

Chapter I

New Media, Communities, and Social Practice: An Introductory Tutorial

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to provide an introductory tutorial to the key topics and themes suggested in the chapter's title and further developed by authors in the four main parts of this volume. It was considered important to provide this introductory account for two main reasons. First, it serves the purpose of sketching the boundaries of the volume by establishing an early focus on the concepts being addressed and highlighting the volume's orientation. This is expected to help the reader clarify the difference between this edited collection of chapters and other relevant literature. Secondly, the tutorial will hopefully unfold the rationale behind the structure of the volume into parts as well as the contributions selected in each part.

INTRODUCTION

This volume is primarily concerned with the design of virtual community practices enabled or facilitated by new media (i.e., social software, collaborative practice toolkits and emerging infrastructures such as Grids and Web 2.0) and performed by human collaborators in a variety of

community settings (i.e., online communities, virtual communities of practice, cross-organization communities of practice, etc). Three key concepts stand out very promptly as primary challenges motivated by a variety of theoretical and / or engineering perspectives. These are the concepts of 'new media', 'community' and 'social practice'. Each by itself is a challenging concept in the sense

that, despite years of study by researchers across different disciplines, common ground in terms of a consolidated body of knowledge is yet to be established. Furthermore, it is also striking that very few studies have attempted to explore how these three constituents are intertwined and how such intertwining gives rise to the new virtualities manifested through novel social practice toolkits and technologies. The above provide a sketch of the broad area covered by the authors contributing to this volume.

In order to bring these three concepts into perspective, this introductory chapter attempts to provide the necessary background information which is needed to gain better insight into the structure of the volume into parts and the individual contributions within these parts. Our objective is therefore to provide a tutorial which on the one hand will define the concepts of new media, community and social practice and on the other hand it will bring to the surface the distinct issues and challenges resulting from their intertwining.

The chapter is structured as follows. The next section sets the scene by providing a contextual account of the global challenges considered relevant, thus motivating the volume's organization and selected contributions. Our intention is not to preoccupy the research orientations of the individual contributions, but rather to provide an abstract and synthetic account of their common ground in the context of this volume. The next three sections are devoted to exploring the cornerstones of such common ground, namely new media, communities and social practices. This serves the purpose of both defining the concepts as well as outlining open research areas in an increasingly networked society. The last section summarizes and concludes the chapter.

MOTIVATION AND RESEARCH FOCUS

To set the context for our analysis, we will first consolidate our current understanding regarding how new media, community thinking and computer-mediated social practice are interrelated to facilitate the emergence of new virtualities. Specifically, our running hypothesis can be formulated as follows:

New social media (i.e., practice-specific toolkits, games, Social TV) and infrastructures (i.e., grids, Web 2.0) enable a variety of virtual community types (i.e., online communities, communities of practice, virtual cross-organization communities of practice, networks of practice, etc) in a variety of domains (i.e., organizational knowledge management, learning, music performance, tourism, health, eScience), resulting in the reproduction of existing or the incremental formation of new social practices as a result of the new virtualities.

In light of the above, one may pose several challenging questions, but for our purposes two of them stand out very promptly: (a) 'What is it that actually drives new virtualities in an increasingly networked society?' and (b) 'What determines the success or failure of new virtualities?' There are various perspectives from which these two questions could be addressed. Scientists would certainly bring to the forefront advances in the natural sciences which clearly have contributed to reshaping society over the centuries. Technologists would argue on the value of appropriating the benefits of scientific endeavors and making them available as integrated products and services. Social scientists would stress the human needs driving technical changes and resulting into new experiences of the world surrounding us. Innovation management scientists seem to unify these perspectives by distinguishing and classifying innovations as technology-push (i.e., radical technical change), demand-pull (i.e., incremental

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