

NEW COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY REPRESENTATIONS IN RURAL AREAS¹

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Abstract

In connection with communities and community representations in Szeklerland, it can be observed that in parallel with the spread of the use of information technology, the virtual space is playing an increasingly important role. While at the beginning of this process there was a business-card-like visualization of communities around local governments, NGOs, and businesses, more and more new communities have emerged in the last few years in which virtuality is an important element not only in their visualization but also in their organization. It cannot be considered as an explicitly virtual community because a significant number of the members know each other, interactions in the physical space play a significant role in community organization, and so on. In this sense, the field of organization of such communities is not exclusively the Internet.

Based on field experiences, the aim of the present study is to create an overview of the organization and virtual visualization of a community related to the Ciuc region and backyard farming activities. The analysis is based on the following aspects: group formation and goals, rules and posts, values and norms, characteristics of group operation.

Keywords: local community, community organization, virtuality, backyard farming

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Introduction

ICT and the virtual space made accessible thereby have structuring and society-shaping effects: they have both influence on the form of operation and appearance of traditional communities and contribute to the organization of new communities. An essential professional issue arising with regard to local communities living in rural areas aims to find out the type of responses, reactions that occur to global effects and that can be observed at the individual as well as family level and affect the whole of the local society. Assuming that the three most common forms of communities are location-based, interest-based, and spiritual communities (Willmott 1986, Lee–Newby 1983, Crow–Allen 1994), social group organizations that deviate from the representations and organizational structures considered to be conventional in the context of the specific region's socioeconomic processes prove to be intriguing and worthy of analysis. The emergence and spread of social media has generated several changes in terms of communities, leading to the development of new communities and new community organizational structures.

When analysing new communities and representations of communities in a rural environment, several possibilities for interpretation arise, especially when focusing on communities whose development and functioning involve virtuality as a key factor. Since due to modernization (development of ICT, expansion of travel opportunities, etc.) nowadays' communities show a highly diverse picture and have constantly increasing numbers, individuals can be members of a great many communities at the same time based on values and norms they hold important as well as on the functions these communities perform. Shifting between communities in the virtual space takes nothing but a few clicks – although this implies some sort of shifting between identities too, which has its own downsides and limits (i.e. no one can take part in an infinite number of communities), presence and interaction are by far not as demanding for the individual as in the physical space. On the other hand, locality needs to be mentioned and stressed in the functioning of certain virtual communities, where it refers to elements taken from the physical environment and used consciously or instinctively by the virtual community for self-determination, for placing their operation and interactions into context. In connection with the Szeklerland area, the recent years have seen the organization of a growing number of new communities whose core element is virtuality (they appear on social media too) and whose name, objectives, admission of new members

and their online presence as well as interaction all bear the marks of being determined by the immediate or extended physical environment, yet they are not linked to any organization (e.g. *Zero Waste Csíkszereda* [Zero Waste Miercurea Ciuc], *Csíki kiskertes mozgalom* [Ciuc Backyard Movement], *Gyergyói kiskertes mozgalom* [Gheorgheni Backyard Movement], *Csíki közlekedési infó* [Ciuc Traffic Info], *#Vegyélhazait Székelyföldről!* [Buy Domestic Products from Szeklerland], *Sepsiszentgyörgyi őstermelők és vásárlók* [Primary Producers and Customers of Sfântu Gheorghe]). Besides their connection to the physical space, these communities are created for some specific purpose or function, while the ideological and practical content are equally essential in their operation. Another specificity is that part of these interactions takes place in the physical space since the majority of their members also know each other personally, wherefore they cannot be considered exclusively virtual communities. Consequently, an analysis of such communities will necessarily differ from the virtual platform analysis. Studies published in the 90–91 (2015) and 108–109 (2018) issues of *Replika – Social Science Quarterly* address questions and topics that thoroughly discuss the changes in society and social research taking place in parallel with the development of information technology. Considering the methodological challenges facing social sciences, the present study is based on a dual-track approach taking account of both online and offline space. Focusing on a community connected to the Ciuc region and to backyard farming activities, the paper seeks to answer how a community whose scope extends beyond locality tries to organize itself in the virtual space. With a view to answering the question, the analysis relies on the following criteria: group formation and goals, rules and posts, values and norms, particularities of group operation.

