHat Santa Barbara first launched in 2003. Since this website is tied to a physical location, Santa Barbara, it offers a unique view on how history, identity, civic participation, responsiveness, empathy, and sharing can shape an online community where an already established offline community exists.

The sample was taken from user posts and comments that occurred by noon on each day of data collection. After the original collection was made, those posts were revisited three days later in order to provide sufficient response time for users to post comments to the original posts (OPs). Data collection began on May 28, 2012 and ended July 1, 2012.

After the collection period ended, user posts and comments were coded using the following operationalization:

Communitarian concepts:

A1: History

Indicators: The post or comment refers to some established tradition within the EdHat/Santa Barbara community. This could be a festival/outing/event, etc. that has been established and is

recurring, or one that may gain that status such as a “1st annual” event. It could also be a recurring political event.

A2: Identify With Community

Indicators: Member’s post/comment identifies as being part of the EdHat/Santa Barbara community. i.e. “I’m an EdHatter,” or, “We’re Santa Barbarans,” or identifying with a tradition or norm within the community.

A3: Action within the community

Indicators: The post/comment is a call to action that will result in a benefit to others. The comment states a preference for any option that would benefit others. This might be a prompt for other members to take part in an event or a vote or some other decision-making process that will benefit the community or others in some way.

Care concepts:

B1: Responsiveness

Indicators: Sincere answer to a question (i.e. *not* sarcastic or patronizing). The comment seems intended to be helpful to another member of the community (satisfies or is helpful in answering the question that the member may be able to use).

B2: Empathy

Indicators: Comment identifies with a member’s post or comment by offering a similar account of their own. The comment states a vicarious understanding of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. i.e. offering up that they understand “where the person is coming from.”

The codebook used by the primary coder and two other coders is the following:

Concepts and indicators for coding purposes:

- I. Concept: Communitarian Ethics. Emphasizes the importance of the group, or community, and how individual members are shaped by and contribute to this community.
 - A. Dimension: History

Indicators:

- I. The post or comment refers to some established tradition within the EdHat/Santa Barbara community. This could be a festival/outing/event, etc. that has been established and is recurring or one that hopes to gain that status such as a “1st annual” event. It could also be a recurring political event.

Example post/comment: (none)

-
- B. Dimension: Identify With Community

Indicators:

- I. Member’s post/comment identifies as being part of the EdHat/Santa Barbara community. i.e. “I’m an EdHatter,” or, “We’re Santa Barbarans,” or identifying with a tradition or norm within the community.

Example post/comment: (none)

-
- C. Dimension: Action within the community that directly benefits (or could benefit) all and not “one.”

Indicators:

- 1. The post/comment is a call to action that will result in a benefit to others.

And/Or

- 2. The comment states a preference for any option that would benefit others. This might be a prompt for other members to take part in an event or a vote or some other decision-making process that will benefit the community or others in some way.

Example post/comment:

COMMENT 283336

I suggest taking the dog to the County Animal Shelter (off Overpass road and Patterson). They can scan for a microchip and hold the dog for a few days to wait for the owner to pick-up and pay a fine. If s/he isn't claimed in 5 days, you or someone else can surely adopt the little one.

I. Concept: Ethics of Care. Care is a practice of responding to needs- material, psychological and cultural that develops over time with attributes and standards and should be carried out with appropriate attitudes (i.e. compassion).

Dimension: Responsiveness

Indicators:

1. Sincere answer to a question (i.e. NOT sarcastic or patronizing).

And/Or

2. Comment seems intended to be helpful to another member of the community (satisfies or is helpful in answering the question that the member may be able to use).

Example post/comment:

Is there a company that does either parasailing or hang gliding lessons? I'd like to try either one.

COMMENT 286150

Eagle Paragliding 729-4037 These guys are amazing. I bought my son a lesson for Xmas, and couldn't have put him in better hands.

2. Dimension: Empathy

Indicators:

1. Comment identifies with a member's post or comment by offering a similar account of their own.
2. Comment states a vicarious understanding of the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another. i.e. offering up that they understand "where the person is coming from."

Example post/comments:

COMMENT 292393

2012-06-28 12:45 PM

Oh great, maybe they can lower there fees a bit now.

