



# Virtual Communities: Bowling Alone, Online Together (Digital Formations)

*Felicia Wu Song*

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Does contemporary Internet technology strengthen civic engagement and democratic practice? The recent surge in online community participation has become a cultural phenomenon enmeshed in ongoing debates about the health of American civil society. But observations about online communities often concentrate on ascertaining the true nature of community and democracy, typically rehearsing familiar communitarian and liberal perspectives. This book seeks to understand the technology on its own terms, focusing on how the technological and organizational configurations of online communities frame our contemporary beliefs and assumptions about community and the individual. It analyzes key structural features of thirty award-winning online community websites to show that while the values of individual autonomy, egalitarianism, and freedom of speech dominate the discursive content of these communities, the practical realities of online life are clearly marked by exclusivity and the demands of commercialization and corporate surveillance. Promises of social empowerment are framed within consumer and therapeutic frameworks that undermine their democratic efficacy. As a result, online communities fail to revolutionize the civic landscape because they create cultures of membership that epitomize the commodification of community and public life altogether.

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