

Online Communities and Online Community Building

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INTRODUCTION

In this article, we define and describe the concept of online communities, outline the essential conditions under which they emerge and present some means that foster the building of online communities.

“Online community” is one of the buzzwords in the age of Web 2.0. Within this article, we refer to online community as a voluntary group of users who partake actively in a certain computer-mediated service. The term “online community” is preferred over the term “virtual community,” as it denotes the character of the community more accurately: community members are interacting online as opposed to face-to-face. Furthermore, the term “virtual community” seems too unspecific, because it includes other communities that only exist virtually, whereas, an online community in our definition is always a real community in the sense that community members know that they are a part of their community.

Nevertheless, there are other reasonable definitions of online community. An early and most influencing characterization (which unfortunately utilizes the term “virtual community”) was coined by Howard Rheingold (1994). He wrote: “...virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people [...] who exchanges words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks” (p. 57). A more elaborate and technical definition of online community is given by Jenny Preece (2000), which acts as a benchmark for developers since then. She states that an online community consists of four basic constituents (Preece, 2000, p. 3):

- Socially interacting people striving to satisfy their own needs;
- A shared purpose like an interest or need that provides a reason to cooperate;

- Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, or rules that guide the community members’ behavior; and
- A technical system that works as a carrier that mediates social interaction.

Not explicitly mentioned in this characterization, but nevertheless crucial for our aforementioned definition (and not in opposition to Preece’s position), is voluntary engagement (see also Janneck, Finck, & Oberquelle, 2005).

As Preece’s (2000) definition indicates, the basic constituents of online communities include individual issues, group-related issues, as well as technology-related issues. Online communities thus comprise the participants’ basic individual motivation, the social interaction processes entailed to “bundle” individual needs to increase efficiency, and the implemented technical functions that support these processes.

In the light of the aforementioned role of social processes, it is not surprising that, with respect to online communities, findings from voluntary groups of active user communities outside computer-based systems are also a highly relevant source of information (see e.g., Baumeister & Bushman, 2008). In the section devoted to online community building, we will present Kraut’s (2003) suggestion of a highly-sophisticated application of social psychology theory to address some well-known problems in online communities.

BACKGROUND

Just because everybody is now talking about them, online communities are historically seen neither as a repercussion of the World Wide Web—which dates back to 1991 (Berners-Lee, Cailliau, Groff, & Pollermann, 1992)—nor as dependent on the Internet as a transport infrastructure. In fact, online communities emerged at the time when ARPAnet—the predecessor of the Internet—was still restricted to military-

funded institutions. Some of these online communities were based on computerized bulletin boards first introduced by Christensen and Suess (1978). Their system was called CBBS (computerized bulletin board system) and followed the idea of a thumbtack bulletin board hosted electronically on a computer. Other computer hobbyists were able to connect with their home computers via a dial-up modem connection and could “pin” messages to a shared “board.” The first online communities developed when other participants responded to those messages and created ongoing discussions. At that time, computer hobbyists and scientists were more or less the only ones who owned computers and modems. Therefore, most topics on CBBS were within the realm of computers, but in the long run, the topics of discussion broadened. By the 1980s, similar systems appeared that were now called BBS (bulletin board system). The most well known BBSs were “The Well” (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link) and FidoNet (Rheingold, 2000).

Apparently, at the very same point in time, the technological and social environment was ready for online communities, as there were at least two other independent developments emerging:

1. The Usenet was invented by computer science students at Duke University and the University of North Carolina. They used a simple scheme by which these two computer communities could automatically exchange information via modems at regular intervals.
2. The first MUDs appeared at the University of Essex (UK) creating playful and imaginative online communities. MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon/Dimension/Domain) are computer-implemented versions of text-based role-playing games, in which multiple gamers can take virtual identities and interact with one another. Early MUDs were adventure games played in a labyrinth of dark dungeons with hidden rooms, trapdoors, and so forth.

Nowadays, most online communities are using the Internet as a carrier. Most of them are Web-based, using HTTP as a protocol for transportation and a combination of XHTML, CSS and JavaScript for presentation. But there are still communities that employ other systems and protocols, like newsreaders using NNTP and mail-groups using SMTP- or IRC- (Internet relay chat) based chatting systems. Some online communities even use multiple systems and protocols to communicate and cooperate.

A multiple group of new Web-based services like instant messaging, forums, chats, Web logs (or blogs), wikis, social bookmarking services and several types of other sharing services (e.g., for photos, videos, audio-files, or files in general) has recently been developed. Some of these services like instant messaging, forums or chats are typical applications within the field of computer-mediated communication and

therefore foster online communities. Other types of services like, for example blogs, are at first sight not made to be platforms to house online communities. But as soon as these services are enriched with comment functions, RSS feeds and linkbacks (linkbacks are means to obtain notifications when other documents are linked to a certain document) they can be used as such. The latest developments are platforms like Facebook or MySpace, often summarized under the somewhat vague label Web2.0. They typically combine several of the aforementioned services to create rich communication media that could be used by online communities.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

The conditions in pure online communities highly differ from a computer-mediated communication situation within companies and corporations. Whereas employees in a computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) context usually meet online as well as face-to-face, members of online communities have, as a general rule, never met each other. Working in a highly standardized company context, employees have to focus on task fulfillment within a certain timeframe. Superiors evaluate their achievements, and they are accordingly paid by the company.

Online communities live from their volunteers. Usually none of the community members can be forced to do something, and there are no tangible incentives. Basic research in motivation psychology (Franken, 2001) even shows that incentives tend to be counterproductive.

Community members usually show a high degree of intrinsic motivation to participate actively in the development of an online community. It is still open to discussion where this motivation comes from. Simple rules like “It’s all based on trying to maximize the potential personal benefit” seem to fail, if the concept of the term “personal benefit” is too simplistic. The attention-economy-debate (e.g., Aigrain, 1997; Ghosh, 1997; Goldhaber, 1997) shows that personal benefit is a complex entity if one relates it to online activities in the World Wide Web.

The likelihood of taking an active part in a community increases with the potential personal benefit that could be gained within that community. This is directly related to the quality of the contents offered. As Utz (2000) stated, the likelihood of submitting high quality contributions increases with the quality and the manifoldness of the existing entries. Appropriate solutions for quality assurance are rating systems.

A “killer feature” for such an application generates immediate benefit for users as soon as they start using the application, even without anybody else contributing. Unfortunately, this kind of feature can’t always be found and implemented. As a (partial) replacement for such a feature, one can follow best practices. After analyzing numerous

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