Chapter XXXVI
How to Engage Users in Online Sociability

Licia Calvi
Lessius University College, Belgium

ABSTRACT

The chapter presents and combines the results of two case studies dealing with online communities[1] in order to understand under which conditions people are willing to engage in online sociability. Of the two studies considered, one case collected user needs data for an urban mobile application; the other focused on a virtual network connecting home and outside organizations. The chapter shows that people are interested in engaging in online networks mainly to connect to people they already know, but not to get in contact with the strangers and the anonymous others available to them online. The author argues that these results cast doubt on the viability of one single view on online sociability and hope that understanding the dynamics and motivations underlying online communities will help construct better online social places where people will feel more engaged.

Experimentation should never be goal-directed, otherwise data collection is limited, it is these last ones that, actually, have to be targeted even to some practical goal.”

—Bruno Munari,
   Italian artist and designer,
   translated from exhibition catalogue,
   Didattica 2. Perché e come, 1977

INTRODUCTION

With the increasing popularity of Web 2.0, a lot of research has been devoted to the concept of online sociability, although research on online and virtual communities as such actually dates back from the late '90s, and some even originates from much older sociological studies (see, for instance in (Gusfield, 1975; Preece, 2000; Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2003; Rheingold, 1993). In this chapter, I look at online sociability from a different perspective. My research question is:

What are the conditions under which people will engage in online sociability?

This question implies the desirability of a novel type of online sociability, different from those just mentioned. I will formulate one such definition on the basis of the empirical results that were collected while performing a user and task analysis within two research projects, i.e., an urban mobile application[2] and a virtual network connecting home and outside organizations[3]. Both case studies foresee some form of community building and of online sociability as part of their objective. Although these projects present different starting points, assume different perspectives and aim at different finalities, they both impinge upon the notion of online sociability, since they both focus on the notion of personal networks as communities, i.e., on the concept of networking, and this mainly from the point of view of an individual who is engaged in social relations and on the way s/he networks. They analyse the possibility for them to become virtual communities and envisage the means by which such communities may profit from the strengthening of the ties among its members from being online. This is the reason why it is extremely useful to compare their results and to use them both in this attempt at defining online sociability differently, i.e., to come to a definition whereby the social context may change users' behavior, which in turn may have implications for design and evaluation.

The emphasis is therefore on the social issues involved in the creation and development of online communities, mostly of peers, i.e., at the crossroad between the social needs of individuals while networking and the activities that are pursued by it.

This topic has become more and more relevant and its consideration urgent since, in recent years, the new media have started to pervade everybody's life to the extent that they tend to shape and affect it: technologies are no longer used only by professionals but they are also used to manage personal activities thanks to applications like MySpace, Flickr, and Facebook, just to mention a few.

Understanding the effects of this use on users and on the activities they perform and, at the same time, understanding how the individual's social role within a personal network can affect the use of different media can help design and develop a better tool to support them.

To be able to answer the question of engaging people in online sociability, the paper has been structured as follows: first, the definition of online sociability I intend to address is presented; then, the projects that are used as case studies to this end are briefly and separately introduced; next, some of their results are compared; I ultimately draw some conclusions and explain on the basis of these results what I think are the conditions under which people are willing to engage in the type of online sociability that was discussed in this chapter.

A DEFINITION OF ONLINE SOCIABILITY

There are different ways in which a social relation can originate and further evolve. Depending on this, different types of communities can be distinguished. I identified three of them (Calvi, 2006), depending on the intertwining of their online and offline character. Although I also believe, like others (Wellman, 2006; Granovetter, 1973) that there is no longer a marked separation between life online and offline, but that there is a constant shift between these two extremes, I believe as well that the amount of one

Related Content

Starting Food Chain as a SME in Canada: Adopting Social Media for Its Success

Rubina Nabin (2023). *Strengthening SME Performance Through Social Media Adoption and Usage (pp. 234-247).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/starting-food-chain-as-a-sme-in-canada/316231

iPhoneography in the Secondary Classroom: Using Social Media to Enhance Visual Communication

Kristi Oliver (2018). *Social Media in Education: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice (pp. 165-187).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/iphoneography-in-the-secondary-classroom/205707

Ethical Dilemmas Associated With Social Network Advertisements

Alan D. Smithand Onyebuchi Felix Offodile (2021). *Research Anthology on Strategies for Using Social Media as a Service and Tool in Business (pp. 1833-1865).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/ethical-dilemmas-associated-with-social-network-advertisements/283056

Simulating Experiences of Displacement and Migration: Developing Immersive and Interactive Media Forms Around Factual Narratives

James N. Blake (2019). *International Journal of E-Politics (pp. 49-60).*

www.irma-international.org/article/simulating-experiences-of-displacement-and-migration/241306

Geographic Information Networks in American Indian Governments and Communities

Mark H. Palmerand Jack Hanney (2010). *International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking (pp. 1-10).*

www.irma-international.org/article/geographic-information-networks-american-indian/45775