SERBIAN VIRTUAL COMMUNITY AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts
Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the
University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT

This research is an ethnographic study of a Serbian virtual community, observed and explored during the Kosovo crisis. The ethnic virtual space was analyzed from the perspective of a participant-observer in the research site, combining techniques of participant-observation, online surveying and online interviewing of community members. Analyzed patterns of community interactions allowed developing a typology on a basis of observed data and elaborated concepts in literature.

Discussion of the research includes suggestions about ways of how an ethnic group could use computer-mediated communication technologies for its own purposes and in its own language to locally construct an environment, to participate in homeland and immigrant issues and to establish otherwise impossible contact among its dispersed members. In addition, discussion also addresses educational components of the ethnic virtual community - social organization, rules of behavior, and modes of access.
I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Joel Weiss, my supervisor, for his continued support, knowledgeable inputs and encouragement that guided me through the entire thesis process. I would also like to thank Dr. Robert Morgan for accepting to be a member of my thesis committee. To Jason Nolan, thanks for stimulating discussions that have inspired many aspects of this thesis.

Finally, thanks to Vladan for being himself.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In many ways, cyberspatial culture is like the modern spatial city with its segregation of spaces and internal contradictions, only more so. And just as there are resistance movements to urban domination and the multinational corporate culture located in cities, the Net embraces a multitude of local and international anti-globalization movements that use the global technology. (Irvine, 1998)

The Internet, the worldwide network of computer networks, and its relationship to society, has become a main subject under research focus in the last ten years. Scholars coming from various academic backgrounds have gained insight into the Internet’s complexity and importance to society. Started with technophilic “hype” and technophobic animosity, the discourse surrounding new Internet technologies and their possible influence on individuals and social groups has become closer to moderate optimism or moderate pessimism in its estimation and evaluation.

The dramatically increasing number of people gaining Internet access and the constant growth of the new computer networks from different parts of the world slowly but importantly changed the picture of cyberspace. The Internet network has become a huge resource of information, simulating a new kind of giant multi-media library, easily searched and accessible from every part of the network. Moreover, the Internet has offered opportunities to its users, even to those with decent computer literacy, to access the Internet space and “publish” chosen information. Theoretically speaking, anybody with the access to a computer and an ISP account can search or browse the world’s information database or “publish” the information on the Internet. Both of these possibilities offered by the Internet are important and demand further examination.
However, what actually has provoked the wide research interest and where the scholars have found a focal point of the Internet’s influence on society was its capability for interactivity. New communicative technologies, founded upon the Internet’s infrastructure, have given people the ability to communicate with others regardless of geographical location. They can access virtual sites to communicate, share ideas and values, discuss different issues of interest and form virtual groups for emotional support, which were unimaginable possibilities before. The Internet infrastructure, with accompanying communication software has offered a new array of possibilities for people to “talk” to each other and form different types of groupings.

The cited paragraph has effectively set the tone for the following discussion. The Internet embraces numerous divided, but possibly interconnected, virtual spaces that are created, populated and maintained by people of different interests, ages, languages, and ethnic or religious groups. These virtual groups can use different combinations of Internet technologies for their own particular purposes. From this approach, what we mean by “virtual group” or by “Internet” could be highly disputable. The variety of groups regarding their structure or purpose, for example, the diversity of members who populate one group, or the number of groups in which one Internet user could simultaneously participate and, moreover, multiple combinations of Internet technologies a person could use – can blur our “monolithic” picture about the Internet and its population. It seems that the only way to understand virtual communities, formed in and with the help of the Internet, is by acknowledging their complexity and to study social phenomena in relation to specific virtual spaces.
This thesis is an attempt to gain insight into one of the virtual ethnic groups populating the Internet, the Serbian virtual community. Despite the many sound theoretical claims about globalizing forces that the Internet technologies and the prevalent use of English language entail and spread out over the Internet, the Net-presence of the national, ethnic, cultural or regional virtual groups makes this issue far more complex.

Believing in the potential of virtual ethnic communities, I will explore in this research the Serbian virtual community and its main characteristics, and speculate on its role in the life of Serbians, particularly those living in Diaspora. Special interest will be placed on the Serbian virtual community as a site for creating, recreating, maintaining or negotiating the Serbian ethnic identity. Moreover, within the context of extreme real-life circumstances, the Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia from March to June 1999, this research will address the changes in the Serbian virtual community provoked by this real life event.

In this research I will combine several sources of data including the perceptions of virtual ethnic community participants, the observation of the virtual site(s) and the participants' interactions, the broad literature and research work related to virtual communities, ethnicity construction and tensions between processes of localism and globalization in the cyberspace, as well as, changes in the ethnic virtual community generated by the real-life war situation.

Although a substantial body of literature addressing the diverse issues of virtual communities and their importance exists, limited research work covers the field of the ethnic participation and organization in cyberspace. To enhance understanding of diversity and complexity of Internet-based virtual groups, this study aims to explore, in detail, the ethnic
virtual space where communication is in Serbian, the mother-tongue of the community members. By sharing Net-space with mainly English-speaking virtual communities, gathering together Serbians living both in Diaspora and the homeland, and observing and exploring specific real life circumstances (the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia) – this virtual community as a research point of interest could be of particular importance to those interested in the exploration of different issues related to a virtual community, negotiation of ethnic identity, agency and resistance of the marginalized groups or, forces of globalization and localism in the cyberspace.

This research hopes to give insight into the virtual “place” – the complex web-site created with several communication technologies (particular focus will be placed on the computer conferencing forums and IRC channels), which supports, or is intended to support, the Serbian (and Serbian-speaking) virtual community.

The following questions are addressed in this research:

- What are the main characteristics of the Serbian virtual community?
- What changes in the Serbian virtual community were provoked by the extreme real-life experiences during the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (the homeland of participants in the virtual ethnic community living in Diaspora)?
- What can we speculate, reviewing the broad literature and gathered research data, about the possible role that the virtual ethnic community plays in the lives of the participants living in Diaspora, in general and, for their ethnic identity in particular?
The Researcher

As an immigrant of Serbian and Montenegrin descent, brought up in Belgrade, the largest city in Serbia and the capital of Yugoslavia, I came to Canada in 1996. Along with my husband, also of Serbian descent, we entered Canada under the “professional” class. Born, raised, and educated in the former Yugoslavia, I was taught to feel as a Yugoslavian. After the “quick” deconstruction of the country began in 1991, today’s Yugoslavia covers the territory of Serbia and Montenegro. By having firsthand experience of the process of forced change of ethnic identity in a society within a short period, the issue of the ethnic identity construction and reconstruction has become one of my personal interests. Believing that “an identity formation is not entirely a matter of self-ascription” but also is a “matter of ascription by others” (Danforth, 1995), I am a “self-ascribed” Yugoslavian and at the same time, by others “ascribed” as a Serbian. Like many Serbians living in Diaspora, the “hybrid” identity I brought with me to my host country was further challenged by the real-life events happening in my homeland, the “official” media presentations of those events and stereotyping about “Serbian-ness” and local, cultural, and political context. I believe that I share these experiences with the majority of immigrants of Serbian Diaspora who have emigrated within the last ten years.

I discovered the Serbian virtual community in June 1997 by surfing the Web and looking for information related to Serbian issues. From that point, I started to participate, sometimes as an observer, and other times as an active participant, depending on my “real life” obligations. In some ways, the virtual community I will write about, as well as, the
stories of the community members and, my personal observations and reflections are intrinsically connected.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Internet - in the context

The Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC), like earlier technologies for communication (telephone or television), have drawn the interest of scholars into the question of social change and the nature of that change. Will the Internet and CMC change the way people communicate, organize, educate or even how they participate in a wider society? Particularly interesting with the advent of the new technologies is that those predictions and prophecies of observers will gradually change with the development of technology itself. Historic distance is needed regarding the phenomena under study especially for those with fast-paced development. "Trying to assess the true importance and function of the Net now is like asking the Wright brothers at Kitty Hawk if they were aware of the potential of American Airlines Advantage Miles" (Ferren as cited in Remnick, 1997). Hopefully, many believe that we are able, armed with curiosity, knowledge and attention, to ask the right questions and develop sound strategies to approach the challenges posed by technology. The number of networked computers around the world and, the increasing number of people who are, adopting the technology, spending hours daily typing, searching, reading, trading and communicating, naturally attracts the curiosity of anyone interested in the interplay between society and technology.

Literature dealing with interpretations of the Internet's influence on wider society and culture could fall into several relatively distinct approaches. The optimistic or
technophilic perspective showed up with the first steps of the Internet and CMC development. The proponents of this approach see the Internet as a new tool for prosperity in the quality of the human life - in the sphere of education, entertainment, democratic participation, and community. They argue that the Internet has brought about the space for democratic discussion and exchange of ideas, something close to a "new public sphere" (Poster, 1996), possibly freed from constraints of the contemporary society. With affordable access to the Internet, the argument goes further, everyone has the opportunity to log on and, "covered" by anonymity, freely participate in the fair and rational debate related to issues of societal importance. The CMC, conducted in virtual spaces, and offering predominantly textual communication without visual cues, is considered more democratic than current social circumstances since the participants are potentially free from stereotypes of race, age, gender, or appearance (Reid 1991, Turkle 1995). Moreover, the Internet's ability to connect computer networks all around the world and thus, people who are geographically distant, offers the opportunity for multicultural dialogue (Reid, 1991). Besides the democratic "public sphere", the Internet can permit new types of "play" and experimentation that assumed anonymity has allowed - the play with real life identities in the Internet space. The "identity" question, as the proponents of this approach suggest, loses any importance in cyberspace. The Internet could be a positive environment for empowerment of currently marginalized people, allowing "silent" voices to be heard and existing hierarchies to be flattened. This optimistic approach is frequently criticized in the literature as similar to technological determinism, (Kellner, 1997) that assumes new or any technology could by itself lead society into greater prosperity. The Internet is seen by the proponents and
promoters of this approach as the medium able to constitute new kinds of spaces different from those in the “real life.”

Equally important, the technophobic and pessimistic discourse has surrounded early Internet development. Some critics are pessimistic about new technologies and their general impact on a wider society (Postman, 1993; Stoll, 1995). Others see danger in only certain aspects of the Internet, recognizing that technology is important for shaping human culture because it can:

(...) alter our perceptions, redefine our values, change the very shape and grain of our lives in ways we can rarely predict... In short, the notion of choice (or easy choice, anyway) is a myth...Arguing that virtual communities simply add another ingredient to the stew (which we are free to sample or not), is a bit like arguing that genetically-altered vegetables simply expand the consumer's option. (Slouka. 1995)

From this perspective, Internet technology could be seen as a new tool to control society by the market, state or corporations, further alienating people from each other and gradually destroying the potential of human agency. As Mitchell (1995) insightfully explains:

(...) the market place stands to gain something by first isolating us from one another, then selling us simulated versions of the things we used to have available to us, for free. As life in the West collapses (with increasing speed), into a series of internal spaces (the home, the car, the office, etc.), we are reduced to peering through screens of one sort of another at the world we used to know.

Aside from such general theoretic approaches, further technology development and burgeoning research into the CMC field have generated new perspectives about many of Internet's features. Anonymity, an essential assumption behind the technophilic approach, has been seriously questioned by scholars (Wynn and Katz, 1997). Several CMC researchers (Burkhalter, 1999; Donath, 1999; O'Brien, 1999) report that, “traditional status hierarchies
and inequalities are reproduced in online interaction and perhaps even magnified” (Kollock & Smith, 1999). The discourse of race, gender, or ethnicity is shown as important and relevant in the online environments. Actually, there is an assumption that the participants involved in electronic communications are interested in finding out who they are talking to and choose to present themselves in “real life” identity categories (Baym, 1998).

Furthermore, the controversial “unique ID” embedded in the new Pentium III processors that could provide the identification of any computer connected on the Internet, will probably put the issue of anonymity aside. Anonymity is maintained only by agreement, because it is “possible for any net-savvy person to trace an individual, and the Internet service provider (ISP) has a record of the account-holder” (Wynn & Katz, 1997). The participants that populate the Internet spaces are “real” people who construct their online identities and understand the identities of others drawing from real life contexts. In addition, like any technology, the Internet relies upon social institutions and processes that provide it with necessary infrastructure and support. “The Internet is not growing apart from the world, but to the contrary is increasingly embedded in it.” (Agre, 1999)

The question of access, closely connected with the ideal of participatory democracy over the Internet, is also the prominent question in the literature. Does the Internet have an “elitist” character? Statistics of Internet users conducted and frequently cited in literature during the mid-90s showed that the typical Internet user is a North American, white male in his mid-30’s. A brief look at the numbers of Internet hosts attached to the Internet network indicates that the rest of the world (mostly Asia and Africa, but even some European countries) counts for only one hundred or less computer hosts. Cheap Internet service combined with the free local telephone calls is a North American luxury. Multicultural
dialogue, as with any dialogue, is only possible if people are able to understand each other. The Internet and most of its accompanied software are intended for communication in English. Therefore, millions of people are excluded from the “multicultural” dialogue if they cannot read or write in English. “It’s estimated that over eighty percent of global net messages and data content are in English, as opposed to slightly more than a tenth of the global population that speaks English, including both primary and secondary-language speakers” (Lockard, 1996). Moreover, the prevalence of “Cyber-English”, a developed and customized form of English specifically related to CMC technologies, makes this obstacle for the non-English world even harder to overcome. Non-native English Net users are “the permanent clueless newbies of the Internet, a global class of linguistic peasantry who cannot speak technological Latin” (Lockard, 1996). Those issues related to Internet multicultural participation come to the forefront of the theoretic interest because of the constant increase of new Internet users from different countries and cultural groups.

A relatively new issue, closely related to the English language and Internet culture, is “homogenization”, popularly referred to as “Americanization”. Believing that CMC technologies are not culturally neutral and, that Internet has embedded cultural practices, critics put the new warrant in front of the optimism of those who believe that Internet offers new spaces for marginalized cultures to involve themselves in multicultural dialogue (Pargman, 1998). As Ess (1998) argues, optimism regarding computer mediated communication is founded on the different philosophical assumptions ranging from, the belief in a universally communicable humanity, the belief in the universal legitimacy of values associated with this vision (democracy, free speech), and the belief in communication as a sufficient condition for development of the global village. This approach to the new
technologies, perceiving them as a part of a globalizing force that could further weaken already fragile cultures of "other", non Western-countries, indicates the complexity of the Internet and its agency.

In contrast, the point of view that Hongladarom (1998) takes in looking at the question of the Internet and its social and cultural change seems believable and productive. Examining the Thai virtual community, he has found that "instead of erasing local cultural boundaries, creating a worldwide monolithic culture, the Internet reduplicates the existing cultural boundaries. What the Internet does, on the contrary, is to create an umbrella cosmopolitan culture which is necessary for communication among people from disparate cultures." (p.231)

Besides Net-dialogue among different and distant cultures, the Internet offers a chance for geographically dispersed people of the same cultural origin to "gather around" the same Net space. We can see the world as being "globalized" or "Americanized", but the responses and reactions to American cultural products in other parts of the world are not a passive acceptance. (Appadurai, 1996)

To examine the cultural change that the Internet has made possible, we should explore in detail all aspects of computer mediated communication in both real and virtual contexts and analyze their joint work. This point of view, present in the work of many CMC researchers, indicates that if we want to understand the online interactions we should not study them in isolation from other social, political, and cultural contexts co-present in online communication (Baym, 1998; Kendall, 1999; Sterne, 1999).

Seeing the Internet as both a complex space and, a mixture of technologies used by variety of people, "speaking" from a variety of viewpoints, is necessary to understand all of
the possibilities of the Internet. Fast-paced development of the new technologies, coupled with rapid growth of the new joiners of diverse cultural backgrounds, changes the Internet scenery. The Internet technologies people use today, the current demography of the Internet population and the daily habits of the networked Internet users would be completely different today from the same information gathered in 1996.

**Virtual Communities**

The opportunity for geographically distant people to gather and communicate on the Net space is one of the most important features of the Internet technology. CMC technologies and their use by a variety of virtual groups are the focus of many scholars from a variety of academic backgrounds.

The first attempt to define the virtual grouping as a “virtual community” came from Rheingold’s well-known book about the WELL (Whole Earth ’Lectronic Link), a San Francisco-based conference site. Rheingold (1993) has defined virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” (p.5)

Soon adopted by the majority of CMC researchers, the term “virtual community” is widely accepted today (Baym, 1998; Jones, 1997; Mitra; 1997; Wellman & Gulia, 1996). However, the problems with defining a virtual community still remain. Several critics of the approach of Internet based virtual groups as *real* communities (Doheny-Farina 1996; Fernback & Thompson, 1995) further developed discussions about the meanings of “real”
communities in contemporary society and the criteria for naming some virtual groupings - the virtual community.

As Femback (1999) argues, the term of “virtual community” in Rheingold’s sense, treats it as characterized by shared value systems, norms and rules of behavior, the sense of identity and commitment, emphasizing the symbolic aspects of the community. In that sense, “community exists in the minds of participants; it exists because its participants define it and give it meaning” (Femback, 1999: p. 213). Femback (1999) also highlights the processual character of the community, stating that it “is defined by its inhabitants, its boundaries and meanings are renegotiated, and although virtual communities do possess many of the same essential traits as physical communities, they possess the ‘substance’ that allows for common experience and common meaning among members” (p. 217).

Wellman’s (1999) argument highlights the misleading comparison, frequently used by scholars, between the virtual communities with the “imagined” and “pastoral myth” of the ideal community that is not present in the real life anymore. Real-life communities are not locally based and “densely-knit neighbors” as they tend to be presented, but rather “social networks” with already specialized, weak, and highly-mediated community ties. The idealized approach to the community “almost always treats the Internet as an isolated social phenomenon without taking into account how interactions on the Net fit together with other aspects of people’s lives. The Net is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact” (p. 170). The participation in virtual communities could be perceived by Net-users as important and “real”, so we should not exclude the perceptions of the participants from our discussion. Furthermore, as Wellman contends, the Net supports different types of virtual communities that foster multiple participation. In those communities people form and
maintain a variety of community ties, varying in strength. The CMC participants could perceive some relationships as important and others as not. In the same manner, some virtual groupings could be perceived as communities and others could not.

Setting aside the definition of the virtual community and its relationship to a "real" community, Baym (1998) treats the "community issue" specifically, focusing on the process of how a virtual community is imagined. Baym (1998) offers the useful model for the exploration of the online community. The model attempts to cover two steps in the exploration of a virtual community. The first step covers the possible factors of influence that "shape" a virtual community's "style" by "affecting emergent social dimensions of the group" (p. 62); the second refers to the process of discovering those emergent social dimensions. The presence of the group-specific social meanings let us talk about the possible community formation. The Baym's model seems a rare attempt found in the CMC literature, a systematic approach to the analysis of virtual community.

The factors of influence on a virtual community's "style" that Baym (1998) proposes include: external contexts (the offline cultural context where CMC is nested and from where online participants give meanings to online interaction, as well as the wider Internet culture); the temporal structure (the asynchronous and synchronous Internet environment); the system infrastructure (the characteristics of software the people use); the group purposes; the participant and group characteristics (the group size, its composition, the individual characteristics of the participants, etc.).

Baym's (1998) research shows that the participants of the virtual community exploit those factors and create possible social meanings (for example, forms of expression, identity, formed relationships or behavioral norms) which, if they develop into "stable
group-specific understandings”, the virtual group “gains the potential to be imagined as a community.” (p.51)

As mentioned earlier, the CMC literature covers, usually in the form of case studies, a variety of the Internet-based communities. The frequent difference among virtual communities lies in the type of communication software they are using. There are reports about communities formed on the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) in which communication among participants happens at the same-time, synchronously (Reid 1991); communities formed around computer conferences, usually on Usenet, where communication goes asynchronously, by posting and reading the messages (Baym, 1998; Mitra, 1997; Rheingold, 1993); communities formed on semi-synchronous and role playing virtual spaces like MUDs or MOOs (Multi User Dungeons or Multi Object Oriented- virtual environments) (Bruckman, 1997; Reid, 1994). There are different types of research done in those environments, and a growing number of case studies conducted in those virtual spaces point out that the virtual community “phenomenon” is still very important and relevant.

Besides the distinction among virtual communities regarding their Internet “location” or the type of environment, the CMC research indicates the differentiation of communities along the lines of shared interests (usually those found on Usenet discussions, IRC or MUD) and those formed on the basis of some “real life” group characteristics, like ethnic, religious, or national identity. The first ones, formed around shared interests, tend to gather people regardless of their cultural background, gender, race, or ethnic identifications. The second type of communities, tend to gather people from the same ethnic, national or religious culture in their attempt to produce an “imagined version” of that “real life” culture.
A few CMC researchers report about the features, organization and style of those ethnic virtual communities (Hongladarom, 1998; Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1998, 1999) and I will come back to those issues later in a detailed discussion about ethnic identity and the Internet.

**Ethnic Identity**

The dominant discourses surrounding the questions of ethnic identity have conceived it to be "an expression of an innate and age old ethno-cultural identity." (Kolar-Panov, 1997, p. 111) Or, as Morley and Robins (1995) argue, addressing the impact of the new communication technologies (in our case, the Internet) on the cultural identity, this question tends to be posed as a search of the potential impact of a "new technology" on a set pre-given objects, national (or cultural) identities". (p. 44)

This type of *primordialist* or essentialist view that any collective, and in that sense ethnic identity, should be understood as "based on shared claims to blood, soil, or language" (Appadurai, 1996; p. 140), and a reflection of the "original" ethno-cultural characteristics of an ethnic group. Furthermore, ethnic identity is almost objectified as a fixed "unity" which could mislead us with an oversimplified picture of its complexity. This approach excludes processual, situational, and changeable characteristics of ethnic identity, that are "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (Hall, 1990, p. 222).

The alternative, *constructivist* approach to ethnic identity emphasizes its socially constructed nature, "through the manipulation of historically derived symbolism and signs"
According to Nagel (1994), Fredrik Barth was the first who convincingly articulated the notion of ethnicity as, "mutable, arguing that ethnicity is the product of social ascriptions, a kind of labeling process engaged in by oneself and others", (p. 154) rejecting the previous essentialist approach. In that sense, ethnic identity is a "composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others about one's ethnic identity" (Nagel, 1994; p. 154). Ethnic identity is depicted as a site of constant struggle between internal and external forces. The chosen ethnic identity will depend on "the individual's perception of its meaning to different audiences, its salience in different social contexts, and its utility in different settings." (Nagel, 1994; p. 155) Of course, according to Nagel (1994) the process of identifying with a particular ethnic category is not simply a matter of personal choice. An individual can choose "from among a set of ethnic identities" but that "set" is limited and influenced by socially and politically defined and imposed ethnic categories (Nagel, 1994). The social, political, economic and cultural forces which influence the construction of an individual's or a group's ethnic identity play the crucial role in the process of self-identification.

Donald (1988) further contends that the apparatuses of discourse, technologies and institutions (including mass media) produce 'the national culture' and to look at the possible changes we should focus on those sites of production culture. He argues that, "'the nation' is an effect of these cultural technologies, not their origin. A nation does not express itself through its culture: it is culture that produces 'the nation'" (Donald, 1988; p.32). The communication technologies play a very important role in the construction of national identities allowing ""a space for identification'; not just an evocation of a common memory, but rather 'the experience of encounter and of solidarity'.” (Morley and Robins, 1995; p. 67)
The current theoretical approach dealing with the question of the new Internet technologies and ethnic identity (Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1999) derives many useful ideas from the influential theory of modern nationalism proposed by Benedict Anderson in his work "Imagined Communities." (1991) Anderson proposes that the rise of nationalism is connected with the shared identity of members of an imagined community, and that identity is expressed in a common language and medium of communication. Nations are conceived as imagined political communities, formed and maintained by the new communication technologies, the printing press at that time. The nations are imagined because, "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson, 1991, p. 6)

The advent of modern technologies offers a new array of possibilities for community building and further strengthening of nations. The nationally founded media, such as, television, "represent the principal cultural practices of the nation" (Mitra, 1997, p. 56). Television could influence even more (than print media) the process of nation building as an imagined community. Moreover, new communication technologies accompanied by processes of migration could transgress national frontiers by supporting the creation of new communities detached from "local" or national space. The national and political control present in traditional media are relatively non-present in Internet communication, and compared to the traditional media, many more people have an opportunity to be actively involved in dialogues about national politics, regardless of their "local" place of residence.
Virtual Ethnic Communities

What is usually recognized as a paradox is that, "simultaneously with the rise of global networked society there is an increase in national, ethnic, and religious identity politics and the resistances to globalization inherent in these movements" (Irvine, 1998). The reference here is to the existence of different groups that use the Internet, conceived as intrinsically globalized technology (similarly to other electronic media), for the creation of their local web presence. Geographically distant people based on their national or ethnic identities or affiliations could use the web space for their own purpose, to reunite and re-create their "imagined" local culture virtually.