Had a 3 hour emergency room visit last August for a kidney stone which ran \$5,000 + the cost of the CT scan.

COMMENT 292415P

2012-06-28 02:13 PM

I agree with 393 - We took a friend into the GVCH after a nasty bike accident. One other person there @ 1:30 pm on a Saturday afternoon. Total time in to out FIVE hours. Nuts!

The ER, from the waiting room area to the actual exam rooms was very dated & downright unsanitary looking.

The staff was in complete slo-mo the entire time we were there. Probably a staff picnic at the same time. Never again!

3. Dimension: Sharing

Indicators:

1. Comment discloses commenter's personal information i.e. photographs, family matters, health concerns. Anything that could not be knowable to the members of the community without such disclosure and that does not directly benefit individuals in the community or the community as a whole.

Example post/comments: (none)

Dimension: Other. Comment or post does not reveal any of the above dimensions/indicators and cannot be clearly marked as communitarian or care ethics i.e. no benefit to the community or another individual in need of "care" (psychological, material, cultural). This could be just a statement with no real contribution.

Along with the above response categories, a number of other categories were generated. The following is a list of these other codes, not associated with the concepts of communitarian and care but occurring frequently enough to warrant coding (these were not included in the intercoder-reliability measure).

IOS: individual opinion, sarcastic

This is used to describe any post or comment that did not fall into the A1-3 or B1-3 categories, was strictly an individual opinion and was sarcastic in nature.

ION: individual opinion, negative

This is used to describe any post or comment that did not fall into the A1-3 or B1-3 categories, was strictly an individual opinion and was negative in nature. This varies from IOS in that no humor or irony could be detected in the post or comment.

IQ: individual question

This type of post or comment is an individual question posed by a member of the EdHat and/or Santa Barbara community. These questions were typically specific to the individual poster with no known relevance to the community as a whole.

DTAP: directed toward another person

Posts or comments directed toward another person(s) that did not exhibit communitarian or care concepts, meaning that the comment could not be seen as helpful or beneficial in any way (typically an individual opinion directed toward someone else that was negative or sarcastic in nature).

R: report

This type of post or comment came across as strictly factual with no hint of individual opinion. This post usually listed an event or news piece as it related to the Santa Barbara community.

U: unspecified

Unspecified posts or comments did not fall into any of care, communitarian, or above listed categories.

Intercoder reliability

One person coded all posts in the study. An intercoder reliability test was done using two additional coders, each coding the same 22 posts as the principle coder to obtain measures for Fleiss' Kappa. Below are the results using the website <http://dfreelon.org/utills/recalfront/recal3/> to make the calculation.

Average pairwise percent agr.	Pairwise pct. agr. cols 1 & 3	Pairwise pct. agr. cols 1 & 2	Pairwise pct. agr. cols 2 & 3
71.212%	68.182%	68.182%	77.273%

