"Community" in the Digital Realm

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Introduction

The Internet was originally envisioned as a decentralized network which, due to its design and architecture, would favor the free flow of information.[1] But over the years, it became more susceptible to the control of powerful private actors and states, reducing the network's beneficial contribution to democracy.[2] In this context, social media platforms have developed their own rules, which are valid within what they usually call their "community" and the multiple "communities" that use their products and services. Nevertheless, they do not provide clear definitions of these terms and their implications. However, the different uses of these terms are relevant for platform governance as decisions such as content moderation rules and platform design rely on one conception or another. As a consequence, not understanding what platforms understand when they speak of a community would lead to overlook the underlying reason for these decisions. While they may seem irrelevant, these notions inevitably impact the way in which content and information flow within the new public sphere.

This essay will argue that platform governance decisions rely on various conceptions of what a community is. Moreover, these choices impact on the experiences of the users and the rules platform use for deciding their own structure and acceptable content. Our analysis is presented in two parts: first, we analyze how platforms have used the term *community*. We conduct an empirical analysis that shows platforms draw upon different conceptions of this term. The empirical analysis is

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[1] Agustina Del Campo & Ramiro Álvarez Ugarte, *Fake news on the Internet: actions and reactions of three platforms*, CELE 5 (Feb. 2021), https://www.palermo.edu/Archivos_content/2021/cele/papers/Fake-news-on-the-Internet-2021.pdf.

[2] *Id.*

grounded on public statements of both companies directives and the companies themselves, as we will show in section one. This allows us to identify common, divergent, or even implicit uses of the term. In doing so, we find two different conceptions of community. The first one is platform centered, so it encompasses mainly platform users, while the second one is based upon the presence of shared interests.

In the second section of this essay, we show the impact of the concept of community for platform governance. The drivers of this impact are content moderation rules and platform design. Theses vary according to the audience to which a certain content will be distributed, so what defines this audience -what defines its targeted community- is a relevant question for understanding it. As to platform design, both rely on a certain conception of community and affect users' experience.

We conclude that how platforms use the term community should not be overlooked when analyzing platform governance. We will show in the next sections that there is no unanimity on the understanding of this concept and adopting one conception or another has relevant consequences. Therefore, it is possible to say that the idea of community is a relevant dimension for understanding platform governance.

1.   Use of "Community" by Social Media Companies

Social media platforms rely on the idea of community in order to justify their design choices.[3] Just as different conceptions of community can affect constitutional design,[4] they can also lead to different choices when it comes to platform governance. As a consequence, it is important to understand how platforms are using this term and what are the consequences of relying on a specific conception of community.

In this section we present a system-level analysis on how platforms understand what a community is. Since platforms do not explain how they use the word "community", we can only infer its meaning and scope by accounting the context in which they use this term. We do this through a case-by-case analysis of the uses both companies and their directives make of this term. In this regard, we have identified two uses of the term "community": one focuses on a shared space (the platform) and the other one on a shared interests.

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[3] Lawrence Lessig, *Open code, and open societies: Values of internet governance*. *Chi.-Kent L. Rev.* 74 (1998): 1405.

[4] Will Kymlicka. Federalism, nationalism, and multiculturalism. *Theories of Federalism: A reader* (2005): 269-292.

a. Platform-Centered Community

First, there is the idea that social media platforms form a community that primarily includes users but could also include employees and/or business. This definition of community is platform-centered and dependent on space. For example, some posts by Mark Zuckerberg refer to Facebook in its entirety as "our community" as in "our community and business had a strong end of the year."[5] Semantics have changed over recent years,[6] but the use of the word "community" and Facebook's goal to connect people or "bring the world closer together"[7] and "build a global community"[8] have been a constant within the company. Facebook, as a community, has its own members —the users–, and is governed by its own values[9] and rules –also known as "community standards–."[10] Facebook users are thus thought of as members of one community that needs to be built. Solely for the purpose of this work, we will characterize this conception as being "platform-based."

