

Social Resistance in Virtual Communities

Rahul De'

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore, India

INTRODUCTION

The period from 1994, after the release of the Web browser, Mosaic, until the turn of the century saw the upsurge of what was termed e-commerce, which grew into a much-hyped and much-invested proposition that followed a predictable cycle of boom and then bust. Though the value propositions of e-commerce, as promised in business-to-business, business-to-consumer, and consumer-to-consumer models, survived, they drew much more attention from the media and publications than was, possibly, due to them. What was happening simultaneously with the business explosion of the Web was the alternative use of the Internet as an arena of dissent—as an organizing medium, as an activist space, and as a medium for counter-propaganda. These phenomena were not necessarily unnoticed or in any way secretive in nature, but they did not occupy the front pages of the media, and they did not attract investors. These phenomena were both defined and adopted by people in various capacities to advance a cause, an idea, or simply act.

There are 605.60 million users of the Internet worldwide, as estimated by the Scope Communications Group (<http://www.nua.com>), a Dublin-based company. Given that there are about 6.2 billion people in the world (Population Reference Bureau, <http://www.prb.org>) as a whole, the number of Internet users is about 9.6% of the total population. In comparison to television, where the estimates are around 4 billion viewers around the globe, the reach of the Internet seems to be small, but there remains a crucial and defining difference: the Internet enables users to participate in the content whereas television does not. Television and other media have tremendous reach but only as broadcast sources: a few control the content broadcast to many.

The phenomena of virtual communities on the Internet was recognized early in the 1990s and was defined as groups of people that communicate via the Internet. This is the broadest possible definition.

The Internet is a network of telecommunications networks, and its representation as a virtual community becomes possible as its members take for granted that the computer networks are also social networks spanning large distances (Wellman & Gulia, 1997). Aggregations of virtual communities form the society of the Internet, where the structure of this society is defined by the patterned organization of the network members and their relationships (Wellman, 1996). Defined in this manner, the Internet society is now amenable to analysis by sociological and political theories and constructs.

Various communities and groups have emerged in the society of the Internet. These communities are distinguished by their thematic content and the delivery mechanism they use. Free service providers, such as Yahoo! Groups, support thousands of informal groups with restricted or unrestricted access that define communities in the broadest sense. Other types of communities include chat rooms, multi-user gaming, *metaworlds*, blogs, and interactive video and voice (Wallace, 1999). Communities may form and disband easily on the Internet. The Internet is thus a virtual space that is not constituted by physical objects of land, bricks, cement, furniture, but of a collection of files, folders, and accounts. These digital assets are created as quickly as they are destroyed; what perpetuates them is the common interest of the community. Further, the members of this community may be widely dispersed geographically and so may the files and accounts of the community, their physical presence, and geographic location at any point of time, irrelevant to their functioning.

To understand and examine social resistance in virtual communities, the intent of this article has to first draw on the various themes in research literature that define and shape the contours of the discourse. We begin with a review of some of the literature on virtual communities. Social resistance, as understood by the acts of organizing, activism, and counter-propaganda, are then examined and

their characteristics highlighted. We conclude with a summary of the basic ideas in this article.

BACKGROUND

Virtual communities on the Internet constitute an active area of research in both business and social science disciplines. The literature in information systems (IS) has studied various aspects of virtual communities quite extensively, including virtual teams, virtual organizations, virtual enterprises, and the issues related to information sharing, cooperation, collaboration, trust, and so forth. The literature in the social sciences has examined the very nature of virtual communities, their organization, scope, rationale for existence, and their implications for society. The principal distinction in the research is the understanding of communities on the basis of their observable properties, which may be engineered, as in the former stream of research vs. understanding on the basis of their underlying sociology, as in the latter.

For example, in IS research, virtual communities are understood as social networks in a virtual space that bring people together for some purpose (Ridings, Gefen & Arinze, 2002). One binding force is trust, which is central to the sustenance of the group and its ability to generate participation and contribution. The motivation for the study is the insight that can be obtained on the digital economy and its consequent value in marketing campaigns and market research. (However, it will be noted that trust is not an essential binding force in all virtual communities. For example, in online gaming communities, trust is not an issue at all; the electronic environment of the game ensures that players play by the rules.) In another study, Raybourn, Kings, and Davies (2003) examine “cultural markers” used to define particular communities. The research identifies cultural cues that will help strangers identify others as also belonging to the same community to facilitate information sharing and communication. In both cases, the papers directly address issues related to retaining members and facilitating electronic interchanges for commercial benefit.

Virtual communities exist, and people flock to them because they derive economic benefit from such participation. Incentives for participation include gifts, public goods, and benefits derived from

reciprocity and sharing (Butler, 2001; Kollock, 1997). Participants gain from resources such as information, influence, and social support that are quantifiable as utilities or economic benefits.

Other research on virtual communities examines deeper propositions about society and the relations within societies that shape technology use or that are shaped by technology formations. With a view to examining emergence of newer forms of society, this research (Burkett, 2000; David, 2003; Stevenson, 2002) assumes that questions about the role, access, and impact of technologies need to be asked on an epistemological basis before the questions about the manipulations of technology for commercial reasons are addressed. The fundamental assumptions are: the move to the “information society” is not necessarily inevitable; the diffusion of technology is not also a metric of the advancement of a society; the information society is more democratic and participatory; and “given enough information we can solve all the world’s problems” (Burkett, 2000, p. 680).

The phenomenon of social resistance on the Internet refers to a particular usage of technology that enables groups of people, loosely or densely bound, to actively engage against an overarching, hegemonic power (Conway, Combe & Crowther, 2003). Technology is manipulated and organized to support formations within groups and the emergent resources of such formations are then used in the resistance. The resistance may take many forms, those of organizing, activism, or of counter-propaganda, and in each case, technology plays a central role in coordination, information dissemination, and information gathering, among other uses.

SOCIAL RESISTANCE

When theorizing about the diffusion, spread, or acceptance of a technology in society, it is of interest to consider not only the extent of the diffusion but also to bear upon the changes that the technology introduces in the structures and functioning of the society. These changes may be studied in different ways. An interesting aspect of change introduced by technology in society has to do with how the unempowered, or marginal, can use technology to challenge dominant forces and the powerful (Conway et al., 2003; Kamat, 2002). Technology becomes a

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