Fleiss' Kappa

Fleiss' Kappa	Observed Agreement	Expected Agreement
0.485	0.712	0.441

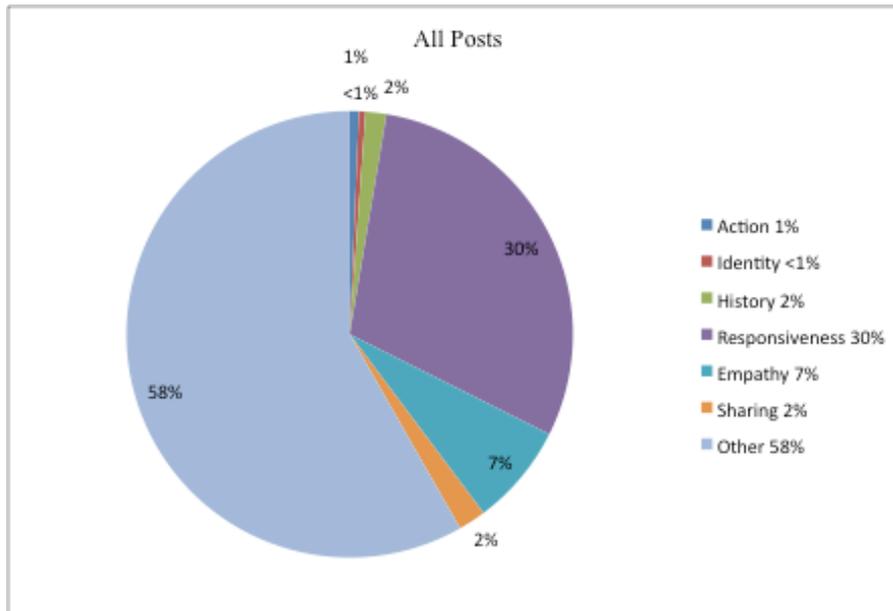
Results

The results show that care ethics are employed at a much higher rate than communitarian ethics. The first considerable finding was that out of the total number of user responses, only 1% employed a communitarian ethic while 42% fell into the concept of care. The second significant finding was that out of the three dimensions of care (responsiveness, empathy, and sharing), responsiveness was by far the most frequent, with 79% of all “care” responses employing responsiveness as it applies to an ethic of care (namely, that the response is positive and helpful either to an individual or beneficial to the group as a whole). This was often found in the type of response to individual questions. Similarly, the original post categories saw far less evidence of communitarian ethics compared to the care and “other” categories. (However, whether the post was an *original post* or a user *response* to a post was not significant to this study and simply remained a tracking tool throughout.)

The total number of posts collected was 1,049. The following charts reveal the frequency of content categories broken into the concepts care, communitarian, and “other.” They are further broken down into their respective dimensions as outlined in the method section.

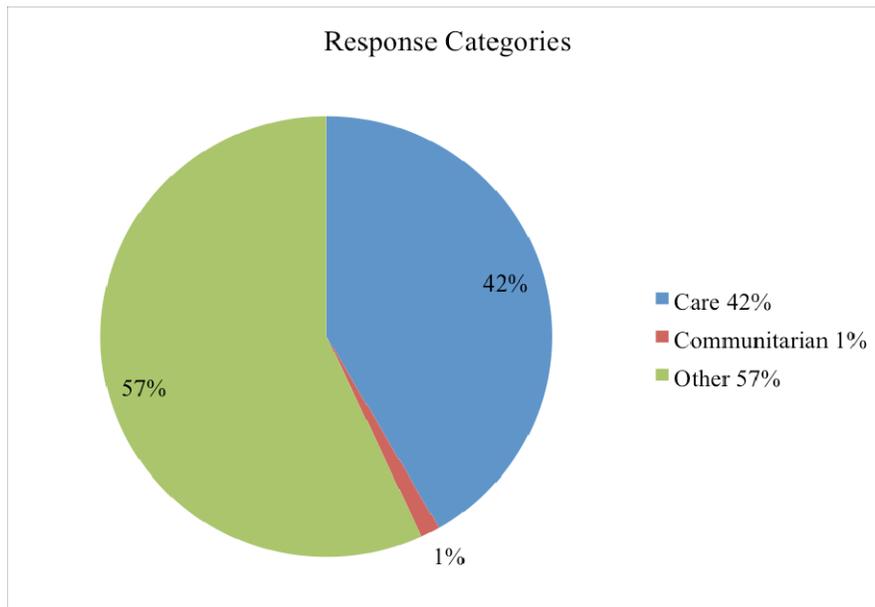
The following chart represents percentages of all dimensions (both original posts and responses).

