

Measuring the Maturity Level of a Community Portal

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INTRODUCTION

Social interaction is a fundamental to human beings. In an effort to facilitate social interaction, various tools and technologies have been designed and developed over the centuries to connect people and create better means of communication. Most recently, this effort has been directed at facilitating the interaction of communities that share a common purpose or interest. These communities are diverse and often involve individuals or groups that are not situated in the same physical context. The World Wide Web (WWW) has become an important tool in facilitating the interaction and communication between such communities. This is evident in the large number of online community Web sites, portals and forums that have proliferated in the last decade. These Web-based tools provide communities with an online space to exchange information, share stories and experiences, solve problems, discuss issues, and socialise regardless of their location. Portals, in particular, have become the most widely used interface for online communities to meet and interact (Lacher et al., 2001).

Despite the widespread use of portals by online communities as an interaction medium, the research in the area to date has mainly been descriptive (Millen & Patterson, 2002) or focused on general portal design issues (Mynatt et al., 1997). Our knowledge about community portals is limited and constrained by a lack of frameworks and models to explain how community portals are developed, used and sustained. As a first step towards extending our knowledge about community portals, this article presents a framework for measuring the maturity level of a community portal. The framework has been named the S3 model and can be used to assess the level of a maturity of an existing community portal. By applying the model to a number of different portals in the same domain, it is possible to determine the “current state of play” in that domain. The following section provides a background into portals in general, and described the S3 model and its potential applications.

BACKGROUND

Web portals are access gateways to the World Wide Web that integrate various information sources and services (such as search engines and directories) and usually provide users with the ability to customise the content, layout and navigation to suit their personal needs (Lacher et al., 2001). Portals can be categorised as either horizontal or vertical. Horizontal portals originally began as search engines. They are multifunctional spaces used for information, navigation, communication and e-commerce (Vermeij, 2000), and offer broad content to the mass market. Well-known examples of horizontal Web portals include yahoo.com and msn.com. Vertical portals, such as webmd.com and about.com provide content that is of interest to specific markets or demographic categories. Vertical portals are characterised by depth, rather than breadth, of content. Affinity portals are special types of vertical portals, which target specific segments of the market. However, they are designed to appeal to people’s emotions, values and belief systems rather than interests and hobbies. For example, affinity portals have been developed for religious groups. Although Web portals are traditionally categorised by their content and intended audience, a special type of portal has become a topic of research interest because of its distinct community focus. It has been referred to as a community portal.

Portals that are specifically designed to provide resources and meet the needs of a particular community are known as community portals. Community portals are usually based on common interests shared by its users (also known as communities of interest). However, others are based on the geographical location of the users. These portals address the specific needs of a local community situated in a particular area (neighbourhood, town, city, area, region, etc.). Australia has pioneered the establishment of these portals through its One City, One Site (OCOS) program, which is the first of its kind in the world. The OCOS program reserves certain domain names specifically for the use

of local communities. Only a not-for-profit organisation that is situated in a particular geographical location and is cross representative of the general community in that location can apply for these domain names. The domain names take the form of www.locality.state.au. For example, www.melbourne.vic.au is reserved for a not-for-profit organisation that consists of members who reside or work in Melbourne. To apply for the domain name, the organisation must also be representative of residents and groups that are in the Melbourne area. The OCOS program is currently undergoing pilot testing, with three community domain names to be allocated in August 2004.

Benefits of Community Portals

The benefits of community portals are diverse and numerous. Millen et al. (2002) suggest that they can be grouped into three distinct categories: individual, community and organisational benefits. A community portal brings a number of social, cultural and business benefits to the individuals living in a particular community. Amongst the most important of these benefits are enhancing existing social relationships and creating new social, professional and business links between members of the community. This results in the creation of a familiar and supportive environment (Millen et al., 2002) and an inexpensive forum for community members to interact at any time, regardless of their location. The ultimate benefit of a community portal is an increased level of trust amongst members of the community (Millen et al., 2002), which will have a direct impact on the society at large because it will promote a general feeling of safety and security.

On a different level, a major benefit of community portals is the integration and interoperability of different community information resources and services (Lacher et al., 2001). This leads to breaking down barriers between people in the community, for example, disabled people or minority groups (City of Seattle, 2000) and a community asset for youth (in particular youth from low-income families) to break the poverty cycle (Spencer & Neil, 2002). Finally, the economic benefits to consumers and businesses, especially small to medium enterprises (SMEs), are a significant by-product of successful community portals.

Government Initiatives

To promote the benefits of community portals, the Australian government has created and implemented various initiatives in the last decade. Networking the

Nation (NTN) was the largest of these initiatives. As part of NTN, a Regional Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (RTIF) was set up to improve telecommunications infrastructure, access to the Internet and mobile communications in regional areas, to develop educational and training programs and to promote strategies to develop regional telecommunications services (Networking the Nation, 2003). Initially, \$250 million was allocated over a period of five years, starting in 1997, and an additional \$214 million was injected in 1999 for further projects. Funding was allocated towards the development and establishment of community portals, amongst other projects.

Several components of the NTN program were concluded in June 2002, with further funding for these components suspended. By this time, more than 110 Web sites and portals had been set up using the allocated funds and of those, 37% were community portals (Collins & Eccles, 2002). Amongst these were the Mainstreet (www.mainstreet.au.com), an online community portal for Western Victoria; the New England North West Region portal (www.nio.com.au) to promote regional communities and businesses (New Connections, 2003); and Maranoa region's e-business incubator and portal (www.maranoa.org.au), which was described in a study by Lawley et al. (2001).

The One City, One Site program (described previously) is a more recent initiative specifically targeted at the establishment of community portals, whereby a set of geographically based domain names has been reserved for communities. The use of these domain names is restricted to portals that reflect the interests of a local community, including local businesses, tourism, historical information, cultural events, etc. This initiative has significant implications for the business, government, media and education sectors because of the potential economic benefits involved. As mentioned above, pilot testing is currently under way prior to progressive implementation across Australia.

Government initiatives such as the ones described above are essential if the full potential of community portals is to be achieved. However, they must be complemented by a body of knowledge about community portals in general. As a first step towards developing this body of knowledge, the S3 model has been proposed. The S3 model is a conceptual framework that can be used to assess the maturity level of a community portal, and subsequently determine the "current state of play" in community portals. Armed with an understanding of the current situation, government organisations and policy makers will be in a better position to develop programs and initiatives that are informed by actual events and developments in communities.

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