The organization and operation of the studied group is a social phenomenon that differs from the community representations characteristic of the Szeklerland area on the one hand and has several points in common with the traditional model of family subsistence farming specific to the region on the other hand, such as: small-scale farming, fragmented lands, agriculture, livestock farming, self-sufficiency, transfer or selling of surplus production, or avoiding exposure to external factors. Results of professional analyses and household surveys (1999, 2004, 2011, 2013) carried out within the framework of the Miercurea-Ciuc-based WAC – Centre for Regional and Anthropological Research suggest that farming activities based on small-scale land ownerships and informal self-employment – often undertaken in addition to an existing

job – are peculiar to over half of the Szeklerland households (Biró 2019a). Further, it is important to mention the agricultural innovation process in Szeklerland,² whose one regular feature is the strengthening and growing number of small-scale farming type of initiatives. Researchers investigating the topic address the group of young farmers as a separate category including young people seeking to improve household-scale farming activity and operate it within the context of small enterprises acting even as market producers (Biró–Magyar 2013). In terms of the agricultural innovation process in Szeklerland, the actors' social embeddedness is an issue worthy of highlighting, more specifically the initiatives of agricultural actors aiming at establishing or strengthening social embeddedness, such as: organization of local events, initiatives on cooperation, counselling, or knowledge transfer (Biró 2019b, Biró–Sárosi-Blága 2020, Sárosi-Blága 2019). The studied community's organization and virtual emergence in the briefly outlined regional agricultural innovation process can be considered a specific form of agricultural actors' initiatives seeking self-determination and strengthening social embeddedness.

Virtual Representations of Communities

Although the community under investigation here cannot be clearly regarded as an online community, the virtual dimensions of community organization make important the inclusion of literature approaches tackling the various forms of communities, including online communities.

In the interpretation of communities and community representations, the present study will first of all base itself on functional approaches, meaning those lines of research that define the concept of community based on its role, function in society (e.g. Wuthnow 1994, Hankiss 1982, Niedermüller 1999, Kovács 2007, Utasi, 2010). As Légmán (2012) sums up community definitions: under functional approaches, ideological or virtual communities can also be seen as specific community categories in addition to traditional or local – i.e. the already existing

² Analyses of agricultural innovation processes have been performed within the scope of Pro Agricultura Hargitae Universitas Foundation as well as WAC – Centre for Regional and Anthropological Research since the year 2011. Publications summarizing the results of the research programme are available at the following website: http://www.pahru.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=134&Itemid=712&lang=hu.

communities that accompany us from the cradle to the grave and provide us with readily apparent identities (Tönnies 1983) and the chosen communities such as the one under investigation here. The majority of community definitions taking a functional approach make mention of common interest, goal, value system, identity, and belonging to a concrete place (Légmán 2012: 362). The cited author names time and the individual as further essential components of community definitions. As postulated by her, the time component suggests that every era has its own peculiar, characteristic community representation. The individual, on the other hand, is a critical aspect in questions and interpretations related to the identity-forming, social integration role of communities. Légmán's (2012) work reviewing classical sociological theories and definitions points out a discourse on two contradictory processes: losing the safety of familiar contexts due to the multitude of choices and at the same time turning to the familiar contexts, categories of communities. Since the virtual space and travel opportunities have significantly accelerated the pluralization process of communities, individuals can now belong to a great many communities of their own choosing, which puts the spotlight on the factors determining and influencing the choice of the individual. Individuals opt for the chosen communities of their own free will as opposed to the already existing communities. Their weakness lies in that they can only provide individuals with temporary identity and that upon the disappearance of the common goal such groups can easily dissolve (Légmán 2012).

