

Virtual Community

Authored by
mohammad looti

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A virtual community is a social network of individuals who interact through specific media, potentially crossing geographical and political boundaries in order to pursue mutual interests or goals. One of the most pervasive types of virtual community include social networking services, which consist of various online communities.

The term virtual community is attributed to the book of the same title by Howard Rheingold, published in 1993. The book, which could be considered a social enquiry, putting the research in the social sciences, discussed his adventures on The WELL and onward into a range of computer-mediated communication and social groups, broadening it to information science. The technologies included Usenet, MUDs (Multi-User Dungeon) and their derivatives MUSHes and MOOs, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), chat rooms and electronic mailing lists; the World Wide Web as we know it today was not yet used by many people. Rheingold pointed out the potential benefits for personal psychological well-being, as well as for society at large, of belonging to such a group.

These virtual communities all encourage interaction, sometimes focusing around a particular interest, or sometimes just to communicate. Quality virtual communities do both. They allow users to interact over a shared passion, whether it be through message boards, chat rooms, social networking sites, or virtual worlds.

Introduction

The traditional definition of a community is of a geographically circumscribed entity (neighborhoods, villages, etc.). Virtual communities, of course, are usually dispersed geographically, and therefore are not communities under the original definition. Some online communities are linked geographically, and are known as community websites. However, if one considers communities to simply possess boundaries of some sort between their members and non-members, then a virtual community is certainly a community. Virtual communities resemble real life communities in the sense that they both provide support, information, friendship and acceptance between strangers.

Early research into the existence of media-based communities was concerned with the nature of reality, whether communities actually could exist through the media, which could place virtual community research into the social sciences definition of ontology. In the seventeenth century, scholars associated with the Royal Society of London formed a community through the exchange of letters. "Community without propinquity", coined by urban planner Melvin Webber in 1963 and "community liberated," analyzed by Barry Wellman in 1979 began the modern era of thinking about non-local community. As well, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in 1983, described how different technologies, such as national newspapers, contributed to the development of national and regional consciousness among early nation-states.

Purpose of virtual communities

Virtual communities are used for a variety of social and professional groups. It does not necessarily mean that there is a strong bond among the members, although Howard Rheingold, author of the book of the same name, mentions that virtual communities form "when people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships". An email distribution list may have hundreds of members and the communication which takes place may be merely informational (questions and answers are posted), but members may remain relative strangers and the membership turnover rate could be high. This is in line with the liberal use of the term community.

Internet-based virtual communities

The explosive diffusion of the Internet since the mid-1990s has also fostered the proliferation of virtual communities taking the form of social networking services and online communities. The nature of those communities is diverse, and the benefits that Rheingold envisioned are not necessarily realized, or pursued, by many. At the same time, it is rather commonplace to see anecdotes of someone in need of special help or in search of a community benefiting from the use of the Internet.

Virtual communities may synthesize Web 2.0 technologies with the community, and therefore have been described as Community 2.0, although strong community bonds have been forged online since the early 1970s on timeshare systems like PLATO and later on USENET. Online communities depend upon social interaction and exchange between users online. This emphasizes the reciprocity element of the unwritten social contract between community members.

The embedding of virtual community in the experiences of everyday life and its reflection of and influence on the communication practices and patterns of identity formation make online community a colossal research enterprise which requires continuous investigation and theorizing.

Impacts of virtual communities

On health

The impacts of such communities in causing health issues are extremely under studied for a verdict to be passed on its side effects. It's argued that online relations are not as valuable as offline ones because there is less socialization. Concerns with this kind of interaction also include verbal aggression and inhibitions, promotion of suicide and issues with privacy. Studies regarding the health effects of these communities did not show any negative effects, but that doesn't mean that there is no harm done. There was a high drop out rate of participants in the study that if

continued could have led to a negative net effect. The health related effects are not clear because of the lack of thoroughness and the variation in studies done on the subject.

Rather, recent studies have looked into development of health related communities and their impact on those already suffering health issues. These forms of social networks allow for open conversation between individuals who are going through similar experiences, whether themselves or in their family. Such sites have in fact grown in popularity, so much so that now many health care providers are forming groups for their patients, even providing areas where questions may be directed to doctors. Involvement in social communities of similar health interests has created a means for patients to further develop a better understanding and behavior towards treatment and health practices. This has patients using such outlets on more occurrences, but the extent to which these practices have on health as a result of use are still being studied.

Studies on health networks have mostly been conducted on groups which typically suffer the most from extreme forms of diseases, for example cancer patients, HIV patients, or other life threatening diseases. It is general knowledge that one participates in online communities to interact with society and develop relationships. Individuals who suffer from severe illnesses are unable to do in a public sense, it could be a risk to their health to leave a secure environment, thus they have turned to the internet. In a study conducted by Haven B. Battles and Lori S. Wiener on the effects of networks on children suffering from incurable diseases, did discover a positive correlation in enhancing children's behaviors and overall moods. Usually individuals suffering withdraw from social interactions, yet online communities have caused individuals to become more involved and want to learn more about their prognosis from others. As for the children who participated in the study, their behavior and mood not only changed, but they were more willing to go to treatment after having these interactions.