From their foundation, the Internet technologies have offered users a chance to discuss ethnic and national issues. For example, the Usenet, a huge conferencing system database is structured as a hierarchical system of "newsgroups" that cover all possible topics of interests for the Net participants. Among them is the "newsgroup" "soc.culture" that "represent[s] nations, communities, tribes, cultures, and ways of life from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe" (Mitra, 1997; p. 61). Almost any nationality is represented under different "subgroups" within the larger "soc.culture" group, in which participants interested in the issues of that particular culture can pursue the message exchange, getting involved in discussions and debate about ethnic related topics. The Usenet communication, organized around specific interest "newsgroups" reflects the emergence of the first developed ethnic communities on the Internet. Several researchers have created interesting and insightful work about virtual ethnic communities formed around specific "newsgroups" on the Usenet (Hongladarom, 1998; Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1999).
Examine the current processes of globalization. Appadurai (1996) argues that we should look closely at the forces of mass migration and electronic mediation and “their joint effect on the work of imagination as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity.” (Appadurai, 1996; p.3) He points to the imagination as a social force in today’s world in which both media and migration produce an enormous degree of “positive” instability in the creation of selves and identities, providing new resources for identity construction. The constant access to media images by individuals makes resources available for the creation of new identities. The “joint work” of media and migration, changes the focus of the imagination from the “imagined community” of the nation-state to numerous “diasporic public spheres”. The Internet communication technologies, “have created new possibilities for transnational forms of communication, often bypassing the intermediate surveillance of the nation-state and of major media conglomerates.” (Appadurai, 1996; p.194)

Also, Elkins (1997) optimistically argues that modern communication technologies could help the global society maintain existing cultural diversity. Seeing ethnic communities as either geographically concentrated or geographically dispersed, he contends that those “dispersed” ethnic migrant groups living in Diaspora, until recently, could not maintain their cultural or linguistic heritage, because of the geographical constraints that minimized social interaction among their members. Elkins’s argument is that the current development of the new media technologies, particularly those related to computer-mediated communication, could offer the potential communicative environment for “dense” social interaction among the distant members of an ethnic community. Those previously dispersed ethnic communities, with the help of the CMC, could be transformed into potent “virtual ethnic
communities” that can choose from a variety of possibilities that the Internet and CMC offer and adopt them for their own purposes.

“Diasporic” Identities

The process of constructing a virtual ethnic community is essentially connected to the combined “work” of the ethnic groupings seen as “Diasporic” and involved with CMC technologies. The concept of “Diaspora”, useful for analyzing the processes of migration and negotiation of cultural or ethnic identities of migrant groups, will be further explored.

Clifford (1997) uses the term ‘Diaspora’ to emphasize the ways in which ethnic groups. “maintain important allegiances and practical connections to a homeland or a dispersed community located elsewhere” (p.250). Ang (1993) contends that diasporas are, “commonly understood as transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland’”.

The processes of migration and immigration, as important forces in the modern world, produce geographically dispersed people, spatially distanced from their place of origin. Mitra (1997) argues, the ‘new wave’ of immigrants in the last two decades, usually well-educated professionals employed in North America, Australia and the Western Europe, are not like earlier immigrant waves, settled close to their “ethnic enclaves” in big metropolitan areas in the Western world. They are as Mitra (1997) puts it, “scattered across the Western hemisphere, working in similar professions but spatially distanced from each other” (p. 57). They are trying to immerse themselves in the ‘host’ country, but are still
interested in the issues from “back home”. These immigrant groups use the new technologies as “alternative means of community formations” (Mitra, 1997; p.57) to connect with each other, to get information about their homeland and, to participate in discussions about “ethnic” issues. Those virtual ethnic communities, gathering people of the same ethnic origin, have become the potential sites for the construction of new, immigrant identities. As Poster (1998) states, explaining the proposed notion of “virtual ethnicity” – virtuality involves, “the articulation of new figures of ethnicity, nationhood, community and global interaction.” (p.194) The diasporic groups, in the process of adopting some of the cultural practices of their host country repertoire and, mixing them with existing elements of the homeland cultural practices, “exist in two cultures simultaneously” (Kolar-Panov, 1997; p.176).

They have had to learn other skills, other lessons. They are product of the new diasporas which are forming across the world. They are obliged to inhabit at least two identities, at least two cultural languages, to negotiate and ‘translate’ between them... They are the products of cultures of hybridity.” (Hall, as cited in Kolar-Panov, 1997; p. 176)

The virtual sites, could become, as Stubbs (1999) argues, “computer-mediated diasporic public spheres” where Diaspora could maintain their connection to the “imagined homeland” and the people of the shared cultural origin, but also explore its diasporic position, narrativize, construct and negotiate its diasporic identity.

Similar to previously wide spread ethnic clubs, organized and maintained in the “host” countries by immigrant’s groups, “according to national, ethnic and regional affiliations” (Kolar-Panov, 1997), the virtual ethnic “clubs” could provide for diasporic groups a “cultural” place that they could claim as their “own”, in which they do not feel as
"marginalized (even if their club is perceived as marginal from outside)" (Kolar-Panov, 1997; p. 77).

The need for regular social interaction among the members of immigrant groups and, the need to keep their cultural and linguistic heritage relevant, could be the force for the development of the virtual ethnic community. While exchanging messages in their own language, connecting with others from similar cultural background and sharing common memories, stories, issues of interest and information about their homeland, those virtual ethnic spaces could, to speculate even further, possibly create the sense of belonging, similar those of the ethnic clubs. Moreover, if "ethnic clubs could serve as a kind of substitute kinship base for the newly arrived migrants" (Kolar-Panov, 1997; p. 82), their assumed virtual representation in the ethnic virtual community, could have a similar function.

Another point of view, equally important for the analysis of ethnic communities and new media technology, is providing the cultural space for immigrant cultures in the existing official media systems of the host countries. The smaller ethnic communities coming from less populated countries are especially vulnerable to assimilation by the host countries, not only by their geographical dispersion but due also to the impossibility of being meaningfully represented in the official host media. Even in those host countries, where multicultural policy allows "symbolic levels of heterogeneity (symbolic ethnicity)" (Kolar-Panov, 1997; p. 38) such as, Canada or Australia, it is impossible to offer the cultural space for every one of the ethnic immigrant groups. In her analysis of the Australia's broadcast television service that provides programming for a variety of ethnic audiences, Kolar-Panov (1997) states that, "[A]lthough over half of SBS broadcasts are in languages other than English, SBS can never satisfy or meet the needs of all ethnic groups in Australia, since no single
non-English speaking (NES) community audience makes up more than 5 percent of Australia’s population” (p. 45). Being in a non privileged position in the host country, without the space in the official media for cultural-specific programming in the local language, small ethnic communities have to rely on alternative media to, “satisfy their need for entertainment and information from their homelands” (p. 45)

Embracing the new electronic communication technologies available with the advent of the Internet, the ethnic communities can create culturally specific spaces they can claim for themselves. As Stubbs (1999) states:

The existence of computer-mediated diasporic public spheres deepens the understanding of what have been termed transnational and postnational imaginings since, as complex discursive and historical fields, they represent particular constructions of the national space from diverse global sites (...)

As Morley and Robins (1995) argue, the key issues about “the role of these technologies in disrupting established boundaries” (p.64) and the analysis of the processes of creation of cultural identities, “needs to be grounded in the analysis of the everyday practices and domestic rituals through which contemporary electronic communities are constituted and reconstituted on a daily basis.” (p. 64)

This research acknowledges the importance of virtual communities for ethnic groups living in Diaspora as a possible site for construction, maintenance and negotiation of ethnic and cultural identities. I will attempt to explore the structure of an ethnic virtual site and the ways of its use by a particular ethnic community, trying to gain insight into the assumed “joint work” of media technologies and diasporic communities.
The Serbians—Historical Sketch

Historical narratives are ‘verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences. (White, as cited in: Campbell, 1998; p. 35)

Taking into account White’s point of view regarding historical narratives as possible "fictions", but at the same time acknowledging the importance of those "fictions" for the national and ethnic identity of the Serbians, I will attempt to briefly depict the main historical events that could serve as reference points in the majority of stories that construct "Serbian-ness".

Serbians (or Serbs) are a Slavic-origin tribe, which settled in the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th and 7th centuries. The first organized Serbian state could be traced to the early 12th century when Stefan Nemanja founded a dynasty in 1159 that ruled for two centuries. In the 13th century, Bysantia recognized the independence of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Under Stefan Dusan, who became King in 1331 and Czar in 1346, Serbia started to gain prosperity, but soon after his death in 1355, the former empire gradually decayed.

The battle of Kosovo Field in 1389, during which the Ottoman Turks defeated Serbian Medieval State, the “cream” of Serbian nobility was massacred and Serbia lost its independence. For Serbians, the Kosovo battle will retain its high symbolic significance. That historical event told and re-told over generations, changed and modified, has the characteristics of legend or myth. Kosovo became, as Zivkovic (1997) argues, the archetype for not so much a lost and mourned battle, but for “the eternally recurrent defeat and ‘decapitation’ of the nation” (p. 24). During the centuries of Turkish occupation of Serbia,
the memory of the lost battle, "incorporated themes of heroism, betrayal, martyrdom, and
the Christian theme of the choice of Heavenly over the Earthly Kingdom – the Kosovo
Covenant." (Zivkovic. 1997; p.24) Serbia became a Turkish province, with its lands
distributed to the Turkish military aristocracy.

The liberation struggle began in 1804 and finally, in 1829, Russia forced the
Ottomans to grant Serbian autonomy under Russian protection and to recognize Milos
Obrenovic as hereditary prince. This historic period was characterized by the rise of an
independent Serbia and development of the pan-Slavic sentiments among other Slavs
(Croats and Slovenes) who remained under Austro-Hungarian rule. Assassination of
Austrian Archduke Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 by a Serbian terrorist group called
"Young Bosnia", provoked the Austrian Empire to declare war on Serbia, hastening World
War I.

After World War I, the Kingdom of the Serbsians, Croats and Slovenes was
established in 1918, headed by King Petar I of Serbia. The name of the country was changed
to Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929; however, according to Hammel (1996) "[s]erious
tensions. especially between autonomist Croats and centralist Serbs, persisted, and in
Croatia and Slovenia the Yugoslav regime was seen as fundamentally Serbian, expansionist,
and hegemonic." King Aleksandar was assassinated in Marseilles, France in 1934 by
terrorists of a Croatian (with the help of Macedonian) nationalistic group. The Kingdom of
Yugoslavia collapsed under German and Italian attack at the start of Word War II. A
substantial number of Croats, as Hammel (1996) claims, allied themselves with the Nazis,
establishing a collaborationist Independent State of Croatia.
In 1945, partisans led by Josip Broz-Tito gained the political power and formed the Federative People's Republic of Yugoslavia (later - Socialistic Federative Republic of Yugoslavia) usually referred to in the historic literature as the "Second Yugoslavia". To indicate the complexity of the multi-national state constituted after World War II, Hammel argued that there were five major components of social identification in the Yugoslav republic: religion (Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity and Islam); spoken language (there was no standard Yugoslav language, but only Serbo-Croatian, Slovenian and Macedonian); orthographic diversity (Cyrillic alphabet, based on the Greek uncial, was used by Orthodox Slavs - Serbs, Montenegrin and Macedonians, and Latin alphabet by Catholic Slavs - Croats and Slovenes); class (referring to urban-rural distinctions) and ethnicity. Referring to the last component, Hammel (1996) claims that, "in the local context and in the absence of obvious visual clues, one simply cannot determine the ethnicity of an interlocutor. If people have that information it is based on local knowledge over the life course."

In 1987, Slobodan Milosevic became leader of the Serbian League of Communists. The political use of national mythology by Milosevic's regime had the purpose to 'wake-up' national sentiments of heroism and national pride and, most importantly to provoke the 'feeling of victimization'. The uses of the "Kosovo myth" by Milosevic were systematically combined with the interpretation of real events that occurred in Kosovo. By the mid-1980s, forced and steady migration of Serbs from Kosovo, combined with the high Albanian birthrate, had reduced the Serbian minority from about 28% of the population following WWII to under 15% in 1981, falling to 10% by the late 1980s.
As Denich (1993) argues, the Yugoslav reality during the 90s has been conventionally described in terms of old age hatreds among Serbs, Croats and others, taken as a literal, bounded entities, and those hatreds were "suppressed" only by the power of Socialistic state. Stating that the conception of an ethnic identity in Yugoslavia as fixed, primordial qualities is easier, but misleading, she argues for acknowledging the complexity of the Yugoslav "question" through grasping the process of how identities were redefined, intensified, and activated over a brief period of time. The official "media-ized" communication (television, newspapers, radio) among Yugoslav republics developed a specific and growing sense of threat:

In the split images that led to schism in Yugoslavia, each side consistently presented itself as victim or potential victim, the Other as threat or potential threat, so that neither party responded to the Other directly, but only to its own projections of the Other. Each reacts to the Other as a threat, and in its reactions, reinforces the behavior that appears threatening. Nor were these perceptions questioned by those who increasingly identified with their own "people". Victimization appeared to be an all-powerful mobilizer of ethnic solidarity. (Denich, 1993)

In his insightful analysis about Serbia's "storyhouse" or, "web of historically and culturally constituted narratives", important for understanding the construction of Serbian national identity, Zivkovic (1997) depicts several clusters of narratives that refer to particular historical events. Besides the Kosovo-epic, there is the epic of "Golgotha and Resurrection of Serbia" in World War I referring to, "the Serbian victory over Austro-Hungarian forces at Kolubara in 1915, the subsequent retreat before the German Army, and the harrowing experience of crossing Albanian mountains, ending with the evacuation of the decimated Serbian Army to the island of Korfu." (p. 25) Equally important is the cluster of narratives of "stories that Serbs have been telling themselves (and others) about themselves", as Zivkovic claims, centered "on the Second World War, and most
importantly, on the slaughter of Serbs in Croatia and Bosnia at the hands of Croatian Ustashe.” (p. 25) These stories, their interpretation and use in different contexts, are important for understanding how Serbians narrativize their experience regarding the current events.

**Serbian Diaspora**

Some statistics (Lopusina, 1998) report that one fifth of all Serbians live in Diaspora. Metaphorically speaking, there were several migration “waves”; however, for this research, the most important is the last migration “wave” of Serbians during the 1990s, caused by wars and economic crisis in Yugoslavia. Not having precise data about the main reasons for emigration of Serbians from Serbia (Serbians from Croatia and Bosnia were trying to escape the war situation), we could assume that economic reasons accompanied with apathy toward life and disbelief in the future has forced Serbians to leave their homeland. The approximate number of Serbians who left Serbia at the beginning of the 1990s is, according to Korac, (1993) “over 200,000 educated and highly skilled people between the ages of twenty-five to forty-five”, and estimated 30,000 men escaped the military service that way. She emphatically states that, “[t]his war is not their war, this leadership is not their leadership.”(p. 111)

The Serbian Diaspora, beside the Serbians from Serbia (mainly from urban centers), consists of a large number of Serbs migrating from Bosnia and Croatia. If we agree with the claim that there is a difference between “refugee” Diaspora and “professional” Diaspora, we could apply that dichotomy on Serbians who came from Croatia and Bosnia, and those who came from Serbia. Serbians from Croatia and Bosnia, forced to emigrate by escaping the
war, came to North America, Western Europe, and Australia under refugee, humanitarian or family programs. On the other hand, Serbians from Serbia could only apply under an "independent" immigration program reserved for "bilingual educated professionals", proving their knowledge of the language of the host country and university education (usually related to computers). This distinction and its implication for the process of narrativization of "Serbian-ness" by Diaspora could possibly contribute to the process of the construction of diasporic identity.

**The Serbians and the Internet**

According to Stubbs, (1998) "[t]he wars of the Yugoslav succession from 1991 are, perhaps, the first 'wars with computers' in which reactions to a real war were multiplied immensely by the possibilities of new communication technology, computer-mediated communication (CMC)". From the first days of Yugoslavia's deconstruction, characterized by broken telephone lines, fax or postal service between republics, many Yugoslavs embraced CMC technologies for information exchange and to maintain communication. The first computer network *ZaMir* (ForPeace), established among the urban areas in 1992, via a server located in Germany, had provided the necessary contact among Yugoslavs. The personal reports, war-stories and the plans for organizing local political actions were circulating on the network and, despite its relatively disappointing results regarding the achievement of goals for a "civic dialogue", it was "a kind of experimental participatory democracy" (Stubbs, 1998) at its best moments.

The next example of the use of the Internet technologies is related to the B92 Belgrade radio station. From its beginnings, the radio was a part of cultural and political
opposition to the Serbian regime, with its important role during student protests, as well as protests by political opposition parties. The B92’s connection to the world started in the fall of 1996 when the radio-station started to regularly post news programs in English and Serbian over the Internet in the form of audio files. This way, news from Serbia was available to the international public and Serbians living in Diaspora. During the protests in 1996, the Serbian regime tried to stop the news programming of the B92, interfering with the transmission (not for the first time) and eventually closing the radio station. Real Networks company, the software manufacturer of Real Audio Internet technology, offered assistance giving the B92 opportunity to broadcast the news “live”, twenty-four hours a day over the Internet, via Amsterdam’s server.

Another interesting example of how “Former” Yugoslavs use Internet technology is related to the construction of a web page – a nostalgic attempt to virtually recreate the former Yugoslavia. This “virtual country”, named “Cyberslavia”, gathers 12,521 citizens-members that are coming from 121 non-virtual countries. “Cyberslavia” symbolically grants virtual “identity” to its members who still “feel” Yugoslavian, an identity previously denied by the newly formed national states. The words written on the front web page of the web site are:

This is Cyber Yugoslavia. Home of Cyber Yugoslavs. We lost our country in 1991 and became citizens of Atlantis. Since September 9, 1999 this is our home. We don't have a physical land, but we do have nationality, and we are giving CY citizenships and CY passports. Because this is Atlantis, we are allowing double and triple citizenships. If you feel Yugoslav, you are welcome to apply for CY citizenship, regardless of your current nationality and citizenship, and you will be accepted. (...) When we have five million citizens, we plan to apply to the UN for member status. When this happens, we will ask 20 square meters of land anywhere on Earth to be our country. On this land, we'll keep our server. [The World Wide Web address of the site is www.juga.com]
The NATO-Yugoslavian Conflict and the Internet

To understand the life of the virtual community, it is important to understand the real life context from which "real" people are logging on. The change in their real life circumstances, it can be assumed, would influence many aspects of the virtual community life. Fernback and Thompson (1995) argue that the virtual community "seem[s] more likely to be formed or reinforced when action is needed, as when a country goes to war, rather than through discourse alone." This research would be focused on those possible changes provoked by the changed "real life" context.

As many observers noticed, this particular conflict is the first instance of warfare, where a small but significant part of the population of an attacked country has Internet access. The small number of Serbians (still living in Serbia and Montenegro), who are technically literate and have the Internet access, have used the Internet technologies to create, as written in The New York Times article, an "entire news network consisting of e-mail exchanges, chat rooms, and bulletin boards" (MacFarquhar, 1999). This collective action of information exchange and emotional support between Serbian Diaspora and Serbs in the homeland, showed how during the conflict in their homeland and with the help of technology, they could create a whole alternative network behind the official media.
CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The advent of the Internet as an infrastructure for computer-mediated communication and the emerging number of virtual communities have provoked discussion among scholars about the methodological approach of studying the online culture and virtual communities. One of the most useful approaches to this field is the ethnographic exploration of virtual communities (Reid, 1994; Baym 1995). Through “ethnography”, the ethnographer “participates, overtly or covertly, in people’s daily lives for an extended period of time, watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; p.2).

To gain an insight into a virtual community, the researcher should spend a considerable amount of time in the virtual setting and be involved in everyday interactions with other participants. By being a regular “part” of the setting, he or she would be able to understand the created cultural meanings of the virtual group, the language tightly connected to the “local” virtual context, the rules and norms of behavior and, the elements of the emerged social hierarchy. Becoming familiar with the virtual site(s) and the communication software used by the participants allows the researcher to follow the “textual” culture as it develops and to understand the complex process within the community.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) state, triangulation refers to a process of “checking inferences drawn from one set of data sources by collecting data from others” (p. 198). Although I used in this research several techniques for data collecting (observation,
survey, interview) they had been designed to be complementary to each other, related to different aspects of the virtual setting, and were not intended to facilitate triangulation itself. Nevertheless, I had an opportunity to check validity of some concepts that are part of virtual culture (for example: stable virtual identities, formed online relationships, the importance of norms for regulation of behavior, and feelings of “belonging to virtual community”), comparing different data that were produced by those different techniques.

This research is focused on an ethnic virtual community created by the geographically dispersed Serbian-speaking Internet participants, which also includes the Serbians currently living in Yugoslavia. It closely examines the participants and their interactions rather than the particular computer technology. This Serbian virtual group uses at least two Internet technologies for message exchanges – synchronous and asynchronous. In this respect, this research is different from other work in the field (Baym, 1998; Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1999), since it encompasses several virtual sites connected to the community web page. The language used for the communication is Serbian, the mother tongue of the participants. The participants mainly use the software and the commands in English.

This research is an ethnographic account of the Serbian virtual community formed around the Internet web-site in December 1996. As the web site offers several Internet technologies connected to the virtual site, the community daily life, organization, changes and shared meanings can only be understood by monitoring the community’s use of the most prominent technologies for communication. The number of community members is not known, but some statistics and the frequency of the message exchanges indicates a possible large membership (over 6000 registered community members). The two most commonly used tools by the community participants are the IRC chat-lines and the computer
conference forums. For the purpose of this research, focus is placed on one of many forums in the computer conference and, two IRC chat channels closely connected to the community web site.

The Virtual Ethnic Group

The personal interest of the researcher, who is at the same time a participant of the Serbian virtual community, determined the choice of this ethnic group. Choosing the ethnic virtual community, which shares Internet space with numerous other types of communities and carries its communication in Serbian, being surrounded with mostly English speaking Internet users, could give us an insight into the ways the ethnic group organizes its local cultural space and uses Internet technologies for its own purposes.

Insight into the organization and community interactions and relationships among Serbians, geographically dispersed all around the world but “virtually” connected to each other, is particularly worth exploring through questions of ethnic identity construction, negotiation and maintenance. Moreover, the observing and recording of interactions produced by the community members during the Kosovo crisis, while many members of the community, currently living in Yugoslavia, were in “real life” danger, give us a “special” picture of the changes that happened in a virtual space. In this case, particular account will be given to the relationship between the “offline” and “online” worlds.
Research Instruments

I will take the ethnographic research position as a participant-observer in the research site, and attempt to give a detailed description of the “virtual ethnic place” (consisting of the “host” web site, the computer conferencing forum, the chat channels and web pages linked to the main web site).

Being a regular member of the Serbian virtual community since June 1997, I have had a chance to see how the community has grown and changed over time, to meet and “talk” with people online, to listen to their stories, as well as to record the interactions I found either typical for the community or very unusual. My personal reflections underlying this research are the result of my informal and formal participation and recognition that I am a “part of the social world” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983; p.14) that is under observation.

Participant Observation

For the purpose of this research, I had formally participated in the community as a participant-observer from March to June 1999, observing the message exchanges on the multiple virtual sites and recording the interactions among the community members. Using the possibility of the Internet software technology to record the computer-mediated interaction, I started to log the computer files of the conversations and interactions on the two IRC channels over the two weeks in April (12 – 26), for two hours per day. Moreover, I downloaded the posted messages from the computer conferencing system from late March to June 1999 from one of the forums particularly dedicated to the conflict in Yugoslavia.
Believing that the ethnic virtual group, if it has the capability at its disposal, will use as many tools as possible to get and exchange information of interest and, make and maintain contact among the members, the focus to both Internet technologies (the forum and the IRC) seems as appropriate. That does not exclude the possibility that participants had used other computer technologies to interact with one another (emails, ICQ, I-phone chat, Video-chat), particularly in one-to-one communication or among the small groups of members. I chose these two virtual sites as the most open public spaces with the greatest availability for observation and recording, as well as, for participation, believing in the importance of those sites to the global Serbian community. Private conversations using IRC software, small group interaction on the “closed” IRC channels, or the mailing lists among the members from a computer forum, are very important aspects for the building of the community on a global level. However, ethical issues regarding private conversations and public message exchange boundaries do not permit researchers (even if they have a chance to participate) to include those accounts into their analysis, without asking the permission of the informants.

**Survey**

Interested in the participants’ point of view related to the issues of the virtual community, I decided to distribute an email-survey among the participants.

As mentioned earlier, the members of the community participate in different virtual sites, which are closely connected to the ethnic web-space. To include participants in the research from both virtual spaces (the IRC channel and the computer forum), I chose to contact the participants differently, depending on the type of contact usually maintained in
those spaces. The participants on the IRC channel were contacted online, on the monitored IRC channels. I electronically asked each participant individually for an email address where I could send him or her the consent form with an explanation of the research. Knowing that participants will not easily disclose this personal information to someone they are unfamiliar with, I decided to choose the participants who I already "virtually" knew from previous conversations on the channel. They knew that I was a researcher of the virtual community from our previous conversations, but they still wanted more information about the purpose of the survey. Once I explained the main points of the research and the aspects related to the community's characteristics, its emergent culture and, the patterns of the participation, all of the contacted IRC participants gave me email addresses showing their willingness to participate.

