

Internet–Mediated Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Internet-mediated communities (IMCs) emerge when people (their *members*) share interests and make use for some time of the same class of Internet technologies to exchange information with each other regarding the shared interests. The technological evolution in communications shows that IMCs are not a phenomenon specific to people with certain backgrounds or interests; indeed, the materialization of such communities seems to be limited only by technology, in the sense that a priori no person is put apart from potentially becoming a community member in the future.

IMCs inspire academic research in several knowledge fields such as sociology, communications, rhetoric, laws, information management, education, and marketing. Although occurring abundantly in the literature, it is hard to find a satisfactory compilation of concepts for grounding prospective studies on such communities. The industry, in turn, is aware of the business opportunities enabled by IMCs; in fact, business models and investments have flourished in this regard since the first days of the concept (as illustrated in “Are Friends Electric?”, 1997; Hagel & Armstrong, 1997; La Franco, 1999; Machlis, 1998; Sansoni, 1999). A first attempt explicitly proposed in the literature towards rationale building unifying theoretical constructs and business interests seems to be that of Bellini and Vargas (2003); the present article aims to look at its fundamentals and indicate corresponding research lines for future investigation.

The article is structured as follows: first, human groups, communities, and the Internet are put together under the concept of IMCs; second, a distinction is made between a community and its place—broadly defined, the realm where the community achieves meaning—and the individuals who shape the community’s identity are grouped in generic profiles found in most communities; third, 12 key factors for studying and implementing IMC Web sites—resultant from extensive literature review and a series of empirical studies—are defined; and last, trends in the IMC field are outlined as they present challenges for several research initiatives.

HUMAN GROUPS, COMMUNITIES, AND THE INTERNET

The concept of *community* is controversial (Komito, 1998). Starting from Homans’ definition for the *human group*—people interacting for some time, who are sufficiently few so that each can communicate directly to the other within the group (as cited in Jones, 1997)—we may understand a community as being a group of people who share social interaction and some links between themselves and the other group members, and who occupy the same area for some time (Hamman, 1997). We now discuss how the concept applies to the Internet.

If *cyberspace* is conceived as the communication channel enabled by the world computer interconnection (Lévy, 2000), or as “an artificial environment created by computers” (Gibson’s original definition, as cited in Everett-Green, 1995), then *virtual* or *online communities* may be understood as “social relationships forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place ... that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest” (Fernback & Thompson, 1995), or “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough...to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (in the widely known definition by Rheingold, 1993). Alternatively, such communities would also be groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic means (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke, 1997), or groups of people who interact in computer networks in a many-to-many fashion, and such networks arise when people with common interests are able to interact (Williams & Cothrel, 2000). These definitions hold much of Mowshowitz’s (1994) understanding about *virtuality*, which encompasses social arrangements with functions and structures highly dependent on information technology and relatively independent of space and time limits—and maybe this explains the predominance of the expression “virtual community” over other similar terms in the literature.

Another competing term found in many related studies is that of *computer-mediated communities*, which focuses on communities relying on computer-mediated

communication (CMC) to effect information exchange. Research on CMC is mainly focused on the technological means for the interaction of people, whereas studies on computer-mediated communities emphasize the social structures found in the context of such interactions (Jones, 1997). Hence, for research on the social sphere, the electronic connection of people and the aggregate information are not sufficient for the true meaning of “community” (Jones, 1997; Rheingold, 1993); CMC is required for computer-mediated communities but does not necessarily imply their existence (Jones, 1997).

The decision made on adopting in this text the expression “Internet-mediated community” (IMC) instead of the more prevalent and previously mentioned terms (“virtual community”, “online community”, and “computer-mediated community”) is due to the following:

- The word “virtual” in “virtual community” could cause confusion when compared to its use in other contexts; for instance, the literature on *virtual organizations* (e.g., Mowshowitz, 1997) may not necessarily constrain the term to the deployment of information technologies such as the Internet.
- The literature on communities whose members access the Internet to interact with each other usually employs the word “virtual” to mean something that takes place in the cyberspace (Jones, 1997), and this allows us to replace “virtual” by “Internet-mediated” with minimum loss of content (since the cyberspace can be interpreted as ultimately restricted to the Internet) and ceasing potential semantic doubts about the meaning of “virtual.”
- “Internet-mediated community” is one particular case of “computer-mediated community,” exhibiting, at first hand, the computer technology involved.

Combining all that to the idea of group communication not requiring face-to-face interaction anymore nor being restricted to a few people (Jones, 1997), which amplifies Homans’ original concept for human groups, it is possible to organize the terminology under the concept of an *Internet-mediated community* (IMC), or a *group of people who share interests and make use for some time of the same class of Internet technologies to exchange information with each other regarding the shared interests*. For the sake of clarity, we are not advocating one expression against the others but we choose a more specific term to frame concepts and particular applications.

COMMUNITY PLACE AND PARTICIPANTS

The concept of *place* is present in most definitions of community. Oldenburg (1999) talks about *third places*—the third element in a triad with workplaces and households—which are neutral grounds where community members meet and disregard all differences, developing a sense of inclusion rather than exclusivity. Conversation is the central activity in the third place, which is also characterized by being open when most places are closed, by exhibiting the character of its regular clientele, and by offering a friendly atmosphere. Although necessary for building communities (Hamman, 1997), the third place would be in a process of gradual disappearance (Oldenburg, 1999), and this in turn would be leveraging communities in computer networks (Williams, 2000).

A community, however, cannot be taken as synonym for the place where it achieves meaning, notwithstanding a place with the following four attributes is closely related to any IMC (Jones, 1997): interactivity, sustainable membership, diversity of communicators, and a shared technology for group CMC (this last attribute is restricted in this article to Web sites and the technologies they provide for information exchange).

In the IMC place, some individuals play special roles:

- **organizer/guru:** the mentor of the community’s place
- **member:** anyone with formal membership to the community, according to community-consented criteria
- **facilitator:** member who coordinates the activities within the community’s place, specially in starting, mediating, and keeping alive the communication, or informing the other members about new features of the community’s place
- **vendor/supplier:** individual or firm that performs business activities within the boundaries of the community’s place in commerce-oriented IMCs
- **internaut/visitor:** individual interested in but not a formal member of the IMC and who visits the public areas of its place

KEY FACTORS FOR COMMUNITY WEB SITES

The academic and professional literatures provide us with a myriad of elements for studying IMCs and the

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