Figure 1



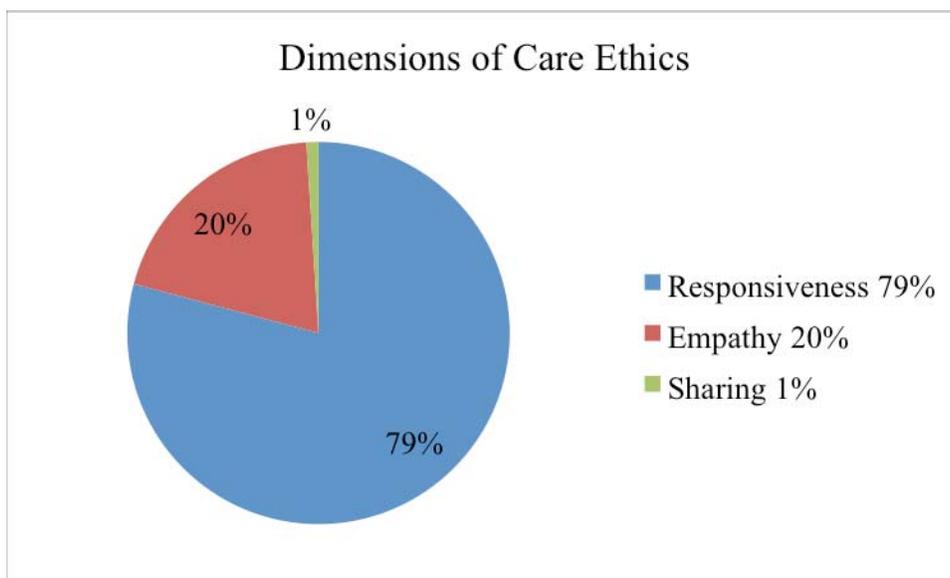
The following chart represents the percentages of communitarian, care, and “other” response categories with their dimensions collapsed; it represents the first significant finding: that roughly two of every five responses fell into the concept of care while only one in 100 were communitarian.

Figure 2



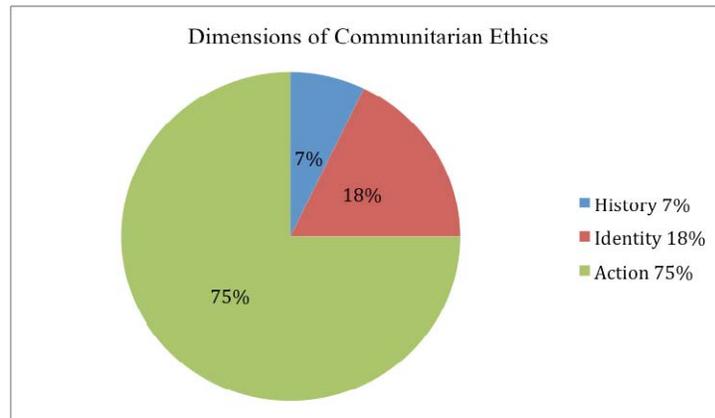
The following chart breaks down the concept of care into its three dimensions and reveals the second significant finding: the large number of posts in the responsiveness dimension as outlined by an ethic of care.

Figure 3



For comparison, the following chart breaks out reponses for the communitarian concept into its three dimensions. However, these three dimensions still represent only about 1% of all posts.

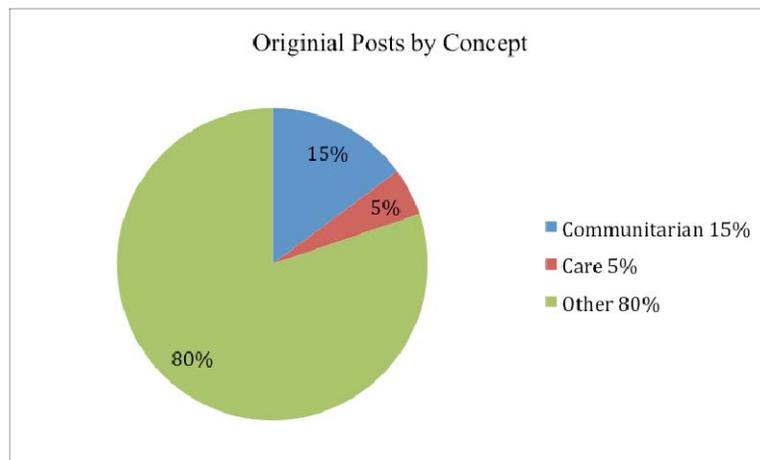
Figure 4



While still a relatively small percent of all posts, some members of EdHat did find a use for the site in promoting action (n = 21). Others identified with being a member of Santa Barbara or the EdHat community (n = 5), and a few injected community history into their posts (n = 2).

