

# The “Chicago School” in the Global Community

## Concept Explication for Communication Theories and Practices

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*This article advocates a theoretical grounding in “community” that not only has heuristic value in the social sciences, but that is particularly useful in building communication theory. This grounding is predicated on and is deeply rooted in the understanding of “community” as conceptualized by the sociologists of the Chicago School of Social Thought. First, this article presents a necessary background for defining “community” as a societal ideal from the Chicago School’s perspective. Next, it argues for the continuing relevance of this early 20th Century concept to contemporary social science in a global, yet multicultural and fragmented, society, and specifically to communication theory and practice worldwide. Finally, it offers a range of examples of communities that have evolved that are illustrative of dysfunctional communities that stand in contrast to the ideals, i.e., the ethics and values, of the Chicago School’s conceptualization of community. Such examples of dysfunctional communities can expand our contemporary understanding of the requisite elements of normative models of functional communities that can both inform and ground public relations theory and practice as espoused by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988). The article argues, not only for the utility of the concept of “community” in contemporary public relations theory, but also advocates that community-building must be the primary role of and a function of a successful public relations practice. The article furthermore identifies elements, or dimensions, of the concept of community that influence both the functionality and dysfunctionality of communities. Thus, this essay builds on previous research in community engagement, and particularly*

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*communication and public relations (e.g., Barbaro, 2006; Ramirez, Aitkin, & Kora, 2005; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001) and extends a meta theoretical framework of community in relation to community-building to continue to inform communication theory-building by providing a typology of communities together with constitutive and operational criteria of both functional and dysfunctional communities — a categorization that has both theoretical and practical implications.*

Keywords: *Community-Building, Public Relations, Chicago School, Dysfunctional / Functional Community, Typology of Communities*

## INTRODUCTION

“Community” is a concept that most often denotes inclusivity and harmony and emotional, if not material, support for its members. Such an idealized social environment would seem to be the optimal outcome of successful communication practice among institutions and a range of other organizations within a social environment; perhaps as frequently, however, “community” is a construct that connotes divisiveness and enmity, if not among a “community’s” members, themselves, certainly in this community’s relationships with other disparate “communities” that may compete against it in any number of ways; such outcomes of divisiveness and enmity, of course, would be the obverse of any optimal outcomes of normative models of communication, specifically strategic communication, as practiced by institutions and other organizations within that social environment. In other words, a “community” may manifest itself through inclusivity or its obverse exclusivity, i.e., a community might be the foundation of harmony and support but also divisiveness and enmity through exclusivity regarding who may or may not join this social group and/or through its competitive relationships with other “communities.” To examine these opposing outcomes, the concept of “community” needs to be explicated and constitutively, if not operationally, defined for use in the social sciences, particularly in communication. Its heuristic value to communication research must be explored and evaluated carefully and critically from a range of disciplinary and ideological perspectives.

By explicating the concept of community and its relationship to the

communication field, this article provides a meta-conceptual grounding of “community” so that communication scholars, and in particular strategic communication scholars, can better examine and evaluate the utility and desirability of functional communities in the 21st Century, ideally to diagnose problems that contribute to dysfunctional communities, and to prescribe communication strategies to overcome these problems. Fundamental to such explication are important elements, i.e., dimensions of “community,” e.g., the ethics and morals that are requisite to building and maintaining communities that are functional for their members as well as for others in a global, but nevertheless multicultural and fragmented, society.

