Chapter 2

Going Virtual: The Driving Forces and Arrangements

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“Microprocessor and computer technologies, contrary to current fashionable opinion, are not new forces recently unleashed upon an unprepared society, but merely the latest installment in the continuing development of the Control Revolution.” James Beniger (1986, p. vii).

INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, the adjective “virtual” has become a common place descriptor of social forms where people do not have to live, meet or work face to face in order to create goods and services or maintain significant social relationships. There are specialized literatures about new social forms, such as virtual corporations, virtual organizations, virtual communities, virtual libraries, and virtual classrooms, as well as related practices such as telecommuting, computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), tele-education, teleconferencing, tele-medicine, tele-marketing, and tele-democracy. There is general agreement in the literature that the profound impact of information technology (IT) and its rapid adoption by individuals, groups,
organizations, and communities has given rise to the proliferation of “virtual societies.” While computer networks figure frequently as enablers and shapers of “virtual societies,” other kinds of communication technologies, including paper mail, telephone and fax, also play roles in linking people and groups. Some of the literature celebrates the flexibility and enhanced possibilities of these new forms of “virtual social life.” But there are also important critical empirical studies of specific virtual social forms that examine the possible losses.

In this chapter we examine the driving forces behind the growth of virtual societies and discuss existing arrangements and practices at the individual, group, organization, and community levels. We also examine the implications of how people will live and work in societies where these arrangements and practices are widespread and mixed with face-to-face relationships. Our discussion follows the model of virtual society presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 describes an evolutionary model conceptualizing an entire hierarchy for studying the virtual society and summarizes both the driving forces and arrangements that are critical components of this proposed framework. Specifically, this chapter is organized as follows: We first discuss the driving forces which include global economics, policies and politics, enlightened

![Figure 1. A Framework for the Virtual Society](image-url)
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