On the other hand, I have never actively written on the computer conference forums. That does not mean that I am not a participant on the site. The "lurkers" (those who only read the postings) make up a huge portion of the community members. The appropriate way to contact the participants was to post a message on the conference with the invitation to participate in the research and my email address, and wait to see who would respond.

The consent letter was sent to every participant from whom I got an email message and who showed willingness to participate in the research. In the consent letter I explained the main purpose of the research and asked the participants to return it as a confirmation that they want to fill out the survey. After receiving the consent letter, I sent the email-survey to each participant. I chose to apply the two-step process, according to Witmer, Colman & Katzman's argument (1999) that "attaching an introductory paragraph with no forewarning
to a full. on-line survey instrument is inadequate and inappropriate to electronic environment” (p. 156-57).

The semi-structured survey consists of fourteen questions covering some of the important topics in advance, based on the literature review of virtual ethnic communities. The first group of questions covered general information about the participant: current city of residence, age, marital status, level of education, etc. The second group of questions explored how the participant found out about the community, how long they have been members and inquired about the main reasons for their participation. With the third group of questions I attempted to get an insight into the patterns of the participation in the community, asking the participants to note where they are participating and how frequently. The fourth group of questions dealt with the emergent or already formed relationships among the members of the community, focusing on the possible extension of the virtual relationship in the “offline” world. The fifth group dealt with the meaning of the virtual community for the participants. The open-ended questions about belonging to the virtual community, the importance and the meaning of the community in the “real” life of its members seemed to me to be particularly worthy of exploration.

The survey results will be discussed in detail in the chapter IV.

Interview

Interested in participants’ perceptions about the meaning of the virtual community during the time of the conflict and changes that happened in the community provoked by real-life circumstances, I decided to ask four surveyed participants for additional “talk” that would capture those perceptions. Knowing that between the conflict and the distribution of
the survey only four months passed, I had the impression that the participants would be suspicious about my intentions if I asked openly in the email-survey about the conflict and the changes in the community. Accordingly, I decided to explore this issue by conducting an interview, which seemed to me more suitable and more personal for discussing sensitive topics. The consent letter, sent to the participants before the survey, allowed the possibility that a surveyed person could be asked for an interview to explore additional issues important to the research.

The decision about interviewing the community participants was based on their answers in the survey. In the survey, the interviewed participants provided elaborated comments about their feelings about community, whether they were more experienced in using the Internet technologies, and if they participated in the community from its foundation. In general, I chose the most “online” active and reflective members from the surveyed participants- those who were more inclined to “talk” about the community, its importance, its changes and transformations over the time.

The interview focused on the meaning of the virtual community in the person’s life during the time of the conflict, as well as the perceived changes in the virtual community they felt the conflict had brought about. The nature of the interviews was “informal conversational” (Patton, 1990). The interview questions were generally related to the community at the time of the conflict, but I did not have a predetermined set of questions. That allowed other topics to emerge during the conversation or email correspondence that might be important to the participant but not included in the survey. The questions depended on the interviewee’s role in the community and the importance that he or she put on the particular aspects of community life in the “conflict period”. The time of the conflict was
explored in more detail, in an attempt to access the personal meaning of being a part of the Serbian virtual community and its role in that person's life. As Thomsen, Straubhaar & Bolyard (1998) argue, discussing the role of interviewing participants involved in the Internet communication, "(i)n addition to providing 'thick description,' they can serve to validate the researchers conclusions and observations."

Two interviewees are female, married, and currently living in North America. Both did not work outside of home, spending most of their free time on the Internet. I met them online in a small IRC-community, two years before this research. Asking them to be surveyed and interviewed was a relatively easy task. Interviews with them were conducted individually, online, on the IRC; both of them helped me to better understand sub-community organization during the conflict, as well as history of the Serbian virtual community in general.

The other two interviewees I had not met online before the research started. They are two males, singles, living in North America. Both of them work in computer-related jobs. They are highly involved in the community organization as moderators. Moreover, they both were involved with other Serbian virtual communities (as founders and important members). I contacted them after I had received completed surveys. The interviews with them were conducted by e-mail, in a two-week period.

The interview results were integrated with observational data, and presented in the chapters V and VI.
"The Sample"

It is very important to consider the sample when the virtual communities are under inquiry. Who are the Internet users and the members in virtual communities in general? As mentioned earlier, the typical Internet user is mostly male, white, well educated, North American, with enough leisure time to participate in the virtual forums. It is impossible to tell much about the “real” users because they are not available for “face to face” observation. We are left to trust our impressions, when we are dealing with “offline” information obtained from “online” participants.

For this research, I had contacted the regular participants, those in the “highly” active category. To be “regular” in any virtual community, means to have time to spend in the community; access to a computer with a modem; to be computer literate, at least enough to use the communication software. Moreover, the “regulars” willing to participate in the research and especially those speculating about the virtual community and its importance, are not in any way representative of the rest of the community. They could be highly active, the most computer literate, and their opinion about changes (explored in the interview) could only reflect their individual perspective, not necessarily the perceptions of others.

Assuming that the “highly” active members have a specific power and influence within the community hierarchy and the opportunity to bring changes, it is worth exploring those opinions as the reflections of those highly involved in the community life.
Procedures

The data collection took place on a web site conference board and the IRC channel, in March to June 1999. The surveys were issued and returned during November 1999. The interviews were conducted on the IRC channel and through emails. The researcher approached all subjects via email to inform them about the nature of the project and to arrange for approval and distribution of the survey.

The consent letter was sent to 66 participants, requesting their involvement in the research. I received consent forms from 34 participants and, to only those, I forwarded the survey. I received 28 completed surveys (that is 43% of the total), which is a very good return rate compared to email distributed surveys of this type.

The interviews were conducted during the last two weeks of November. I interviewed 4 participants who I believe were more willing to elaborate on their answers and to talk about the community issues during the conflict in Yugoslavia. Two of them I interviewed online, on IRC channels, and with two participants, I exchanged several emails with interview questions.

Ethical questions

In this research, the privacy of the participants is protected through several procedures:

First, this particular web site does not have saved archive records of messages from computer conferencing boards, which are older than several days. The webmaster stated that the reasons could be found in the combination of limited server space and message overload,
especially during the time of conflict. I daily downloaded all available message postings, starting by late March to June 1999 and beside my hard disk those messages are not available on the Internet. Second, all message exchanges conducted on this particular computer conference forum are in Serbian. For the purposes of the research, the messages were translated into English. Because of translation differences it is impossible to put the cited message into an Internet-based search engine and locate the site with this message even if the archive did exist. Third, the webmaster of the conference forum voluntarily decided to leave out the two parts of every IP address in the messages heading to protect the senders' privacy. Fourth, I coded all the nicknames (and left out ISP addresses) that were used through this research discussion.

I changed names of the IRC channels and monitored conference forum, as well as the web address of the site. This, in combination with disguising the identity of the message poster by coded sign, would make it exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, for anyone to discover the message source or identity of any cited participant. All surveyed participants are coded as “S” and number (S1-S28) to maintain their anonymity. The interviewed participants have a code “I” plus a number that corresponds to their number in the survey.

An inquiry during “politically sensitive” times (when homeland is in a state of war) about changes in community life could leave a misleading impression to community members about the inquirer. Playing an “outsider” role by being a researcher could possibly produce the opposite effect than intended – instead of attracting community members to participate in the research, they could “recognize” the researcher as an outsider who, inquiring into community life, could find out their political opinions and possibly affect their private offline lives. In that sense, besides protecting the participants, I was also protected
from possible harassment by getting a secure account at the university email server. All email communication between participants and me was securely saved on this server. It is important to note that, although I posted publicly my "call" for participation in the research, no one misinterpreted my posting or attempted to do any harm. The timing of the research (six months after the conflict) and decreased emotional tension in the community, combined with precautionary actions (guaranteed anonymity to participants) – possibly had made the participants response rate higher.
CHAPTER IV
RESULTS

Results of the survey

The survey results presented below are from twenty-eight completed surveys that were returned to me. The participants' responses to questions are divided into five groups that cover five survey topics.

**General information about participants (demographic data)**

Among twenty-eight surveyed participants, fifteen stated that they currently live in North America. Five live in Europe, one in Australia, one in Asia (Japan), and six are in Yugoslavia (or former Yugoslavia). Twenty participants were born in Serbia and Montenegro, six in former Yugoslavia (Bosnia or Croatia), and two participants did not respond to the question.

Fourteen participants are between 25-35 years old, four participants are the range of 20-25, and seven are over 35 years. Three participants did not respond to this question.

Among the twenty-eight surveyed participants, nineteen are male and nine are female. Among them, fifteen are single, ten are married and three did not provide information for the question. Regarding the level of education, twenty-three participants out of twenty-eight have post-secondary education (fifteen have university degree, five college diploma, four are university students and one is Ph.D. student); four participants have a high school diploma and one participant did not respond. It is important to note that fifteen
participants work in computer related jobs (as programmers, computer consultants or system analysts).

When asked about the social environment of Internet use, sixteen participants said that they are logging into the community from home only, three were logging in from their workplaces, and nine participants from both home and workplaces.

Language environment could also be an important contextual factor of participation. The question in the survey - “Language at home/workplace” - intended to explore the language environment that surrounds a participant, regardless of his or her country of living. (My assumption was that a participant could live in Germany but at home or work speak Serbian only - working in a Serbian company, and being married to Serbian; his or her “language context” could be different from the “language context” of a participant living in same country but working in a German company and being married to German or working in a German company and being married to Serbian). Results to this question showed that, beside six participants who live in Yugoslavia, only three participants speak Serbian both at home and workplace. Three participants stated that their workplace environment is German and Dutch. Sixteen participants use combination of Serbian and English, at home and workplace. These results if related to the results in other survey questions, did not suggest that particular “language context” produce a difference in the activity level, the choice of particular virtual location or feelings of belonging to the community. However, the detailed analysis combined with interviews particularly focused on this contextual factor, could give us better insight into potential interrelationship between different “language” environments.
The participation

The second group of survey questions, given in an open-ended format, explored several aspects of community participation. Answering the question: “How did you find out about this community?”, fifteen participants said they got the information from the “friend network” that recommended this particular web-site. Eleven participants found information about the community by exploring the Internet on their own. For example: “I looked for Serbian news and accidentally found it!” or “Reading news from Serbian news-site”. Two participants reported other ways for getting the information about the community (a newspaper and a university course). To the question “Have you told others about this community?” all participants (twenty-eight) responded affirmatively.

The question with which I intended to capture the length of participation showed that nine of surveyed participants had joined the community at its foundation (participating in it more than three years); eleven had participated approximately two or more years and seven had been members for less than a year.

“What are your main reasons for joining the community?” is a question aimed to explore participants’ reasons for community involvement. The responses could be grouped into two main categories: reasons related to people (“I want to meet with our people all around the world”, “To make friends” or “Keep in touch with friends”) or reasons related to Serbian language and homeland (“I want to know what’s happening in Yugoslavia” or “Using a mother tongue, of course”). Fifteen participants stated that “meeting” and “keeping in touch” with others were their main reasons for involvement. Eleven of surveyed participants explained their reasons mentioning the need for homeland information, the use
of mother tongue, or a discussion on topics of interest. Two participants explained their participation as being a result of boredom and an abundance of free time.

**Patterns of participation**

The third group of questions was an attempt to gain an insight into the patterns of the participation in the community, asking participants to address the Internet technologies they use and frequency of community participation. Those three questions and several sub-questions were given in the multiple-choice format.

Among twenty-eight surveyed participants, eighteen used both IRC and forum for participation in the community. (However, it is important to note that four of those eighteen participants had also used other Internet communication tools – for example: ICQ, NetMeeting, Internet-phone and similar.) Five participants reported that they used only IRC, and five participants had used only the community forum.

Looking for the patterns of participation, I included the question: “In which conferences have you been participating?” Among twenty-three participants who used the conference forum, nineteen mentioned more than three different forums where they were in regular attendance. Four forum-users stated that they only participated in one community forum. Regarding the frequency of participation, fifteen forum-users stated that they logged into chosen forums on a daily basis (eleven of them both read and post on the forum). Eight forum-users read or read & post, on a weekly or monthly basis.

A similar mode of participation is found with IRC-users: among twenty-three IRC-users, eighteen participated in two or more IRC channels, and twelve of them participated daily, ten several times per week, and one participant gave a non-precise answer, (“Rarely.
There was more chatting when I started with it”). Fifteen IRC users reported that their participation was both public and private; six participated only privately with “already known” members and two reported chatting only publicly.

**Identity and relationships**

As questions about stable identity and formed relationships in the community represent very important aspect of the virtual community life, the survey included several questions related to those two issues. On the question: “Do the other community members recognize you by your nickname?” all participants but one stated that their nicknames were known by others.

The issue about emergent or formed relationship(s) was covered by three questions. The first one asked about the community database with community member presentations. Among the surveyed participants, twenty-two of them searched through the database to find out about the others, usually on a monthly basis. However, when asked if they had an online personal presentation (a web page) in the community-members database, only four participants said that they had. The others, responding to the question “If not, why?” replied usually with “I’m not exhibitionist”, or “I pass over that phase. I do not like that “advertising” aspect of self-disclosure” or “I don’t see a point”.

Inquiring into formed relationships on-line, I asked participants “Have you ever formed personal relationship(s) with people who you met virtually in the community?” Among the surveyed participants, twenty-four reported that they formed one or more relationships (two of them said that they formed an online relationship only once). Describing the nature of that relationship(s) by the question given in the multiple-choice
format, participants reported a friendship (twenty-one); information exchange (nine); love (seven); business (three), and cyber sex (three). Four participants said that they never formed relationships online.

Asked if their relationship(s) went beyond virtual community into real-life, among twenty-four participants who reported that they had relationship(s), twenty-two said that they transferred their relationship(s) into other channels of communication. Most frequently, participants reported that they had real-life meetings with person(s) (seventeen participants) combined usually with other forms of contact, or, if not, than they had telephone conversation or contact by regular mail (five). Only two participants never tried to transfer their relationships out of cyberspace.

**Community feeling**

The last group of questions was an attempt to explore the feeling of belonging to a virtual ethnic community. This intention was realized through an open-ended format of question “Did you think about yourself as a member of some virtual community?” and, especially by the following sub-question “If yes, how is that membership important to you?”

Among twenty-eight participants, six participants said that they had not thought of themselves as community members. Twenty-two of them, recognizing themselves as community members, described that membership in several ways. For example, “Yes, I’m a part of a small group who is together to make easier nostalgic feelings”, or “Yes, I am. My #xxx channel is the best. It’s so good when everybody come from different part of the world. We are all around, but at the same time, we are all good friends” or “Yes. It’s like the
feeling when you are going into a small pub, and a waiter already knows what is your
favorite drink”.

The open-ended question that asked how much importance participants put on their
community feeling provoked several types of responses. Two participants stated that even if
they perceived themselves as being a part of the virtual community (or a sub-community)
they did not think that it’s very important to them or not important enough to elaborate their
answer. Others, stating that they valued a feeling of being a community member, explained
that importance putting the accent on several closely connected perspectives: culture,
information and people.

Culture related – A community feeling as closely related to homeland (“In a foreign
country, distanced from real life friends this kind of contact is very important to me” or
“This community brings back the feeling that I’m still a part of a nation where I grown up”
or “It’s important- we all have similar world-view”.)

Information related - Being a part of community gives a opportunity for knowing
more
(“For me a community is important because of all that talk, jokes, but sometimes the help in
getting an information” or “I like when we all can exchange things we are all interested in”.)

People related – A community brings people closer to each other (“It brings a
possibility for meeting many new friends” or “We are like a small family - our small
channel especially”)

Finally, the two survey questions were intended to explore how participants valued
virtual friendship as compared to its real-life counterpart. Answering the question “Do you
think that people act differently in virtual environments than in real life”, a majority of
participants (nineteen) stated that they think that people act differently. Others (nine participants) answered with "It depends" or "Somebody yes, somebody no" answers. Only one participant wrote that "For a 'sharp eye' there is no difference", explaining the similarity between those two types of environments. Elaborating the statement about the different behavior in cyberspace as compared to real-life behavior, participants frequently stated that the anonymity of the Internet was a main reason for the different behavior. Sometimes, anonymity was presented as a positive feature ("People are more free and natural on the Net" or "Anonymity gives a comfortable and equal environment" or "The Net is a complex-free") and sometimes as a constraint to better communication ("People are free to hide and lie about themselves" or "People sometimes show on the Net the worst types of themselves because they are hidden behind the screen" or "There is no real closeness. Even a post mail is more personal.").

When asked to compare virtual versus real-life friendship, nineteen participants stressed only positive aspects of virtual participation into community. Their answers addressed the advantages of having a possibility to have virtual friends ("You really have a chance to choose among many different persons and decide with whom you will talk"; or "The community makes us closer to each other even if we are so distant. We would never meet each other in ordinary, "real" way"; or "I'll never meet so many people as I do on the Net.")

Other participants, elaborating negative aspects of having virtual friends, stated that the Net-environment gives the possibility for manipulating and hiding one's real-life identity ("Without a smell, look or touch – everything is a different, even worse"; or "If virtual doesn't go in "real" at the right time, virtual friendship would come to an end"). It is
important to note that of the nine participants who emphasized the negative aspects of virtual friendship, four were those who did not perceive themselves as community members either.
CHAPTER V

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE VIRTUAL ETHNIC COMMUNITY

The observation data and findings from the surveys and the interviews related to the emergent Serbian virtual community are organized according to Baym’s proposed framework (1998), presented in general terms in the Literature Review chapter. Exploring the “style” in which any virtual community is “imagined”, Baym argues that it is necessary to explore both the pre-existing structures that could possibly shape the style of a virtual community and the “dynamic set of systematic social meanings” (1998, p. 38) which are the products of the online interactions that could enable “participants to imagine themselves as a community” (1998, p. 38).

In accordance with the first step in the proposed framework, I will describe the major pre-existing structures that could influence online interaction among the Serbian-speaking participants. These structures, as Baym notes, are not static, unchangeable resources from which the participants draw resources and rules and make sense of online communication, but rather a complex set of variables that influence one another and the online interaction.

Pre-existing Structures

The External Context

This category refers to the national, international and the global Internet culture that surround online communication. Internet communication is firmly nested in a particular cultural context that enables understanding among participants. Members of the virtual
community use Internet technologies according to their cultural practices and, they communicate with others “speaking” from the specific culture. External cultural context, existing before the participant logs on, allows participants to understand online interaction. Equally important, the participants of the virtual community share the understanding of the general Internet culture. Moreover, the “immediate situation” through which they access the Internet, is a part of the external context as well. Thus, the participants bring to online interaction their real-life cultural “baggage”, for instance, their language, class, ethnicity, gender, and so on.

The participants of the Serbian virtual community are Serbian-speaking Internet users who are accessing the virtual community from all over the world. There is no precise data about who are they or how many participants are members of the community, but we can assume that they are not a homogenous group. A brief look into the IP addresses of members indicates that the majority of them are living out of Yugoslavia, most frequently logging from North America, Western Europe and Australia. In addition, a small number of participants access the community from Asia and Africa. The members who are living currently in Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) are very important to the community, as are the smaller number of those who have access to the community from Bosnia, Macedonia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

Although the participants are geographically dispersed, they share the same country of origin (the former Yugoslavia), the same language (one could argue that people from Croatia and Bosnia do not share the same language; however, the language is similar enough that participants could easily understand each other), and the same cultural background. Those similarities make up the shared cultural “pool” from which the participants draw
cultural meanings, translating them into online communication. This collective understanding creates a “virtual” culture specific to the community.

A member of the Serbian virtual culture is able to understand the meanings produced and played over the Internet as they relate to general sources of Serbian culture. Sharing the same country of origin, cultural background and language, with the majority living in Diaspora, the participants could feel confident that they would be understood and would be able to find others in the community with whom they could exchange memories, stories and interests. To participate in the community means you are interested in the homeland issues and are willing to share with others information related to the homeland.

The web site that serves as a foundation of the community and which keeps the community together, represents a kind of “mosaic” of different topics related to Serbian culture in general. These include: Serbian cuisine (covered in the forum with recipes, even given in video format), music (the web-radio and the music forum are dedicated to music from Yugoslavia), the search engine that searches through Serbian related issues posted on the Web (named “yuhoo” with obvious association to “yahoo” search engine, but containing the acronym of Yugoslavia), the community database with links to over 7800 homepages of community members) and, other Serbian-specific topics. These topics make the environment “local” and friendly, even for those who do not know English very well (the participants who log on from Yugoslavia).

The main language of the Serbian virtual community is Serbian. That is unusual if we take into account the surrounding Internet culture and domination of the English language. Reviewing the current research literature about the formation and the emergence of ethnic virtual communities, I noticed that the researched ethnic virtual communities
convey their communication in English (Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1999). The Serbian virtual
group uses the Internet infrastructure that is intended for communication in English and
communication software written in English. There are no Internet tools on the market that
are translated into Serbian. The community members communicate in Serbian by using the
Latin alphabet. The alphabet of the Serbian language is Cyrillic, but the members of the
community creatively use Latin alphabet that allows communication to be conveyed in
Serbian.

This is an important fact since the virtual environment is primarily textual. Virtual
communities are built and developed from “text” exchanged online. The environment, even
if it is surrounded by an English-speaking culture, becomes familiar to Serbian-speaking
participants. Despite the fact that the majority of Serbians who access the community live in
English-speaking host countries and, we could assume that they are able to use English to
communicate, the community is organized this way to permit membership to those Serbians
who live in Yugoslavia, as well as in Sweden, Germany or Japan. The different “host”
countries, in which the Serbian immigrants currently live, and through which they
participate in the community, means that the local cultural context is contributing to the
richness of the created virtual culture.

The Internet environment is another part of the external context that shapes the
ethnic virtual community. The global Internet culture that surrounds this “local” virtual
space is shaped and developed by many Internet-specific subcultures. This community even
if I call it “local”, is not isolated in the Internet space. There is a vast amount of diverse
communities formed and developed along the particular interests of Internet users. It could
be assumed that many participants of the Serbian virtual community take a part in other
Internet communities as well. (The interviews with the Serbian community members showed that participants tend to participate in other Serbian virtual communities, or even in English-speaking virtual communities, that could meet their other needs beside ethnic ones.) They therefore, bring their “Internet” knowledge back to the community, as well as, “take out” gained “ethnic community” knowledge. The Internet culture has a strong and constant influence on the process of developing an ethnic virtual community, probably more or less the same as for the other virtual communities.

In addition, the participants use different Internet technologies to access the community, adapting them for communal purposes. Those technologies (Internet Relay Chat or IRC; the computer conferencing forums; “I Seek You” or ICQ; Internet Phone and varieties of email software) have embedded specific practices related to the Internet culture and their use, shaping the community environment. For example, the specific vocabulary (emoticons, acronyms, commands, ways of communicating) or norms for regulating online behavior are parts of the global Internet culture that shape the local ethnic culture to a large extent.

When discussing the context through which the participants access the community, it is important to emphasize the possible importance of the “local” cultural context of “online” environments. Being rather speculative, I assume that there is a likely difference between the Serbians living in Toronto and those residing in Sofia or Perth. The Serbian living in Toronto or Chicago, cities heavily populated with Serbian people, has many opportunities to be in contact with other Serbians “offline”. Information about Yugoslavia could be found easily within this personal network, from the local media, and through “face to face” contact with Serbians in cafes or clubs. Furthermore, the time zone when the participants access the
community is important. The majority of participants live in North America and the times when they are logged into the community are the times when it is heavily populated. The other Serbians, living in Sofia or Perth (cities mainly without Serbian Diaspora) could not have the same resources. His or her contact with the Serbians could be limited to “online” communication only. Thus, the virtual community could be a highly appreciated source for both contact with other Serbians and for information about the homeland.

A large number of the community members participate on the virtual site from Yugoslavia. Their “context” of access could be quite different than for those living in Diaspora. Computer access to the Internet in Yugoslavia is expensive and rare. The disastrous economic situation in Serbia and Montenegro makes the Internet access a kind of privilege, available only to those who live in the major cities. An Internet statistic shows that only 5% of people in Yugoslavia have the regular Internet connection from approximately 10,500 computers.

Another aspect of the “external context” category that possibly shapes Internet communication is the “immediate context” from where the participants are logging into the community. That could be the workplace, library or home, each having an impact on the amount of time that a participant has available to “spend” in the community, as well as, his or her behavior, particular time of logging on, etc.

The survey of twenty-eight participants of the Serbian virtual community indicates the possible offline “geography” covered by the participants of the Serbian virtual community. For example, out of twenty-eight participants - six are logging in from Yugoslavia, five from Western Europe, seven from Canada, eight from USA, one from Australia and one from Asia (Japan). Two participants did not want to reveal the current
country of residence. This data could only indicate how geographically dispersed the group is, even if that probably does not depict the “real situation”. Since I live in Canada, the participants who I “virtually” know and, the interactions I observed do not “cover”, for example, the Australian “usual” time of participation, since time zones are quite different.

