

The Beijing Olympics (2008) Advertainment Portal

Natalie Pang

Monash University, Australia

Don Schauder

Monash University, Australia

Sanxing Cao

Communication University of China, China

INTRODUCTION

As communities develop their sense of identities, the Web reflects such identities through the appearances of Web portals. This short article argues that it is not only technologies that drive the emergence and popularity of portals, but the very sense of commonality that communities share fuels and propels the development and growth of portals. Such commonalities contribute to the establishment of a “knowledge commons” within the community; a virtual space dedicated to the sharing of understanding, memory, and practical know-how. Using a case study of a portal developed for the purpose of producing “advertainment” content in the upcoming Beijing Humanistic Olympics, the role of portals in contributing to the establishment of the knowledge commons is investigated.

This article centres its discussion around the case of the portal developed for the purpose of the upcoming Olympics in Beijing, 2008, and examines the ways by which the portal has been set up to cultivate memories of the event by cross-cultural communities. This article explores how technology and action by many people are aggregated and organised by the portal to create a knowledge commons space for the communities involved.

The idea of a commons is not new—in fact it has always been around—as long as the first human cooperation in history. Men hunting together for food and sharing their skills and eventually, their produce—the commons is rooted in communities of social trust and cooperation (Bollier, 2004).

Since its conception, the commons have received a faire share of sceptics and support. Sceptics refer to it as merely a metaphor—and regard it as risky to guide decisions based on a metaphor. Others defend it fiercely—knowing that without which, resources would be taken over by market forces. The commons, therefore, is distinct from the market. Active defenders of the commons such as the Friends of the Commons (2004) report on the status of identified commons in America. According to them, the commons “is a generic term, which

embraces all creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and freely, and hold in trust for future generations.” Levine (2002) points out the “commons” as resources that are not possessed or controlled by any one individual, company, or government. These resources are un-owned and therefore, free for all to use, borrow, imitate, or alter.

Such defenders argue that it is critical that we make distinctions between what is shared and common to the society—so as not to allow market forces to overwhelm the less privileged—and create fragmentations caused by social differences such as income and literacy. While the commons movement has been historical, the current movement of the knowledge commons focuses on knowledge creating communities using technologies to empower or constrain their shared spaces and resources. This article examines how portals can play a part toward this movement.

The portal in discussion is part of the collaboration-production trial project that runs within the framework of “sustainable Olympics” where teams from past, current, and future Olympic cities collaborate over the Internet to contribute in the creation of all types of multimedia content resources representing the participation of volunteers in the past and upcoming Olympics.

Salient to this article is the approach to consider community cultures as a starting ground to illustrate the drivers and motivations behind portals and their emergence, cohesion, popularity, and interactivity. Using Giddens’ structural theory (1986), this article first demonstrates how portals provide for communities senses of identities and in that context, how a knowledge commons space is created within the portal.

PORTALS IN THE CONTEXT OF KNOWLEDGE-CREATING COMMUNITIES

While it is clear that there are already many examples of portals—bringing together structured collections of

resources, communities, and technological applications, Strauss (c.f. Pearce, 2003) stated that there appears to be a trend of “portalisation” where organisations “are rushing to produce portalware and portal-like Web pages without fully understanding the scope of a portal undertaking.” Pearce (2003) provided further understanding to this seemingly confusing trend, noting that portals have evolved to be expected to perform a number of diverse functions, including the access, storage, and organisation of information, gateway to enterprise applications, customer relationship management, communication, and so on. This article argues that the sustainability and usefulness of portals lies in the dynamics of the user communities; and in the same way, portals function as an important platform for the sustainability of communities.

Figallo (1998) states that true community exists when “a member feels part of the larger social whole,” when “there is ongoing exchange between members of commonly valued things,” when there is an interwoven Web of relationships between people, and when these relationships last through time, creating shared meanings and histories.

It is an opportunity that portals present in bringing together the construction of self and communal knowledge of individuals and their communities. The emergence and popularity of portals is evidence of a desire of people in a community to connect, alongside with the need to construct self-knowledge. This desire, or innate nature of people, is described by Castells (2003) as:

We know of no people without names, no languages, or cultures in which some manner of distinctions between self and other, we and they, are not made...Self-knowledge—always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery—is never altogether separable from claims to be known in specific ways by others. (Castells, 2003)

According to Castells (2003), the construction of self-knowledge is an inevitable process when people come together as a community. The term “communities” is used in its widest sense here, including communities of practice, communities of interest, local and virtual communities (Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2000; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The term covers not only corporate-based communities, but also the vast variety of communities that make up the civil society as defined by the World Summit on the Information Society (Schauder, Johanson, & Taylor, 2005). The ties that bind people together is well above and beyond their formal tasks and work practices. As noted by Figallo (1998) and Rheingold (2002), there is a view of communities that is altogether dialectic and multifaceted.

In the process of self-construction of knowledge, one makes sense of his or her existence, presence, and roles in the world—and in this process of constructing knowledge of oneself, people in communities make sense of their

relationships with other people (whether through work or otherwise), and thereby end up with multiple associations with various communities—and very often the behaviour and roles they eventually take up in different communities are not independent of each other. Because there is such a multiplicity and intertwine of communities consciousness in people, whether they are made aware or not, it is not possible to only include one aspect of a community without considering the others.

The world ends up with people trying to make sense of their identities in multiple communities, reducing the conflict between these identities, and eventually results in a glut of communities trying to collaborate within and with each other, and in the course of trying to achieve this aim, technology, spaces, and other resources are utilised. With the current state of the Internet and information society, we are already witnessing how that can be an extremely chaotic (and sometimes trying) task.

Portals provide access to information technologies, resources, and contexts of use—they also provide a method by which such multiple layers of identities, memories, and knowledge can be construed by communities. In examining the social reality of portals, they are regarded as forms of structure (Orlikowski & Robey, 1991)—created by and shaping human actions. The consideration of human actions must therefore be examined with the dynamics of communities in mind. With this in mind, the article evaluates a vision of portals using structurational theory.

Giddens (1984) offers the insight that:

The best and most interesting ideas in the social sciences (a) participate in fostering the climate of opinion and the social processes, which give rise to them, (b) are in greater or lesser degree entwined with theories-in-use, which help to constitute those processes, and (c) are thus unlikely to be clearly distinct from considered reflection, which lay actors may bring to bear in so far as they discursively articulate, or improve upon, theories-in-use. (Giddens, 1984, p. 34)

In other words, meanings, actions, and structures are closely and continuously interdependent. The cumulative effect of people’s living and working within social frameworks (through a dynamic that Giddens calls structuration) is the production and re-production of culture. According to Giddens, community cultures are generated and re-generated through the interplay of action and structure. Social structure both supports and constrains the endeavours of individuals, communities and, societies. Giddens’ theory of structuration is the cornerstone concept for this article.

In Giddens’ theory of structuration, he proposes what is known as the “duality of structure,” where human actions create structure or institutional properties of social systems, which in turn shapes human actions (Giddens, 1986). It recognises that “man actively shapes the world he lives in

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