

Chapter 11

Online Communities: People and Processes

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ABSTRACT

The chapter describes the basic tenets of online communities, their typology and their fundamental elements with a view of informing ways in which people can get to participate online, something that those individuals or organizations dealing with e-governance initiatives also aim at. A key consideration is the importance of socializing as an ingredient that motivates individuals and which can offer them a degree of freedom to discuss government related matters.

INTRODUCTION

The Internet is a computer network that removes barriers to access information and communication by connecting millions of people worldwide. Since its creation the number of Internet users has grown exponentially, and so have the forms of participation and intentions of use. Modern forms of Internet tools include Weblogs, Online Forums, and Social Networking sites, such as Facebook and YouTube. Institutions and people from all backgrounds use these tools including government departments and community areas, public institutions, local governments as well as individual citizens. They create

websites and weblogs, and participate in forums to express their opinions to the online world. Examples of these are “The Gordon Brown Blog”, Madrid City Council Portal and “CRNUK”- Community Recycling Network UK web site.

Within internet environments, groups of people come together to share their ideas. Online communities emerge when these groups grow in numbers and engage into active participation. These communities are kept alive thanks to their members’ desire to participate and share experiences, their common interests, and the time devoted into developing their relationships. In addition, interesting, good quality content, which is updated regularly, is needed to keep the members interest as well as to attract new ones. Content can be provided by the “owner”

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of the community (e.g. the institution who owns the forum, the blogger, etc.), the moderators or by the members themselves. Norms of behaviour are designed within each group to ensure that the interactions within the communities run smoothly, without misunderstandings. Some common behaviour norms include, avoiding inappropriate language and focusing the content of posts on a topic (or topics) for which the forum was initially created and intended. There are numerous ways to encourage members to follow community norms including moderation and rating.

The use of new improved web technologies and the various forms that the mentioned community aspects can take allow users to create and apply different styles of participation. These forms of interactions can have an impact on social processes, such as leadership, decision making and community administration which can affect (positively or negatively) the capability of the communities to regulate their activities. The aim of this chapter is to explore the aspects of online communities' dynamics which are likely to have an influence on their successful self administration and therefore on the achievement of their goals. I expect that this discussion will help readers to draw some connections between the development of online communities and e-governance efforts, as both of them aim at engaging people in online participation. Successful online communities could be used as models for e-governance initiatives as they have managed to motivate and get the interest of their online participants, and are obviously achieving their goals. This chapter will explore some definitions of online communities, types, members' roles and technologies. A final discussion will highlight some overlaps between online communities' dynamics and e-governance efforts.

WHAT ARE ONLINE COMMUNITIES?

Online communities are formed by groups of people who interact through online or internet tools. The name "online community" itself refers to two important aspects of these kinds of groups. The "online" aspect represents the use of networked computers and software tools used for communication. The following definition of online community by Lee et al. (2003) emphasises the use of technology:

a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven contents, resulting in a relationship being built up (Lee et al., 2003)

The "community" aspect represents people with similar interests, who gather for entertainment, to discuss or ask for help. The second definition of online communities, by Rheingold (1994), focuses on the human and social processes emerging from the participations:

social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1994)

In relation to this second aspect of online communities, it is important to stress that the mere act of gathering people online does not imply that a community will be created. Online communities cannot be engineered or manufactured. The best technological tools could be used but if users do not engage then communities do not emerge. Indeed most of their success depends on human and social rather than technological factors. In this section I highlight some of these factors.

Online communities emerge from the interaction of people who have the "desire and need to share problems, experiences, insights, templates,

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