It is interesting that sixteen of the twenty-eight participants say that they usually log on from home, and nine who log on from both home and office. Only three participants say that they access the community from the office only. Since the majority of surveyed participants are logging on from home (or in combination with the use of their office computer) we could only make a guess about the local “context of access” of the community in general. Since the language of the community is Serbian, the Serbians in Diaspora who work in offices with different cultural and language environments, could not easily “switch” between languages, so they choose their home environment for community access.

I found an interesting discussion that could illustrate how participants reflect on the influence of the immediate offline context on the community in the monitored forum conference. The message exchanges went under the topic “Did you notice...”

<poster> that during weekends there are less postings than working days? I don’t believe that’s a question of a smaller number of home computers. No, I think it’s easier to log on from the work: a supervisor doesn’t ask: have you washed dishes, walked children, is the dinner ready?  
<reply1>Ohhh, if you have on mind that of 8-9 hours spent on the job, a person really works only half of that..... You would know then why the forum is “full” over working week.... Moreover, during weekends all of us have other things to do.... Why spend our personal time here if we could get paid for this ;-)  
<reply2> I wouldn’t agree with you about working hours, maybe in Yugoslavia – but here ---- 90% of working hours are spent in a real work!!  
<reply3> Nick2, in what kind of country are you?? I agree...  
<reply1> poster> I am in USA-kind of country, NY city:-)  
<reply3> My boss is an animal, slave-driver and rotten capitalist:-((( Because of that I log on the Net every time I can. If he makes me suffer and work 15-18 hours – then – I can give a little pleasure to myself ....
The NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, seen here as the external context of online communication, has brought about many changes in the real lives of the participants. As Internet users live in the concrete social, economic and cultural contexts, from which they translate online phenomena and understand online experiences, this extreme change in their real life logically affected their online behavior and habits. Already involved in discussions about homeland issues, the participants living in Diaspora were naturally interested in the event that could destroy their homeland. The recent immigrants, with the majority residing in host countries for less than 10 years, had a close and firm contact with Yugoslavia through family members and friends still living there. On the other side, participants living in Yugoslavia found in the mutual community the space to express fear or anger and find support. As one participant from Yugoslavia said “Chatting with those abroad, despite ephemeral, helped me to feel a kind of hope, a connected.” Confronted with the media campaign that elaborately framed the NATO military action, stigmatized by the Western media as “war mongers” and “identified” with the Serbian’s regime, the participants of the Serbian virtual community sought in this “local” place emotional support, potentially trustworthy information, or a place for discussion about the issues of primary interest.

The patterns of community space use and the importance that the community had for participants during the time of conflict will be more elaborately discussed in the next chapter.

The Temporal Structure of the Group

Another factor of influence on a virtual group is its temporal structure. As Baym points out, what is shaping the virtual community is the temporal structure of the computer-
mediated communication - usually referred to as synchronous and asynchronous. The difference lies in the issue – do the participants need to be simultaneously online or not. Moreover, the temporal structure of the interaction is referred to as the time a virtual group spent together.

In the asynchronous type of the communication, (usually related to the different types of computer conference forums) the participants are not co-present on the virtual space. They communicate by posting and reading the messages located on the server and publicly available to anyone who is interested. To be involved in synchronous communication, the participants need to be logged on the same “virtual space” at the same time (as in the IRC or Java chat communication). Those differences between synchronous and asynchronous forms of communication, as Baym (1998) asserts: “influence the availability of immediate feedback, the opportunity to compose and rewrite messages before sending them, how many members of a group are participating at any given time, the meanings of some verbal and nonverbal phenomena (such as pauses), and other variables that directly affect a group’s communication patterns” (p. 43).

When discussing the Serbian virtual community it is important to state that the host web page offers the community several Internet technologies. One of them is the computer conference consisting of more than 20 topics ranging from general areas (film, music, food, sport, philosophy, computers, parenting, jokes), to nationally and culturally specific topics (forums dedicated to the cities in Yugoslavia and national politics) as well as, Diaspora-specific (the cities that are the current residence of the majority of Serbians in Diaspora – Toronto, Chicago, Vancouver, New York, Sydney). Closer examination of those forums could indicate that small sub-communities are emerging in almost every forum. Each forum
gathers a specific audience, but also, there is an impression that many members of the community regularly participate in many of them. Of course, some of the forums are intended for a specific audience, and naturally exclude others (for example, a participant who lives in Chicago is probably not interested in the postings from the “Vancouver” forum). Opening specific forums in the conference could lead to further segmentation of the participants, as they follow the particular needs of the participants. (The participants on the “Toronto” forum could exchange specific information about life in the Diaspora in that city and meet the needs of those who are interested in those issues.) This type of organization allows the participants to participate in different forums depending on the interest.

My impression is that many participants, especially those who are “highly” active, participate in several forums simultaneously and, depending on interests, develop their own specific “combinations” of the forums. The survey results indicate that a participant is either involved in several forums (on some a person could only “lurk”, on others they could actively participate) or not use the computer conference at all.

Another Internet technology used for communication in the community is the synchronous chat line, introduced at first as Java-chat located on the front web page of the community. At the time when I discovered the site, in June 1997, about thirty participants were regular members in the community Java chat-room. In the fall of 1997, because of a highly increased number of participants, the founders of the community posted a link to the IRC channel on the web site, with the same name as the previously used Java-chat room. The newly opened Serbian-speaking IRC channel was housed on one of the large IRC servers sharing net-space with mostly English-speaking channels. The number of Serbian-speaking participants communicating online became higher (usually fifty at the same time).
By the spring of 1998, several new IRC community channels (four) were opened. I started to participate in one of them from its creation, which gave me the opportunity to monitor the global changes over a period of time. The founders of newly opened channels stayed as regular participants of the host community channel, having the channel-operator status and membership on both channels (newly opened and the “host” one). I assume that those participants, usually spending many hours connected per day, are the same ones who are the most computer-savvy and their offline work is closely related to computers.

Despite the several newly opened channels, the number of participants on the “host” channel has increased month by month. The virtual sub-group that gathered around the “small” channel in which I participated, became relatively stable, at about 15 participants. In the fall of 1998, despite the stable existence of the virtual sub-community, the owner of the channel decided voluntarily to close the channel. The virtual group went several weeks without net-“space”, until one of the regular members decided to open a channel with a new name but on the same IRC server. The new channel was opened in November 1998 and it is “live” today, being “home” to the same virtual sub-community as the previous one.

Many relatively stable sub-groups interact using the IRC software in the Serbian virtual community. The members of almost every sub-group are at the same time, regular participants in the “host” channel, located on the same the IRC server. The capabilities of IRC-software allow this simultaneous participation on several channels. (For example, the member on the “x” channel could, at the same time, be a participant and member in “y” or “z” channels). This type of multi-membership gives participants the opportunity to communicate with a large group “other” sub-groups, and to become aware of the “identity” of his/her own “sub-group”. (In this specific case the virtual sub-group from the “closed”
channel “survived” through ability to communicate on the “host” channel and organize themselves in a new “place”, on the newly-opened channel.)

Another contextual factor that influences group interaction is the amount of time that a virtual group spends interacting together. The noticeable characteristic of the Serbian virtual community is its segmentation over time, regardless of the type of communication channel. As we have seen on IRC, starting with one channel of communication, a growing number of participants provoked the opening of new channels. Sometimes, those channels are opened in accordance with the participants’ interests or newly formed relationships. For example, a small group of people could open a channel to have a private conversation and, after a while, transferring the interaction onto other types of communication (personal meetings, ICQ), they could close the channel. Another example is that channel could be formed related to some offline characteristic of group (place of current residence or previous city of residence in Yugoslavia), attracting members with similar interests.

The segmentation of the community and emergence of newly founded sub-communities was visible on the conference forum, as well. Over time, new forums had been added to the community conference, which gathered a new audience. The high level of moderation, present on the conference, in comparison with the IRC, allows less chaotic organization of sub-groups of interests. It is harder to open a new forum, but if one is opened, it is carefully maintained.

It is hard to estimate how long Serbians have been participating in the virtual community. According to the survey, there is a wide range of length of participation — there are participants involved in the community from its opening to those who have participated for only a few months. As a primarily diasporic web site, in the beginning the community
attracted mostly participants who lived in Diaspora. A participant (I24) who has participated in the community since its founding, said:

At that time, only fifteen of us were there, on Java chat. IRC wasn’t so popular:-())) And many were from Toronto and US… I remember only two or three people from Yugoslavia, regularly. I don’t know, everything is different today, so many people, you know, it's not so intimate and personal as used to be.

A large number of participants came to the community at the time of the NATO conflict mainly looking for information. They were mostly unaware of the long existence of the Serbian web space before this, as one participant (S11), answering when he became a participant, said: “Of course, like every else here – from April when bombing was started!”

It is hard to tell without extensive longitudinal research of a virtual group how long period of time could influence this group segmentation or the interaction in the virtual community in general. However, it could be assumed that if the group communication is stretched over a long period of time, that could influence the type of communication. Time could make it possible for participants in the group to form relationships among themselves, develop their interests, become familiar with the mutual environment and its possibilities, even change the tools of communication, and adapt the technology to the newly formed group interests.

General observation of the Serbian virtual community suggests that temporal structure of the Internet software, as well as the time that a group spends communicating in the virtual place, are very important contextual factors that need careful examination.

The changes that the NATO conflict brought into the community were especially visible through the dramatic increase in the number of new members. Although the organizational changes were made as new spaces for communication were opened, the “old”
spaces became over-crowded. The small sub-communities, having stable membership, had to enforce firmer rules of behavior to “survive” the huge influx of new participants.

**The Infrastructure of the Computer System**

Baym (1998) suggests that many characteristics of the computer infrastructure could be important for conveying community interactions. Similar to the temporal structure of the Internet communication software and the infrastructure of the Internet, its “physical configurations, system adaptability and level of user friendliness” (Seibold et al., as cited in Baym. 1998, p. 44) could shape the virtual group interaction in many ways. The number of computers connected to network, their spatial dispersion, the speed of the system, the capacity for anonymous interaction, ability of the system to support multiple tasks, flexibility, and ease-of-learnability are just some of these characteristics.

Regarding the system’s infrastructure, the Serbian virtual community is influenced by the general characteristics of the computer conference forums, as well as, the IRC software. The characteristics of those two environments in general, could possibly shape the styles of the sub-communities formed and developed around them. The extensive literature of both Internet communication technologies exists, and those explored system characteristics are applicable to the Serbian virtual community like any other virtual community. I will focus on the specific systems’ features of those Internet technologies that could be important for the Serbian virtual space in particular.

The main characteristics of the system’s Internet technology infrastructure is support for using the Latin alphabet, particularly the Latin characters used in the English language. The written form of Serbian language is Cyrillic, but can be easily adapted into the Latin
alphabet because all Serbians have learned to use the Latin alphabet for Serbian language. However, problems arise with the existence of four "extra" letters in the "Yugoslavian Latin" compared to the English alphabet, and are therefore, not supported by the Internet communicative technologies. Thus, to use the conference forums and IRC, besides using the Serbian written form in the Latin alphabet, the Serbians have to restrict themselves to using only 26 letters out of 30 letters to communicate in Serbian. The system's infrastructure that influences the form of communication forced the Serbians to adapt themselves to the environment, creatively exploring the possibilities of written Serbian language.

The Internet communication technologies are not only adapted to the English-speaking users by allowing them to use only the English language characters, but, all commands of the IRC or conference software are in English. For example, on IRC, the commands like "who is", "connect", "join" or on the forum, like "send", "topic" or "message" – are English words. Furthermore, Serbians do not have any translated computer software in their language (like Windows, Netscape, Explorer). This is a very important fact, because they have to simultaneously use the English commands in English adapted software with the Serbian written language "adapted to the environment" (without four "extra" letters) to communicate. That simultaneous use of languages and their interesting mixture, indicate the general willingness of the Internet users, in this case the ethnic group, to adapt technologies as much as possible to their own purposes and create an environment that is different but as "close" as possible to their offline environments.

The other characteristics of the Internet system’s infrastructure are related to the features of the communicative software the participants use. The computer conference environment used by the Serbian virtual community has the similar structure as any
asynchronous form of communication. The posted conference messages are stored on the “host” web-site, publicly available to anyone interested in retrieving them. As mentioned earlier, there are many forums in the conference, covering a variety of subjects relevant to the community. The messages in the particular forum are organized into the message threads, with clearly stated message topics or subjects. Anyone in the conference can open the new topic, and all replies to that message go in the same thread. Every newly posted message that opens a new topic has an automated header with the information about the topic, the sender’s nickname and IP number, time of posting and possibility for the poster to enter his or her email address. The replied message has the same heading with the exception of the subject line. As different from the Usenet, for example, a participant could choose to put into a message header any nickname (there is no automatic identification between IP number and the nicknames). The only way to know the sender is from the IP number – for example, if I want to post messages, I could constantly change my nickname, but my IP number will be the same. However, to make the environment more “anonymous”, the IP address is masked (e.g. 192.168.*.*) and the “clear” identification of the poster is an almost impossible task. Furthermore, there is no “search” possibility – for example, to find out all messages that a participant under an IP address or a nickname has ever posted. All of this, including having the message posted on the server only for several days, and during the NATO conflict, only one day, made the environment almost close to that of synchronous communication.

The IRC Serbian environment is relatively typical of that kind. The IRC “host” channel is opened on the English-speaking server, being surrounded by English-speaking channels. It is linked to the web-site physically, through the Java chat link, web-posted
explanations for new users of IRC, and the web-based link to the IRC software. Furthermore, the IRC channel is linked to the web “host” page even symbolically – there is the forum in the computer conference dedicated to the IRC problems where the IRC participants in the community could also asynchronously exchange the messages related to their synchronous communication. Over time, the IRC channel was transferred to the new server completely dedicated to the Serbian virtual sub-communities with now more than 40 Serbian channels.

The Group Purposes

By its overall conception, the Serbian web site is the “base” for the formation of the Serbian virtual community. I assume that the main purpose for founding the web site was to gather the participants of Serbian-speaking language around the discussions of the homeland and diasporic issues by offering the tools for communication (attaching the Java chat and the conference forums, and latter, introducing the IRC channel(s)).

The web page, completely written in Serbian, could attract only Serbian speaking Internet surfers. Its diasporic character is framed by the attaching on the web page the issues that appeals to those Serbians who are living outside of Serbia. Over time, the changes in the community have brought about the changes on the web page itself. The further development of the Internet technologies (Internet-phone, Web based radio and similar) also influenced the patterns of participation in the virtual community.

The purpose of discussing the issues of the homeland and socializing among the Serbians living in Diaspora are based on the several implicit assumptions: Serbians dispersed by migration around the world are willing to maintain the contact with each other
and to the homeland using the Serbian language; the Internet technologies could bring the diasporic Serbians together to form a community; and, information about the homeland are important for those Serbians who are living in Diaspora. The purpose is to offer the space for community building and information exchange explicitly through the web site. Of course, as Baym (1998) states, this explicit purpose, “entails specific purposes that often remain implicit.” (p. 46.) Those implicit purposes, as part of the communicative fabric of the virtual community that could emerge within a group’s interaction, will be explored in the next chapter. I will discuss the ways that the community web space was used during the time of the conflict.

A Serbian-speaking participant, living in Diaspora, could log onto the web site and read the current news about the homeland, at the same time listening to Serbian or Yugoslav music available through the Internet software on the same web page. He or she could log onto the forum and review the postings of fellow Serbians about some issue of interest. In looking for the contact with other Serbians, the imagined participant could look at the database with linked personal home pages and send an email from web-site-based free email account. Furthermore, he or she could chat with other Serbians either over the Web (Java chat) or using the IRC software. They could also use the search engine located on the web site to explore a specific Serbian issue. The capability to have “Serbian Internet” inside the global Internet is particularly interesting for this research. My point here is to emphasize to what extent, the development of the Internet technologies and computer-mediated communication, make possible close contact among distant people of the same place of origin, and to their homeland in general.
The results of the survey, indicated that, as the founders of this Serbian web site correctly assumed, the meeting of other Serbians is the main, explicitly stated reason for the participation of more than half of the participants (for fifteen out of twenty-eight). Besides the socializing, the participants state the other reasons are the use of the Serbian language, information about the homeland and the need to discuss the issues of interest with others of similar background.

The changed external context during the NATO conflict was particularly visible online in the changed group purpose. As primarily a place for socializing and discussing the ethnic issues, the virtual community became the place for constant information exchange. The conflict in the homeland, accompanied by fear among participants for their family members in Yugoslavia, or even fear for their own life, demanded timely and reliable information. Surrounded by the media in the host countries that implicitly or explicitly “supported” the actions of the NATO alliance and, on the other side, by the Serbian official media that Serbians already treated as undependable, the community participants from both Yugoslavia and Diaspora tried together to interpret, reinterpret and further discuss news. As a virtual space for information exchange and reinterpretation of the news, the virtual community had a specific significance during the time of the conflict.

The Characteristics of the Group and its Members

Baym’s analysis of the contextual characteristics of a virtual group shows that the group factors - its size, composition, members’ shared history of the group, the social hierarchy among the members – represent very important factors that shape the style of the community. Besides the group characteristics, the personal characteristics of individual
members - their level of the familiarity with the medium, the level of Internet and computer literacy including their attitude toward technology, could further influence the community interactions.

The Serbian virtual community consists of many virtual sub-communities, organized around the particular community's sub-spaces. The common link among them is their connection to the Serbian host web page conceived as a "base" community. As I have noted earlier, the existence of the "base" or main "host" could "serve and protect" the community, simultaneously offering possibilities for further developing small sub-communities and after their "closing" - the space for "coming back home". This approach of the "host" providing various opportunities for community formation, as my observations indicate, is what makes the "host" community stable even with the constantly growing number of participants over time.

One example could help to emphasize how the virtual community is shaped in this way. The imagined group of participants could meet on the forum dedicated to music. After awhile, a small community could emerge of participants that have similar opinions about a specific musical group. They could maintain contact by participating on the same forum and simultaneously exchange emails. They could meet each other face to face, if they live in the same city, and go to concerts together. Between the meetings, they could maintain contact by telephone and still participate in the forum. Moreover, they could transfer their communication to the IRC, forming the new channel dedicated to that particular music group. (open or closed to the public). However, after awhile, the community feeling could start to "wear off" or the intensity of the group gatherings could become lower. The lower level of activity will cause the channel to close eventually. Some of the members may
decide to stop logging on because of offline reasons (job, family reasons, or just boredom) but others can come back to the “host” forum where they initially joined. The freedom to “migrate” between the channels, to develop, maintain and “close” sub-communities is very important for the longevity of a virtual community. With this in mind, I have focused this research on the Serbian virtual community in general, remaining constantly aware of the existence of different sub-communities and that each participant can have multiple memberships into different sub-groups.

Analysis of the surveyed participants’ responses regarding ways of participating in the community showed that they tend to use more than one method of access. The majority uses both the forums and the IRC channel for access. Several others, stating they use either IRC or the forum only, use them together with additional Internet software (Net meeting, Internet-phone, ICQ). Information that the majority of surveyed participants (twenty-one out of the twenty-eight) use at least one Internet tool for communication on a daily basis indicates their already “high” participation. Although it would be misleading to make any claims about the wider Serbian community, my impression, as a long-term participant in the community, is that people tend to use different Internet communication tools to realize their imagined goals, whatever those goals may be.

Analyzing responses from the survey regarding general participants’ characteristics that could influence the shape of the community, I find several points worthy to note. A majority of the surveyed participants has a high level of education and knowledge of English language, and many of them work in computer-related jobs, which makes them a highly computer-literate group, relatively easy to manage in the community. Although this could be an interesting issue for further research, we could assume that those characteristics probably
affected the virtual community life by making the process of community building easier. If a majority of members gathered around a virtual site already know rules that govern online behavior or communication ("netiquette"), software commands, navigation among different virtual sites, or roles in online social hierarchy – they can spend more time in social activities that could lead to creating a community.

Created social meanings

Baym (1998) suggests that a virtual group needs to develop social meaning into stable group-specific understandings to gain the potential to be imagined as a community. As Baym states, “the members of these groups creatively exploit the system’s features in order to play with new forms of expressive communication, to explore possible public identities, to create otherwise unlikely relationships, and to create behavioral norms” (p. 51). In the next pages of this chapter, the Baym’s typology of social meanings created by a virtual community is applied to the Serbian case and analyzed in relation to the previously explored factors of influence to computer-mediated communication.

Forms of expression

The most prominent feature of computer-mediated communication is its textuality and the reality that separated participants, typing behind the computer screens, have no visual cues about the other participants they are communicating with. The CMC feature of "stripped visual cues" creates a specific environment. Research literature shows that
participants who communicate virtually, “create methods of compensating for the lack.” (Reid, 1991) Newly created ways to exchange messages incorporated into the textual nature of CMC, have led to the development of the new type of expressive communication. Many CMC researchers show that “standard forms of expression” relating to the global Internet culture, are emoticons and other textual signs of expressing emotional states. For example, the context-specific acronyms and vocabulary (LOL, BTW, etc.) as well as, context-specific jokes that result from the prominent features of the environment. Participants will need to learn those CMC-specific forms of expression if they want to understand message flow, to actively participate in communication and, become a part of the general CMC community. Over time, every virtual community develops its context and culture-specific forms of expression depending on the type of medium used for communication, group characteristics, length of time a particular group spends together, as well as, the purpose that group is trying to fulfill.

A new user coming into the Serbian virtual community is like any new Internet user who is trying to understand the online message exchange. He or she needs to learn forms of expression used in the general CMC culture, and they need to become familiar with the environment. Over time, they will learn to actively participate using the group-specific meanings. As with many aspects of the Internet, learning about any Internet culture-specific forms of expression would involve observation, asking other participants for the explanation and using the CMC characteristic forms of expression. Learning the way to communicate and become familiar with the virtual environment could be a time-consuming activity.

Using Serbian language in the virtual community, within an intrinsically English environment, has created a unique mixture of English-Serbian-CMC-language. The
participants in the community use a whole range of CMC specific emoticons and acronyms, combining them with regular English words to construct sentences. Depending on a person's familiarity with English, the participants will choose the English words and constructions (for example, "thanks", "as well", "be good", "be back", or "hello") more or less frequently in Serbian sentences. Similar use of other languages can be observed on IRC (Swedish, German or French), depending on the group composition and participants' current residence.

