

Building Trust in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Information processing and communication technologies are developing so rapidly today that it can be said that there is a communication technology explosion. The new technologies widen the world for the individuals to reach other human beings regardless of where they are on the globe. Various groups of people can come together according to their private or business interests, forming a virtual community. In the generation and operation of these communities, cooperation and collaboration have significant roles. On the other hand, these technologies deeply modify traditional forms of social connections, communication, and cultural habits as well. These modifications can be observed in particular in hierarchies, social rules, norms, conventions, familiarity, and reputation.

A very important element of human contacts is trust. In a networked society, trust is the atmosphere, the medium in which actors are moving (Castelfranchi & Tan, 2001). Trust can bridge cultural, geographical, and organizational distances of members. Trust is the basis of cooperation, the normal behavior of the human being in the society. As the rate of cooperation is increasing in all fields of life, the importance of trust is evolving even faster. In this new communication environment new methods and techniques of trust building have to be developed, as the conventional rules of face-to-face approach cannot be applied. According to different experiments, the level of trust is highly influenced by the way/mode of communication and by the duration of contact.

BACKGROUND

Definition and Classification of Virtual Communities

In the late 1980s, personal computers were totally disconnected from each other. The first big step was when all those computers (and the people behind them) got connected to the Internet, and after reaching a critical mass, digital networks were changing social groups into the virtual community. Today the convergence of mobile

communication and computing is going on and this change in technology brings a change in the way communities come together and express themselves.

According to Howard Rheingold, a virtual community is a community of people sharing common interests, ideas, and feelings over the Internet or other collaborative networks. In his book, *The Virtual Community* (Rheingold, 1993, p. 4), he defines virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Internet when enough people carry on public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.” Cyberspace is the total interconnectedness of human beings through computers and telecommunication without regard to their geographical location.

The classical definition of Rheingold describes the “clear” type of virtual community. Today there are additional forms of communities that are called also as virtual communities in spite of the rather big differences in their goals and technologies. Based on the types of the members (private individuals, professional individuals, organizations), on the goals of the community (private, social, business), the form of cooperation (free, formal), and on the type of participation (voluntary, voluntary organized, formally organized), three different basic types of virtual communities can be distinguished:

1. **Community/network of independent intellectual workers (IIW):** IIWs are independent advisers and consultants who form temporary groups based on their interests according to their actual work/project using different types of networks and media.
2. **Virtual organizations—formalized cooperation of different remote business units:** A special subgroup of virtual communities is the virtual organization (VO). VOs are organizations that can be faced with the dynamic and turbulent environment that requires flexible and fast responses to changing business needs. They have responded by adopting decentralized, team-based, and distributed structures variously described in the literature as virtual, networked, cluster, and *resilient virtual* organizations.
3. **(Voluntary) Virtual communities—random connection among individuals or group of people:**

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- a. Working voluntary for a common goal of a community—working with commitment, taking responsibility, sometimes certain risks as well
- b. Collaborate in a certain field of hobby, discuss a topic without special responsibility

A virtual community requires social capital to succeed in its goals. Social capital is the “ability to collaborate effectively” (Blanchard, 2000) and it includes three important factors: structure, trust, and common goals.

- Structure refers to human relations within the virtual community. Usually there is no real social hierarchy among the members of the virtual community. They are all subject to the rules and regulations in the privacy policy of the community/Web page, for example, which basically explains the social norms for the community. Anyone who has access to the Internet can join the community, and they can participate in all of the benefits.
- Trust is a social construct. In order to increase social capital, there must be trust between members of the community. This may require individual members to refrain from taking actions that may benefit them in the short term for the sake of the long-term benefit for the entire community. Establishing trust on the Internet is a difficult task because of the anonymity and possible deception of members regarding their identities and information. Because of this difficulty in establishing trust, many individuals approach virtual communities with caution and suspicion. Member profiles and personal pages are domains where the individual can reveal important information about themselves, for the other members of the community to see.
- Common goals are the third factor of social capital. The basic goal is to create an online community of people. They believe that communities can only truly be built through interaction and participation among community members based on trust, privacy, and freedom of expression, which overlaps somewhat with the notion of social capital.

To be a successful virtual community, there must be high social capital, meaning there must be low structure, high trust, and common goals. All three classes and their subclasses of virtual communities can be organized independently of nationality and distance.

Media of Virtual Communities

Before the Web, virtual communities existed on bulletin board services (BBS). Today the main tool/technology for virtual communities is the Web. In general, there are two

kinds of communication among virtual community members: message postings and real-time chat. Usenet newsgroups are an example of the former. For real-time chat, Internet relay chat (IRC) is a system used by many Web sites realizing virtual communities.

Today there is a set of new technologies that can extend the possibilities of formation and operation of the various virtual communities and organizations; these are the different forms of wireless technologies. Wireless technology means mobility, namely individuals are available independently of location and time. This mobility is an important attribute of today’s society.

Mobility can be achieved by using different types of wireless networks such as satellite communication, wireless wide area networks (WWAN—different types of mobile phone systems, e.g., GSM, UMTS, and iMode), wireless local area networks (WLAN, such as Wi-Fi, e.g., IEEE standard 802.11a/b/g), and wireless personal area (or Pico) Network (WPAN, e.g., Bluetooth, IrDA2). These networks can be connected, so the user can be reached at any place through a type of wireless connection.

In order to have significant influence on the society and on the culture, new technologies have to reach a critical mass. The penetration rates of mobile phones in the world are different, for example, there are regions where it is 70-80 % or even higher.

An important service type of mobile phones is the multimedia messaging service (MMS) that is an evolution of SMS and enhanced messaging service (EMS). The multimedia element differentiates MMS from other messaging offers by integrating the ability to send and receive photos, images, video clips, and polyphonic sound by camera phones. This message type is significant in forming virtual communities and also in trust building. The use of Internet-ready phones is challenging social customs and human relationships as people shift more of their attention and resources to the cell phone.

DEFINITIONS AND FORMS OF TRUST

Trust can be defined as a psychological condition comprising the trustor’s intention to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the trustee’s intentions or behavior (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, & Camerer, 1998). Those positive expectations are based on the trustor’s cognitive and affective evaluations of the trustee and the system/world as well as of the disposition of the trustor to trust. Trust is a psychological condition (interpreted in terms of expectation, attitude, willingness, perceived probability). Trust can cause or result from trusting behavior (e.g., cooperation, risk taking) but is not behavior itself.

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