Chapter 3.10
Designing Practice–Oriented Toolkits:
A Retrospective Analysis of Communities, New Media and Social Practice

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to develop a conceptual frame of reference for analyzing and gaining insight to virtual community practices. The author's normative perspective is that the vast majority of studies on virtual communities concentrate on managing (i.e., identifying, forming and sustaining) virtual communities, dismissing the practice the community is about. On the other hand, there is evidence to suggest that practice-oriented insights may offer new grounds for innovative engagement in virtual settings. Following a thorough analysis of seemingly heterogeneous concepts from new media, community-oriented thinking and practice-based approaches the article discusses what is it that differentiates offline from online practice, how these two are intertwined and why the literature lacks detailed insights on the actual practice virtual communities become engaged in. In light of this discussion, the Community-media-Practice grid is proposed as a guide for designing practice-oriented toolkits fostering a shared language for co-engagement in linguistic domains.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years there has been a growing discussion on virtual community practices and the extent to which they result from the appropriation or enactment of structures inscribed in technology (Orlikowski, 2000; Gochenour, 2006; Fernback, 2007; Amin & Roberts, 2008). Recently, there have also been debates relating material aspects of technologies (i.e., social software, collaborative practice toolkits and emerging infrastructures such as Grids and Web 2.0) with the social practices of human collaborators in a variety of community settings (i.e., online communities, virtual communities of practice, cross-organization communities of practice, etc), providing useful insights to how

practice shapes new media and how new media are implicated in practice (Akoumianakis et al., 2008; Wyeld & Prasolova-Førland, 2009; Chen & Duh, 2009; Tsiknakis, 2009).

In all these efforts three fundamental 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 notion 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. In light of the above, this article is concerned precisely with such interplay between the constituents of the triad – new media, community and social practice – assuming that it is this interplay and tight intertwining that facilitates more enlightening accounts of a variety of novel forms of human communication and interaction across a broad range of community settings. In doing so, there are several challenges lying ahead of us.

Firstly, new media, communities and social practices are three concepts widely discussed and researched by scholars of various theoretical traditions, using however different frames of reference and units of analysis. Consequently, there are no standard definitions, unified theories or consolidated engineering frameworks, which holistically and exhaustively prescribe these phenomena per se, or the tensions between their constituent parts. For instance, we cannot explain with the required scientific rigor or empirical knowledge how different community settings or types emerge, how new media facilitate their formation and what practices emerge along the way.

Secondly, it seems that no single theoretical stand or engineering perspective is equipped

with the necessary tools to provide the required analytical insight. For example, pure engineering analysis of the new social media and applications may offer useful insight into technical and architectural abstractions, but fails to explain why some of them are more successful as social software applications than others. On the other hand, social science perspectives and practice-based analysis of the new virtualities go as far as explaining retrospectively the new status quo, rather than offering means and tools for proactive design. For instance, there are social theories explaining prominent differences between interpersonal offline practices and virtual practices, but no such theory could actually anticipate or foresee or motivate some of the new virtual practices through innovative design insights or guidelines.

Finally, it may be that aiming to investigate the intertwining between new media, community and social practice is useless effort, or too complex and bound to fail. It may be that, as in many other domains of human endeavor, evolution and progress are processes grounded purely on biological events and phenomena rather than conscious theorizing or engineering practice.

In spite of the constraints and the danger sketched above, the article will attempt to bring some insight to the relationship between new social media, communities and social practice, in an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of their intertwining and its implications. In this effort, we will first review standard connotations for the three terms, as encountered and widely discussed in the relevant literature. Then, we will attempt to synthesize an integrative view by discussing the 'Community-media-Practice' grid – an analytical instrument for assessing the existing status quo and envisioning future developments. Finally, we will briefly comment on the role design can play to facilitate novel practicing using new media so as to foster communities of various types.

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