While we can talk of online interactions of individuals and groups ever since the advent of the Internet, the virtual or online community is a relatively recent concept. Owing to technological advancement, the virtual space offers a wide variety of methods for meeting, communication, working/employment, and so on. Thus, the virtual community is a new concept emerging in relation to the virtual space to describe social lifestyles: a social entity wherein people connect to each other with the help of technology, which overwrites the fundamental role played by the geographical proximity or organizational cohesion of traditional communities (Stolterman et al. 1999). The cited authors see the studying of virtual communities as an essential task because of the rapid growth and development of cyberspace and the emerging issues related to our future society. Although the referenced work was written more than 20 years ago, I believe that the questions and aspects addressed therein can still be considered relevant today, particularly in the sense that technological development took place with a considerable time lag in Eastern

European societies. These questions and aspects are the following: what are virtual communities created for and what does that mean with respect to the functioning of society? Who will be involved in technological development and who will decide what direction the development of cyberspace should take? Will cyberspace be integrated into society? (Stolterman et al. 1999). I believe that a more thorough studying of online communities analysed in the paper that are connected with locality (the Ciuc region) as well, function based on well-defined objectives, values, and norms, and are built on the physical environment can bring us closer to answering such questions.

Hunter and Stockdale's (2012) work makes a good starting point for the analysis of online communities: it describes how a distinction can be made between online communities and other group interactions supported by the Internet, provides the outline of an online-community definition, and distinguishes three types of online communities. In his view, online communities bring considerable benefits for enterprises, non-governmental and other community organizations, and individuals alike. Hunter (2010) draws attention to the identification of the various types of communities and their characteristics as an important step towards understanding how virtual communities can support the operation of enterprises, institutions, and organizations, the satisfaction of collective needs, and so on.

As defined by Hunter and Stockdale (2012), an online community is a group of people who share a common interest and communicate in the virtual space by means of a computer. Characteristic features of online communities are inter-activity, permanent membership, common values, and socialization. The following are inconsistent with the definition of online communities: online shopping, online businesses, blogging. Additionally, the cited author distinguishes three types of online communities: business-related (serve the interests of an enterprise, public relations, brand image building, etc.), socially constructed (created by one or more individuals with a view to promote the access of a stakeholder group to general or specific information), and volunteering/action groups (NGOs or local stakeholder groups). Based on the above-listed categories, the community under study can be considered as a socially constructed one: the group was designed as conceived by administrators, is connected with a stakeholder group offering and interested in backyard farming products, shares information on such products, and encourages the creation of own garden plots as well as the consumption of local foods.

Analysing the Organization and Virtual Emergence of a Special Sort of Community

In respect of rural areas similar to Szeklerland, relevant questions that arise in analysing communities also present in the online space are: what sort of new communities are created in and via the cyberspace? What type of already existing communities start to show up, act, and communicate in the online space? What processes do/can these changes generate in the operation of traditional communities? Although answering these questions in full would exceed the scope of the present study, the case selected for analysis below can still serve as a good starting point. The form of appearance and functioning of a relatively new community – established in 2019 – will be examined in what follows, which is a social media group operating in the Ciuc region and primarily related to backyard farming and self-sustaining lifestyle. A distinctive feature is that actors belonging to the group also interact in the physical space and know each other personally. The analysis considered the following aspects with regard to the group's organization and appearance in the online space: (1) group formation and goals, (2) rules and posts, (3) values and norms. In what follows, I will summarize my observations about the operation of the group through the prism of these criteria.