This article advocates a meta-perspective on “community” that is predicated on and deeply rooted in the understanding of “community” as conceptualized by the sociologists of the Chicago School of Social Thought, a community of scholars whose early 20th Century work remains an ideal model for contemporary 21st Century communication theory and practice. First, this article presents a necessary background for defining “community” from the Chicago School’s perspective. Next, it argues for the continuing relevance of this ideal model in contemporary social science and particularly in communication. Finally, it offers a typology of dysfunctional communities that stand in contrast to the Chicago School’s normative conceptualization of community that, the authors argue, remains a benchmark ideal for 21st Century global strategic communication practice. A typology of dysfunctional communities that are the antithesis of what the Chicago School valued can expand our contemporary understanding of communities within the context of communication theory and practice. Examination of such dysfunctional communities, in contrast to functional communities, can provide a conceptual grounding for communication scholars to examine and evaluate both functional and dysfunctional communities in the 21st Century and can inform strategic communication, particularly public relations, strategies and tactics. Thus, this essay builds on previous communication research in community engagement, community orientation, and public relations (Barbaro, 2006; Kruckeberg & Starck, 1988; Gumpert & Drucker, 1998; Ramirez, Aitkin, & Kora, 2005; Shim & Salmon, 1990; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2001) and extends a theoretical framework of community-building as advocated by Kruckeberg and Starck (1988), by identifying and examining dysfunctional communities that are the antithesis of what the Chicago School envisioned as functional.

## CHICAGO SCHOOL'S CONCEPTUALIZATION OF COMMUNITY

One perspective on "community" as a societal ideal that has had considerable impact historically on social science has come from the Chicago School of Social Thought (Grossberg, 1979). Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) noted that these sociologists consisted mostly of a group of professors at the University of Chicago, an exception being the University of Michigan's Charles Horton Cooley, who shared intellectual interests and social philosophies with the other members of the "Chicago School." Central figures included John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, W. I. Thomas, Robert E. Park, Thorstein Veblen, Ernest Watson Burgess, and Louis Wirth. The group became known collectively as the "Chicago School" because, save for Cooley, its members had spent much of their academic careers at the University of Chicago and they also used the City of Chicago as a social laboratory. The "Chicago School's" period of greatest productivity and influence was from 1882 to about 1939 (Depew & Peters, 2001). Belman (1975) reported that those in the Chicago School were historical in their orientation, optimistic in their mood, and democratic in their spirit. The Chicago School believed that history was fundamentally progressive, and these scholars viewed the study of *communication* as the primary means to understand the social phenomena that would help society to progress to higher levels (Grossberg, 1979).

Because the concept of "community" was of such central importance to the members of the "Chicago School" (Depew & Peters, 2001), they collectively identified and described specific elements that they claimed were requisite to the definition of "community," a concept so focal to their scholarship that it required the most careful examination and explication.

Burgess (1973) argued that "community" was the term that was applied to society when it was considered from the perspective of the geographic distribution of individuals and their institutions; although an individual might belong to many "*social groups*," she or he would ordinarily belong to only one "*community*." Park (1952) agreed with Burgess that every community had a physical location, with the members of this community residing within the "community's" geographic territory. Park (1952) also concurred with Burgess (1973) that a smaller community could be included within a larger one. Indeed, Park (1952) extended this larger "community" to the whole world as the *ultimate community*, an intriguing concept that certainly has

relevance today. Importantly, however, Burgess (1973) maintained that an individual could be a member of a “community” only to that extent to which she or he participated in the common life of this community. Dewey (1916) argued that a community was not possible unless individuals were primarily interested in entering into the activities of others within that community as well as in participating in conjoint and cooperative activities. Indeed, Park, Burgess, and McKenzie (1925) agreed that a community was where an individual maintained his or her life as a person. Mead (1964) believed the ideal of a community rested on the full attainment of individuals’ functional differentiation and social participation. He observed:

In civilized communities while individuals and classes continue to contend, as they do, with each other, it is with the consciousness of common interests that are the bases for their contentions and their solutions. (pp. 365-366)

However, Park (1952) maintained that institutions, not people, were final and decisive in distinguishing a community from other social constellations.

Park (1952) observed that a local *culture* also existed within a community, i.e., those sentiments, forms of conduct, attachments, and ceremonies that were characteristic of a locality, either originating from that geographic area or that have become identified with it in some way. These sentiments, forms of conduct, attachments, and ceremonies, Park said, comprised a “cultural community.” Further, Park, and Miller (1969) believed that people within a community would also have a body of *common memories* that were sufficient to enable them to understand one another. Dewey (1939) saw an associated, joint activity as a condition for the creation of a community. However, while association remained only physical or organic, Dewey argued that communal life was in fact moral. By moral, Dewey meant emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained.

