

Virtual Communities for Development

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INTRODUCTION

Americans, and to some extension, the greater world, appear to have an obsession with celebrity. We often find ourselves defined not by our deeds but by our relationship, either real or imagined, with famous people. Celebrity lives appear more appealing or real to us because we can see their lives up close and in ways we cannot see our own. Peter Howe (2005), in his book *Paparazzi: And Our Obsession With Celebrity*, examines the origins, ethics and our insatiable appetite for celebrity that keeps the paparazzi in such demand. With so many things competing for our attention, we often pursue the path of least resistance. We go to bed and wake up to the celebration of celebrity through mass communications media. The major network television morning news and late-night shows tend to focus only the first 10 minutes of broadcast, if any, on national and local affairs of society, and then quickly retreat to celebrity promotions or gossip. For dinnertime or early evening entertainment, the major networks are filled with such shows as Entertainment Tonight, Access Hollywood and Celebrity Justice. Cable networks and radio also serve as additional mass-media vehicles to further celebrate and promote celebrity. The Internet has become the newest vehicle to help feed this frenzy of celebrity pursuit. Thousands of virtual communities of interests have developed to help foster a sense of relationships to celebrities, feed these obsessions and escape from reality.

Does Internet usage favor the development of new communities, virtual communities; or instead, is it inducing personal isolation, severing people's ties with society and ultimately the real world? This article examines virtual communities from the perspective of the American obsession with celebrity, using as an example a Yahoo celebrity virtual community that has evolved over a period of four years.

THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Virtual Communities

Webster's New World Dictionary defines community as a group of people living together as a smaller social unit

within a larger one having interests, work and so forth in common (Webster's, 1974). Virtual communities, unlike physical communities, are not limited by geographical boundaries. In a virtual community, people do not necessarily share the same physical space, but instead they share cyberspace. Lee, Vogel and Limayem (2003), in their paper *Virtual Community Informatics: A Review and Research Agenda*, provide some insight on the topic of virtual communities by examining the different definitions found in this overview research. The researchers found that these communities are developed through the Internet, and its members participate in Internet-mediated communication. Further, they discovered that communication and interaction were the main drivers of virtual communities, and that the content or topics of discussion are driven by participant members. The effectiveness of these communities is reflected through the establishment of strengthened relationships between community members as a result of interacting over a period of time. Lee et al.'s (2003) working definition encompasses those elements and defines virtual community as a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven content, resulting in relationship building. In this article, we define a virtual community of interest as a group of individual people brought together around shared values and purposes through an Internet-mediated communication media. Note that the original purpose of individual virtual communities may evolve and change over time as relationships are built.

Shared Values, Interests, and Purpose of the Community

Internet interactions appear to be both specialized/functional and broad/supportive in virtual communities, in that as interaction in the networks broadens so does the scope of communication over time. Wellman and Gulia (1999) show in their research that as in physical personal networks, most virtual community ties are specialized and diversified as people build their own relationships. Many networks that start as helpful and specialized end up providing personal support, both material and affective.

Hence, virtual communities can develop into physical meetings, friendly parties and material support for the members of the communities. Wellman (1979) indicates that many virtual communities evolve into “personal communities,” or an individual social network of informal, interpersonal ties ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties. Social exchange theory states that people tend to collaborate to gain desired resources through social reciprocity (Cook & Emerson, 1987). The dynamics of these “communities of interest” are similar to the generally more well-known “communities of practice.” Wenger and Snyder (2000) define communities of practice as groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise. Communities of practice allow its members to share ideas and knowledge. Virtual communities of interests provide a means for its members to share ideas, knowledge and information about specific topics of interests. The effective functioning of online virtual communities is driven by trust that members have in the value and validity of information shared. Zhang and Watts (2003) found that genre conformity and information consistency were important factors when assessing the knowledge adoption process of online communities of practice. The definition of genre conformity is the use of socially recognized types of communicative actions habitually enacted by members of a community reflecting cognitive perspectives jointly held by community members; while information consistency refers to the extent to which the current message is consistent with a member’s prior knowledge. Genre conformity and information consistency also play a significant role in the effectiveness of communities of interests by affecting member trust in the community, particularly relationship trust. Paul and McDaniel (2004) in a study of the effect of interpersonal trust on virtual collaborative performance, described relational trust as a type of trust where one feels a personal attachment or wants to do good by another party. As this type of trust grows, more members are encouraged to participate, increasing the value of the virtual community, consistent with Metcalf’s law and the effects of positive network externalities in virtual networks (Shapiro & Varian, 1999).

The Virtual Society

One interesting area for exploration involves the examination of the social impacts of informal virtual community of interests. In the absence of physical cues (verbal and non-verbal) important in interpersonal interactions and the development of physical communities, online community participants build an identity, develop interpersonal ties and play certain roles through the information expressed via their keyboard and mouse. Participants can, and fre-

quently do, explore new relationships or even new identities online. They become, in effect, a created self that may differ in substantial ways from the real self. In essence, virtual communities provide a mechanism for participants, no longer constrained by physical limitations, to escape from the reality of the real world. During the mid-1990s, researchers at Carnegie Mellon University conducted a two-year Internet study on the impact of the Internet on social involvement and psychological well-being. Their research had indicated that greater use of the Internet was associated with a decline in participants’ communication with family members in the household, a decline in the size of their social circle and an increase in their depression and loneliness (Kraut, Patterson, Lundmark, Keisler, Mukopadhyay, & Scherlis, 1998). This research, commonly referred to as the Internet Paradox, was revisited in 2002. A three-year follow-up of respondents tested in the original study found that negative effects dissipated and that Internet usage is now associated with positive impacts on communication, social involvement and well-being. Further, the Internet predicted better outcomes for extroverts and those with more social support, but worse outcomes for introverts and those with less support (Kraut, Kiesler, Boneva, Cummings, Helgeson, & Crawford, 2002). Virtual communities have the advantage of letting people bond without being in close proximity either spatially or temporally. In this regard, virtual communities appear to offer advantages to the handicapped, aged or homebound and offer a sort of safe sound for exploring more risky or socially unacceptable behaviors (Etzioni & Etzioni, 1997). One could argue that as more time is spent building relationships in the virtual community, less time is spent interacting with others in the physical community, resulting in a decline of relationships in the real world. This research points out that virtual community participants may, in some cases, forsake their physical community involvement due to these factors.

Yahoo Virtual Communities

Today, Internet search engines can be used to identify a virtual community that encompasses a specified interest. One of the more popular, although not the only, search engine for identifying virtual communities of interests is Yahoo. Yahoo! Inc. is a provider of Internet products and services to consumers and businesses through the Yahoo Network, its worldwide network of online properties (Yahoo Co., 2004). Its basic products and service offerings are available without explicit charge to its users, making its Web site a very popular domicile for virtual communities called Yahoo Groups. Yahoo characterizes its groups as the easiest way for virtual communities of interest to

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