

When the Virtual and the Real Clash Power and Politics in a Social Networking Community

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on two related aspects—the politics of social networking communities and the impact that clashes between real and virtual spheres on relationships in social networking communities. The starting point for this paper is a series of events that took place in a social networking community involving a dominant member of the community attempting to overpower others, leading to several of the most active members, including the dominant member himself, leaving the community. Following a review of the literature on social networking and politics, the Virtuality/Reality Conflict (VRC) model is presented. The model is used in this paper as a basis for explaining the events in the case and for discussing the implications from this study to research politics of the virtual communities.

Keywords: Interpretive Research, Politics, Power, Reality, Social Networking Communities, Virtual Communities, Virtuality

INTRODUCTION

The nature of relationships in virtual communities and how relationships in these communities differ from relationships in the real world has attracted much research, particularly in the early 1990's when, due to the commercialization of e-mail services virtual communities came into existence for the first time in history. Early discussions of the social dynamics of virtual communities (Romm, 1999) commented on the areas that will be affected by the spread of virtual communities. In particular, Romm

(1999) outlined four areas in which the proliferation of virtual communities would transform relationships:

- **The integration of production systems beyond national borders** – This trend has, indeed, transformed relationships in the commercial world by making the buying and selling of products across national borders possible, by enabling virtual organizations, and by bridging the technological gaps between countries over issues that require global policies, including, climate control, weapons control, monetary control and the spread of diseases.

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- **The integration of national identities** – This trend resulted in values being exchanged across national borders and in the exposure of large sections of the world population to values that are part of other national cultures. As a result of this, defining oneself as a member of a particular national culture (i.e., American or Canadian) now makes less sense than it did before because cultures all around the globe have become more blended.
- **Community fragmentation** – This trend manifests in “confused” loyalties, where citizens of virtual communities who reside in one country, may in fact support groups whose interests conflict with the formal policies of their governments. These could have negative consequences as in the case of international terrorism or positive consequences as is the case of international human rights organizations. In both cases, membership in international virtual communities has become more real for some people than the national, professional, or local communities to which they belong.
- **Redefinition of personal identity** – This trend is a result of the fact that members of virtual communities can describe themselves to others in any way that they choose in terms of age, looks, gender, location, and so on. This makes it possible for members to develop virtual identities that are completely removed from their real-life identities. The freedom to recreate one’s identity, coupled with total anonymity offered by the network can lead to highly “intimate” yet “unreal” relationships that can lead to many negative organizational consequences.

This paper can be seen as building on the predictions that Romm (1999) and others made in that it explores the impact of the proliferation of Internet relationships and the interplay between the virtual and the real spheres. In the following sections, a review of the major themes in the literature on social networking communities is presented. Building on previous research

on politics in social networking communities, the VRC model that combines different levels of analysis of social networking environments with the possibility of clashes between the virtual and the real spheres is discussed. The model is used to interpret data gleaned from events that took place in a social networking community.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Social networking communities are defined here (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997), as “on-line communities that focus on the building and verifying of social networks for **any** purpose.” This definition accounts for the fact that social networking services and the communities that they support do, indeed, offer a wide range of different types of services. Thus, while some services offer merely blog hosting, others provide the option of joining groups temporarily (through chat rooms) or for longer periods of time (through electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups or on-line groups). Some social networking services focus on medical advice and support, some offer opportunities for professional networking, some facilitate sharing of music and video clips, and other still match their members for social and marital purposes (the eDating industry).

Social networking communities grew out of networks of professionals (mostly in the information technology area). However, they eventually evolved to offer a social space for people who were not necessarily members of such communities. Also, even though the early social networking communities consisted primarily of members of the “elite”, the past two decades have seen the entry of females, the young, the old, the less educated, those with lower income, non-English speaking, and non-white members of the community (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004).

As social networking communities became larger and more numerous, they also became more attractive business enterprises. One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon is the case of YouTube, which was acquired by

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