After a thorough examination of the literature of the scholars who had represented this stream of social research, Kruckeberg and Starck (1988, p. 56) abstracted these elements from the Chicago School’s definition of “community”:

1. An individual ordinarily belongs primarily to one community.
2. The individual participates in the common life of the community, is aware of and interested in common ends, and regulates activity in view

of those ends. For this, communication is required.

3. Functional differentiation occurs to some extent because people have diverse occupations and activities.
4. People in a community occupy a definable geographic area.
5. Institutions spring up and become prerequisites to community formation.
6. A community develops specific cultural characteristics.

### CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL SCIENCE RELEVANCE

Immense societal changes have not only been occurring rapidly since the heyday of the “Chicago School,” but they have been increasing geometrically, undoubtedly reaching a crescendo during the past decade. These dramatic changes are raising fundamental questions about earlier social-scientific perspectives, especially when considering the escalating development of three inter-related phenomena that have created the most profound, yet largely unappreciated and insufficiently measured, societal changes: 1) communication/transportation technology, which is an intervening variable that has encouraged: 2) its outcome, globalism and 3) globalism’s obverse, multiculturalism because of which a global society remains divisive and fragmented.

To properly reflect these societal changes, especially the first two, some of the Chicago School’s elements, i.e., dimensions, of defining community need to be further explicated and expanded upon. With the rapid development of the Internet the past few decades and social virtual spaces, i.e., the new social media, a “definable geographic area” as a necessary element of a community should be reconceptualized and perhaps recognized as being obsolete. Existence of online, or virtual, communities is a reason for such reconceptualization (Porter, 2004). In virtual communities, geography is virtual, that is definite borders of a community may be non-existent in a traditional sense, yet they remain well-defined.

Virtual communities can have business or social orientation and can be used for facilitating business transactions, discussing shared interests, developing social relations, and exploring new identities, among others (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; Wenjing, 2005). The Internet may even be a sacramental place that facilitates the formation of spiritual online communities (Campbell, 2005). The processes of community-building in

a virtual community become differentiated by a self-organized community and often by the hybrid half-virtual, half-real nature of this community (Rohde, Reinecke, & Pape, 2004). The growth of virtual communities in a “global village” creates a situation in which one individual can easily belong to multiple communities, i.e., both physical and virtual. Belonging to multiple communities has now become the norm, i.e., today, we commonly belong to more than one community. An individual can be a member of such virtual communities as Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube, in addition to being a member of her or his geographic community. Moreover, a person can more easily be simultaneously a member of multiple traditional communities, such as religious, environmental, and educational communities. Therefore, the authors of this article propose to change the first element of a definition of a community to reflect the nature of belonging to multiple communities. Nevertheless, although an individual can belong to more than one community, one community usually becomes primary, i.e., an individual usually defines herself or himself first-and-foremost as a member of X community (whether physical or virtual). For instance, the owner of the most famous profile on MySpace may define herself as a member of the MySpace community first and foremost, whereas a leader of a professional organization will likely first-and-foremost define herself as a member of that professional community.

The authors thus offer to adjust the fourth element of the definition of community, i.e., a definable geographic area, to reflect the presence of virtual (online) communities. In relation to a virtual community, a community can be defined as follows: People in a community occupy a definable space, whether physical or virtual. These proposed elements, i.e., dimensions, of a community, as defined by the Chicago School and as adjusted here to reflect a contemporary reality of communities, can help to further reconceptualize community in communication theory.

The three aforementioned societal changes, two of which, globalism and multiculturalism, ironically are the obverse of one another, have created paradoxes in contemporary society that have tremendous implications for the explication of “community” as a social-scientific concept to the extent that “community” should be examined, not only as a construct for its functionality, but also for the potential dysfunctionality that is arguably increasing in a technological, multicultural, and global age. Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) observed:

Through communication/transportation technology, new communities can and are being formed, yet anomie and societal fragmentation exist perhaps as never before. Social relationships are being rapidly changed in ways that are not fully understood. Traditional paradigms are being challenged and discredited, yet new values have not evolved to fill the resulting void...

