

THE BALKANIZATION OF THE INTERNET
AS SELF-(DIS)ORGANIZATION
OF THE INFORMATION SOCIETY

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Recent information and communication technologies are often considered to contribute to a reconceptualization of the world we live in. As the objective qualities of space and time are altered, through telecommunications and electronic mediation, some come to think that telematics networks erase geographical differences. In this way, the Internet is seen as a concrete realization of the McLuhanian "global village." However, although the transformative power of these technologies aims to the extension of social relationships in new forms of human sociality, as in the emergence of "virtual communities," it is not that obvious that social integration is attained through them. As a matter of fact, increased connectivity may be accompanied with a high degree of fragmentation of social interaction and with the emergence of disconnected patterns of isolated groups being focused on narrower contacts. In particular, a possible outcome might be towards what is usually referred as "balkanization," i.e., the process of dividing people into special interest groups according to preferences, including social, cultural and economic affiliations. Basically, the mechanism of electronic balkanization can be traced back to the fact that a preference for contacts more focused than contacts available locally leads to narrower interaction. This is also certified in a theoretical model of the informational balkanization elaborated by van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson, in which the effect of bounded rationality is taken into account too. As Internet access is widened and information infrastructure is developing at an increasingly faster rate, understanding of the self-(dis)organized emergent patterns of fragmented coalescence is of great importance for policy makers in the information society.