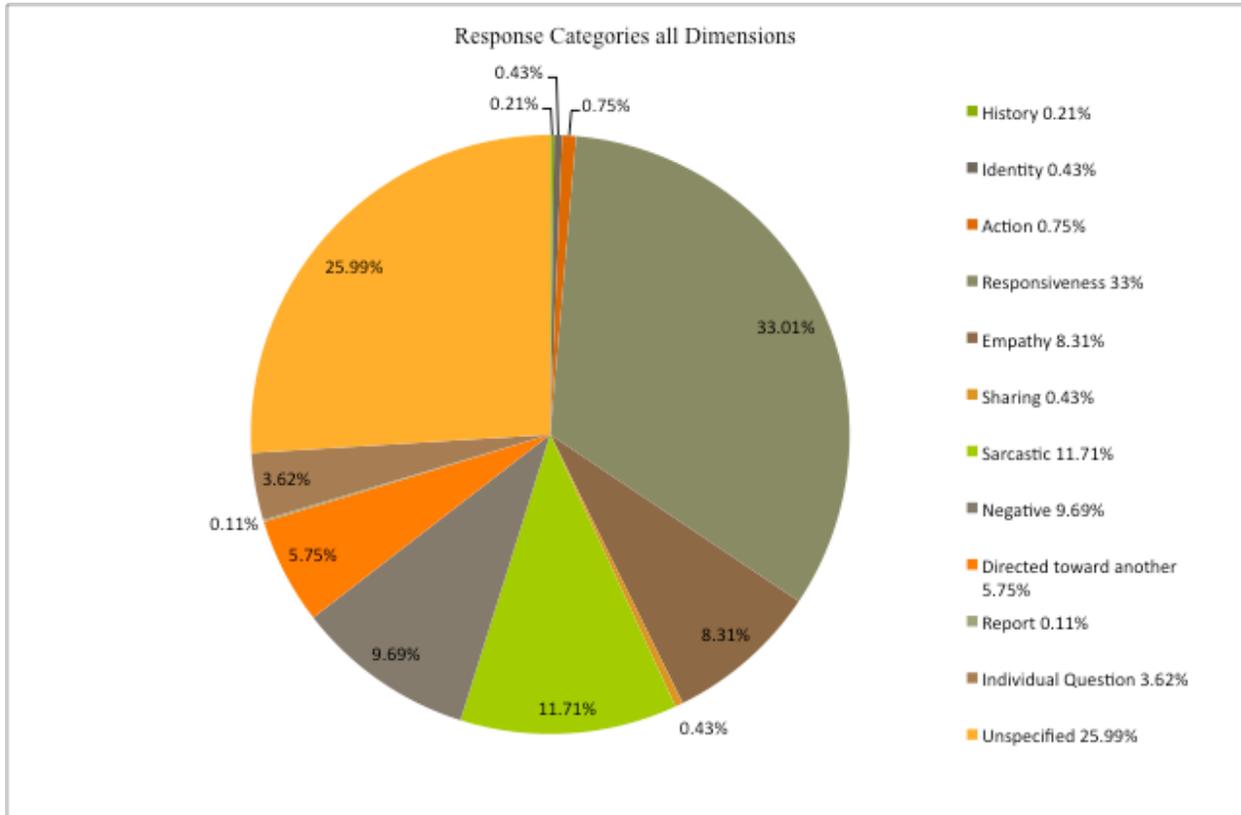
The following chart reveals the overall percentage of original posts broken down by the concepts care, communitarian, and other, revealing a greater use of communitarian than care. But both were relatively small compared to the “other” categories.

Figure 5



The following chart represents percentages of each response category and the “other” categories broken down into each of their dimensions.

