

Factors shaping the form and participation in virtual communities

This article discusses the structure of virtual communities and why people participate in them. It investigates the reasons why people participate in these virtual environments and what shape they may take in the future.

The Internet is becoming an increasing part of the lives of people in society. It is becoming commonplace to exchange email addresses to contact one and other. People are increasingly using the Internet to compliment their real world activities, for news, chat, games, etc.

The term 'virtual community' means different things to different people. To some it refers to a specific website that facilitates discussion on a particular subject or interest, to others it refers to a group of people that communicate with each other on a regular basis using the Internet, through instant messaging services like those provided by Yahoo! or MSN.

The formation of Virtual Communities

It is possible to effectively create a virtual community at a click of a button. Tools such as Yahoo! Groups and MSN Communities allow the casual Internet user to create a space on the Net for people to talk about a specific topic or Interest. These 'communities' could be considered to be more like sub-communities. It is likely that all these users will have a username linked to the provider (e.g. Yahoo!, MSN) and therefore already be part of a much wider 'community'.

Users can join and leave these sub-communities as easily as the manager created them. This being the case, one must question the

actual significance of these communities in creating and sustaining online relationships.

Rheingold (2000) draws attention to the suggestion that these increasingly mediated relationships are, for the most part, increasingly superficial, arguing that more and more of social communication is migrating to email and mobile phones. However, he also indicates that it is possible to maintain deep relationships through letters, telephone calls, or online chats.

Whilst it can be argued that virtual communities and computer-mediated-communication can be used effectively to maintain relationships with family and friends who one is not physically with, is it possible for non-organic relationships to sustain? And what is it that makes people want to continue a relationship that is not physical?

Virtual communities and the role of the Media

Since the creation of the World Wide Web telecommunication companies, Internet content providers and technology companies have been merging to create a new kind of company. The most meaningful of these mergers was perhaps that between America Online (AOL) and Time Warner, which demonstrated the significance of the relationship between the Internet and the media.

Werry (2001) draws attention the fact that in the next few years the large telecommunications and media corporations are likely to control nearly all aspects of the Internet and the

technologies that arise from it. He suggests that a proactive government approach is unlikely to develop in the absence of a strong, unified voice from other citizens, activists and organizations, nonprofits, libraries, and other groups, and this effort is unlikely to coalesce with the necessary strength and speed.

Although the AOL Time Warner merger had many disadvantages, one of the main advantages was that soon people would be able to interact with media services, send emails and browse the Web via their AOL TV set-up. Interactive TV (iTV) as it is known is not however a new phenomenon.

The idea was first spoken about in 1994 with a promise that people would soon be able to interrupt the programme they're currently watching and request more information about the current content. Seven years later, the concept has started to take off slowly in the UK, highlighted especially in summer 2001 with Channel 4's Big Brother. Digital TV viewers were able to go to the E4 channel at any time and call up four cameras by pressing their 'Interactive Button'. They were also given the opportunity to vote on a burning issue that related to the programme.

This form of 'interaction' is limited compared to what iTV's original enthusiasts promised and the idea of users directly influencing content.

Participation in Virtual communities

In the past few years there appears to have been a significant increase in the number of people that participate in virtual communities. But what is it that makes people want to use these communities in the first place?

Figallo (1998) suggests that individuals usually come together to form communities in which they recognize common purposes, values and visions. The commonality is enough – at least in the beginning – to provide an initial impression of agreement with their fellow members. Invariably, as time passes, that agreement proves less solid than first assumed, but diversity of viewpoint and opinion is also important to community longevity

Most people would agree that people join communities that they feel they would fit into, that share mutual views. This does not explain why people continue to stay in a particular community and how any form of relationship can be sustained for that need to participate to continue. Preece (2000) argues that there are many reasons for joining virtual communities, and strong relationships may develop over many months, as occurs in some health support groups. Other relationships are short-lived, shallow, or almost nonexistent, as in online auction interactions

Social Influences in Community Participation

Joining a group that shares common interests is by far, not the only reason that is making people participate in virtual communities. There are people that turn to communities to fulfil a social void, or for some form of on-going support. These people can then become dependent on this form of sociability as a quick fix for the emotions and

feelings they lack in the real world. Kimberly Young, Ph.D., first studied the phenomenon, which became known as 'Internet Addiction' in 1992. She drew parallels between the habits of Internet-users and people addicted to gambling.

Young found that those most likely to develop Internet Addiction are those that are new to the Internet and the idea of virtual communities. Eighty-three percent of the participants of the study that were classed as dependent had been using the Internet for less than one year, suggesting that addiction might only last a short amount of time, however there are other theories that suggest that certain features can keep people hooked for longer. Wallace (1999) suggests that a high-level 'wizard' on an adventure MUD will be rewarded with respect, admiration, and even awe from lower-level players who are still solving the puzzles and earning skill points. The individual might rarely receive this kind of social reward in real life, but here, in the MUD, the player can be king if he spends enough game time developing the character.

Through virtual communities such as Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs), the Internet seems to provide for the need of many users to be successful and respected. These are perhaps emotions that they don't experience in organic communities, but through developing an alternative identity online, others can see them in the way that they want to be seen by others offline. This suggests that people use virtual communities as a form of therapy or possibly to rehabilitate themselves.

Conclusions

At the present time, there is much hype about virtual communities. Nearly every big media company has a web portal that supports them, and it is currently the buzzword amongst IT Managers of corporate networks. Virtual communities are formed through a variety of methods and for a

variety of reasons. With providers such as Yahoo! and MSN offering tools for members to create interest groups, it is possible for anyone with Internet access to start a community. However, it is the media and Internet companies and not the community managers that are trying to take charge of the direction of virtual communities, leaving the average user as simply a participant. As more people begin to access virtual communities, the ways in which they access them will change. What implications will Interactive TV bring to the way virtual communities are used? Maybe viewers of a particular soap opera will be able to get together during or after the programme has been shown and discuss the next episode.

At present in the UK, few people have keyboards for their TV, so the idea of virtual communities that is commonplace on the Web seems far off for television. Those with keyboards are able to access email and web sites like computer users, but there is no 'value added content' as iTV users have been promised in all the hype. The television offers an ideal means to extend the computer-mediated-communication as it allows for scheduled events and provides for greater access and participation in a more rich way compared to the 'flat' interface of the Web. As Jo Kim argues, with the barrier of the PC preventing people from accessing the Internet slowly being broken down with other Internet-savvy devices, the participation in virtual communities of whatever form is undoubtedly going to increase. The technology that people use to take part in virtual communities will become irrelevant as people access them from more places, more often. The sociability aspect of virtual communities is what makes people want to participate in them and in the future they could form an important addition to a person's social network.

References

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