(p. 52)

Nevertheless, Starck and Kruckeberg (2001) hold steadfast to their earlier (1988) contention: they re-attest to the importance of the restoration and maintenance of a sense of community in contemporary society, albeit they claim an even greater urgency to this admonishment. That is because of the increasing institutional power of transnational corporations, which are communities, themselves, that often go unchecked and unaccountable to the citizens of the world.

However, Starck and Kruckeberg are not without their critics, particularly concerning what some contemporary scholars argue is their failure to address what normatively should be a *community* as well as the fundamental question concerning how *community* can be defined and operationalized as a construct. For example, Cheney and Christensen (2001) urged further development of the Kruckeberg and Starck's (1988) and Starck and Kruckeberg's (2001) concept of community so that the construct can become more than a "benign pluralism":

... Starck and Kruckeberg do not present a vision of community that coheres theoretically or practically. In the end, it is difficult to tell exactly what they are promoting except to grant their blessing to connections of all types among institutions and between organizations and individuals. Perhaps their position of moral neutrality and descriptive taken-for-grantedness in accounting for forces of globalization ... leads them to adopt a political and moral perspective on community that could best be described as benign pluralism. In any case, the authors need to go further than they do ... to articulate their vision of community building, lest it remain simply a slogan. (p. 59)

Although Kruckeberg and Starck's concept of community is more adequately described in their book, *Public Relations and Community: A*



*Reconstructed Theory* (1988), Cheney and Christensen's (2001) criticism has validity as a catalyst in helping to define and to examine an ideal "community" in contemporary global society. Kruckeberg and Starck (1988) arguably fell short of explicitly describing a normative type of *community* as a construct. At the same time, Cheney and Christensen further corrected that "the metaphor of *community*, by definition, is a value-laden concept" (p. 59).

The authors of this essay agree that "community" is a value-driven concept. For each community, certain values are developed and manifested. These values include ethical and moral values from which members of the community can feel individual and collective security and identity within the community and through which the community can define itself by defining its relationship with the rest of global society. Such ethics and values create and ensure "functional," rather than "dysfunctional," communities.

In short, a normative type of a community can be defined using revised elements of the Chicago School's definition of community. However, to fully describe the concept of community, values and ethical norms of its existence should also define this concept.

## ETHICS AND VALUES AS MOST SALIENT COMMUNITY VARIABLES

Indeed, ethics and values are undoubtedly the most salient variables distinguishing between functional and dysfunctional "communities". Goodstein, Nolan, and Pfeiffer (1993) adopted the Rokeach definition of values and value systems, "a *value* is an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (p. 147). Lambeth (1992) observed that values, both moral and immoral, define what is good and bad, just as principles define what is right and what is wrong. However, Williams (1995) argued that "culture" dictates what constitutes criminality; from this, one can infer that the societal culture within which a community exists will determine at least the parameters of that community's ethics and values. Goodstein et al., (1993) defined "culture" as a social system based on a central set of beliefs and values.

Just as "professional" groups develop codes of ethics to define the scope of their membership, to identify who they are as professionals and to determine who may join their ranks (Behrman, 1988), agreed-upon social ethics are critical in defining a "community," whether or not such ethics are formally codified. Just as professional groups' codes of ethics formalize these groups' relationship to society (Behrman, 1988), social ethics define the societal mores of a "community." Of course, such ethics must be consonant with the overall expectations of society (Behrman, 1988), but beyond those parameters latitude exists in determining the ethics of a community.

Nevertheless, a functional community must have a set of ethics, codified or not, that are morally defensible according to the society within which this community exists. Today, a *functional* community must have core values that are consistent and compatible with those of 21st Century modern society. A *functional* community's ethics will be based upon and will reflect such core values; a *dysfunctional* community's ethics, whether codified or not, will not be consistent with, and may be in opposition to, those of modern society.

Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1992) conclude that social institutions are the bodies that mediate our "ultimate" moral and religious commitments. These institutions are premised on a moral and religious understanding, or what sociologists call "ultimate values." If so, what are these core values that are requisite to 21<sup>st</sup> Century modern society? One core value must be inclusivity and the pluralism that this inclusivity brings. In a multicultural, technologically advanced global society, it is reasonable, if not obvious, that functional communities must be pluralistic, rather than monistic, i.e., people must reasonably be allowed to join the communities to which they aspire to become members, given their acceptance of the ethics and mores of those communities.

Barney (1986) defined a *pluralistic community* as a social structure that allows, and even assures, the distribution of multiple messages, or the identification of alternatives. In turn, a monistic community is dominated by a single value system that dictates what is right. Monism encourages the suppression of dissenting views, and the majority of such a community's members will structure the community's environment to be self-serving and self-perpetuating. The more powerful the majority, the more likely that it will perpetuate its own values; in contrast, the tolerance that is required

for a pluralistic society will create a need for discussion and deliberation. Other core values would also seem evident, such as a basic concern for individual human rights; a sense of and mechanism for justice; institutionalized compassion; egalitarian concern about the welfare of all members of society, including women, children, and animals; and an emphasis on the humane protection of the weak and powerless.

Also important is the preservation of the physical environment, which a “functional” community would value and protect. Transparency of a society's institutions is another core value to assure a functional community. In turn, a dysfunctional community would practice monism, and there would be a lack of concern for universal human rights, justice, compassion, the welfare of all members of society and a lack of protection of the weak and powerless as well as a lack of concern about the physical environment. Such a community would be closed and conservative in both its decision making and in its acceptance of new members.

## TYOLOGY OF DYSFUNCTIONAL COMMUNITIES

While communities and community-building remain important, arguably even more important in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century world than in past ages, dysfunctional communities are likely to harm either their own members, other communities to which they are opposed or of which members the dysfunctional communities exclude, or society-at-large. Indeed, social scientists and other citizens must be continually watchful and cautious of today's dysfunctional communities. Dysfunctional communities in the proposed typology are easy to identify in a post-modern/post-9/11 world. While this typology is not exhaustive, it allows us to systematically analyze dysfunctional communities and it illustrates the inherent dangers of a range of such dysfunctional communities.

### Tribal Communities

Unrecognized by most until 9/11, “tribalism” arguably represents today's most threatening form of dysfunctional communities as fundamentalist extremists use demagoguery to form communities of the disenfranchised. Ironically, modern means of communication and transportation have allowed them to do so more effectively than ever before. “Tribalism” in today's

society is a rebellion against modern mass-mediated society and against nationalism and secularism by those who seek to re-establish traditional unmediated societies. Stephen (1995) noted two characteristics that differentiate modern and traditional societies: first is pluralism, and second is egalitarianism. First, in traditional societies, "beliefs are consensual and communication functions mainly to convey information and to coordinate action" (p. 16). Modern societies are extremely pluralistic, i.e., beliefs are non-structured, and "communication is used to create shared constructions of reality," (p. 16) which further provides stability to isolated members of mediated communities. Egalitarianism is another characteristic of a modern mediated society; in such societies, interaction occurs within, as well as between, representatives of unequal social power. Multiple levels of interaction create multiple shared meanings that allow for constructions of reality.

Over a decade ago, Mowlana (1996) wrote that Western theories of human development, both Marxist and liberal democratic, assume that modern economic and social organization must replace traditional structures, i.e., industrialization in the economy; secularization in thought, personality, and communication; a cosmopolitan attitude; integration into a world culture; and rejection of traditional thoughts and technologies. Today, one can see that tribalism is not only "dysfunctional," but arguably has become the primary threat to modern global society.