As I have mentioned earlier, having the option to use only 26 letters from Cyrillic alphabet (using Latin alphabet), participants frequently play with the letters that, read as if they were written in Cyrillic, have a different meaning in Latin alphabet, forming Serbian words. The topic on the IRC channel could serve as an illustration:

```plaintext
Session Start: Mon Apr 12 15:32:03 1999
*** Now talking in # channel_name
*** Topic is 'XPNCTOC BOCKPECE CPBN.....!!!!!!

The phrase "XPNCTOC BOCKPECE CPBN" meaning, "Christ has resurrected, Serbians" (the phrase "Christ has resurrected!" is usually used in Serbia as a seasonal greeting for Easter). The words in the phrase are actually written using the Cyrillic letters from the Latin "pool" of letters. The participant who wrote this obviously intends to demonstrate the specific power over the environment and play with the Cyrillic alphabet. Whenever participants feel the need to play with the combination of Cyrillic and Latin, they do so – including their nicknames or common used phrases.

In general, the participants adapt different forms of expressions taken from other CMC contexts and either translate them or mix them with Serbian vocabulary, while drawing from Serbian and adapting it to the English environment.
The NATO conflict and changed group purposes initiated different forms of expression, observable in message exchanges. Phrases like “CCCC” (Only Unity Saves Serbians) or “Stop NATO bombing!” that intended to show support or “bust” morale, are frequently used regardless of context (in nicknames, message headers or incorporated in the participant’s “signature”). Frequently, depending on the situation, participants “flooded” channels on IRC, typing phrases of that kind repeatedly. Those messages, while intended to show emotional support or express anger toward the offline circumstances, had become online “noise”, especially on the IRC channel, making the process of communication rather difficult.

The IRC environment, mostly used by community members for socializing and play, changed its character at the time of research. The users, perceiving the seriousness of the circumstances, were carefully choosing jokes, some of them created for this context-specific purpose. For example, some users after entering the IRC channel used the phrase “Bombardan!” The combination of the words “bomb” and “day”, meaning “Have a bombed day!” is used as a paraphrase of “Dobar dan”, for “Have a nice day”. Those carefully created jokes intended to show solidarity with those who were living under bomb alerts.

The channel operators on the IRC, the moderators of discussion, frequently used the topic line to create the mood of the environment. Sometimes they used humor or an ironic textual line referring explicitly to a specific event. For example, in the next exchange with reference to the lack of cigarettes even on the Serbian “black” market:

Session Start: Wed Apr 14 11:07:08 1999
*** Now talking in #channel_name
*** Topic is ‘Welcome to the #channel_name.....A war coffee??? ...All right, but bring your own cigarettes :-)...
*** Set by T1 on Wed Apr 14 07:04:37
Frequently, during the conflict, a number of participants chose to enter the IRC channel(s) with the intention to provoke or “stir in” discussion. They could “play” the role of a foreigner, or non-Serbian “pacifist”, using specific wording or phrases inappropriate to the context (from the standpoint of community members). The “pacifist” enacted discourse (for example: “Serbs, do not be aggressive. Stop with attacking the others”; or similar type) was perceived as a provocation when Serbia was under NATO attacks. The participants often replied to the pacifist “calls” by playing with the sentences taken from the nationalistic discourse like “Yeah, we are the ‘Pacifists’ - Serbia to the Pacific Ocean” (referring to the nationalist phrase “Serbia to Virovitica” used during the wars in Yugoslavia that describes the future borders of Serbia; Virovitica is a city in Croatia, the furthest from Serbia).

The changes within the external or “real life” context from which the participants of the virtual community “speak”, obviously influenced the virtual sites. The Net-talk, being at first a mixture of Internet culture and use of Serbian language, adapted to the new circumstances. The NATO -Yugoslavia conflict influenced changes in the forms of expression, as well as, in the content of the message exchanges. The changed real life environment had an impact on other factors, in turn, influencing the virtual community: the purpose of the group had changed, the number of participants dramatically increased, as well as, the amount of time participants spent in the community.

**Identity**

The process of identity creation in the computer-mediated communication environment is closely related to the perceived anonymity of the medium. Without visual cues, the communication in virtual environments allows participants to choose and explore
the virtual identity by themselves and, as many scholars argue, different from those in real life. In particular, the scholarly research into the role-playing virtual environments like MOO or MUD (Reid, 1994; Turkle, 1995) focused on the process of experimenting with identity representation. The issue of how comparable the virtual identity of a participant involved in CMC communication is to his or her real life identity, is still under wider discussion by scholars.

The important aspects of community development are the stable virtual identities of the community members. As Reid (1991) points out, "[t]he uniqueness of names, their constant use, and respect for – and expectation of – their integrity, is crucial to the development of online communities". Freedom to choose a nickname is a certain privilege compared to real life, and could be the start in the process of constructing participants' virtual presence. "Since a person's physical existence and identity must be condensed textually into a single line which states the nickname and the electronic address, the person will attempt to make these representational elements as prominent as possible" (Bechar-Israeli, 1995). Like real names, the nicknames could provoke stereotypes by being heavily filled with cultural connotations. There is an assumption in the process of choosing a nickname - some expectation of how others will understand it upon participant’s entering the virtual environment.

Despite the anonymous and potentially playful character of the virtual site, the members of the Serbian virtual community frequently use personal names as nicknames and tend to keep them stable as long as possible. Even if they do not choose the nicknames as their real names, the lack of desire to play with them seems obvious. On the other hand, their relatively stable character gives a firm starting point in the process of community formation.
The certainty that even after awhile a participant could easily find an already known person under the same nickname could foster relationship formation and brings order in a potentially anonymous environment.

Similar to Baym’s (1998) findings relating to the virtual community formed on the Usenet, the participants in the Serbian virtual community, in general, discourage anonymity. People frequently ask others for their real name, place of residence and background information. If a person does not want to disclose personal information, he or she is usually “put” under suspicion from the rest of the community. The disclosure of personal data seems to offer some sort of “guarantee” to the others in the community, that a person is honest and reliable. Furthermore, the background data could be easily “checked” by others – there is always somebody in the community who went to the same school or university in Yugoslavia, or who lived in the same part of the town, or spent time in the same club or cafe. That kind of “investigation” of “who is who” in the community usually happens at the beginning, when a person enters the community as a new member. With that “communal” practice, individuals are prevented from fully experimenting with their online identity.

The process of personal disclosure is most evident in the compilation of home pages of members located on the community web site. There are approximately 7800 home pages of members with elaborated description of their virtual (or real) identities. The participants frequently use that web space to offer their personal data, interests, pictures, favorite web-links and contact addresses; information you could usually find on typical home pages over the Internet. The database makes it possible for community members to easily find each other and possibly re-establish a lost contact.
Despite an environment that almost naturally induces the connection between "real" and virtual identities, people try to create distinct virtual personas. Sometimes, participants use specific nicknames or explore different textual possibilities of the environment. For example, one person with a nickname "Wave" creates a specific entrance on the channel - instead of the usual "hello", he or she uses the sign "~~~~" as an association to their nickname. The specific entrance is assigned to that person, even if he or she changes their nickname.

As the survey shows, almost all participants (twenty-seven of twenty-eight) claim that others in the community (or the particular sub-community) recognize them by their nicknames. That means that the surveyed participants keep those nicknames relatively stable, which is in accordance with my general impression. Further research into community and individual creation of self-representation in the virtual environment could explore the issue of why some communities particularly insist on fostering nickname stability and discourage anonymity, as indicated in this community.

The changed offline environment additionally fostered stability of virtual identities and their connection to offline identities. Playfulness and carefree chatting, as the dominant form of communication before the conflict, were transformed into the information exchange. The need for particular and reliable information influenced the community members to look for the dependable sources. To believe or not to believe in some piece of information becomes the primary importance. "Aversion to anonymity" as Baym phrases it, becomes noticeable in the community "atmosphere", which in this case could be connected to the changed real life context.
Online Relationships

In exploring the social uses of online communication, CMC scholars became interested in the process of creating relationships in cyberspace (Reid, 1991; Bruckman, 1997; Baym, 1998). Despite the CMC environment’s lack of social cues, common in face-to-face communication, these researchers reported that participants frequently form online relationships and tend to transfer them from virtual environment to real life (Parks & Floyd, 1996).

The phenomenon of relationship formation is particularly important for the exploration of the ethnic virtual communities. The formation of different kinds of online relationships could be a possible motive for people participating in the community. The connection of people geographically dispersed but coming from the same place of origin and, tightening relations between Diaspora and the homeland through information exchange, are the main forces in developing the ethnic virtual community.

The Serbian virtual community gathers a large number of people of Serbian origin who communicate, frequently on a daily basis with other Serbians. Sometimes, people go online to find others who speak the same language and have similar cultural backgrounds, or who share similar interests. After awhile, depending on the participants’ country or city of residence, it seems to be a natural process for them to contact each other offline, or arrange meetings face to face. It might sound highly speculative, but the general atmosphere in the Serbian virtual community tends to foster feelings of trust, belief and reliance among the participants – maybe more then in other virtual communities on the Internet. The survey, done in the Serbian community indicates that the online relationships are rather frequent. Of twenty-eight surveyed participants, twenty-four reported that they formed one or more
relationship online. What is even more interesting, which was my previous speculation, is that only two of those twenty-four participants who formed online relationships report that they have never moved the relationships out of CMC environment.

For example, a participant (S24), currently a resident in Canada, 41 years old, female, married, has participated in the community from its creation. She reports that she formed several relationships over the Net, and characterizes them as friendships.

I think that this is a beautiful way to meet “our” people, to choose them right....so, possibility of CHOOSING is what I like so much. When somebody is somewhere far away from home, what he really needs is - to communicate with those who understand him best. Unfortunately, everyday life doesn’t give us that kind of opportunity and that sort of feeling. This way, I can talk to those who are nice to me, who make me forget my everyday life, those who make me laugh... And not to mention a potential usefulness of that type of contact.

The assumption that there is an “close understanding” between the participants, based on their similar backgrounds, culture and shared memories, is a prevalent feeling in probably every ethnic community; especially in the Serbian community, if we look at the wider social context surrounding the “Serbian-ness”. Feeling excluded and marginalized by media stereotyping, being first-generation immigrants residing in the Western countries for less than ten years – Serbians find their “community” on the Internet, a familiar, easily “understandable” environment.

In relationship formation, as mentioned earlier, participants tend to extend online relationships into other channels of communication. What is interesting, of twenty-four surveyed participants who formed online relationships, seventeen reported that they have made face to face contact with the person(s) who they met online.

A participant (S15), residing in Canada, 21 years old, female and single, started to participate in the community in January 1999. She used mostly IRC to access the
community, but also actively read and wrote on the conference forums. Her “real life” friends told her about the online community. When asked about a relationship that she had made over the Net, she stated that she met a person “offline”: “From the first moment we saw each other we started to be very good friends. you know (...) even my parents met his parents and after that they are visiting each other regularly; I am so happy that I met someone (in a such a strange way) who is so good.”

The transfer of online-formed relationships to other “real life” channels depends naturally on where participants live. This will determine how many chances somebody will have to meet others in arranged face-to-face meetings. Even if somebody lives in a part of the world where other Serbians do not live, participants could get the chance to meet each other when they travel to the “homeland”. I witnessed many situations where the participants were exploring the possibilities and actually arranging real life meetings in Yugoslavia with others from the virtual community who will travel to Yugoslavia at the same time. Those arrangements would become the main topic of discussion, sometimes lasting months in advance. keeping the community together more than usual.

Of course, geographic proximity is not the only factor of influence for relationship formation. Particularly, the participants need time to form online relationships, to get to know each other. Even if the “lack of non-verbal cues” in the CMC medium is usually seen as an obstacle to relationship formation, the research literature in this field (Byrne, 1994; Parks & Floyd, 1996) indicates that people easily overcome any constraints by “switching” from one to another communication channel. Frequently they exchange emails and pictures, make telephone contacts, write letters. From this perspective, the CMC seems to be used as any communication tool that people could easily adapt to their own needs.
Sometimes, the participants will go online with pre-existing face-to-face relationships. An interesting example is one participant, who chose a nickname as a combination of a word and number - “Walker3”. After several introductory sentences, typical for that type of communication on IRC, I asked her why she uses that number with the nickname. She replied that she work in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in the office with 5 computers. All of her colleagues participate in the same chat channel in the Serbian virtual community. The number she took depends on the number of the computer in the office and her other colleagues use other numbers with the same word (as “Walker1”, “Walker 4”). This example highlights the complexity of the online interactions – the mixture of offline and online relationships at the same virtual site that need careful investigation. How would we approach the issue of anonymity if several participants could be logged on from the same virtual site in the same real-life environment?

Changed real life circumstances, like the war, affected almost every aspect of the virtual community, particularly relationships formed in the sub-communities. The sub-communities, formed around small IRC channels and forums, become “crowded” with participants: current regulars, new members, and even “previous” members who stopped coming on a daily basis. Everybody is trying to offer help, show sympathy to those who live in Yugoslavia, to use the virtual space to express anger, sorrow, and support. One interviewed (I27) participant, living in USA, 42 years old female, told me:

After those first news on TV that morning, when the bombing started ....I think I saw them on CNN.... I furiously entered on the IRC channel...... When I saw there Y*** [nickname of the person who lives in Belgrade, Yugoslavia]. Ufffff......I was so happy, because I thought that all those news about bombing were lies. I was so happy..... You understand?...
The already intimate atmosphere on some smaller IRC channels became even more personal. The participants, particularly those from Yugoslavia, logged on the channel as much as possible, and were the community’s main informants about happenings in the homeland. They offered help to call the parents or family members of the community members who live in Yugoslavia (telephone lines among Yugoslavia and other countries were not working from time to time). Sentences like “I live there, do you want me to call your parents to check if they are OK” – were very frequent. On the forums, the participants logging from Yugoslavia would leave their emails accompanied with the notice “If somebody needs some information I could call and check. Contact me”.

**Norms of Behavior**

Behavior regulation within the virtual environment is one of the most prominent aspects of the online culture. Creation of the rules and norms of behavior provides the foundation for the development of any virtual community. The different types of Internet software have built-in features that provide the basic regulation of online behavior. The IRC software, for example, has an “ignore” command that could “block” all messages from specific participants so the member will only receive messages from participants he or she wants to communicate with. Moreover, the channel operators, present on every IRC channel with access to “extra” commands and capabilities, are able to “throw out” people from the channel and, if necessary, to “ban” those participants from entering the channel permanently. On the computer conference forums, moderators regulate the message postings and, in the same way, monitor the participants’ behavior.
The Serbian virtual community, with access to the IRC and computer conference technology, maintains the norms of behavior and appropriate online conduct closely related to the general Internet communication culture ("netiquette"). Particular norms and rules, specific to the community, have been developed over time as the number of participants increased. The emergence of sub-communities under the shield of the community in general, has prompted further development of the specific rules.

The rules of behavior are closely related to the purposes of the group. Since recognized purposes of the community were related to socializing and exchanging information. the community rules were "taken" from other English-speaking environments that had the same purposes (IRC or Usenet-culture). They have been translated into Serbian and made available to the community in general. The process of making and enforcing the rules in the community is left in the "hands" of the chosen participants, which take care of the behavior management on particular virtual sites (mentioned before as "channel operators" and "moderators").

For example, the participants can find the rules and norms of behavior on the community web site, and these are enforced on the chat-lines of the main, host-channel. The participants should not: insult others or respond to an insult; provoke arguments, especially that related to nationality; "flood" the channel; type vulgarities; use "war-scripts" and "nuke" other participants. As stated on the web page: "In short – talk to each other, do not insult others and do not respond to the provocations – and, yes, enjoy in chatting :-) ."

It is interesting that participants have access to the "Rules for channel operators", visible to the rest of the community. As stated on the web page:

The role of channel operators is not only to "kick out" people, but to offer them help. Helping participants includes answering to their questions related to chat-problems –
in a chat-forum, as well as, in a chat room. Rules for operators are the same ones as for the rest of participants accompanied by the following ones: vulgarities and insults are prohibited, in chatting, as well as, in the scripts. The same is for other languages. Operators should be "examples" to others. Private messages are personal things of participants and they shouldn't be the reasons for expelling participants. In this case, explain participants how to use "ignore/silence" command. Giving the "operator status" to others is not allowed. Taking off the "operator status" to others is not allowed.

In the conference forums, the rules of moderation, and the moderators themselves, are not visible to the participants. The moderator of the forum has the power to delete a posted message before it becomes available to the public. The rules as to which messages will be available for the community are mostly implicit and closely related to the rules in the IRC environment. The others do not usually know which participant is chosen as the moderator of that particular forum. In only a small numbers of forums, the moderator can choose to disclose himself or herself, even to leave his or her email address available to others.

In the conference forums, the participants frequently discussed the norms and the actions of moderators. The process of making and enforcing the rules was endlessly discussed, even disrupting the regular message flow around the topic that the forum covers. The participants want to know what the criteria are for the moderator's actions, why some post is not publicly available or what the identity of the moderator is.

The importance of the rules and norms of the online behavior became central after the real life circumstances changed. More and more participants demanded firmer rule-enforcement and better organization. The first visible change in the structure of the community was the opening of designated spaces for information exchange specifically
dedicated to the conflict. The two new forums and IRC channels were opened with that purpose.

Changing rules included prohibiting use of the English language on the chat lines and forums, and firmer enforcement of the “old” rules – particularly those related to provoking or insulting others. Solidarity with those participants living in Yugoslavia who did not speak English (most frequently used language of Internet communication), as well as a growing interest in people of non-Serbian origins to participate in discussion, led to the rule about prohibiting English. In addition, a newly opened forum related to the conflict was completely dedicated to communication in English where interested net-surfers from other cultures could communicate with the community members.

On the chat channels, norms of behavior particularly for those newly added, had been re-posted frequently, depending on the situation.

(...)
<operator> hey all, .....Listen to me for a minute!!...<
<operator> I’m asking everybody to follow the rules
<operator> and those who don’t understand, would “see” consequences...
<operator> Rules of #channel are: No cursing, no repetition, no flooding; no “text/nick/join” or “/part”; no advertising of other channels, no vulgarities, no bothering other guests; no using “Caps”, no vulgar nicknames; no asking for “channel-operator” status and – yes, speak Serbian!!!!
<operator> or look at the rules on www.***.com
<operator> So, no provoking and similar
<operator> thanks
<operator> now, go on with chatting
(...)

This type of “visible” and firm moderation of the channel had an intention to offer a “protected” atmosphere. From time to time, somebody would “call” the channel-operator, asking him to enforce the rules (for example, to “kick out” somebody from the channel). The
small number (under ten) of operators, regulating behavior of almost 500 participants at the same time, were forced to be aggressive and firm.

<operator> to all: Warning!!! If somebody is cursing or provoking, inform the operators: we are not on this channel only but on several - so we cannot see everything... Warning!!!

Those "not-negotiable" rules participants perceived as imposed from "outside" rather than created collectively. Due to the nature of the IRC environment and the increasing number of the participants, it was almost impossible to elaborately discuss the rules and norms on the channel itself. From time to time participants, experiencing the norms themselves, held this type of conversation:

(...)
<user1> it says at the top - "don't provoke guests". I've never tried to provoke anyone, but have been kicked off for disagreeing with YU government propaganda. POLITELY.
<user1> user3, so who is censoring this?
<user2> user1> you want to know something ----this channel is sponsored by California!!!
<user2> It is hosted in Canada
<user1> user2> doesn't surprise me.
<user1> So, if you disagree about political issues you get kicked off??
<user3> I got kicked off for something similar before...
<user3> depends on what mood they are in
<user1> last time I got kicked off was because I said that CNN wasn't the only news source in the USA. Go figure. There are thousands more, "only".
<user3> I got kicked for saying Serbia would be a 3rd world country after the bombing
<user1> Well, user3, I don't think any Serbians want to hear that.

The rules of behavior clearly stated, and visible to all, demand the operators evaluate the context before applying the punishment to a participant. In situations where a participant is obviously intending to provoke the others, the operators react quickly:

<user1> Are there any bombs today???????
<user1> or, some rockets, maybe??????????????
<user1> or maybe some tomahawk??????
<user2> carefully user1, maybe YOU can get some
*** user1 was kicked by <operator1> (here, here.....boom, boom, boom)
<user2> uhh, somebody finally hit him, thanks “operator1”

These actions usually pass with little comments from users who break the rules, as shown above. It is possible that users already know the rules and choose to behave against them, knowing precisely what the consequences are. But sometimes, reactions could be as follows:

<user1> Hey, what’s happened? Somebody kicked me????
<user1> I didn’t know that somebody could kick me!!!
<user1> this is the Internet!!! There are no rules!!!
<user2> Now, you know
<user3> user1 don’t curse.
<user1> this is Milosevic’s channel, obviously
<user1> Sorry

Another way to make the rules visible to all users is the use of the topic line to list rule(s). When the conflict started, the new channel was opened as a supplement to the main one. This new channel was dedicated to the current political conflict, having the obvious name of the subject – “Stop NATO bombing”. The operators of this channel usually post one of the rules or norms for chat-behavior in the topic line. For example:

Session Start: Mon Apr 12 15:32:03 1999
*** Now talking in # [channel_name]
*** Topic is ‘XRNCTOC BOCKPECE CPBN.....English ONLY IN PRIVATE...use in public is PROHIBITED...
*** Set by T1 on Sun Apr 11 19:14:54
#[channel_name] url is www.***.com
or:

Session Start: Fri Apr 16 10:22:10 1999
*** Now talking in # [channel_name]
*** Topic is ‘NATO Aggression Will Be Stopped ....DO NOT PROVOKE GUESTS, OR FACE CONSEQUENCES...
*** Set by T2 on Thu Apr 15 03:59:50
The purpose of the text-topic is to set the tone for the conversations on the channel. It also offers information about the nickname of the channel operator who sets the topic. Only on some smaller channels, with regularly 10-15 participants, norms of behavior could be discussed in detail.