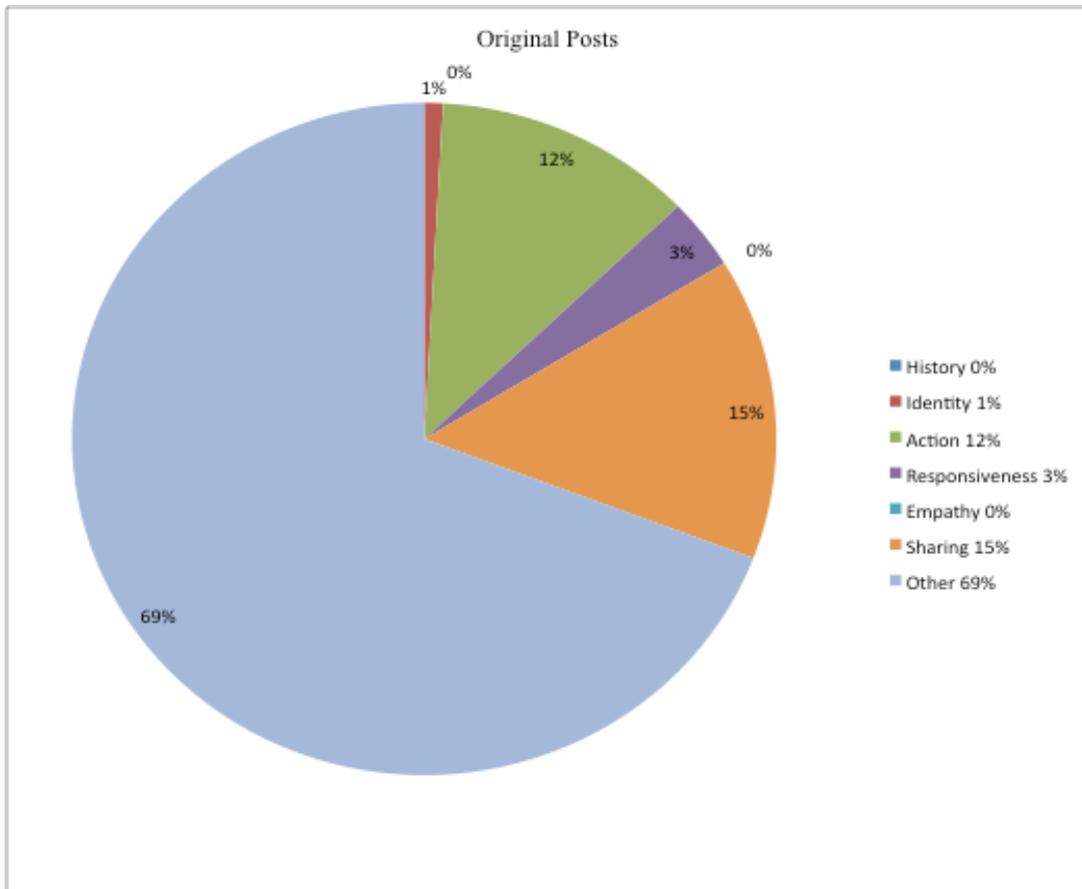
Figure 6



Again, the *responsiveness* dimension of care is the highest of all dimensions (32.6%) with “unspecified,” coming in second highest (26%).

For comparison, the following chart breaks out *original post* categories into all dimensions.

Figure 7



The above graph reveals that out of communitarian and care concepts, the dimension *sharing* plays a role in member's original posts. All but one of the 17 original posts labeled this way were shared photographs taken by members of EdHat.

Discussion

This study reveals that members of the EdHat community are employing care ethics in the content they post. The concept of care plays a significant role in user responses with 42% employing care and just 1% communitarian. This lack in use of communitarian ethics comes as a surprise. Since EdHat is based in Santa Barbara, the dimensions of history and identity would seem especially relevant to members of EdHat. However, the dimensions of identity and action each garnered an incredibly low 1%, and history did not appear at all (0%). While the concept of care is widely used, it is the *responsiveness* dimension that holds the most weight with 79% of care coming from this category, 20% showing empathy and 1% sharing.

The original post was often a member's individual question to the EdHat community. This ranged from asking members where the best place to find running shoes is, to how to go about getting scratches out of a car. While it would appear that many of these questions would elicit responsiveness, it was only coded as such if the response was 1) sincere and 2) intended to be helpful to the individual or community as a whole. These are important distinctions. Many responses were negative in nature or the question seemed to have triggered a personal rant.

Below are a few samples of individual questions and responses exhibiting either positive responses or negative or irrelevant responses.

Ex. 1: Original post: I'm looking for recommendations from wine-loving Edhatters.

Response: Foley has the best chardonnays and pinots, exquisite! Firestone is a beautiful winery and getting better since Foley bought it several years ago. Fess Parker is very pretty too. Depends on if you want good wine or good looking wineries. Lincourt has some delicious wines and is an old vineyard, picturesque, good prices. So many good ones out there, have fun! Be safe!

