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A social contract for virtual institutions

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Abstract Computer-mediated social groups, often known as virtual communities, are now giving rise to a more durable and more abstract phenomenon: the emergence of virtual institutions. These social institutions operating mostly online exhibit very interesting qualities. Their distributed, collaborative, low-cost and reactive nature makes them very useful. Yet they are also probably more fragile than classical institutions and in need of appropriate support mechanisms. We will analyze them as social institutions, and then resort to social contract theory to determine adequate support measures. We will argue that virtual institutions can be greatly helped by making explicit and publicly available online their norms, rules and procedures, so as to improve the collaboration between their members.

Keywords Virtual institutions · Social institutions · Social organizations · Social contract · Wikipedia

1 Introduction

The remarkable development of electronic networks has given rise to novel forms of social life online. The internet with its numerous applications (email, the web, social media, etc.) allows people to communicate and to socialize quickly and easily without meeting face-to-face. Various types of virtual communities have thus emerged in the past 20 or 30 years: notably forums, newsgroups, web-based associations and lately groups of "friends" or "followers" on social media (such as Facebook or Twitter).

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These virtual communities are by now almost as varied as real-life social groups in size, nature and goals (Kollock and Smith 1999; Memmi 2006), but they often exhibit particular characteristics: They tend to be more impersonal, goal-oriented and more functional than classical communities. In this way, they probably participate in the general trend toward impersonal and abstract relationships that is typical of modern society.

More recently (in the past decade or so), one has observed the advent of a new phenomenon: Some virtual communities have become even more impersonal and goal-oriented, taking the form of a durable abstract construction that is more than the mere union of group members and which can survive the usual turnover of participants. Wikipedia is a very good example, but we could cite a few others. In other words, these virtual groups have become social institutions, a fundamental construct of sociology. As social institutions are the building blocks of society, the emergence of virtual versions is noteworthy.

We will argue here that virtual institutions are likely to develop further and that they deserve to be examined carefully. We will see that they possess very interesting qualities in comparison with classical institutions: Their collaborative and virtual nature makes them naturally flexible, adaptable and cheaper to operate. Yet they are also potentially more fragile than traditional institutions, and appropriate support mechanisms should be devised and provided to ensure their functioning and durability.

In fact, when pondering the conditions for the smooth operation of virtual institutions, one is led to pose the same questions that have been asked about social institutions in general: How can a social organization be justified and made legitimate? How to ensure the cooperation of its members with a minimum of coercion? This has traditionally been discussed by using a theoretical fiction, the