

Chapter 13

Tracing Community Life across Virtual Settlements

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that virtual communities can be traced in the online 'tells' retained by popular virtual settlements like Facebook and Twitter. In this article, the authors push this line of research toward an analysis of pre-requisites and constrains of virtual settlements that determine the understanding of community life across settlements. The approach followed is grounded on a 'practice lens' that views virtual communities as enacted cyber-structures revealed through cultural artifacts facilitated by affordances inscribed into virtual settlements. The presence or absence of key affordances determines not only what is retained as online 'tells' in a virtual settlement but also the type and range of cultural artifacts, as well as how these artifacts are used across virtual settlements.

1 INTRODUCTION

For most people daily life is conceived of as activities situated across multiple community settings. Such communities are formed by territorial boundaries (e.g., neighborhoods), affiliation (e.g., organizational or professional settings), spiritual commitments (e.g., religion), etc. Each community maintains its own set of policies (formal or informal), rules of engagement and body of knowledge. Accordingly, members become engaged in different material practices, develop skills to appropriate different kinds of knowledge

and experience the community through designated norms. It is evident therefore that at any time, what is known of anybody is what can be traced of his/her participation and history of engagement across community boundaries in different physical, virtual or spiritual settlements.

Early community settlements were confined to certain places or landmarks and assumed the members' proximity. Crossing community boundaries was typically achieved by arrangements that ensured the member's physical presence and/or co-engagement in each separate settlement. In due time, space-oriented settlements emerged to allow

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communities where physical presence of members is not a pre-requisite or a sufficient indicator of togetherness. For instance, in communities formed around professional fields of expertise, the key to participation is not so much the physical proximity of members as it is what members actually do, the practice they become engaged in and the capacity to communicate using a shared language. Then, boundary crossing is framed and analyzed in relation to certain configurations of people, artifacts and social relations as they are enacted in practice.

Although such boundary crossing is beyond any doubt, there are very few studies explaining how it is materialized in virtual settings. Phrased differently, it is still difficult to analyze virtual community boundaries and what enables or constrains boundary spanning and cross-settlement community life in virtual space. The problem can be attributed to a number of challenges confronting researchers of social networks. Firstly, it is not always easy or straight forward to establish the appropriate settlements for investigation. This is especially difficult for virtual settlements whose boundaries are not easily defined (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005). Secondly, there is a compelling need for methods allowing the collection of rich and targeted data of appropriate scale to provide insights to how communities and social networks are established, obtain structure and change over time (Ricken et al., 2010). Again, in virtual settings this challenge is more demanding and complex as virtual settlements are not designed to collect the type of user data desired (Gilbert et al., 2008). Finally, another challenge appears to be the lack of consensus on what kind of data constitute virtual 'tells' of community life and how they are traced and processed across settlements so as to provide informative accounts of established and emerging communities (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000). Recent research has emphasized the value of social interaction traces such as listserv postings, user logs, web site structures, messages posted or retweeted and links. However, it is unlikely that

these alone can provide the explanatory insight required to understand cyber-structures at both micro and macro levels. The primary limitations of these online 'tells' is that they represent historical records of online activities decoupled from what collaborators' do and the practices they become engaged in. In response to this shortcoming, the turn into practice (Schatzki, 2001) promises to provide a research strand capable of alleviating obstacles while offering a more epistemic basis for analyzing virtual communities as enacted structures.

This article seeks to shed light into some of the issues that determine human boundary spanning capacity in virtual settings. The challenge is approached through a practice lens intended to frame boundary spanning in relation to the practices appropriated and enacted by human agents as they collaborate with peers in different virtual settlements. To this end, the next section motivates the problem at hand by reviewing relevant works within or closely attached to the practice turn. Then, the following section outlines a proposition for tracing virtual communities across settlements based on both material and immaterial aspects of practice. Finally, the present work is concluded by a brief discussion of implications and areas of future research.

2 THEORETICAL MOTIVATION

With the advent of the Internet and more recently the Web 2.0, virtual communities form one outcome which is increasingly and profoundly 'sensed' in cyberspace (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Scholars have used a variety of terms to qualify the resulting enacted artificial structures, such as imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), online or virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000), knowledge communities (Lindkvist, 2005), distributed communities (Gochenour, 2006), blogosphere (Efimova & Hendrick, 2005), to name a few. Although, there is substantial debate as to

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