For corporations, which remain perhaps the most visible icons of modern society to be able to prosper, dominant values must include Western rationalism, scientific inquiry, and legal theory in addition to capitalism (Kennedy, 1993). It is unlikely that corporations could compete in the global economic arena if they were steeped in the cultures of developing societies that retain dominant value systems that are antithetical to these norms.

Violent wholesale attempts to create a rebirth of tribalism in a desire to return to erstwhile traditional societies are dysfunctional to modern society and its core values; community-building efforts that seek a return to tribalism are inherently incompatible with, and cannot exist alongside, modern societies in a world that is dramatically shrinking in time and space. However, resisting tribalism is highly problematic, of course, not only because of the amorphous nature of these tribes (e.g., in comparison to "nations" that can be readily identified through formal governments and geographic boundaries), but also because of the irreconcilable ideological

absolutisms that are inherent in many forms of tribalism and because of the oftentimes accompanying fanatical hatred that was demonstrated by 9/11.

### Corporatist Communities

A largely unrecognized form of tribalism exists that can be called “corporatism,” whether this is in the form of a corporatist state in which political and economic power is vested in an organization of corporations or whether it takes the form of large transnational corporations that can circumvent openness and transparency and accountability by operating within an international, i.e., “extra-national,” environment. Although their goal is profit, they must operate at least nominally within the environment of modern societies to assure their markets and labor expertise. Therefore, they are not as overtly threatening; at the same time, such communities, when their ambitions remain unchecked, can manifest socially harmful “tribal” tendencies within a global society. For instance, one can think of a state-controlled community that is an active player on the global economic arena as an example. When the Russian government recently threatened to cut off gas to Ukraine, it manifested tribal tendencies by ignoring the fact that Ukrainian pipelines transport gas, not only and not so much to Ukraine, as to multiple members of the European Union. The incident disrupted a normal flow of events, and one act of a dysfunctional community interrupted the functionality of several others. Acknowledging the complexity of a global economic society is a necessary “reality check” for actions of corporatist communities.

### Hate Communities

Hate communities exist for, and focus upon, their enmity toward other communities. They are the most overtly dysfunctional of any communities because their reason for existence is to be against, indeed to harm, other communities. One can think of underground neo-fascist communities in some countries of Eastern and Western Europe as an example of hate communities.

### Nationalistic Communities

While tribalism arguably has shown itself to be a greater threat to modern global society than has contemporary nationalism, the creation of nationalistic fervor can create highly harmful "pseudo-communities" very much like hate communities. Extreme nationalistic communities do not manifest hate, but their ideals are often hard to separate from those of the hate communities. Not to be confused with patriotism, extreme nationalism can create communities that are dysfunctional, not only to their members within their nations, but in their threat to other nation-states. Strong nationalism creates a divisiveness that is bred of exclusivity, which of course becomes ultimately threatening to the global community. Nationalistic communities on both ends fuel the current conflict between Serbia and newly independent Kosovo.

### Religious Communities

While the strength of religious communities may be the inclusivity that is inherent in their attempt to co-opt and then nurture believers, the historic danger of religious communities has been the obverse of this inclusivity, i.e., the hateful intolerance that some religious communities have toward those who do not share their beliefs. At best, religious communities exemplify "functional" values for the betterment of society, while, at the least, religious communities are innocuous to those who do not share their beliefs; at the worst, they display the harmful characteristics of dysfunctional tribal, corporatist, hate, and nationalistic communities.

### Ethnocentric Communities

Such communities may share the traits of religious communities, ranging from being innocuous to those outside of their communities to displaying gross intolerance of others who, because of race or ethnicity, cannot or will not join their communities. Ethnocentric communities can exemplify all of the harmful characteristics of tribal, corporatist, hate, and nationalistic communities. Importantly, however, just as patriotism should not be confused with nationalism, neither should ethnic pride be confused with ethnocentrism.

## Local and Regional Communities

The Chicago School believed in the importance of these local and regional communities, and those scholars rued the loss of these “communities” that were geographically based. Functional at best and usually innocuous at worst, such local and regional communities can become dysfunctional when they take on the divisive traits of tribal, corporatist, hate, and nationalistic communities in their opposition to other communities or when they unduly limit the welfare and development of their own community members, as was argued by the U.S. State of Texas’ law enforcement personnel, who seized 416 children of members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints at the religious sect’s El Dorado, Texas, “Yearning for Zion Ranch” in April 2008.