YouTube's use of "community" is similar to Facebook's: "…[T]he world is a better place when we listen, share and build community through our stories."[11] It also provides users with the YouTube Help Community,[12] where they can share posts and questions regarding the use of the platform. This section follows Google Help rules, known as "Communities Content Policy."[13]

Tik Tok uses a similar approach. In its Community Guidelines, the company expresses: "We welcome people from around the world, as they come to TikTok to discover a diversity of ideas, creators, and products, and to connect with others *in our community*. To help ensure a safe,

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[5] Mark Zuckerberg, FACEBOOK (Jan. 27, 2021), https://www.facebook.com/zuck/posts/i-just-shared-our-community-update-and-quarterly-results-there-are-four-big-them/10112734959725421/.

[6] Chaim Gartenberg, *What is Facebook? Just ask Mark Zuckerberg*, THE VERGE (Mar. 8, 2019, 9:00 AM), https://www.theverge.com/2019/3/8/18255269/facebook-mark-zuckerberg-definition-social-media-network-sharing-privacy.

[7] Mark Zuckerberg, *Bringing the World Closer Together,* FACEBOOK (Mar. 15, 2021), https://www.facebook.com/notes/393134628500376/.

[8] Mark Zuckerberg, *Building Global Community*, FACEBOOK (May 5, 2021), https://www.facebook.com/notes/3707971095882612/.

[9] FACEBOOK, COMMUNITY STANDARDS, https://transparency.fb.com/es-es/policies/community-standards/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[10] *Id.*

[11] ABOUT YOUTUBE, https://about.youtube/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[12] YOUTUBE HELP COMMUNITY, https://support.google.com/youtube/community?hl=en (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[13] GOOGLE HELP COMMUNITIES CONTENT POLICY, https://support.google.com/communities/answer/7425194 (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

trustworthy, and vibrant experience, we maintain a set of Community Guidelines that include rules and standards for using TikTok. The guidelines apply to everyone and everything on our platform. They are informed by international legal frameworks, industry best practices, and input from our community, safety and public health experts, and our regional Advisory Councils"[14]. As we can infer from this excerpt, this idea of community is centered around the platform and therefore is composed of all of its users. However, we can also point out that Tik Tok uses the term community in yet another sense. In the section "Find your community" Tik Tok expresses that in that section it "will explore how [the user] can identify the right communities for [them] and [their] videos, find other creators who share [their] interests, and connect with people who enjoy watching [them being them]"[15]. This definition of community seems to be more focused on the use of the platform and in connecting people via their interests. In this sense, it is more similar to the Interest-based conception we will explore in the next section.

With regards to online platforms, we can infer elements of what sociological theory describes as organic communities.[16] For instance, for Tönnies, a "truly human community" is characterized by a shared place inhabited by their members., In Facebook's example the *place* seems to be the platform itself.[17] The shared place (more than shared interests) is

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[14] TIK TOK, COMMUNITY GUIDELINES,

https://www.tiktok.com/community-guidelines/en/

[15] TIK TOK, FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS, https://www.tiktok.com/creators/creator-portal/foundations-for-success/finding-your-community/

[16] When theorizing about communities, classical authors generally emphasize the specifics that can turn a group of people into a "community." Ferdinand Tönnies, focuses on blood ties, place, or spirit when theorizing about *Gemeinschaft*. When these three elements are present, we are in the presence of what Tönnies calls a "truly human community in its highest form." Others, such as Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, focus on shared beliefs, interests, and ideas. Their conceptions of community embrace the idea of rational association based on the belief of common ethnicity (Weber) and the idea of a community of interests (Durkheim). In other words,

detaching the notion of community from the precondition of place and blood ties expands the concept and allows for new "versions" of community to emerge, such as virtual communities. See Max Weber, Economy, and Society: An outline of interpretive sociology 388 (Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich eds., University of California Press 1978) (1921); Émile Durkheim The Division of Labor in Society 12, 14-16 (George Simpson trans., The Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois 4th ed. 1960) (1893).