So while there is limited amount of material being presented about how online communities affect the health of the healthy, it would appear they are having a positive impact. on those who are ill by creating communities for ill individuals to develop and flourish.

On civic participation

Online communities seem to have a direct impact on civic participation. 20.3% of members do something in real life at least once a year to support a cause related to their online community. 65% of members have started involvement in civic causes since they connected to the Internet. 43.7% are more involved with social activism since connecting with their online communities. Over half of virtual community members sign into their respective communities every day and 70% interact with other members daily.

Types of virtual communities

Internet message boards

An online message board is a forum where people can discuss thoughts or ideas on various topics. Online message centers allow users to choose which thread, or board of discussion, users would like to read or contribute to. A user will start a discussion by making a post on a thread. Other users who choose to respond can follow the discussion by adding their own post to that thread. Message boards are not conversation based because user responses do not have to take place right away. Whenever the user revisits the message board, he/she can make a response. Unlike a conversation, message boards do not have an instantaneous response and require that users actively go to the site to check for responses.

Anyone can register to participate in an online message board. A message board is unique because people can choose to participate and be apart of the virtual community, even if they choose not to contribute their thoughts and ideas. Registered users can simply view the various threads or contribute if they choose to. Message boards can also accommodate an almost infinite number of users, something a chat room is limited to.

Internet users' urges to talk to and reach out to strangers online opposes real-life encounters where people are hesitant and often unwilling to step in to help strangers. Studies have shown that people are more likely to intervene if they are the only one in the situation. With Internet message boards, a user sitting at his or her computer is the only one present in their online experience, which might have to do with why they are more willing to reach out. Another possible reason for this is that people can withdraw from a situation much easier online. They can simply click exit or log off, whereas they would have to find a physical exit and deal with the repercussions of trying to leave a situation in real life. The lack of status that is presented with an online identity also might encourage people because if you choose to keep it private, there is no label of gender, age, ethnicity or lifestyle associated with yourself.

Online chat rooms

Shortly after the rise of interest in message boards and forums, people started to want a way of communicating with their "communities" in real time. The downside to message boards was that people would have to wait until another user replied to their posting, which, with people all around the world in different time frames, could take awhile. The development of online chat rooms allowed people to talk to whoever was online at the same time they were. This way, messages were sent and online users could immediately respond back.

The original development by CompuServe CB hosted forty channels in which users could talk to one another in real time. The idea of forty different channels led to the idea of chat rooms that were specific to different topics. Users could choose to join an already existent chat room they found

interesting, or start a new "room" if they found nothing to their liking. Real time chatting was also brought into virtual games, where people could play against one another and also talk to one another through text. Now, chat rooms can be found on all sorts of topics, so that people can talk with others who share similar interests. Chat rooms are now provided by Internet Relay Chat (IRC) and other individual websites such as Yahoo, MSN, and AOL.

Chat room users communicate through text based messaging. Most chat room providers are similar and include an input box, a message window, and a participant list. The input box is where users can type their text based message to be sent to the providing server. The server will then transmit the message to the computers of anyone in the chat room so that it can be displayed in the message window. The message window allows the conversation to be tracked and usually places a time stamp once the message is posted. There is usually a list of the users who are currently in the room, so that people can see who is in their virtual community.

Users can communicate as if they are speaking to one another in real life. This "like reality" attribute makes it easy for users to form a virtual community, because chat rooms allow users to get to know one another as if they were meeting in real life. The individual "room" feature also makes it more likely that the people within a chat room share a similar interest; an interest that allows them to bond with one another and be willing to form a friendship.

Virtual worlds

Virtual worlds are the most interactive of all virtual community forms. In this type of virtual community, people are connected by living as an avatar in a computer-based world. Users create their own avatar character (from choosing the avatar's outfits to designing the avatar's house) and control their character's life and interactions with other characters in the 3-D virtual world. It is similar to a computer game, however there is no objective for the players. A virtual world simply gives users the opportunity to build and operate a fantasy life in the virtual realm. Characters within the world can talk to one another and have almost the same interactions people would have in reality. For example, characters can socialize with one another and hold intimate relationships online.