“Communitarianism,” according to Etzioni (1994), nevertheless, is essential. An ideal community should not lead to “majoritarianism,” resulting neither in “thought police,” nor a minority of extremists who impose their immoderate views on the community, nor a fear of the majority who impose its views on dissenting individuals.

## Professional/Occupational Communities

Professional and occupational communities may be among the most functional of all communities and may hold the most promise in community-building. For example, members of professional and occupational communities, from an agreed-upon normative theory of society, can contribute in unique ways toward a global society of peace and harmony as well as prosperity for all. Through the codification of their professional ethics, professional and occupational communities not only can define their relationship with society, but such communities can determine their contributions to social welfare. The mark of a true professional/occupational community is the professionalism that ensures that the occupation’s mission and goals to help society. Such a community can, nevertheless, become dysfunctional if it does not pursue its mission, goals, and principles.

## Special Interest and Consumer Communities

Special-interest and consumer communities are innocuous as long as their goals do not overtly harm society. Hobby/avocational interests and

loyalty to products may not be fully understood or appreciated by those outside these communities, and thus such communities may be neither functional nor dysfunctional at large. However, such special-interest and consumer communities can also be highly functional — providing a sense of community for those not otherwise having the benefit of community membership.

### Global Community

The potential for, and the benefits of, a global community are feared by some and misunderstood by many. However, we might have little choice in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century in which time and space have become insignificant, in which communities and community-building are not restricted by travel and geography, and in which there is an economic, if not cultural, incentive to “go global.” Certainly, nothing technological precludes citizens from belonging to geographically diverse communities as well as to a global community that has the resources, if not the potential, for peace, harmony, and prosperity. A global community is often complex and comprehensive as ethnic diversity and migration constantly define and re-define the nature of the global community. For instance, media engage in a global community-building, playing a decisive role in connecting diverse groups and parties, whether or not they are physically crossing the borders (Gumpert & Drucker, 1998; Shim & Salmon, 1990).

A global community is not without its dangers, however. A global community may have the same dangers that Kaplan (2000) identified for peace:

... (A) truism that bears repeating is that peace, as a primary goal, is dangerous because it implies that you will sacrifice any principle for the sake of it. A long period of peace in an advanced technological society like ours could lead to great evils, and the ideal of a world permanently at peace and governed benignly by a world organization is not an optimistic view of the future but a dark one. (p. 169)

Kaplan (2000) has made a compelling argument that true peace is obtainable only through a form of tyranny, however subtle and mild, and thus he does not endorse any type of world government:



In such a world, a unified global elite agrees on how to fight disease, poverty, global warming, dictatorship, drug smuggling, trade barriers, and so forth. The problem with this vision is that there are no universal truths on how to organize society or improve it. The cannon of humanism emphasizes that we cannot know everything about ourselves, that we will forever remain a sanctified mystery. It is not that we are doomed to be individuals and, therefore, to disagree: on the contrary, such disagreements are precisely what clarify our *humanness*. (pp. 176-177)

We must be aware of potential danger of a global community if it takes certain characteristics of one of the previously discussed dysfunctional communities, such as corporatist or hate. One should not go further than to recall any anti-utopia in order to imagine the potential danger of a dysfunctional global community. A global community should not be guided by opportunistic ideas, such as solely economic prosperity or a unified global government whose power extends worldwide. The challenge of a global community is to bring together all communities, which sometimes also include dysfunctional corporatist communities, in order to reach one commonly shared goal, such as minimization of the greenhouse effect. But, even then, the functionality of a global community is socially constructed, and, as such, can also be challenging and potentially controversial.