[17] Ferdinand Tönnies, Community and Civil Society 27 (Jose Harris ed., Margaret Hollis trans., Cambridge University Press 2001) (1887). While the term used by Tönnies to refer to the concept of community is Gemeinschaft, the term to refer to society is Gesellschaft. As he explains, "The theory of Gesellschaft takes as its starting point a group of people who, as in Gemeinschaft, live peacefully alongside one another, but in this case without being essentially united – indeed, on the contrary, they are here essentially detached. In Gemeinschaft they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in Gesellschaft they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them. As a result, there are no activities taking place which are derived from an a priori and

bringing people together. There is also a sense of belonging, as users accept the platform's rules and share the way of communicating within its boundaries.

A platform-based conception of community embodies the belief that there is one global community that belongs to at least one platform. According to this view, platform users wish to communicate with each other within the platform, hence company policies should foster integration and dialogue between its members. In this sense, this use of the term community resembles Derek Foster's conception of imagined community[18] wherein there is communion with others who are faceless or anonymous, including the platform's users, the company itself, its workers, etc.

b. Interest-based Community

The second way in which the term community can be used may be observed in how   Facebook identifies multiple "communities" within its network. For instance, "people are using Meta to connect and strengthen their communities" and to "see how people are connecting to lift up their communities."[19] If Meta is used to connect with one's communities, it means that what defines this term is not the fact that one is a Meta user, but something else. Rather than focusing on the element of place, this way of understanding communities seems to prioritize the element of shared interests and causes. We will refer to this conception as interest-based.

When referring to these types of communities, Facebook appears to present itself as a tool for enhancing the development and cohesion of these types of social organization[20]. In this sense, it offers features to help communities grow and thrive, displaying how small businesses can be

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pre-determined unity and which therefore express the will and spirit of this unity through any individual who performs them. Nothing happens in Gesellschaft that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself. On the contrary, everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension against everyone else." *Id*. at 52.

[18] Communities generally require an imaginary (and sometimes performative) act to "summon the image of communion with others who are faceless, transient, or anonymous." As some authors explain, "community can also be considered a 'mirage' because it could be seen as a product of our imagination, and this can let us move a step forward to the virtual community concept." See Derek Foster, Community, and Identity in the Electronic Village, in Internet Culture 23, 25 (David Porter ed., 1997) and Stefano Agostini; Peter Mechant, Towards a Definition of Virtual Community, 38 Signio y Pensamiento 1, 4 (2019).

[19] META, OUR COMMUNITY, https://about.facebook.com/community/ (last visited Feb. 10, 2022).

[20] *Id*.

supported through the platform,[21] offering groups and pages, which are essentially tools designed for like-minded people or users sharing an interest to connect[22] and to "build …community on Facebook."[23]

Interest-based communities include both online and offline communities (i.e., there could be a pre-existing pre-virtual community that connects virtually or there could be a community that is constituted virtually with no offline preexistence) that do have a virtual presence. What defines the community in interest-based settings is not the membership to a certain platform, but the presence of shared interests. These interests can even be prior to the launch of platforms -take for example the community of fans of a certain football club- or not, just as in the case of the community of pet society players. While it is possible that a certain community is formed only by users of a certain platform, it is not its distinctive element.

This resonates with some conceptions of communities developed in the specialized literature. Scholars like Max Weber and Émile Durkheim believe a community is defined by the presence of shared beliefs, interests and ideas.[24] Some other scholars state that a community is a set of people who share a feeling of belonging to a certain group, influence each other, tend to reinforce other members, and share an emotional connection.[25] A community therefore requires that its members share a way of communicating and feel they are part of one group and the possibility of having fruitful relations among them.

Interest-based conception goes back to the early days of internet platforms. Just like Meta today, in the early 2000s Yahoo! Launched Yahoo! Groups, "a new place for communities."[26] It was one of the first

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[21] *Id*.; Meta, Supporting Small Business, https://about.facebook.com/supportsmallbusiness/ (last visited Feb. 10, 2022).