Group Formation and Goals

The community under investigation is a social media group primarily related to backyard farming and (continuously) organized in the Ciuc region. It came into existence in the year 2019 as an example of and with the support of a community similar in function and field of activity but operating in another Szeklerland microregion. The community has 9,000 members at the moment and is constantly expanding. No significant differences can be observed as regards membership in terms of sex and age-groups, so men and women, the young generation and the middle aged are represented in similar proportions; however, it should be noted that the majority of the active members are women. As a social media group, the target group designated in the description has the following composition: small-scale backyard farmers and livestock owners, local hobby craftsmen, and individuals interested in the products produced and manufactured by them.

The explicit goals of the groups are as follows:

- Providing a virtual place for the presentation and sharing of foods and artisanal products originating from local garden plots and backyard farmsteads.
- Rejecting foods transported from longer distances and containing chemicals.
- Building a community striving for self-sufficiency, especially in the field of foodstuffs and food products.
- Strengthening the personal relationship between producers and consumers; encouraging the creation of own garden plots.
- Cultivating the tradition of mutual assistance.
- Reintroducing what is local, human, and natural.

Considering Hunter and Stockdale's (2012) typology, this online community corresponds to the socially constructed type as there is a group of administrators consisting of three persons acting as the support staff, who have created, built up and are continuously moderating community interactions. Albeit based on the examples mentioned in Hunter and Stockdale (2012) communities of this type have social functions (education, information sharing, research, promoting interest), economic functions and benefits should also be noted about the community under analysis, these benefits being derived from membership status and may favour those offering foodstuffs and products obtained from backyard farming. It is important to underline that representatives and employees of local small enterprises can also share product information in the group and that a substantial fraction of interactions takes place in the physical space through the exchange of products offered and required in the group.

Rules and Posts

Group regulations have undergone several changes and clarifications necessitated most of all by ensuring the proper implementation of objectives, values, and norms. Given that the personal relationships and contacts between the members resulted in an extremely rapidly growing group, interactions could not have been monitored/controlled in the absence of regulations and strict administration, so the organization of the community in accordance with predefined values and

norms could not have been realized. Exercising continuous control generated numerous conflicts in the beginning, but most members agree that rules are necessary, which is an essential feature of group operation. Besides the rapid growth of the group, the continuous refinement of rules is also justified by the facilitation of interactions (meetings, exchanges, etc.) transferred into or performed in the physical space as well as by the transparency of the virtual platform.

The regulations applicable during the period of analysis contain 19 rules on the features of the target group, the norms and values to be observed, essential requirements regarding the products (own and local), assuming responsibility, and technical information related to the posts (manufacturers/members offering the products and potential buyers being addressed separately). The use of hashtags should be mentioned in this context, which supports the retrieval, grouping, and transparency of posts. Rules include a brief separate description of the topics of the posts that can be published in the news feed of the group. Some of the popular post topics in order of frequency are as follows: vegetables, prepared meals, learning from each other, seeds, seedlings, herbs and spices, meat products, fruits, ornamental plants, animals in small-scale livestock farming, good examples/best practices, bakery, confectionery, and dairy products, handmade cosmetics, artisanal products, rent of tools/utensils and materials, events, bees (i.e. voluntary co-operative work).

Overall, the investigated community's rapid growth in the virtual sense is largely due to the fact that members know each other and meet up in person, so they carry on conversations outside the realm of social media as well and formulate opinions about the group. In this ever-expanding community, rules create a particular bond between the physical and the virtual space: the formalization of posts exerts influence over the meetings and product exchanges.

Values and Norms

In the course of the analysis, several references have already been made to the fact that a three-person administrator group plays a vital role in the (primarily) virtual organization of the community. Referring to the community's values and norms, administrators exercise control on a continuous basis: e.g. remind members of the group norms and values, check the connections, clarify the wording/information of the posts, or delete some of the posts if necessary. Since this monitoring, controlling activity is mostly visible to users not immediately affected, it

indirectly strengthens members' group affiliation, their awareness of the common objectives, values, and interests – in short, collective identity.