That is why through communication community-building needs to be considered to restore and maintain a sense of a functional community, a community that can find a common ground despite a fragmented reality. Communication plays a crucial role in such community-building. It allows communities to continuously re-examine their functionality to reflect and improve the process of community-building. Communities that engage in the community-building process will have a better chance of becoming or maintaining their status of functional communities because of the ongoing “reality check” that satisfies and ensures an equal, shared participation in creating goals as well as in achieving them. This is only possible through open communication and transparency with multiple parties, through building and maintaining relations. Community building can ensure that dangers of a dysfunctional community will be brought to attention, examined, and evaluated by functional communities according to socially constructed and agreed upon standards.

Communication as a field has a central, arguably primary, role in building and maintaining functional communities that can approach, if not achieve, the ideal of the Chicago School of Social Thought. To do so, communication practitioners and scholars worldwide should first form their own functional professional community to a far-greater extent than it exists in this first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Through communication/transportation technology, a multicultural, but global, strategic communication community, including the public relations community, can coalesce into a global professionalized community that, through professional practice, research and education, will significantly help people throughout the world to live in harmony, prosperity and safety in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century global society.

However, communication, its practice, scholarship, and education are predicated upon globally universal professional values that recognize that the ethical practice of strategic communication worldwide can contribute substantively to the betterment of humankind. These values, based on a normative theory of society, include: democracy in its several forms; individual human rights, particularly for women, children and oppressed minorities; equal justice worldwide; universal compassion; and egalitarian concern about the welfare of all members of society — with a special emphasis on the humane protection of the weak and powerless, both human and nonhuman. Preservation of the world’s physical environment is equally valued. Of utmost importance in safeguarding these values are the foundation values of openness and transparency of all social institutions, including governments and civil society organizations and public and private businesses.

The stakeholders of this professional community are many. At the macro level they are all of global citizenry, who can benefit from the ethical professional practice of strategic communication as well as from the scholarship and education that supports its global practice. Primary stakeholders include, but are not limited to, communication practitioners, scholar/educators, and students worldwide; their professional associations and alliances (e.g., the International Communication Association, the International Public Relations Association, the Global Alliance, the Institute for Public Relations, and the Plank Center for Leadership in Public Relations); institutions of higher learning that offer communication professional education worldwide; governments and civil society organizations; and public and private businesses that employ/retain communication practitioners.

As values and standards that would define such functional professional community-building are socially constructed and agreed upon, the role of communication is vast as participation and engagement in forming a functional community of communication professionals are key elements of any successful community-building.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has presented arguments for understanding a global community through the criteria of the “Chicago School.” It has argued for the importance of community-building to restore and maintain the sense of community that had existed in many places before the rapid evolution of modern means of communication and transportation. These pluralistic social groups should be functional communities of inclusiveness and harmony and support for community members. Core values must include a basic concern for individual human rights; a sense of and mechanism for justice; institutionalized compassion; egalitarian concern about the welfare of all members of society, including women, children, and animals; and an emphasis on the humane protection of the weak and powerless. Also important is the preservation of the physical environment, whether physical or virtual, which a functional community would value and protect. Transparency of a society’s institutions is another core value of a functional community, arguably an ultimate value that ensures the creation and maintenance of other core values.

Communication technology, which outcomes are an inevitable exposure to multiculturalism, and the potential for globalism require us to lose neither our identities nor our membership in multiple functional communities within a global society. Chauvinism is often the only obstacle preventing us from appreciating and adopting what is good in other cultures. Ignorance is often the only obstacle precluding us from realizing that people are far more alike than they are different.

A range of communities exists today, and there is great potential for many other types of communities to evolve. Some are dysfunctional (e.g., tribal, corporatist, hate, and nationalistic) communities. Some have the potential for dysfunction, such as religious and ethnocentric communities. Increasingly, a global community could evolve, with chauvinism and

ignorance giving way to an open-mindedness that would encourage us to borrow what is good from other cultures and to realize that the world's peoples are far more alike than they are different. However, as with peace, a truly global community might cost a greater price than we should pay, and a little dysfunction might always be needed in 21<sup>st</sup> Century society.

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