[22] Facebook, Using a Page in your community, https://www.facebook.com/community/using-key-groups-tools/using-a-page-in-your-community/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[23] Meta for Business, Harness the Power of Groups to Build Community, https://es-la.facebook.com/business/learn/lessons/use-groups-build-community (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[24] Max Weber, Economy, and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology 388 (Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich eds., University of California Press 1978) (1921); Émile Durkheim, The Division of Labor In Society 12, 14-16 (George Simpson trans., The Free Press of Glencoe, Illinois 4th ed. 1960) (1893).

[25] David W. McMillan & David M. Chavis, *Sense of community: A definition and theory*, 14 J. Cmty. Psych. 6 (1983).

[26] Yahoo! Press Room, Press Release, "Yahoo! Opens a New Place for Communities With Yahoo! Groups", Jan.30th 2001, https://web.archive.org/web/20080331040120/http://yhoo.client.shareholder.com/press/Release Detail.cfm?ReleaseID=173882 (last visited April 20, 2022).

virtual social network experiences where people could access and share information via e-mail and other web-based tools. Among Yahoo! Groups feature highlights, "virtually anyone with an e-mail address now has a convenient and direct link to their Yahoo! Groups community".[27] We can see how the use of the term community back in the day was referring to the subgroups formed within Yahoo! Groups, which are analogically similar to today's Facebook groups, and can also be identified as interest-based.

Reddit is another example of a social media platform encompassing different interest- based communities within itself. Alexis Ohanian, Reddit's co-founder, mentioned in his 2020 resignation letter to the Board that "Reddit is home to thousands of communities, endless conversation, and authentic human connection. Whether you're into breaking news, sports, TV fan theories, or a never-ending stream of the internet's cutest animals, there's a community on Reddit for you."[28] Ohanian offers a clear picture of the implicit conception of community behind the design of Reddit. If it is home to thousands of communities, this means what defines a community is something different from being Reddit users. Moreover, if this platform was home to these communities, they existed before the appearance of Reddit.

Unlike Facebook, Twitter does not seem to refer to itself as a community. However, in September 2021, they launched Twitter Communities, an initiative created to "give people a dedicated place to connect, share, and get closer to the discussions they care about most."[29] These are also examples of interest-based communities. They are invitation-only groups created by Twitter users. Tweets within the community are public and can therefore be seen by anyone on the platform, but you must be part of the community in order to interact with other members. This initiative was conceived as "a way to easily find and connect with people who want to talk about the same things you do."[30] Twitter also provides a website within the platform dedicated to the "community" of developers: "Twitter Developer Community Groups

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[27] Yahoo!, *Yahoo! Opens A New Place For Communities With Yahoo*! Groups, https://web.archive.org/web/20060502040904/http://yhoo.client.shareholder.com/press/Release Detail.cfm?ReleaseID=173882 (last visited Mar. 20, 2022).

[28] REDDIT, https://www.redditinc.com/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[29] ABOUT COMMUNITIES ON TWITTER, https://help.twitter.com/en/using-twitter/communities (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[30] David Regan, *Communities: Talk about your thing with people who get you*, TWITTER BLOG (Sept. 9, 2021), https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2021/testing-communities.

bring developers together to share best practices and learn more about the Twitter Developer Platform."[31]

Discord claims to be "a voice, video and text app that helps friends and communities come together to hang out and explore their interests."[32] The communities referred to are interest-based since its defining element is the presence of common interests. These are organized in "servers," exclusive thematic groups or spaces whose members join by invitation-only.[33]

Invoking interest-based conceptions necessarily acknowledges the presence of multiple coexisting communities: as a Reddit user one can, for example, be simultaneously part of a subreddit on tall buildings and another on fans. According to this view, there are many communities interacting simultaneously within each platform. As people gather around certain specific interests, they form different communities based on those interests. This conception is similar to Lessig´s view about communities, in which different groups could build their own culture and their own communication rules.[34]

To summarize, platforms use the term 'community' in two different ways. Some of them think of communities as something that is built around a platform. Consequently, the members of this community are mainly platform users but also its employees. On the other hand, some other platforms believe a community is defined by shared interests, which allows for multiple coexisting communities within the same platform.