The above response is labeled responsiveness. It is helpful in answering the question but also shows a level of positive emotion throughout the response. The original poster depended on members of EdHat to meet his or her request for recommendations and of the 30 responses this post received, all but six were labeled as positive responsiveness. This type of “dependence” would, according to Walker (1998), be both a psychological and cultural need displayed by the original poster. The original poster is met with positive, helpful feedback which, psychologically, offers a rewarding experience. Culturally, the question and answers on the topic of “wine,” “vineyards,” etc. offer members of the EdHat community a chance to reveal their experiences with something that is culturally significant to the area. It shows through such positive feedback that wine is a significant (and pleasant) part of EdHat members’ culture.

Below is an example of an individual question that received a series of responses *not* labeled responsive for being negative and irrelevant to the question:

Ex. 2: Original post: Are there any SB stores that sell serapes or Mexican blankets?

Response 1 (intended to be helpful):

Jedlika's sells horse blankets which were all "serapes" were originally.

Response 2 (refers to the above comment- response 1- but offers no help to the original poster’s question or to the group as a whole and comes across as negative):

Jedlika's is a major advertiser on the News-Press, so I will never step foot in that store. Nor would I ever wear a horse blanket.

After response 2, a series of negative comments unrelated to the original post begins:

Response 3:

Maybe when the last known NewsPress boycotter passes on, they will stuff him/her and put them on display like the horse in front of Jedlika's. Great store folks, don't let other sense vengeful retribution put you off. And goodness sakes, someone must be reading the N-P afterall to know who is advertising in it these days. Oh, that's right you just happen to see it everyday spread out page by page when you are passing through the library or rummaging through other people's garbage cans looking at their wrapped fish or dumped bird cage droppings.Gheesh.

Response 4:

You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.

Response 5:

2389.... by the time the last NewsSuppress boycotter passes on print newspapers will be obsolete.... or with any luck Mz. McCaw will be tormenting the devil himself.

Since the EdHat website is structured around community and provides a place where members can pose questions and receive responses, the frequency of responsiveness as it pertains to care comes as no surprise. While the level of care in each response varies, many provide answers to member questions and include information based on personal experience. This additional level of care in the responses of EdHat members may be attributed in part by a location-based connection, with member residing in the Santa Barbara area.

However, what does come as a surprise is the number of negative and sarcastic remarks that contain no ethical consideration or moral purpose (shown in the example above). While communitarian and care posts made up 42% of all posts, sarcastic remarks made up 10% and negative remarks made up 9%. This being said, on a website where people are free to be as helpful or as hateful as they want, members of EdHat preferred to be supportive.

The other two dimensions of care, empathy and sharing, appeared infrequently among EdHat members. In order for a comment to be coded as empathy, personal information must be disclosed. Disclosure of personal information rarely occurred on EdHat. As for the third dimension of care, the personal sharing that did occur was usually in the form of a photograph taken by an EdHat member. These photographs were not intended to elicit empathetic responses but rather were a way for EdHat members to connect with users of the website through common interests, namely that of the Santa Barbara community (almost all photographs were taken within Santa Barbara).

Why a lack of communitarian ethics? There could be a number of reasons. EdHat users may not have as strong a sense of virtual community, which Blanchard (2008) suggests is needed to bond online community members. It is argued that in order to have a sense of community, knowing the *identity* of the person with whom interaction is taking place becomes vital to feelings of trustworthiness and connection. Almost all members of EdHat remain anonymous, making it difficult to “get to know” other members of the site.

It may be that the history of the Santa Barbara community does not transfer well to the online community. The historical context and traditions from which communities stem are central to a communitarian ethic. Individual identity is created in part by the identity of the collective and is solidified through members’ shared values (Christians, et. al, 1993). Perhaps if members of EdHat are not obliged to reveal their identity online, the established traditions found in the Santa Barbara community may not become as apparent. Also, it could be that a substantial proportion of EdHat members arrived in Santa Barbara relatively recently and lack a sense of history of the place.