This type of virtual community allows for people to not only hold conversations with others in real time, but also to engage and interact with others. The avatars that users create are like humans. Users can choose to make avatars like themselves, or take on an entirely different personality than them. When characters interact with other characters, they can get to know one another not only through text based talking, but also by virtual experience (such as having avatars go on a date in the virtual world). A chat room form of a virtual community may give real time conversations, but people can only talk to one another. In a virtual world, characters can do activities together, just like friends could do in reality. Communities in virtual worlds are most similar to real life

communities because the characters are physically in the same place, even if the users who are operating the characters are not. It is close to reality, except that the characters are digital. Second Life is one of the most popular virtual worlds on the Internet.

Another use for virtual worlds has been in business communications. Benefits from virtual world technology such as photo realistic avatars and positional sound create an atmosphere for participants that provides a less fatiguing sense of presence. Enterprise controls that allow the meeting host to dictate the permissions of the attendees such as who can speak, or who can move about allow the host to control the meeting environment. Several companies are creating business based virtual worlds including Second Life. These business based worlds have stricter controls and allow functionality such as muting individual participants, desktop sharing, and/or access lists to provide a highly interactive and controlled virtual world to a specific business or group. Business based virtual worlds also may provide various enterprise features such as Single Sign on with third party providers, or Content Encryption.

Social network services

Social networking services are the most prominent type of virtual community. They are either a website or software platform that focuses on creating and maintaining relationships. Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace are all virtual communities. With these sites, one often creates a profile or account, and adds friends or follow friends. This allows people to connect and look for support using the social networking service as a gathering place. These websites often allow for people to keep up to date with their friends and acquaintances' activities without making much of an effort. On Facebook, for example, one can upload photos and videos, chat, make friends, reconnect with old ones, and join groups or causes. All of these functions encourage people to form a community, large or small, on the Internet.

Howard Rheingold's study

Howard Rheingold's Virtual Community could be compared with Mark Granovetter's groundbreaking "strength of weak ties" article published twenty years earlier in the American Journal of Sociology. Rheingold translated, practiced and published Granovetter's conjectures about strong and weak ties in the online world. His comment on the first page even illustrates the social networks in the virtual society: "My seven year old daughter knows that her father congregates with a family of invisible friends who seem to gather in his computer. Sometimes he talks to them, even if nobody else can see them. And she knows that these invisible friends sometimes show up in the flesh, materializing from the next block or the other side of the world." (page 1). Indeed, in his revised version of Virtual Community, Rheingold goes so far to say that had he read Barry Wellman's work earlier, he would have called his book "online social networks".

Rheingold's definition contains the terms "social aggregation and personal relationships" (pp3). Lipnack & Stamps (1997) and Mowshowitz (1997) point out how virtual communities can work across space, time and organizational boundaries; Lipnack & Stamps (1997) mention a common purpose; and Lee, Eom, Jung and Kim (2004) introduce "desocialization" which means that there is less frequent interaction with humans in traditional settings, e.g. an increase in virtual socialization. Calhoun (1991) presents a dystopia argument, asserting the impersonality of virtual networks. He argues that IT has a negative influence on offline interaction between individuals because virtual life takes over our lives. He believes that it also creates different personalities in people which can cause frictions in offline and online communities and groups and in personal contacts. (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2002). Recently, Mitch Parsell (2008) has suggested that virtual communities, particularly those that leverage Web 2.0 resources, can be pernicious by leading to attitude polarization, increased prejudices and enabling sick individuals to deliberately indulge in their diseases.

Advantages of Internet communities

Internet communities offer the advantage of instant information exchange that is not possible in a real-life community. This allows people to engage in many activities from their home, such as: shopping, paying bills, and searching for specific information. Users of online communities also have access to thousands of specific discussion groups where they can form specialized relationships and access information in such categories as: politics, technical assistance, social activities, and recreational pleasures. Virtual communities provide an ideal medium for these types of relationships because information can easily be posted and response times can be very fast. Another benefit is that these types of communities can give users a feeling of membership and belonging. Users can give and receive support, and it is simple and cheap to use.

Economically, virtual communities can be commercially successful, making money through membership fees, subscriptions, usage fees, and advertising commission. Consumers generally feel very comfortable making transactions online as long as the seller has a good reputation throughout the community. Virtual communities also provide the advantage of disintermediation in commercial transactions, which eliminates vendors and connects buyers directly to suppliers. This eliminates pricey mark-ups and allows for a more direct line of contact between the consumer and the manufacturer.

Disadvantages of Internet communities

While instant communication means fast access, it also mean that information is posted without out being reviewed for correctness. It is difficult to choose reliable sources because there is no editor that reviews each post and makes sure it is up to a certain degree of quality. Everything comes

from the writer with no filter in between.

Identities can be kept anonymous online so it is common for people to use the virtual community to live out a fantasy as another type of person. Users should be wary of where information is coming from online and be careful to double check facts with professionals.

Information online is different from information discussed in a real-life community because is less ephemeral online. As a result, users must be careful what information they disclose about themselves to ensure they are not easily identifiable, for safety reasons.

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