2.   Implications of the use of "Community" in Platform Governance

The internet was envisioned as the future of the public sphere a long time ago.[35] Its horizontal culture and openness made it appealing for those worried about the centralization of public debate in a few hands. However, a process of re-centralization took place and internet companies became relevant actors in the digital realm.[36] As Cohen and Fung note,

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[31] TWITTER DEVELOPER COMMUNITY GROUPS, COMMUNITIES, https://twitterdev.bevylabs.com/chapters/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[32]   Discord   Senior   Manager,   *Law   Enforcement   Response*,   F, https://discord.com/jobs/6058659002#:~:text=Discord%20is%20a%20voice%2C%20video,%2C%20plant%20parents%2C%20and%20more. (last visited Apr 19, 2022).

[33] DISCORD, https://discord.com/ (last visited Feb. 15, 2022).

[34] Lawrence Lessig, *Code: And other laws of cyberspace*. ReadHowYouWant. com, 2009.

[35] Zizi Papacharissi, *The virtual sphere: The internet as a public sphere*. *New media & society* 4.1 (2002): 9-27.

[36] *See* Del Campo and Álvarez Ugarte, *supra* note 1.

the informal public sphere is currently mediated by platforms that curate, moderate and amplify the content we see online[37], which has an impact on the information we access to and the discussions we have. In this section, we will show how both platform and interest-based conceptions of community affect platform governance. In particular, we will claim that the different conceptions of ´community´ impact platform governance through platform design and content moderation rules.

The dominant conception of community on a platform influences the content we see on platforms. Take the example of Wikipedia, which is among the ten most popular websites[38] and relies on a platform-based conception of community. The results we get when we search through Wikipedia are a consequence of a process that is not seen by users. It is based on a process of discussion modeled by Wikipedia's code, modeled by an architecture that allows discussion within the limits of Wikipedia's policy of "neutral point of view", "verifiability" and "no original research".[39] Decisions on which content can be part of Wikipedia's entries have an impact in the way people access information, educate, and inform themselves to later participate in the public sphere discussions.[40]

However, the rules for making these decisions rely on a certain conception of community. The requirement of a neutral point of view, for example, clearly aims to make the content acceptable for everyone, which can only be a goal if one thinks there is one big community of Wikipedia users with different ideologies. It is possible to imagine a different platform in which different groups of people, each with a different ideology, make entries that reflect their respective biases. This mental experiment allows us to understand how a certain conception of community influences the rules that govern a platform.

The logical consequence of grounding platform design on a platform-based conception of community—reinforcing the idea of *place* and bounded by the platform's technical limits—would be developing common rules of interaction that apply transversely to users, regardless of their different interests and backgrounds. Whereas a platform that is closer to an interest-based conception—which emphasizes the connection

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[37] Cohen, A. and Fung, A., *Democracy, and the digital public sphere*, in Bernholz, L, Lademore, H., and Reich, R. (eds.), *Digital Technology and Democratic Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, 2021, p. 36.

[38] Alexa, (last visited Sept 10, 2023), https://www.alexa.com/topsites.

[39] Esther Weltevrede and Erik Borra, *Platform affordances and data practices: The value of dispute on Wikipedia. Big Data & Society* 3.1 (2016).

[40] Just to mention one example, the literature shows that Wikipedia influences judicial decisions. Lee F. Peoples, *The citation of Wikipedia in judicial opinions*, Yale JL & Tech. 12 (2009).

based on common interests and causes—would guarantee a space in which each community can develop and interact according to its own rules not necessarily identical to the platforms. Making one choice or the other depends on how designers understand communities and influences what content we access.