While still a low percent of all posts (12%), action was the most prominent of the dimensions of communitarian ethics. One example of this type of post follows:

“The SB Office of Emergency Management advises you to get to know your neighbor: Study Shows Knowing Your Neighbors Helps During Disasters (Santa Barbara, CA.) - Major emergencies and disasters are nothing new to the United States, and Santa Barbara County is no exception. During these emergencies a repeated lesson is how neighbors knowing each other and working together can help.”

While this post is not the type of “call to action” found in the types of activist use of new media to stage protests, for example, it is still a form of the communitarian dimension of action. This type of action should (or could) directly benefit all members of the EdHat community as the

post above suggests. As Robinson and Deshano (2011) imply, this type of content promotes empowerment within the community through active connection.

Conclusion

This study helps to answer the question that many communitarians and care theorists have asked: can there be a return to community after seeing such a push for individualism over the past several hundred years? The answer is yes. People are employing the types of ethics that focus on the community as seen specifically with the concept of care through the dimension of responsiveness.

This thesis analyzed dimensions of communitarian and care ethics in an attempt to reveal how users of a community-based website employ these ethics in their online interactions and content production. The literature review revealed a common theme among researchers and scholars: There is a need to re-examine the way ethics are used in new media, or digital media (Lievrouw, 2011; Drushel & German, 2011; Plaisance, 2009; Ess, 2009; Teske, 2002; Cooper, 1998; Ward & Wasserman, 2012)

In order to re-examine ethics in a digital age, analyzing two that are not commonly researched provides a way to see how, other than traditional media ethics, members of communities who create their own content are engaging in ethical behavior. The significance of communitarian and care ethics is their departure from dominant moral beliefs that center on the *individual* as autonomous (or should strive to be) to the dominate community or society in which they live (Walker, 1998; Cochran 1989; Plaisance; 2009; Held, 2006)

One possible reason for a departure from liberalism is that the current era has a desire for greater community. Historically, people faced constraints that pushed them to seek individual

rights and information where “knowledge became power” and allowed people to operate on a more individual level. Now, with communication technologies connecting people from around the world, a new reliance on one another for news and information has been enabled. People now have opportunities to produce and broadcast news and information without the filter of mainstream media. The frequency and types of relationships that are forming through this requires special attention to ethics.

Findings in this study help to provide a clearer understanding of the attributes of communitarian and care ethics. They also revealed infrequency in the use of communitarian ethics. How can communitarian ethics be better developed in these communities? Perhaps by looking at how user *identity* fosters communities online, a more robust sense of connection may result. Discovering ways for members to express history and tradition within their communities could lead to users’ feeling more comfortable in revealing their names, thus generating a stronger sense of shared understanding, which is central to communitarian and care ethics.

Since the formation of online communities is recent, this study can be used as groundwork for future research. As the evolution of online communities continues, studies like this one may provide understanding as to how they display ethical thoughts and behaviors.

Future research on communitarian ethics should analyze national and international websites to understand how locally-based and globally-based communities compare. While EdHat is a community website, adding less obvious “community-centered” national gossip or journalistic websites would provide a more comprehensive analysis of how communitarian and care ethics are being used across different platforms. It is possible that the lack in communitarian ethics for EdHat might not exist on other websites, or that care and communitarian ethics could virtually disappear in a different social dynamic. A longer data-collection period would also benefit this

study, especially in looking at the evolution of online communities. Revisiting EdHat in five years could reveal quite different findings. Interviews with EdHat members would allow for more in-depth analysis by asking questions on their sense of identity with, or history through, the Santa Barbara community and perhaps how they feel they profit from the EdHat website both online and offline.

New media will continue to transform the way people connect with one another. While some fear that the current technological revolution would lead to even greater individualism with a loss in a sense of responsibility toward community, this study reveals that, at least at one community-centered Website, people do employ the types of ethics that are not “self-serving.” Namely, through responsiveness, ethics of care plays a prominent role in the EdHat community. By asking questions and sharing photographs, members of the EdHat website are able to connect with one another and express certain needs for care that are being met through positive responsiveness. This study has helped, in a modest way, the scholarship of communication ethics to catch up with new media use. Gaining insight into the current roles of communitarian and care ethics will lead to a greater awareness of how people can positively connect and share information online.

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