Based on the formulated goals and functions as well as community interaction, the following values and norms can be observed: when offering a product, it is essential that it be a local (from the Ciuc region) and backyard farming product, manufactured personally or perhaps by local small businesses. The backyard feature usually overrides the local character, meaning that in the case of seasonal products, for instance, information and product offers on vegetables and fruits – such as strawberry – that can be harvested in warmer regions of the country earlier in the year as compared to other areas are accepted in the group. This is the point where the functioning of the community reinforces the most the traditional model of subsistence farming characteristic of the households in Szeklerland and briefly covered in the introductory part of our study, just as it backs up the market-seeking initiatives, the ventures establishing or strengthening social embeddedness initiated by the actors involved in the regional agricultural innovation process.

Based on the interactions, personal relationship and trust appear as further community values. This is demonstrated by the fact that even in the case of small businesses (first of all agricultural, food industry, and craft small enterprises) only physical persons, the representatives of these ventures are allowed to publish information. Therefore, actual businesses are not visible at all – or just randomly – in the group, and they can be perhaps identified upon inquiry, as a result of certain efforts. Since in many cases members know each other and meet also in person, positive feedbacks and experiences foster trust among the members. On the virtual side, photos, videos, or sometimes short films (e.g. on production processes) attached to the posts are also intended to improve trust among members and enhance the reliability of the offered products and the related information.

In the context of virtual interactions, some of the essential norms are respectful, tolerant communication and behaviour, the selective use of the mother tongue, of which group administrators have often reminded members and educated them in this respect, especially in the early stages of group formation. Both the implicitly and explicitly expressed values in the community are closely related to environment protection, to zero- and low-waste lifestyle, that encourages members to make informed purchasing decisions and buy products for their own use.

Group operation performed in accordance with the above highlighted values and norms is characterized by effective cooperation, time-efficient communication, a wide variety of interactions, and cohesion among the members. The organization of the community (both on the virtual and the physical level) constantly reinforces the already established norms. Events published and shared on the virtual platform are in line with group values and norms. Some of these events are as follows: *Csíkszentmártoni komposztnap* [Sânmartin Composting Day], *Komposzt Nap & Nyílt nap a Care2Travel közösségi kertben* [Composting Day and Open Day in the Care2Travel Community Garden], *Csíkszéki Gazdanapok 2020* [Ciuc Seat Farmer Days 2020], *VI. Gyergyói Magbörze* [VI. Gheorgheni Seed Fair], *Zero Waste mindenNapok* [Zero Waste EveryDay].

Summary

The present paper has drawn on observations and field experiences in order to provide a brief outline of the virtual aspects regarding the organization of a community connected to the Ciuc region and to backyard farming activities, taking into consideration criteria such as group formation and goals, rules and posts, values and norms, and characteristic features of group operation.

The organization and operation of the analysed community is a peculiar social phenomenon that, while differing from the community representations characteristic of the Szeklerland area, it reinforces the traditional model of family subsistence farming (fragmented lands, agriculture, livestock farming, self-sufficiency, transfer or selling of surplus production, mitigating exposure to external factors), and, in the context of regional agricultural innovation processes, it can be considered a specific form of agricultural actors' initiatives seeking self-determination and establishing social embeddedness. The community's emergence on the virtual platform as well as the values, norms, and cultural patterns it conveys have a community-strengthening and collective-identity-producing function. This type of community representation and operation is a new, innovative form of cooperation and community organization, wherein lies a society-shaping and social education potential. Based on observations so far, the investigated community enjoys widespread popularity both in virtual and physical terms, and it has an impact on local society through the large number of people using it and talking about it in their everyday lives. The model's social history antecedents and its fitting into the region's social context may be key elements of this success.

New communities and community representations emerging in the Szeklerland area in parallel with the spread of information technology and the role these communities play in society are all important research tasks. In the context of rural areas, the spotlight is placed on professional questions aiming to address responses, reactions that occur to global effects and that can be observed at the individual as well as family level and affect the whole of the local society.

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