On the contrary, it would make sense for a platform relying on an interest-based conception of community to have a different set of rules for each community. This is the case of Discord. We said in the previous section Discord relies on an interest-based conception of community and its impact can be appreciated when we look at Discord's content moderation policy. Discord has some general guidelines for users[41] and server moderators[42], which can be regarded as a platform-based conception policy. However, most of the content moderation work is left to each server's administrators and moderators[43] as they are the ones who decide and enforce the content moderation rules beyond the general guidelines.

One of the authors of this essay, for example, participated in an Age of Empires tournament that was organized through Discord. There, the organizers (server's administrators) not only moderated content in order to keep the conversation focused on the tournament, but also were very strict about disrespectful comments. These content moderation rules were not general but particular to the specific server, which shows the influence of an interest-based conception of community. A server that gathers a different community will probably have a different content moderation policy, since the nature of the talk in there and the culture of this community will be different. Since rules governing content reflect different sets of values and different ways of weighing them, it is quite likely that two different communities will be governed by different rules.

Different conceptions of community also lead to different platform designs. Since platforms usually facilitate interactions between members of a certain community, how this concept is understood determines which interactions should be promoted. While an interest-based conception demands the existence of spaces to interact with others with the same interest, a platform-based conception results in a less fragmented platform governance. Of course, it does not mean that all users interact the same way. Within an open platform we do see smaller groups, e.g., Academic

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[41] Discord, (last visited Sept 10, 2023), https://discord.com/guidelines.

[42] Discord, (last visited Sept 10, 2023), https://discord.com/community/your-responsibilities-as-a-discord-moderator-discord.

[43] Discord, (last visited Sept 10, 2023), https://discord.com/safety/360044103531-role-of-administrators-and-moderators-on-discord.

twitter-, but this is still open to anyone who does not share their interests. However, it is clear Twitter and Reddit, just to mention two examples, decide their design based on different conceptions of community.

Although these categories may seem simple, the reality is more complex. Even when some of the statements on how platforms understand communities seem clear, this is not always reflected on platform design. For example, twitter has created 'communities' for those who share a certain interest and one can scroll reddit without being in any specific subreddit. Therefore, even when different conceptions of community clearly influence platform design, we should not rush into conclusions as sometimes platforms design spaces based on both conceptions.

We believe platforms using both conceptions of community will find themselves with the difficulty and complexities of developing common standards, for these seem to pull in towards different directions. A platform committed to an interest-based conception should allow different communities within one platform to coexist, which may lead to developing a different set of rules for each community. On the other hand, a platform committed to a platform-based conception of community would aim at developing common rules for all, which could clash with the different values and normative worlds that interest-based communities hold dear.

Conclusion

Some of the concepts behind platform governance are still unexplored. In this essay we attempted to show that platforms sometimes rely on different conceptions of community, which they make explicit through public statements. In analyzing their own discourse, we found two different groups of conceptions of community. The first one is platform centered as it builds the idea of community around platform membership. Thus, it mainly encompasses all platform users, but also platform employees and business. On the other hand, we found a conception which focuses on shared interests. According to this view, what defines a community are the common interests of its members. As a consequence, not all users of a platform are necessarily part of the same community, while one can be part of more than one community within the same platform or platforms.

Recognizing the presence of these conceptions is relevant as they lead to different decisions in terms of platform design and governance. This happens in two ways. In the first place, it impacts the rules regarding online speech within each platform. Hence, the criteria for accepting or

rejecting discourses could vary depending on the community in which this speech will circulate. As a consequence, different conceptions of community will lead to different sets of rules. In the second place, platform design is also affected by how platforms understand communities. While a more compartmentalized platform can be built upon an interest-based approach, a platform-based one will lead to a design that tries to bring users together. Given the fact that these choices impact the kind of interactions users will have, they should be taken into account when reflecting on platform governance.