In the conference forum, as with any type of asynchronous communication, the participants have enough time to compose the messages, explore in detail their dissatisfaction with the imposed norms, and ask for an explanation. The next example indicates this type of exchange:

**Topic:** For the moderator!!!(Don’t erase the message at least 2 minutes, please)  
<poster> Well, you think that writing here is a privilege?? I’ll ask you – what privilege???? What kind of opinion must I have to gain that privilege?? I can’t believe that something like this is happening here. People, what’s happening with you??? Have you forgot the basics of democracy??? This forum was earlier a place where discussions were “natural” and not a PRIVILEGE. This was a place for expressing different opinions, and ONLY “provocateurs” – who openly insulted others – were “erased”. This was the only place where every Serbian could openly “air” his opinion - without any censure. You know - RTS – people [Serbian national television] have taught us over years that their program is a privilege, and they gave us only what they wanted at times they chose. Free and uncensored thought, right now, doesn’t exist anymore. It is sad that some of you have started to think about this web-forum as a personal service available only to those who think SIMILARLY to you. Obviously, something has changed. I am afraid that some people, the moderator for example, will soon start to think that is a privilege even to have the Internet. 
<moderator> Look at your contract with your Internet provider – you can read that use of the Internet IS a privilege! If you don’t like it here, open your web-site and write what you like. This place is for chosen people only.  
<user> The moderator – don’t be so stupid, man. This place has always been for everybody with a “good will” whatever his political opinions are. It’s true that a censure is stronger since the aggression started – to “lower” a tension level. The poster - you were “erased” from the forum only because of that.

This message exchange indicates the participants’ dissatisfaction with the moderator’s behavior. During the time of the conflict, the participants spent hours and hours
complaining to the moderator or to other participants. Discussion about regulating online behavior was a frequent topic under which the participants commonly posted and re-posted their anger about the moderation.

My impression is, after reviewing the postings, IRC logs and especially after interviewing moderators from several forums - that firm, clearly stated and timely enforced rules have crucial importance for the community maintenance in times of conflict. As one of the moderators (126) said:

The purpose of this forum was exclusively in the information exchange, without motivation to make something like a sub-community or to organize the activities related to the situation (there were other sub-communities formed on the other places). Consequently, my thesis is that the moderator/committee creates and heads the work of community, and without moderation - all communication would stop, very soon.

The moderation of behavior and organization of the community are “hidden” jobs in the hands of a small number of people. Their work usually passes, unnoticed to the majority of the participants who come and go, giving the illusion that the community space is something spontaneously formed and self-maintained. The participants see that someone is “watching” and “taking care” of the environment, only if somebody breaks a rule. The virtual community, as any social organization, demands a structure. The virtual space that “somebody takes care of” investing work, time and money as well as, making and enforcing the rules of behavior brings stability to the virtual community. As one participant (126), the founder and moderator of another Serbian virtual community, insightfully said:

Dynamism, and at the same time the “freshness” of a community, from my point of view, is defined by the amount of care that the creators/moderator of community shows. Without the moderation, the community would soon be destroyed; e.g. it would become something like the psycho-“sewer”, similar to that on the Usenet soc.cult.yu. AOL, for example, completely depends on moderators who take care of thousands small communities. There is, also, a marketing-problem. “Turnover” of
people is an ordinary process, so if you do not have a “new wave” of people (and a person who takes care of that “new wave”). the participants would start to be bored from each other, and, at the same time, they would probably change their life-style; e.g. they could get different demographic characteristics - not compatible with intense computer communication. Of course, the feeling of community exists and it has been interesting to build it up through all that group characteristics: the community name, the norms of the behavior, a group history, a committee, a logo. However, what is more important – there is a friendship based on human feelings.
Looking at the ways the virtual community was used by the participants during the conflict period, allows me to speculate on the possible role(s) it played in the lives of participants, especially those living in Diaspora. The group purposes are important factors in a community's development. As the survey showed, participants gather in the community to find other Serbians and get information about homeland in their own language. However, what were the community purpose(s) during the conflict? In this chapter, I will attempt to give a more detailed picture about the role of community during that time.

The identified emergent patterns of how the virtual space is used draw upon observational data, the perspectives of the participants given in the survey and in the interviews, and the research findings and proposed categories taken from the research literature. Those identified patterns of interaction could serve as possible guidelines for further exploration of virtual ethnic communities and their role in the processes of ethnicity negotiation by ethnic groups.

"Looking for" message exchanges

"Looking for" category of message exchanges (proposed by Mitra, 1997) was highly prominent on both IRC channels and the conference forum. These types of interaction usually have explicitly stated purposes in the message content – expressed intention of the participant to connect with community or with a specific participant or group. The members of the community, as Mitra (1997) stated, use this type of message to announce their
presence on the network, as well as to find somebody within a stated criterion. If we could assume that relationship formation is important for the community members and represents one of the main reasons for participation in the community, the “looking for” messages give an opportunity to participants, initiating this type of interaction, to build a basis for a possible relationship. For instance, on an IRC channel, in which many participants are simultaneously involved in a conversation, contact with others is usually realized “through” this type of message. Normally, the user publicly announces the party they would like to speak with. For example:

<user1> who knows where can I find maps of NATO targets????
<user2> hey. where are you from?
<user1> who knows about the maps of targets?
<user3> user1. I am from Zrenjanin, I know about maps:-)))))
<user1> which part of Zrenjanin?
<user3> from Sumice
<user1> user3. come to private!!!

The IRC software offers “private” space for conversations, parallel to the “public” space, allowing initiated conversations to transfer and continue uninterrupted by others. This particular method of message exchange was frequently used during the conflict period. Many participants who wanted to know what was happening in particular parts of Yugoslavia chose to post this type of “looking for” messages, asking publicly for the participants under specified criteria.

Frequently, the IRC participants use different strategies to enable this process of “looking for”, and possibly connecting to a person or a group from the community, easier. They can take the specific nicknames accompanied with extensions that suggests the geographic region or city in which they are interested. For example, the nickname “Milan_Kragujevac” consists of a regular Serbian personal name and the name of the town
of origin of the user. The person "armed" with this type of nickname possibly has a better change of finding somebody from "Kragujevac" (a city in Yugoslavia). Usually it would be enough that he or she types only the greetings, and others would know which part of Yugoslavia the particular nickname wants information about.

These invented and self-organizing strategies serve to easily connect geographically dispersed people, especially in the "noisier" IRC environment, with over five hundred people simultaneously online during peak times.

On the conference forum, the "looking for" messages can be found in the postings when a participant writes particular "real life" data or, attaches the name of a specific geographic region. If a reader finds the posted information interesting, and he or she is willing to make contact (he or she could live in that city or have an origin from that part of Yugoslavia), they can reply to the message or privately contact the poster by email. The message headings in the forum, as mentioned earlier, allow participants to enter their personal email address. This feature eliminates the need to publicly reply to the message by only announcing interest in the posted information. The exchange initiated by "looking for" messages usually transfers into private communication.

"Looking for" messages aim to initiate contact among the participants or to announce somebody's presence in the community with the implicit or explicit intention to establish a relationship. During times of the conflict, those messages were particularly used in combination with other types of interaction, especially for the initiation of information exchange. Many of the participants wanted to find a "private news-reporter" - somebody who lives in a specific region, city, or maybe even a specific street, and to get the needed information firsthand.
Information exchange

By reviewing the recorded interactions among participants in the community, I can suggest that the most important reason for involvement during the conflict was the ability to search for information. Official media in host countries, as well as the media from the homeland, is often sporadic, too general and frequently “over-mediated”. The Internet was certainly the most used medium among computer users for getting timely and precise information. As mentioned earlier, the number of users, present on chat lines or those who write (or “lurk”) postings on forums dramatically increased during April and May 1999. This particular web site was one of the most frequently visited web sites during that period, ranging among the top 1000 sites for number of hits during May and June 1999, as the Internet statistic compiled by the Internet-based company showed [the company’s Internet address is http://www.alexa.com].

Personal war reports, a variety of military analyses and prognoses by participants, war diaries that record the events, combined with firsthand informational reports about “what, where and how much” was destroyed by the NATO attack, filled the community space – it seemed like the whole Serbian virtual network was included in constant, twenty-four hour multi-channel dialogue. Before the conflict, there were many Serbian communities on the web (usually gathered and organized around some particular web sites or mailing lists). However, my impression was that during the period of the conflict information exchange was established among different Serbian virtual communities creating the particular type of “Serbian network”.
It was noticeable a "routine" practiced by many participants in the Serbian community I monitored. The "routine" usually covered checking several informational Serbian web sites dedicated to the NATO action in Yugoslavia, each consisting of personal reports from the Internet users in Yugoslavia; then checking the official media, including the TV (CNN, CTV, BBS or Yugoslav's media); the next step was checking the conference forums and so on. The constant checks and "re-checks" of different perspectives from which information was being presented (CNN, YU official media, YU opposition media, personal reports, and analysis of news from Diaspora on forums) offered the participants a chance to, besides being informed, further compare, interpret and reinterpret the news. As an interviewed participant (126) said, referring to the Serbian mailing list which he moderated during the conflict:

The message exchanges especially contributed in the attempt to get qualitative information and their deep analysis; in giving the practical methods for civilians of how to survive; and, maybe the most important – in airing the predictions about bombing targets ("Wall Street Journal" was the best informed source for the "target anticipation" – we translated daily its online edition and posted regularly on the mailing list). Also, the mailing list offered the suggestions of "what to do" during the military attacks (for example: "run after a first strike, they will always hit the same place twice", or "what are radiological effects of counter-tanks bombs?" and similar). For me, personally, the worst part of the war was time when we posted the predictions of the NATO attack on the Serbian Radio-Television building. I begged people from the mailing list to warn all workers in that building." [On April 23, during the NATO attack on the building of Serbian Radio-Television in the downtown of Belgrade, sixteen technicians-workers were killed and more than 30 were wounded.]

The intensity of personal involvement and commitment to the community by Serbians living in Diaspora and particularly by people living in Yugoslavia who kept logging into the community (IRC or conference forums) even after the raid alerts, gave the virtual spaces specific importance. The participants spent hours and hours writing, reading
and exchanging messages, posting and re-posting stories, recapitulations, "war-diaries", and translations of a variety of information.

Serbians living in Diaspora with access to several official TV media in host countries completely dedicated to the conflict, used the community space to inform, reinterpret or translate the TV news to the virtual community audience who did not have access. The fact that many Serbians in Diaspora lived in the countries that took part in the NATO attack on Yugoslavia caused a natural urge for participants to "re-check" and compare any information from the official media with information from other sources. The constant need for information from "back home" (not from official Serbian media, but from the Internet users living in Yugoslavia), made the presence of Serbian participants from Yugoslavia in the community especially valuable.

In suggesting the possible "routine" of the process of getting the information by Serbians in Diaspora, it is important to note how time zones affected the patterns of Internet use during the time of the conflict. The air-raid alert in Yugoslavia was usually after 8 p.m. (CET time zone), which was, with the calculated 6-9 hours difference, after 11 a.m. - 2 p.m. in North America. The NATO attacks usually started after midnight (CET) which was 3 p.m. - 6 p.m. in North America. As I have mentioned earlier, the majority of the Serbians in Diaspora live on the North American continent, and during the NATO attacks they were at home after work, staying awake until the end of the attacks, usually after 2 a.m. EST. I suggest that this "timing" particularly influenced the increase of the Internet participation in the Serbian virtual community and the need for getting firsthand information from the community members.
The review of the recorded interactions of participants and their message exchanges indicates that the community web space was prominently used for information exchanges.

For example, the following message thread, recorded from the forum on 6 April 1999, could serve as a good illustration of the “firsthand” reporting. It developed under the topic “They are just hitting Belgrade, has somebody seen WHERE???”

<poster> I’ve heard many detonations here (New Belgrade), two really strong.... Does anybody have an info about what’s happening?
<reply1> Uffiff, Banjica, f**** :(((((( ...I hope they wouldn’t again “accidentally” hit VMA....I’m afraid of that all the time....[VMA- the largest Belgrade hospital]
<reply2> UN will have a job, then
<reply3> I’ve heard also, almost every half minute, roaring and shaking.... I have no idea where was it, but it has never been so severe like this.... :(((((((
<reply4> seen from New Belgrade: it’s probably somewhere - the west-northwest, slightly on the right from Batajnica... I’m assuming that it’s near to Novi Sad, approx. 20-30 km... I’ve just heard (23:00h) several explosions and “bright balls”... the horizon is bright, our PVO is more active from now on. [PVO- is acronym for Anti Aircraft Defense]
<reply5> Hey. I can see very often on TV those bright rockets as go up to the sky (like synchronized sparks). I suppose that is PVO. Is it?????? Can you see that from there where you are now??????????? I think, maybe our guys are fighting ...
<reply6> What’s happening with Banjica??? Please, say something if you see or know something. But, BE CAREFUL... my parents are there ... I am asking that only because of them ...I’m ashamed to ask you to type while bombs are flying all over you.
<poster> “StudioB” just reported that our PVO is fighting back, stronger than ever, and that airplanes are all around wider area of Belgrade!!!! [“StudioB” is Belgrade radio station.]

This type of message exchange was particularly frequent on the conference forum during the nights of the NATO attacks. The messages were usually short with the clearly stated topic in the message header referring to what issue the message covered. The clearly formulated topics are of special importance at the times of the “heavy” message traffic. In the situations when something important is happening in Yugoslavia, it should be clear from the message header and topic “what, where and how much” has been destroyed or hit, which
makes the information flow easy to follow. If a message poster thinks that his or her information is very important to the participants in the community, the topic of his message would state that it was important.

For example, the message thread from 29 April 1999 opened with topic “Auuuu, downtown is completely in smoke!!!! Military Headquarters or around!!!” The readers on the forum understand that the word “downtown” suggests the downtown of Belgrade, and reference to the Military Headquarters offers the precise location. The topic is clear about where the NATO attack is focused. I will indicate the times of the postings in the thread to illustrate how timely the messages are exchanged:

<poster> [20:46] take care, all!!!!!!
<reply1> [20:53] Is it National SUP or around???? My brother is in K. Milos St., across German embassy…please, tell me….
<reply2> [20:53] I can smell sulfur, VERY MUCH on The Republic Square !!!! Close the windows ---they use depleted uranium in tomahawks and bombs!!!!!!
<reply3> [20:54] I’m in downtown, just exploded near the Parliament… God, please, not The Parliament!!!!
<reply4> [20:56] It’s not The Parliament, I can see it with the naked eye….flame is coming from the right: 95% that The Headquarters and surroundings are hit.
<reply5> [20:58] I don’t know for The Parliament, I can’t see it from here…I’m in K. Milos St. around MUP-s (Ministry of Internal Affairs), look at www.****.com. I can’t see precisely, but it’s somewhere near to the burned International Bldg, but slightly left. Hope it’s not Parliament!!

(...)
<reply6> [21:00] The Headquarters, Ministry of Defense and Ministry of International Affairs. Look at www.***.com

This type of posting, coming from hundreds of people who live in Yugoslavia and participate in the community, made this particular forum for over two months, one of the most visited web pages on the Internet.

This forum functioned during the conflict as an open public forum for information exchange. Anybody who knew Serbian could log on and post whatever he or she thought
was important in accordance to the forum’s rules. The moderators of this particular forum, mostly invisible to the wider audience, were probably very active distinguishing the messages that contain information or topics for discussion, from those that were the “noise”, containing over-repetition, insults, or misleading information.

During the monitored period, even if the moderator deleted (in accordance to rules of the conference forum) the majority of insulting or misleading messages, there were many messages posted with intention against those rules. Participants could very easily change their nickname and intentionally post something what would insult or mislead the participants in the forum.

On many occasions, especially during the times of the heavy message traffic, participants were playing a “role” of “non-Serbs” (usually Croats or Muslims) with the purpose of “flaming” participants on the forum. There are no records about the number of people from Croatia or other parts of the Former Yugoslavia that actually took part in discussions on the forum. However, the possibility that role-playing along ethnic lines could be enacted online without actually being Muslim or Croat, made this issue particularly complex to explore. The postings in the form of statements “Hey, Serbs, now you finally know how hard the situation is when you are attacked”, frequently obstructed the information flow, provoked anger among the participants, followed by disputes, hostile message exchanges and name-callings. The communication tended to lose any rational basis. The only way to prevent this type of aggressive obstruction on the forum was through moderators who regulated the behavior of the participants and quickly deleted every possibly provoking posting. Without moderators, the communication flow would be completely interrupted.
One of the forum-specific strategies as a reaction to the “flaming” was to try to discover, having only a part of the IP address, the “true” identity of the “flamer”, using the additional software. If participants succeed with this strategy, the flamer’s identity was publicly exposed on the forum including the personal data, residence, and even the “real life” telephone number. The “Internet-war” strategies played among participants had an important role during the time of the conflict. The process of discovering “who is an enemy” from time to time interrupted and almost stopped the information exchange, becoming an aggressive “game” for a majority of the forum participants. Although the strategy of “masking” the half of IP address in every posted message by the web masters was intended to prevent this type of “interrogation”, a few of the most aggressive participants continued with their imagined mission to “discover the enemy”, making a meaningful discussion on the forum almost impossible.

In the process of searching for information, participants developed two important strategies for interpreting the information. The first was to rely on the already “virtually” known participants from Yugoslavia who shared community history with the rest of the participants. Those people were respected sources of information; their messages were reference points for establishing the truth of another information source. The second strategy, was re-checking the messages with other available media. The strategy of “networking” different informational sites and using the Internet tools was so intensive, that it deserves particular attention.

The participants used a wide array of Internet features particularly visible at the time of the conflict. The participants in the Serbian virtual community offered the news translated from Spanish, English, French, Italian and Russian newspapers or web sites, television
reports, even radio programs. Combined with people’s personal interpretation, the community became, during those two months, multi-cultural and multi-media virtual space.

As an illustration of “networking” different media stories and reports, this message thread could serve as an example:

Topic: Italian journalist on the Branko’s bridge – Finally!!!
poster> Tonight’s episode of “Moby Dick”, shown on RAI Uno, was the first crucial break-through of the media blockade!!! M. Santoro, a very good journalist and news-anchor, went to Belgrade, on the Branko’s bridge, and reported “live” from it!!!!
poster> Thanks for info and take care:
poster> Have you videotaped this??? If you have, I don’t ask for the price!!!
poster> Yes, yes, yes!! There are three items from cnn site - my contribution: 1) seven die as nato jets hit the village 2) nato deeply regrets refugee convoy death; 3) F16 pilot describes his bomb error. . . . Go girl and come by with more news like this one!!!
poster> be happy you had a chance to see that! If I could see something like that, HERE, I could die happy . . . If I could see only ONE objective report, here on the US news. I’d be happy...

The translated news offered more that just information to the community audience, it gave emotional support to participants in Yugoslavia. These messages also motivated others to do the same - to watch, listen and read information outside of community, and then “come back” and retell the important items.

Sometimes, the audience directly asked that the message poster do something useful for the community. For instance, the message exchange on 22 April 1999 under the topic “What NATO really saves on the humanitarian basis?” indicates how people tend to redirect the poster practice:

poster> There is an article from “Guardian” (UK); everybody is surprised with NATO attacks: “Violence is victory”. [copied article]
poster> If you’ve already read it, it would be better if you retell it by your own words. I don’t like long posts, especially if they are in English. Not everybody is good in that language...Cheers...
Hey "poster"- put the web-link when you post an article, because when I forward the message (to my English friends) it would look more reliable if the text has an link. They want to see by themselves to believe.

Guiding the posters, the community audience, either directly or indirectly, makes the flow of messages easier to read, interpret or further manipulate. Sometimes, it looked obvious how the participants use different media simultaneously, merging the news from different sides and forcing others to do the same. For example:

Topic: 19:30....130,000 in front of the Parliament!
<poster> Go and look!!!!!! http://www.***.html
<reply1> This is not reliable source at all!!!!... Everybody can write on the Internet what he wants. http://www.***.html is proved as independent, and take that sh** of yours out of here!!!

Or

Topic: Is there any site with news about the demonstrations?
<poster> except the site of organizers, of course;-)
<reply1> go & see in "politics" [IRC channel], maybe somebody’s reporting "live"
<reply2> http://www.***.html

During the conflict, the solidarity of community was noticeable in timely answers to questions asked or for searched information. It is my impression after observing the site, that even previous “lurkers” on the conference or participants who very rarely posted on the forum showed their solidarity in responding to questions with known answers. Of course, without proper research about “lurkers” and their habits, their personal characteristics and the type of commitment to the community, we have difficulty gaining insight into their role in community building.

If we compare the IRC channels to the forum regarding the information exchange, there are several striking differences between these two environments. The IRC represent a
more dynamic medium than the conference forum. The IRC allows participants to be "co-present" by synchronously typing, either "publicly" or "privately", on several channels. I have already suggested that during the monitored period, the conference forum looked similar to a synchronous environment, only somewhat slower, due to the large number of messages posted each minute. With a large number of participants on the monitored channels, the IRC was completely jammed by messages, completely chaotic at times. Logged files of the "host" channel suggested that because of the message overload and "noise" on the channel, only a small number of participants actually "talked" publicly. The majority "talked" privately using the IRC for one-to-one communication. The presence of approximately 500 people on the same IRC channel makes any meaningful discussion nearly impossible. People entering the channel can only announce their presence, allowing contact by others connected on the same IRC server. If they found or had been found by other participants, the communication would be redirected to either small IRC channel or "private" channel for communication.

Using the IRC space for message exchange was sporadically present on the monitored channel. Usually they were filled with simple information or useful addresses of web sites that IRC users found particularly important. For example, the excerpt from the IRC log on 12 April, 1999 illustrates how the information exchange is short and quick:

```
<user1> I heard that they hit a civil train at the South of Serbia
<user2> yesss.... a bridge of Grdelicka Klisura is hit
<user3> right, 9 died and 16 were wounded
***Guest82119 is now known as user5
***Guest56992 has quit IRC (Quit: User exited)
<user4> Hey user2, what they are lying right now on cnn??
<user5> Hristos Voskrese, is there anybody from Sweden?
<user2> cnn is a notorious liar - watch itar-tass!!!!!!!
<user4> I can't get Itar-tass in Czechoslovakia:-(((((
```
On the IRC channels with a smaller regular audience (10-20 participants)
communication becomes more personal and goes beyond the information. People usually
“know” each other long enough that they publicly develop dialogue that is more open,
without the interruptions by others.

This is an example from the IRC log file, taken from on a small channel on 13 April,
1999. The “user1” lives in Canada and is talking to “user2” who is from Belgrade,
Yugoslavia. “User3”, the participant mentioned in the log file, is also from Belgrade.

<user1> user2, how was the night in Belgrade?
<user2> it was hot, hot...
<user1> user3 was complaining, an hour ago, that something exploded just close to
her :-((((
<user2> hmmm.....don’t know. It was RELATIVELY close to her
<user1> they are asking for additional 300 airplanes. for god’s sake!!!
<user4> who? Our military or NATO???
<user1> Nato, of course:-((((((
<user1> I’m listening the briefing right now...
<user5> in the tonight’s strike will be more that 1000 planes
<user2> and...what are they saying user1??
<user1> they say that they’ll ask for more planes:-((((((

A small number of people on the channel who know each other are usually careful
not to interrupt conversation. This allows conversations to be more coherent and easier to
follow. The community members have already formed some level of community feeling,
have an idea about the “Net-history” of other participants and the channel atmosphere
provides a comfortable environment for communication.

Participants, who regularly use the IRC to participate in the community, have ideas
about the differences between conference forums and IRC channels. For example, as a
logged exchange from the “host” channel indicates, one participant asked several times:
"What's happening in Serbia, please, NOW??". After awhile, in the middle of the channel "noise", one participant answered: "hey, there is no point to repeat that here, go to forum, and you'll find out the answer more quickly!" I assume that participants, making the distinction between the IRC channels and forums, believe that the forum is a "better" place for presentation of information than chat channels. Each of these two technologies is used for different purposes. The chat-lines, especially the larger ones, gathering more than 50 participants, could be very useful for socializing, for finding a particular person to chat "privately" with or, to get a general idea about what is happening in the community. On the other hand, for more elaborate discussion and more reliable information, participants will use the forum where they have the necessary time and space to read, reflect, interpret and write a message.

Organizing actions

The way to use the community space relates to message exchanges focused on organizing a variety of actions. The calls for action, careful instructions or explanations of motives by the community members refer to virtual or real, local actions. For instance, the excerpt from the IRC log file recorded this type of messages:

<User1> important notice!!!! Vote on the CNN-site about stopping the NATO aggression .....do it now!!!!!!! address is www.cnn.com/CNNI/Programs/qa. For those who don’t know English – click on the third button from the left to vote for stopping!!!
<User1> tell your friends!!!

Or:

<User1> Any other English-speaking Serbians here?
<User2> me
<User1> hey Serbs!!! in yahoo chat there is a theme Kosovo-chat and americans r making fun of you ----- all go there and teach them
<User2> let them
<User3> hey, user1, who cares???
<User2> let them say what they want
<User1> I do care!
<User4> Let's go to yahoo chat, to show them
<User3> Let them say whatever they want. we know what the right thing is
<User2> Nah. No reason.
<User1> let's go to Yahoo and cuss them off
<User4> all of us!!!!...lets go!!!

These exchanges, frequently present on the IRC channel during the conflict, intended to mobilize participants or provoke discussions. The “calls” for the Net-action, usually in the form of online “voting” on the variety of web pages, gave the participants the feeling that they were doing something useful for the community and for Yugoslavia in general.

During the conflict, the question of being a Serbian out of Serbia gained additional meaning. When the homeland is at war, the Diaspora develops a specific type of “guilt” or, as Berger claims “a moral guilt for our own safe position” (as cited in Kolar-Panov, 1997, p. 36). The Serbians in Diaspora felt “helpless and hopeless” (ibid. p. 36), without any possibility to offer help to families, friends or “virtual friends”. This specific paradox was present during the conflict in Yugoslavia – new technology offered a possibility for unbelievable closeness despite real geographic distance. Only through a CMC technology something like this was possible: in one chat channel of 500 present participants, 50 could hear the war planes in their rooms and type about what they hear. The rest of the 450 participants in the same chat channel were sitting in their comfortable rooms all around the world.

The feelings of guilt from “real life” helplessness created a belief among the Serbians in Diaspora that they could do something by using the Internet. Reading web sites,
sending and forwarding emails, voting on web sites related to the conflict or even building a personal home page that contained messages of support were main activities of Serbians living out of homeland. The following example, under the topic “For Serbians on the West”, illustrates the belief in the power of the Internet a willingness of participants to take Internet action. The poster is referring to the media, web sites, chat lines and conference boards in Asia:

<poster>:......regards from the East!!! This is an idea for propaganda. Cut in on their “rows”, but don’t introduce yourself as Serbians, but as citizens of the country where you are currently living, and show that you are worried about what’s happening. Take all positive and truthful things from MEDIA and hold on this. <reply> how they “see” us, what do they say?

The use of the community space for organizing “real life” actions was also present in the community. Frequently, the space was used to announce the times or places for actions addressing that particular audience. The messages were sometimes related to demonstrations against the NATO military action. In many cities on almost every continent, the Serbians in Diaspora organized demonstrations as a way to express solidarity with the Serbians in the homeland. Circulating through the community space were announcements about the particular real-life demonstrations (with time and the place of the gathering) calling community members to take part in them. If we look at the reactions to many of these postings, we can see that these “local” actions were highly supported by the community and the people who took part. They included detailed descriptions of previous demonstrations, pictures, and even video files. The messages on the forum contained web links to the web sites dedicated to these actions. This is shown in the following excerpt, dated 26th March (only two days after the NATO action started):
Thanks to all of you who participated in yesterday’s and today’s demonstrations held in Vancouver. Yesterday’s protest gathered more than 2000 people, and something around that number was on today’s. Demonstrations will go on: Friday at 6:00 pm and Saturday at 11:00 am. Saturday is planned as very important day, we expect at least 4000 people. Macedonians and Greeks will come, as well. We should invite Russians (there are two Orthodox churches, as well as Russian Community Center. I will go there to ask - in person). Please, show up because these protests mean a lot - in annulling NATO propaganda. Even the ordinary moron living here could conclude that something is wrong if people living here (in a “democracy”) are protesting so much. Toronto – our congratulations!! It is important that our people in Yugoslavia see that we are DOING something. Show up on chat lines sometimes [the poster linked web-addresses], and send regards to our people in Yugoslavia!

These types of messages, oriented toward “real life” actions, were present especially at the beginning of the conflict. They had a mobilizing effect – the community and especially people from Yugoslavia appreciated this type of solidarity, if we look at the long message threads of comments, messages of support and gratitude and further self-organizing. Sometimes the participants could openly ask for the support of participants living in Diaspora, as the next message illustrates:

<Poster>: Serbia is definitely in war, and I ask all members of the group who are living abroad – to help by all available means (particularly – to act toward official media in the countries where they live) to beat off the aggression. If you are not participants already on CNN and New York Times conference boards, I ask you to take your part there (as well as on BBC-board and all other Internet sites dealing with NATO conflict). Morale is good here in spite of the fact that we spent nights in shelters. I’ve spent a good part of the nights with my colleagues (I am student) in the shelters of student residence building and nobody said anything against the politics we lead. Only unity saves Serbians!!

Frequently, the participants would list a long string of email addresses from different international organizations and agencies asking the community to write email messages to those addresses. The Internet was perceived, as the previous post indicates, to be an important environment for constructing political opinions and allowing free discussion.
between the participants. The poster of the message expressed a rather prominent idea that circulated in the community at the time of the conflict, that by explanations and through political dialogue with the wider Internet audience, the media representation of Serbians could be changed. The poster finished his message with the phrase “Only Unity Saves Serbs”, taken from the Serbian historical and symbolical narrative that would be one of the most frequent phrases used in the community during this time.

National discourse

The postings and message exchanges that could be grouped in this category reflect the willingness of the participants to discuss issues of politics, culture or religion related to the “homeland”. The messages about the practice of the current regime in Yugoslavia and the political opposition in Serbia are especially frequent. A number of messages involved speculations and discussions about the current and future position of Serbia in a wider geopolitical context. These debates focused on what should be done to make the general situation in the homeland better.

The community participants living in Diaspora, as mentioned earlier, left the country, among other reasons, because of its ruined economy, culture and institutions from the wars in the Balkans during the last decade. A majority of participants addressed their anger and disappointment to the Serbian political regime, finding it “guilty” for the current economical, cultural and political position of Serbia and Yugoslavia.

Numerous message threads, particularly on the forum, which by its nature allows far more elaborate arguments, were oriented toward what Serbians should do to improve the
situation in the country. For example, the following thread could be one of the ways the message exchanges developed, starting with a provoking claim by the poster:

**Topic: Why Serbia needs demonstrations?**

<poster> I don’t understand why Serbia needs demonstrations? In the country, everything is going well, everything is ok. People are satisfied. I think that only those who want power try to persuade people in Serbia that a change is needed. Our regime does EVERYTHING to solve the situation and stabilize the country.

<reply 1> Of everything what he [Milosevic] promised, nothing is fulfilled: 1. He refused a confederation; 2. He introduced Serbia in the war with Croatia; 3. Introduced Serbia in the war with Bosnia, leading two parallel wars; 4. Did everything to prevent Serbia to get into EU and UN; 5. Robbed Serbian people; 6. Led Serbia into disaster 7. People do not have anything to eat.

<poster> Don’t fantasize. Who does not have anything to eat? In Serbia, people are eating as never before. You must be out of here, somebody told you a lot of lies – and you believe??

<reply 2> Hey, poster, if you have money, that doesn’t mean that everybody has. Look around yourself, walk around a little, and come tomorrow and say what you’ve seen.

<poster> I don’t need to walk around. I can see – cafes are crowded, people buy things, the stores are full… What do you want?

<reply 3> It’s almost flattering to say that you are cynic. Slowly, but definitely all of you over there have became animals without any human signs.

<poster> You, from Diaspora, always expect that Serbia would accept you even if you don’t open a wallet. And, at the same time, that Serbia would let you to mess with its politics? Do you send maybe some help through those terrorist organizations, developed to provoke a civil war in the country?

<reply 4> the poster is either too sick or too old, who somehow learned how to use a new media. His job is to annoy people on the Internet, obviously. Best thing is to ignore him.

Often, these provoking ideas are posted with an intention to “stir up” discussion. In this particular posting, provocation comes from the statement that the general situation in Serbia, even if everything shows to the contrary, is very good. Sometimes, like in this case, the poster identifies himself as living in Yugoslavia, which could be interpreted as firsthand knowledge, therefore, nobody can disclaim his observation. Frequently, people on the conference try to “check” the IP address of the poster of the provoking message. If the “check” shows that the poster has an IP address located outside of Yugoslavia, the members
will likely ignore his further postings or, the member would be disputed by arguments that would it make obvious that his statements were untrue.

Disputes about the current Serbian regime frequently lead to polarization within the community – the participants tended to take opposite positions claiming either that the regime does the "right thing" despite the consequences, or, leads to complete disaster. Very rarely, participants got involved in discussion with the messages that expressed doubt, dilemmas or confusion of the issues. Those "fixed" positions taken for discussion leave little space for "moderate" voices of participants, which, if shown, tend to be either ignored or disputed from both fixed positions. Several researchers into ethnic virtual environments indicate similar occurrences in discussions about national politics (Mitra 1997, Stubbs 1998; 1999). The polarization of the participants about the consequences of the current regime on the past and future of Serbia are based on two distinct points of view.

The first one is an attempt to position the Serbian regime as leaders of the country, trying to stay away from the Western influences and intentions of globalizing the world. This argument frequently loses any rational basis by elaborating on the "conspiracy" against Yugoslavia and seeing the regime as the only protection of Serbian people against the Western economic-political-cultural force as an inherently negative influence.

The second point of view depicts the regime as completely destructive of Serbian national interests, taking over power just to destroy and sell any Serbian territories, again with "conspiracy" motives. Frequently accepted by a majority of highly active posters on the conference, the second perspective could also develop in aggressive ways by using a variety of statements from nationalistic repertoire.
Discussions about national issues, even if they were started with relatively "moderate" statements or questions, usually lead to increasingly aggressive elaboration of the fixed positions. Quarrels, even insults and name-calling, ensued and any attempt to moderate participants' behavior only provoked further arguments.

Occasionally, especially at the beginning of the conflict, participants tried to open a discussion related to the complexity of the "Yugoslav issue" and manipulation of national and ethnic interests by politicians in general. Unfortunately, those attempts were overwhelmed by a majority who "exercised" some type of power and tried to disqualify the poster by claiming that the virtual space is "only Serbian" and nobody else's voice should be heard.

The presence of non-Serbian voices, or those who take those roles in the conference, usually provoked a specific type of solidarity among members, even among those who argue from completely opposite political positions. In this case, the participants on the forum take "one voice" against that non-Serbian "Other", even if those participants, now united in solidarity, were involved in an aggressive quarrel just several postings before.

On the IRC environment, where the level of moderation is much lower then on the forum, the number of "provoking" arguments related to the national politics was much higher. The statements of anger, hatred and animosity, written by those who present themselves as Croats or Muslims (usually with obvious references to the "non-Serbianness" in their nicknames) were frequent during the conflict. The following recorded IRC discussion refers to the way participants reacted to this type of "provocation". The user3 "plays" the role of a Muslim from Sarajevo interrupting the previous dialogue of two Serbs from Sarajevo:
<user1> hey user2, I’m from Sarajevo, as well
<user2> really… you are!! What part??
<user1> from Dobrinja….and you?
<user3> user2, Sarajevo is not for those who destroyed it…
<user2> user3…what??
<user4> user3 – what are you talking about….Sarajevo has always been Muslim’s “kasaba”, that’s obvious.
<user2> listen to user3!!! She’s not normal
<user3> user4, Sarajevo was always everybody’s city, until Serbians decided that it wasn’t theirs.
<user4> user3 - go to the Muslim’s chat and cry there for your Muslim’s stupid city!!
<user5> hey Serbians, Croat here….I’m waiting for you, as well:-))
<user3> user2> nobody holds you in Sarajevo – go to your Belgrade - full of gypsies!!
<user4> Sarajevo has always been a source of Islam and Muslims… Serbians have always been killed and tortured there
<user2> you started user3!!!
<user3> user4…. look at international news for a change
<user4> user3…that lying cnn, right?

This exchange, rather typical for the time I was monitoring the channel, illustrates how historical and symbolical claims have been invoked for the purpose of the argument. User3, speaks as the victim of Sarajevo, and accuses “Serbians” of destroying it, despite the fact that user2 actually claims that he (or she) still lives there. Besides the general statement about the Serbian “nature” to decide and then destroy, user3 used the metaphor of “Gypsy-ness” as ascription for Serbians, meaning that the capital of Serbia is “full of Gypsies”. The “Gypsy-ness” is used as an insult, provoking further argument. User4, also takes the historical symbolic narrative about “tortured Serbs” in Muslim “hands”. This shows how historical interpretations and symbolism, used by the official media for the political purpose of ethnic mobilization during the deconstruction of Yugoslavia, are reused in cyberspace.

This category of message exchange addresses questions about national politics, and participants have the chance to discuss the meaning of Serbian identity especially if they
have a chance to confront the ascriptions of others. However, the reactions of participants to stereotyping, negative definitions related to Serbian ethnicity or derogatory comments, rarely lead to rational discussion. Instead, the negative, publicly stated ascription by those “others” only produced further stereotyping by the participants themselves – used from “all-known” nationalistic repertoire, leading frequently a message exchange into aggressive accusations.

**Diasporic discourse**

This group of message exchanges includes messages that relate to the “Serbian-ness” and its meanings from the perspective of the Serbians living in Diaspora. These messages, attempting to answer the question of what it means to be a Serbian out of Serbia, deal with the meanings of an “imagined” and a real homeland, memories and nostalgia of Serbian immigrants.

**Nostalgia**

The nostalgic narrative of Serbians living in Diaspora sees the past in its idealized form. These are prominent topics both in the forum and on the IRC sites. The nostalgic feelings to the homeland, people, memories, and childhood is usually incorporated into messages on a variety of themes. From time to time, the nostalgic narrative could stand alone as topic. The participants, living a distance away from their country of origin, frequently used the community space to discuss their feelings about the homeland and memories of the images, places, people, times, and events. The “talk” about the idealized
past especially gives satisfaction if performed in a group. Through the collective memory exchange, everyone who participates brings something new, a new detail that fills the "memory-mosaic". As a group performance, the "nostalgic talk" needs to provoke others to get them involved in the memory exchange and further contribute to the initial "call".

Nostalgic narratives occasionally start as "looking for strategies", when a participant wonders how to overcome the feeling of being far from home. The following message thread could serve as an illustration. The poster initiates interaction starting the thread with a citation taken from a work of a famous Serbian poet in 70's. The citation should be interesting enough to call for "nostalgic talk". The content of this message thread is rather typical, embracing many elements of the "nostalgia talk" specific to the Serbian virtual community:

Topic: Is it possible to overcome the nostalgia for Belgrade?
<poster> “The person who had a luck to wake up in Belgrade this morning, should consider that he is achieved enough in his life. Every further insistence to achieve more would be immodest…”
I haven’t waked up in Belgrade almost two years ... and ...as more time goes by, it is harder to fight with it. How are you fighting with your towns???

After the initial message, several participants replied to the original "call" to talk about the past - validating the poster’s feelings, acknowledging his struggle with nostalgia and concluding that it is “really hard to overcome the distance to the homeland”. The thread is then typically interrupted by another “voice” from Diaspora, which tends to determine the direction the discussion goes. For example:

<reply4> Now, a question for all: Why people who are obviously broken-hearted and who suffer from Belgrade-sickness (I do not blame them) ALWAYS criticize those who are not in that “minus” phase... something like - “we have soul, and the others are “empty-headed” with “full” pockets. Why things are always oversimplified and - generalized? Why those who managed to adapt (to sushi, local beer or simply - do
not miss “burek & yogurt”) are automatically proclaimed as “non-Serbians” or worse - betrayers?

The reply inserts a division between those who have adapted to the host country and those who have not. The symbolic expression about “burek & yogurt” is used here as a reference for Serbian food in general, even if it does not have direct Serbian origin (burek actually has an origin in Turkish cuisine). The fact that it is very hard to find burek in Western countries, coupled with its popularity with Serbians, makes the reference to “burek” almost synonymous with nostalgia.

The open participant’s “call”, as stated in the reply for further discussion about the meaning of being a “good” or “bad” Serbian, is trying to change the course of the thread focusing on the questions of ethnic identity. However, the preference of the participants to “play nostalgic talk” rarely changes the course of the thread and tends to ignore the “calls” for more rational debate. The messages that follow in this typical thread are given in the form of the immigrant stories, illustrating the problems and daily struggles of the Serbians in Diaspora when adapting to the new cultural environment. The participants are trying to comfort each other by sharing personal memories of the places, people and times left “back home”. Sometimes, like in this particular thread, a participant interrupts the thread attempting to reassure others in their “illusions”, taking the voice of the “traveler”, a person who recently went to the “homeland” and had a firsthand experience. For example:

<reply7> I miss that old Belgrade, as well. One where we went out together in “Cvetic”, “KP”, “Natan”, in all those clubs... I miss my old Belgrade gang that I could listen for hours over a coffee. I miss Knez, Kalemegdan and Usce. But... all those things have disappeared. The last time I was in Belgrade I finally understood that my hometown was eaten by “dark”. Young guys dream now to become gangsters, the rest are on heroin. A gentleman, seventy years old, works as the night-watchman. Our Belgrade has lost its soul and all our memories aren’t there anymore. That Belgrade to which I would like to come back does not exist. Cheers.
“Rational” voices of this kind are frequently ignored because they do not share the
initiated “play”, and normally do not change the course of the nostalgic narrative. The
nostalgic stories, rather similar in their form and purpose to every immigrant ethnic group,
follow each other in almost a natural way. They do not “ask” for any rational debate or
“counter-arguments” but address the feelings of being immigrant and the problems that
entails:

<reply9> (...) I feel that I’m here like a pulled out tree, and then planted upside
down. Here, (as typical for the West) I see my first neighbor once in a year, others
I’ve never met, I don’t know anybody from whom I can borrow an egg, for example.
Even if I die, nobody would notice. I don’t hear music here (only during weekends,
when everybody behaves like crazy), birds don’t sing, children don’t speak (they sit
in homes at computers), people meet each other in bars (if somebody invites you in
his home, that’s an honor!), there are no parties... Here, I can’t get that phone call I
miss: “Put the coffee pot, I’m coming over”, there is nothing which reminds me on
us... I tried to adapt to their rules, to accept their customs... but – it does not go.
Now, I don’t want that anymore. In spite of them... That Serbian “in spite of”...
And, I do not understand, why should I be thankful to them because they accepted
me – they USE me as they USE any other foreigner (....)

As I have mentioned earlier, the nostalgic narrative is present on the different forums
attached to a variety of themes. The glorification of the past versus the reality of today and,
the idealization of the homeland from the perspective of the “host” land, lead to the
relatively abstract picture of Yugoslavia. The homeland is depicted through memories of
good old friends, holidays spent on the Adriatic coast, mother’s kitchen, first love, soccer or
basketball games – the moments or events which are taken out of context and re-narrated in
a way that gives specific emotional satisfaction. The prominence of this type of narrative
and the readiness of many participants to get involved in this type of message exchange
indicates the importance of this narrative for the Serbians living in Diaspora. The
importance of the virtual community could be seen as offering a comfortable space for enacting this “play” among its community members.

Joint presence in the virtual community of Serbians living in Diaspora and those who live in the homeland, adds another aspect to the “nostalgic” narrative. The conflict in Yugoslavia provoked not only an increase in the number of participants from Yugoslavia but it also “added” to their imagined importance. Previously almost invisible, the voices of Serbians from the homeland received a specific kind of “strength” and authority from their perceived position as the “real victims” of the conflict.

To come back to the nostalgic and idealized view of the past, participants who lived in the homeland could “interrupt” a specific string of shared idealized memories of diasporic Serbians. For instance, the next excerpt from the same thread of earlier messages shows how the participant in Serbia reacts to the posts of an idealized version of the homeland. He or she attempts to remind others what is “real” and what is “imaginary”:

<reply14> Dear people of Belgrade-background. what a hypocrisy!!!! Yes. I understand how “burdened” is your life. I felt that during the bombing, as well. It was painful FOR YOU!!! You were supporting us, when WE were out of electricity and water, with bombs during all those nights. You were trembling with us, saving YOUR money for your new cars and third television set. You were crying putting your children in bed, knowing that OURS were in shelters. And now, you are suffering when you are buying milk. having on mind that WE do not have it at all. It is not fair that YOU suffer so much! Who want to come back – I’ll give him my job as a software engineer and my room in my parents’ house and all that “burek” which I couldn’t afford with a salary of 50 $ per MONTH (when it comes). As a change – I’ll take your job and your problems – so that I could suffer a little!!!

This message of the “truth” or feedback from back home is followed by other messages from the participants in Serbia, having similar contents and purpose and expressing an anger towards the “luxury” of nostalgic feelings. For example
<reply16> – Nostalgia?? There is no oil, no bread, and no medicine, no heating… There are bullets; there is blood, freaks, killings… Let’s swap places …Please come in, lunatic asylum is unlocked.

Messages of this type, containing the voices of Serbians staying at “home”, bring a form of closure to the exchange. Initially, opened as “call” to share immigrant stories and find emotional support in comforting memories, the nostalgic narrative was confronted the “rational” debate of the current economic and social situation in Serbia, thus losing its dynamic.

The Internet, allowing joint involvement of Serbians in Diaspora and Serbians from Yugoslavia in the same community, brings novelty to the usual nostalgic narrative. Sometimes “silent” and sometimes visible, the presence of the participants from Yugoslavia, even if they do not often publicly participate in “Diasporic” debate, changes the atmosphere by regulating discourse.

**Customs**

The Diasporic discourses frequently evolve around the explorations and discussions related to maintaining the “old” customs in the “host” country. As the meaning of being a Serb is frequently relayed through discussions on the forum about Christian Orthodox religion, the topics about the religious practices, belief system, symbols or customs have become a part of Diasporic discourse. As The Christian Orthodox church follows the Old Gregorian calendar, celebrations and religious holidays like Christmas, New Years or Easter fall on different days in the calendar than those celebrated by Catholics or Protestants. The participants frequently use the community space to discuss with others when and how to
celebrate these holidays, how to respond to the different religious customs or to share stories about a particular religious practice.

Some discussions emerge especially around the holidays celebrated widely in the host countries, which were not present in Serbian customs. Confronted by cultural differences in their daily life, the participants who live in Diaspora use the forum to share with others their dilemmas or discuss the particular issue. For example, under the topic “Happy Valentine’s Day” the poster initiated the message thread by congratulating the others with “Happy Valentine”. The discussion went on this way:

<reply4> I’ve just read something that amazed me and that was in THIS forum, which is allegedly Serbian!! I don’t believe that Serbians here celebrate “Valentine Day”. on same day as Catholics!!! I’m asking myself. Are you antichrists or atheists who just call themselves – Serbians? Eh, why don’t you celebrate and be proud of your old beautiful customs? Serbian day for love is on 22 March!!!! Why do not you whisper love words, as your grand-grandfathers did, on that day?? Unfortunately, while our grand-grandfathers wrote love verses on that day to leave them for their grand-grandchildren, many of you have grown apart and celebrated holidays of other religions and nationalities. I do not want to comment on you, but it would be worthy to just rethink what you do.

<reply5> Is it really important whose the celebration is when is about LOVE? We are all Christians. Why is important to know what was happened in 1054?

During any widely accepted celebration, it has become almost the rule to discuss and re-discuss the meaning of that day for the Serbians in Diaspora and acceptance of the customs that are not a part of the Serbian culture. The participants living in Diaspora express their everyday stories and the problems they encounter if they want to celebrate traditional holidays following the old calendar, still officially accepted by the Orthodox Church.

On the forums dedicated to parenting, for example, the participants in Diaspora who have children, find these issues particularly relevant. On the forum, they get the chance to
discuss those issues with other immigrants with similar problems related to the adaptation to the customs of the foreign culture.

**Self-reflection of Diaspora**

What does it mean to be a Serbian in Diaspora? This thread could illustrate how Serbians in Diaspora try to discover the meaning of their ethnicity related to life in the host countries. Under the topic: “WebMaster! Drinks to all!!!!, a participant opened a discussion:

<poster> Today I’m celebrating my three years spent in Canada!!!!  
<reply1> Cheers!!! What status do you have in Canada? I met few Canadian families and they are polite and friendly, comparing to Germans. What is your experience about how Canadians treat their immigrants?  
<reply2> and now....slowly.... send papers to Ottawa .....The Canadian would be of you. eh?:-))))
<poster> Already sent! (with picture and money:-))))

This long message thread started in a particularly cheerful vein, where the Serbians who live in North America took a chance to exchange their experiences with different officials and procedures. The discussion soon turned into an analysis of where it is better to live – in Canada or USA. Frequently, as I have mentioned earlier, discussions change course evolving around some other topic raised in a “reply” message. In this thread a participant influenced the discussion addressing the problems of being an immigrant:

<reply10> Can I ask you something? Why do you think that here is better? You know, I came here when I was 16, and I am 34 now. I do not think that here is better. Everything I’ve already had here I would have there. Only that I’m missing happiness now and real friends.... You’ll see that...

This shortened version of the posting, interrupts the “optimism” of the previous discussion, and pushed the topic into a comparison between the host country and the
homeland, making a personal “map” – everything good is “back there” and everything “bad” is “here”. The message also addresses the assimilation of Serbians, who are forgetting the language and heritage in the second generation of immigrants, and so on. The next reply message, acknowledging the previous post, develops the thread further:

<reply17> I am almost 4 years in Canada. It’s not bad. It’s not good, either. I am frightened by the fact that my children would grow up here. Despite the fact that they do not speak English at home, I am afraid that the influence of the environment is much stronger than I thought...

This type of message illustrates the use of the forum for discussing the issues related to Serbian culture, language, tradition, or religion. Despite the fact that the first poster in the message thread intended to open a discussion about celebration of the immigrant’s life, the users changed the course of the discussion to adapt it to their needs and interests.

The problems of immigrant life and adapting to foreign culture are prominent topics in many forums. The discussion could evolve from any longer message thread. The focus of any discussion could be easily redirected to the themes interesting for immigrants. The discussion of what it means to be a Serb could develop around postings about food, film, music, politics, art or travel. This group of messages illustrates how participants are struggling to define their diasporic identities and how to create a story of themselves in the new context. The last message of this thread (consisting of almost 50 messages) was the post:

<reply50> (...) You are absolutely right – spreading “negative” vibrations is not sound, and integration is impossible. But ... a “confused” suffers where he is born, and a “smart” goes where is better for him. As some journalist said once – the lost generation of the lost country.
As the last contributor showed, there are no easy solutions for diasporic Serbians, regarding their adaptation to a foreign country, culture, language, and customs. The narrative about what it means to be Serbian in a foreign land is constant story-telling. The participants are changing (or they are only changing nicknames) by telling and retelling the stories about their "new" immigrant identity. Reading and writing stories could have a "therapeutic" function, but also rational one – the virtual space offers the possibility to "talk" and interact with others. By "talking" publicly, a participant can build the story, and systematically, reinterpret the memories to fill in the "gaps" or use interpretations of others to develop some kind of personal history. The virtual space that the community offers gives a chance for participants to express their feelings and through interactions with others find comfort in sharing those feelings.

**Community reflections and emotional support**

Frequently, on different forums and the IRC channels, there was a tendency for participants to reflect or comment on the virtual community in general. This category of message exchanges, with the intention to discuss the issues related to the life of the virtual community, indicate that the participants are aware of the environment and the process of communication conducted in the community itself. These are valuable messages because they offer insight into how participants perceive the environment and how much value they put on it.

The majority of those messages related to the management of the community life and norms and rules of the behavior, usually contained complaints about the way the forum or
IRC channel was organized or regulated. I have already discussed the comments and reflections of participants in an analysis of the norms of behavior in the virtual community. The awareness level of the environment and the meaning of the community itself are especially emphasized when participants want the emotional comfort from being virtually connected. In a sense, that shared interaction gives participants a feeling of power.

At the time of the conflict, forming a strategy for "mobilization" of the community was present in the form of a "call" to the community. To illustrate the point I will give an example of one long message thread in which the poster asked participants to write from where they are logging on. This could be easily seen as the process of "looking for" information. However, this process of "pulling out" others to identify their location (not addressed to anyone in particular), was intended to "build" the feeling of support showing "how many of us are there". The thread developed very easily consisting of almost 50 messages. During the monitored period, I found similar threads, where people only state their place of living, rarely putting anything else in the message. Under the topic "Let's see from where you are logging....", the poster started:

<poster> I am in Canada, Mississauga...
<reply1> Oklahoma
<reply2> southwest USA
<reply3> Sacramento
<reply4> Boston.....
(...)

Even if an initial post did not explicitly ask for the current residence, a thread could go that way depending on the context. For instance under the topic "Good morning everybody", participants posted:

<poster> Good morning Serbia. Good morning brave people.
<reply1> What about a mornin’ coffee?:-)
<poster> sure.... your place or mine?
<reply1> I think that at your place the midnight has just passed on, and at mine is 16:05. You can choose:-)
<reply2> put another one. I am coming from Melbourne.
<reply3> is there any coffee for me? I am coming from Toronto; I could come quickly.
(...)

The thread now becomes “open” and the participants usually start to contribute with messages containing the location, collectively playing a “game” aimed to offer each other emotional support.

Contemplation about the virtual community and its meaning could be easily found in the forum in many message threads. One interesting message exchange evolved under the topic: “Virtual reality”. In this thread, participants were contemplating the usefulness of computer-mediated communication:

(...) 
<reply> At the beginning, I thought that the Internet is a perfect tool for communication. Now I see how many drawbacks it has: using it - Serbians can’t argue as much as they like. Instead, one group of you talks and talks the same. Other group - those smart ones - is disapproving the first group. And that is repeating, all the time.... I had enough of that!!!! The Internet is guilty because of it. If we were arguing in some grassy field, we would get into a fight, and after that we would again be friends and could finally start talking about some really important issues – the present and the future of Serbia. (...) And, all of you STOP with arguing, please!!!

The idea that there are particular topics that could or could not be discussed using the Internet was raised occasionally during the conflict. Sometimes, as in the previous case, the Internet technology is questioned from the perspective of the characteristics of an ethnic group. The participant uses the self-ascription of Serbians who are not able to lead a decent argument without hostility to address the issue of a lack of closure in CMC communication. The ephemeral nature of the CMC communication as a, “constantly shifting space where
specific texts remain available for a limited period of time" (Mitra, 1997) was particularly visible during the time of the conflict. The message overload, provoked by dramatically increased numbers of participants during the conflict, limited the availability of the messages. At the peak times, the messages were available only for several hours, limiting the time participants could take for reflection or to make contributions to the discussion.

Participants frequently used the community space to reflect or discuss with others the importance of the community to them. Mostly, they refer to the members of the community and existing relationships. An interesting example illustrates that a formed "community network" and its importance for members, is related to one person, who started to log in the community from US. He was a regular and highly active participant on the conference, posting a large number of messages each day. The poster (the nicknames and the postings suggested that he is male), accordingly to his messages, claimed that he lost his "real office job" because the boss had read his posting on this particular conference forum. Many participants on the forum discussed the real life implications of participating in the forum. The nickname of that participant was remembered as a "real" victim of the "Internet war". He always said that he would go back to Serbia. After a while, this participant suddenly showed up on the forum under a topic "Regards from Serbia from the old friend!!" and reaction of the community went like this:

<p>&lt;poster&gt; After three weeks spent in Serbia, I’m getting used to this war. “Belgrade is not down yet, and when it would be – we do not know.”
&lt;reply1&gt; You are back?? It’s strange that you wrote your nickname using the upper letters?? What’s your Internet provider?
&lt;reply2&gt; Ah, like you would be happy because you are in Serbia? You will be sorry, just wait… Does he have an email? Let somebody contact him and find out if he is really him?
&lt;poster&gt; I opened my account in “****” yesterday. Where is the old gang? I do not see anybody familiar:-((((}
<reply3> what do you think by – anybody??? Do not say that you don’t recognize me???
<reply4> hey brother! How is our homeland doing????
<poster> hey, you are here!!! I missed you, really….but, tell me, is our “man” back?? Hey, “reply4” I’m going on ICQ, stay tuned…
<reply4> Hey, people, that’s really HIM, the old one…. Tomorrow I’ll see him.
<reply5> hey, “poster” send an email to me, also…Please… WOW, it’s really hot here in NY:-(((

This message thread indicates the way in which the participant, after a long absence, announces his presence in the community. Particularly interesting is the reaction of members, who check his identity applying different strategies and different technologies (email, ICQ). Those practices indicate the importance of the formed network from both “sides” - the absent participant (who gladly offers a chance to be “checked” in order to become part of the network again) and the rest of the community (who are making an effort to conduct the “checking” procedure).

Sometimes, the participants post messages asking explicitly for the approval from the community for something already done, as well as, for suggestions about future actions. For example, a participant posted the message containing a long letter that he had already sent by him to an editor of an Irish newspaper. The participant of the posted message on the forum asked the community to comment on the letter content. The replies were, as usual, very positive and acknowledged his enthusiasm and bravery (for sending the “open” letter of support for stopping NATO bombing to the newspaper editor).

This is only one example of numerous postings in which the participants share with the community members their real life actions, emails about important institutions, or even events that have happened to them in real life. Frequently, participants share with others
only a description of the completed action, and rarely ask for "real" suggestions. However, depending on the situation and the type of the action, a participant could ask for real "advice" from the community.

The need of Serbians to be in contact to other Serbians that share the same place of origin, cultural background or similar life history is not unusual. Serbians have a need to feel that their experiences, language, or learned cultural practices are relevant and understood. Many factors have influenced the need to find others like them: the need for knowledge about the "host" country, their type of job, "Serb-friendliness" of the host country, personal characteristics, economic status, and so on. All of those factors play a different role in the process of searching for friends.

In the Serbian virtual community, the need to make contact with people of Serbian origin appears as the most important force in the formation of virtual community. In the surveyed sample, almost all surveyed participants said that the main reason for the virtual community participation is "to make a contact with other people". Some participants said that they want to make contact with "Serbian" people explicitly; the others talk about contact with people in general.

For example, one participant (113) who was an active community member from its creation told me that the participation in the Serbian community is only one part of his Net-life. He participates in other, English-speaking, virtual communities (that are close to his other interests), by using both the IRC and conference forums. Talking about the ways and frequency of participation in the Serbian virtual community, he said: "It depends. On some of the forums (politics, for example) I am hyperactive, but on others – I am calm and regular observer." When asked about his reasons for participating in Serbian community (especially
because he said that he is a regular participant in other English-speaking communities), he said:

In our particular example, it is difficult to create the “inner-circle” of shared culture, when faced with geographically dispersed population: I do not have common culture/interests/shared values/background with people I associate daily in close proximity. Furthermore, my choices within the ethnic community I belong to are limited as well. Therefore, the computer generated medium over the networks, where geographical constrains are avoided, has been perfect solution. My peers I “attended college with” were not the ones necessarily from my University; they were from all over US, Canada and Western Europe. We all had something in common – we all left our former homeland (in recent years, after 1991), and we were all lonely.

Another participant (S28), currently residing in Germany, has participated in the community for over two years. He uses only the IRC (he is the founder of one of the channels), but he is a regular, daily participant. His reasons for participation in the community included: “Hmmm... good question. There was a time I met so many friends on the Net. Maybe more than friends. Having friends in a virtual life is not same thing as in a real life. You couldn’t meet so many people in a real life. The Net is full of every kind of people, but you can also find very good ones. I had a chance to met several of them in the real life, so I’m sure about that.”

The presented typology of community message exchange during the “conflict” times aimed to capture the range of possibilities that the virtual community offered to its members – giving the space for a dense ethnic interaction and communication among geographically distant members.

In the next chapter, I will try to draw possible conclusions and suggest directions for further research.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSIONS

All of us have a need to belong. All of us are social beings, right?:-)... Because of a space distance and a time distance between my 'real life' friends and me, which, unfortunately, we couldn't easily overcome, I've found some people here who are right for me... Still, behind every nickname is a person. To put it simply, I feel the need for friends, to belong somewhere... Here, in this strange country (hahaha) it means a lot when you get a smile, even if it is made from a colon and two brackets :-)) and when somebody is happy to see you, just you:-)))). (The participant S3 is female, living in Canada, 29 years old.)

The purpose of this research was twofold. First, my intention was to describe and present the ethnic virtual space in all its complexity from the perspective of an "insider" and "interpreter" and provide knowledge of a way of life in an ethnic virtual community. This intention is connected with an attempt to show "the familiar in the apparently strange" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p.176) by applying the proposed Baym’s model (1998) that was originally developed in a study of a Usenet English-speaking online community.

The second purpose of the research was analysis of patterns of community interactions during the changed offline context and development of an appropriate typology of online interactions on a basis of observed data combined with borrowed concepts from literature (Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1999). The typology, although related to specific circumstances in online community life, could provide us with understanding of how a virtual community “reacts” and “adapts” to offline changes, how its purpose could “stretch” and modify to embrace newly formed group purposes and what possibilities the community could offer to its members.
The model

I found the Baym’s model useful for a virtual community description and analysis, especially because it emphasizes the pre-existing structures of both online interactions and organization of virtual community. Offline culture, from which virtual community members understand and interpret online culture, is especially important for the study of an ethnic virtual community. In the case of Serbian virtual community, Serbian culture and Serbian language were preconditions for any community membership. Moreover, the influence of offline context was especially visible during the time when the research was conducted – what was happening outside of community had a significant influence on virtual community life.

The premise of the Baym’s model, that an online communication is shaped by a variety of forces and that there is constant exchange and “communication” between offline and online environments, does not underrate the importance and influence of a virtual setting itself. Characteristics of a virtual setting and its elaborated online culture put many specific tasks in front of a new member regardless of how familiar he or she could be with Serbian culture. Knowledge of online community structure, its social hierarchy, a variety of software used for message exchange and possibilities of software adaptation for local use are all important tasks that need to be managed by a new community member if he or she wants to be an active participant.
The community

Drawing from observational data and both the survey and the interview results, the research showed that the Serbian virtual group created a "stable set of social meanings" (Baym, 1998) through online interaction that allowed participants of the Serbian virtual group to imagine themselves as a virtual community. The members of the community created and developed specific forms of expressions and norms of behavior, borrowing from the established guidelines of the wider Internet culture. They adapted and recreated them to meet the needs of their specific language environment. Analysis of online interactions and the perceptions of participants indicate that participants have created and maintained relatively stable identities and successfully formed relationships with other participants in the virtual group through online interaction. Results also demonstrated that participants were likely to extend online relationships to the other channels of communication.

The observational data combined with participants' perceptions indicated that changes in external (cultural, political, economical or, as in this case, war) contexts changes established group purposes. The virtual ethnic space, previously the place for informal socializing of Serbians and discussions of ethnic issues, had became the space for important information exchange, organizing actions, both Internet and real, and for discussions about national and immigrant politics. The results also showed how the increasing number of participants, provoked by the changed external context, influenced changes in the norms of behavior and the community infrastructure.
The typology

In the second part of the research, I speculated on the role of the virtual ethnic community for ethnic group life, inquiring into patterns of the community space use during the time of the conflict. The online message exchanges were grouped by criteria of their explicit or implicit purposes. The categories range from groups of messages that explicitly address the “search” for others or for information and the organization of either online or offline actions, to those that included discussions about national and diasporic discourse and community reflections. Categories used for message interactions were not meant to include all possible observable online interactions, but to serve as guidelines for further exploration into the roles of an ethnic virtual community in the life of an ethnic group.

These grouped messages indicate that the Serbian virtual community, during a time of conflict, had several important purposes. It was a space for connecting geographically distant people in and out of the virtual community; it served as an important place for information exchange when the participants’ homeland was in danger; it was used as a space for self-organizing and debating about important issues related to the Serbian national politics, as well as, other issues important for Serbians living in Diaspora.

The underlying assumption, on which the research questions were based, relates to the idea that the nature of an ethnic identity is constructed, changing and fluid. The process of construction, reconstruction and negotiation of ethnic identity is broadened by communication technologies, in this case, the online community. As seen from this perspective, the Serbian virtual community offers a space where Serbians, using the mother tongue, could discuss the important ethnic issues and be in the contact with other Serbians,
and ultimately, the homeland. The research, focused on online interactions and the perspectives of participants who live in Diaspora, indicates that Serbians in Diaspora tend to use the virtual community space to discuss their immigrant identity, negotiate meanings of Serbian-ness outside of Serbia and, to share nostalgic memories about the homeland. The presence of non-Diasporic Serbians in the virtual community has an important impact, often changing the course of discussions and keeping them connected to reality. The ethnic space offered by the virtual community was used for interpretation and reinterpretation of issues related to the diasporic identity in a specific “real life” context.

The messages and online interactions, evolved around issues related to national interests and the future of Serbia (and Yugoslavia), showed that participants tended to take polarized, “fixed” positions, and discussions were frequently transformed into highly emotional arguments, quarrels and aggressive “name-calling”. Similar to other research findings (Mitra, 1997; Stubbs, 1998) the discourses of the national politics tended to “split” the community and did not leave space for those who do not share those “fixed” opinions.

Since it was conducted during specific real-life circumstances, the research addresses the changed nature of the environment as a possible reason for the frequent obstructions of the discussions. The increased number of participants and need of participants to get the firsthand information, brought about message-overload that, despite the firmer moderation of the environment, frequently obstructed discussion.

Finally, the Serbian virtual community, apart from being a space for discussion of different, but equal “voices” and having the possibility to become an imagined “public sphere”, offered emotional support and feelings of belonging for Serbians. The research showed that inter-group relationships, whether emergent, established or maintained, are the
essence of what makes the virtual community especially valuable. The results, obtained through survey and interview, showed that established relationships tend to extend to other channels of communication and frequently into real life, building on the idea that the ethnic network could never be established otherwise. Serbians in Diaspora, participating in the online community, showed that new CMC technologies could be used for keeping the Diaspora in touch, despite its dispersal through almost all continents. During the monitored period, organizing actions, especially those on the local, offline level, illustrated the potential of a virtual network to build an offline “agency”. The adaptability of the CMC to serve a variety of purposes, to be supported by a variety of technologies, to be incorporated in a particular language environment and to provide the potential for offline ethnic mobilization, made the virtual ethnic community a site worthy of a further investigation.

The research

As a two-year participant in the Serbian virtual community even before I started with the study, I had some assumptions underlying my approach. I believed in the potential and importance of the virtual space for a creation of community feeling. “Virtually” knowing a number of community members and witnessing many situations, in which participants showed that they care about each other and the environment, I was probably inclined to present the virtual space in “community-like” terms.

Despite the suggestion noted in the fifth chapter that “community feelings” would develop in online sub-communities built in a larger community, this research was intentionally focused on the global Serbian community. The “structural” community changes, provoked by the offline conflict, influenced a majority of participants, for different
reasons (search for information, organizing actions or debating) to regroup and gather on the most crowded places in the community. I thought that a "wider" perspective would give a better picture of the community organization then it would be focusing on the small sub-community.

The prolonged online membership in the community made me used to "watching and listening to" textual conversation and to understand created "culture codes" – forms of expressions, norms of behavior, roles in the community, or jokes played in conversations. More importantly, it gave me an opportunity to develop and to build trust with community members who possibly made easier the recruitment of participants for the survey (especially members contacted from the IRC channels) and for the interview. From that perspective, the participant-observation and ethnographic approach seem to have been well suited to the research questions of this study.

The significance of this study

A detailed description and analysis of interactions in an ethnic community and its organization could be interesting for scholars coming from different backgrounds. For those interested in ethnicity, cultural identity and urban anthropology, the description and analysis would allow insight into the ways of how new communication technologies and the Internet offer new array of possibilities for identity maintenance. In addition, the questions of how Internet technologies, providing the infrastructure for community building, could possibly influence identity, or, as Poster (1998) asks "how specific figures of ethnicity are altered by their electronic constitution in virtual spaces" (p. 200) represent also interesting issues for those scholars.
A particularly important aspect of this study is the time when the research was conducted. The war situation that happened offered a chance for monitoring online interactions during the specific real life changes and registering those changes in the virtual community that could not be possible to register otherwise. In that sense, this research represents specific attempt to depict the changed virtual community environment in the circumstances of war. Scholars interested in the link between real-life and online cultures, as well as in the influences that one culture has on another, could gain new perspectives from this research.

It is understandable that an ethnic virtual community is intentionally formed to satisfy social needs of geographically dispersed people of the same ethnic background. An ethnic group uses different resources to build a cultural space by appropriating computer technologies for communication. From that point of view, organization of a cultural/ethnic space could be important for those scholars interested in educational issues and learning, as well as those interested in research on virtual environments.

Any virtual community could be perceived as a created context in which an individual, drawing from different offline and online resources (cultural patterns, language, computer knowledge, or Internet knowledge) participates in the process of building virtual social organization. As Nolan and Weiss (in press) argue, to see a virtual community as a potential learning context, educators should get an insight into several curriculum locations that offer learning possibilities for community participants. These are - the Curriculum of Initiation and Governance (learnings necessary for the creation and maintenance of a virtual site); the Curriculum of Access (learnings necessary for locating a virtual site and
socializing with it); and, the Curriculum of Membership (learnings necessary for successful participation as a community member).

These curricular moments could be identified in the Serbian virtual community. The creation of the site, the knowledge of initiators of how to combine the available communication technologies to satisfy the social and cultural needs of participants and to establish continuity of community are important moments of the Curriculum of Initiation and Governance. In addition, this research addressed the particular importance of maintenance and moderation of the virtual community before and during the time of change. The ways in which rules and norms of behavior are created, applied and later transformed to adapt to a changed environment (increased number of participants, restructuring of the community space, and newly formed needs for firmer moderation of communication) also could be important issues for educators.

To successfully adapt to the virtual environment and become an active member, in this case a member of the Serbian virtual community, an individual needs to find the site, understand how to communicate with others, use software, adapt the software to a specific environment (to understand and be understood by others) – which all are learning moments related to the Curriculum of Access. The concept of the Curriculum of Membership suggests the issue of how a community member finds and understands his/her role in the social hierarchy of a virtual organization and becomes a successful participant who develops a feeling of belonging to community. Particularly important for the Serbian virtual community, as shown earlier, is the process of adaptation to the use of Serbian language in the environment that does not support all letters from Serbian alphabet. Social needs or
needs for information could motivate a person to learn highly sophisticated combinations of software in a very short time.

It is possible to conclude that, although developed for social purposes, the ethnic virtual community has an educational component because it "teaches" participants – by its social organization, by its rules of behavior, and its modes of access. If we argue that Internet literacy would be the most needed "skill" for the future, understanding the ways of how this "skill" is acquired by participants gathered in different communities over the Internet should be our important task. The issue of creation of virtual spaces and communities (those "clearly" educational, as well as, those based on other goals) might be understood better by analyzing already successful virtual communities, those with stable organization, moderation and membership.

Finally, researchers interested in issues of how to do research into virtual spaces (social or educational) could possibly benefit by having an insight into how particular research methods are applied – in this case ethnography – and how they are appropriate or not for research of particular virtual sites. The issues related to the techniques of online data collection by survey and interview could provide additional understandings to those interested in research on virtual environments. Ethical questions, concerned with the privacy of community members, and the need for ethical treatment of subjects and collected data, are also raised in the research. Ethical issues, closely connected to the characteristics of a virtual environment and computer-mediated communication (what is public/private communication, when to obtain the informed consent, strategies for the preservation of anonymity of participants and virtual sites, and other issues), were shown as particularly important in cases when researchers deal with "sensitive" topics.
Further research

The presented “picture” of online community life in extreme circumstances does not say much about its everyday life. The same research inquiry conducted before or after “the conflict-situation” could provide us with possibly different answers. It would be interesting to compare the patterns of community space use during “regular”, “everyday” times with those presented in this research.

Because of the “processual” and changing nature of a virtual community, only longitudinal study could track the community development – the “initiation” and involvement of new members, formation of relationships, elaboration of shared meanings, or departure of members and process of dissolving once stable online relationships. This research showed that members had formed relationships and transferred them into real life. It would be even more important to know what happened with those relationships over time, how participants managed to maintain them or how real life meetings influenced those relationships when they returned to the online environment.

I suggested the importance of online ethnic community for the process of maintaining ethnic identity of members of community living in Diaspora - offering the space for “dense” social contact among a ethnic group and (re)creation of “real life” culture in online environment. Future research needs to discover if and how online ethnic participation influences people’s life offline: their work, free time, and family life. Do members of an online community living in Diaspora tend to form and maintain offline contact as a group, or do their relationships have only one-to-one character?
Despite the idea that views the Internet through its globalization trends, this research suggested that the ethnic group could use CMC technologies for its own purposes and in its own language to locally construct an environment, to participate in homeland and immigrant issues and, to establish otherwise impossible contact among its dispersed members. However, the research indicated another important aspect that needs further exploration - the importance of the wider Internet culture, as well as, external offline contexts from which participants are accessing the community.

The process of building an ethnic virtual community does not start from some abstract beginning unrelated to the context. The wider Internet culture offers an ethnic virtual community the infrastructure with embedded practices of use, established meanings and forms of expressions, rules for online behavior management and, the constant "flux" of new technologies that shape an already established ethnic community. Even if organized around ethnicity and self-excluded from the other virtual communities, setting aside the language "barrier", the ethnic community experiences ongoing changes, influenced by external and internal forces. The research focused on the influence of a global Internet culture on a "local" virtual space could provide us with important insights.

The research also indicated that the ethnic virtual community is not as homogenous or "local" as it could appear to "outsiders". Depending on many factors, participants freely choose and change virtual environments, and an ethnic virtual community is only one place that meets only some of their needs. Coming into a community and going out of it, a participant could always bring something in and take something out. In that sense, an ethnic community could be seen as a complex site under the constant influence of external context,
either offline or online. Only for the purposes of research, we are deliberately “freezing” the community. Otherwise, it is ever changing and evolving.
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Chronology of NATO attacks: March 24 – May 7, 1999

(According to Human Rights Watch)

March 24
NATO bombing begins.

April 3
NATO destroyed the “Most Slobode” (Freedom Bridge) across Danube River to Novi Sad, and the bridge across the Danube that connects Backa Palanka with Croatian Bank.

April 5
On the evening of Monday, three NATO missiles and/or bombs were reported to have landed in a civilian neighborhood of Aleksinac, a village about 100 miles south of Belgrade, killing five civilians. Tanjug Agency reported seventeen civilians killed. NATO expressed regret for the loss of life and called the incident an “accident of war.” The intended target, NATO said, was a military barracks positioned nearby.

April 9
NATO admitted damage to civilian homes in a strike on the main telephone exchange in Pristina, regretting “unintended damage or loss of civilian life” when a bomb struck some 200 to 300 meters from the target in what seems to be a small residential area.

April 12
A civilian passenger train traveling from Belgrade to Skopje, Macedonia, was hit by NATO bombs as it crossed a bridge on the Juzna Morava River, on the morning of Monday, April 12. At least ten people were killed and sixteen were wounded. (The Yugoslav government reported that fifty-five passengers were killed.) NATO reported that it had targeted the bridge because it was an important supply route into Kosovo. The bridge was at Gredeljaka Klisura, some 300 km south of Belgrade.

April 14
NATO acknowledged mistakenly attacking a civilian vehicle north of Djakovica, on the road between Djakovica and Decani. NATO called the incident an accident of war that resulted from an attempt to destroy Serbian military forces who had set fire to civilian homes in the area. NATO spokesman admitted that the pilot of an F-16 fired on what he believed to be military trucks, and expressed “deep regret.”
April 18
NATO targeted economic sites reportedly in order to chip away at Milosevic’s system of political and economical patronage. These sites include a tobacco factory and warehouse in Nis.

April 23
Sixteen employees of Serbian Television and Radio died in a NATO strike on its headquarters.

April 28
NATO admitted bombing the residential area of Surdulica in southern Serbia, when a missile intended to hit a military target strayed off course. Serbian media reported that ten to twenty civilians were killed.

May 1
NATO admitted destroying a civilian bus crossing a bridge at Luzani, north of Pristina. There were forty-seven deaths, according to Yugoslav officials. NATO officials said that the bus appeared after an attacking aircraft released its weapon against the bridge, which it described as a key military route.

May 3
NATO reported it attacked four transformer substations in the Yugoslav electrical grid, blacking out 70 percent of homes in Serbia for some seven hours and causing intermittent loss of electrical power to civilian areas until May 4.

May 7
NATO reported it again attacked four transformer substations of the Yugoslav electrical grid, four in the vicinity of Belgrade, blacking out the capital.

May 7
NATO acknowledged it dropped cluster bombs on a market and the main hospital in Nis, Serbia’s third largest city. Serbian officials reported that fifteen people were killed and seventy wounded, and about twenty unexploded cluster bombs remained in the area. According to NATO, the bombs were intended to strike an airfield a mile away.

May 7
NATO admitted bombing the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade, killing three people and injuring at least fifteen. NATO mistakenly targeted the site after outdated information indicated the building was a Yugoslav arms agency, the federal Directorate for Supply and Procurement.

Hello,

Below is the survey that I am using for my thesis. The purpose of the study is to capture the sense of the virtual community – from the perspective of its members. When I say “virtual community” – I think of the feeling of belonging to the group of people that you meet regularly or from time to time only over the Internet (it could be computer conferencing, chat rooms, emails).

This survey is anonymous, and any data you provide I will keep confidential. Thanks again for your participation.

Current city (and country) of residence: ______________________________________

Part of Yugoslavia you are from: ________________________________

Age: _______

Gender: ( ) Male  ( ) Female

Marriage status/children: ______________________________

Level of education: ________________________________

Internet access to the community: ( ) home  ( ) job

Language at home/job: ________________________________

1. How did you find out about this community?

2. How long have you been participating in it?

3. Have you told others about this community?

4. Please describe the ways in which you have been participating?

( ) Conferencing  ( ) IRC channels or Java Chat  ( ) If other, please specify: ________________________________
5. If you have been participating in the computer conferencing - in which conferences have you been participating?

How have you participated?

( ) Only reading
   How often: ( ) daily ( ) weekly ( ) monthly ( ) if other, what?
( ) Posting and reading
   How often: ( ) daily ( ) weekly ( ) monthly ( ) if other, what?

6. If you have been participating in IRC channels:
   Which channels: ____________________________
   How often: ( ) daily ( ) weekly ( ) monthly ( ) if other, what?

   Could you be specific about the way you are participating on channels:
   ( ) public ( ) public & private ( ) only private with specific persons

7. What are your main reasons for joining IRC channels or conferencing?

8. In the places where you contribute, do the others recognize you by your nickname?

9. Have you ever searched through the Serbian community members’ database?
   ( ) Yes ( ) No

   8.a. How often? __________________________

10. Have you made your personal page listed in the members’ database?
    ( ) Yes ( ) No

   10.a. If not, why? __________________________

11. Have you ever formed personal relationship(s) with people who you met virtually in Serbian community?
    ( ) Yes, one ( ) Yes, more than one ( ) No

    If yes, what kind of relationship have you formed:

    ( ) Friendship ( ) love ( ) netsex ( ) business ( ) information exchange
Have your relationship(s) gone beyond virtual into real-life?:
( )yes ( )no

If yes, could you be specific about - on what way(s) your relationship(s) was extended: ( )"snail mail" ( )telephone ( )real life meeting ( )if other, please describe? __________________________________________________________________________

12. Do you think that people act differently in virtual environments than in real life?
( )Yes ( )No

If yes: Why do you think this is? __________________________________________________________________________

13. Do you think about yourself as a member of some virtual community? In what sense?
__________________________________________________________________________________________

13.a. If yes, how is that membership important for you?
__________________________________________________________________________________________

14. In what way(s) is the virtual community different from real life community?
__________________________________________________________________________________________
I agree to be surveyed for a Master's Thesis Research Project. The goal of the research is exploration of the role and importance of the virtual community from the perspective of its members. The research has two steps: the first is – the survey (consists of fourteen questions). The second will be an interview of a selected number of people who participate in the survey. Its purpose is to go “deeply” into capturing the sense of virtual community in the life of online participants.

I understand that my nickname, ISP address, as well as my email address will be kept confidential, only known by the researcher. I understand also that my participation is voluntary and that I can withdraw from research at any time and the data will be destroyed. Replying to this message means that I want to participate in the research, receive the survey and be willing to be interviewed. The data will be destroyed after the research is completed.

(This consent form was translated in Serbian language and emailed to those participants who gave me his/her email address)