

Chapter XII

Explaining Participation in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

The last few years have seen a substantial growth in online communities such as MySpace and Facebook. In order to survive and increase in size, online community systems must enhance social interaction and participation. This chapter analyzes participation in new online communities, using a combination of the socio-technical perspective and the human-computer interaction perspective. In 2007, both qualitative and quantitative data was collected from questionnaires from five sample groups in Norway—four popular online communities and one national sample of Internet users. The results show that online communities attract like-minded people, but vary in terms of different user types. Most visitors have a clear social purpose, but the level of participation differs with respect to user types and community characteristics. Participation in terms of user-generated content (UGC) differs greatly, depending on the medium used. Most users do not contribute audio-visual UGC, and text is still the main UGC. Possible future research and socio-technical design implications are discussed.

Participation is everything

—Involve (<http://www.involve.org.uk/>, 2005)

INTRODUCTION

By combining the socio-technical perspective with the human-computer interaction perspective (HCI), the aim of this chapter is to broaden our understanding of how non-professional users participate in online communities. In particular, this chapter will try to close the socio-technical gap (e.g. Ackerman, 2000) by addressing both the community level and the user perspective—thus identifying social user requirements and how these can improve participation in online communities. This will be done by analyzing and discussing empirical data about community usage within several Norwegian online communities. (Access to and the uses of online communities are high in Norway compared to other countries in Western Europe, and are therefore a particularly interesting area when investigating community usage). Finally, this chapter suggests some socio-technical design principles of this analysis.

The background of this chapter is the growing body of research that demonstrates an exponential increase in online communities and user-generated content (UGC) (Brandtzaeg & Heim, 2007; Li et al., 2007; Bishop, 2007; Horrigan, 2007; Wunsch-Vincent & Vickery, 2006). Unfortunately, this research fails to account for *why* and *how* users participate or engage in social networking settings and UGC. However, this is critical knowledge, since online communities are increasingly becoming an established part of the Internet and have changed the nature of online user participation (Bishop, 2007).

Several Internet services have been designed to draw upon voluntary active participation among non-professional users in terms of both UGC production and social interaction. The core condition of all online communities is the active participation of community members. However, at present, the general ambition about user participation, creation and sharing of UGC in online communities is far from being fulfilled, while only a few users actually are participating actively (Bishop, 2007; Geerts et al., 2007). Several online communities pay little

attention to the complexity of community interaction and the need to support and guide it. This may explain why many online communities are more or less ghost towns (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar 2003). A number of studies (e.g. Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Nielsen, 2006) indicate that, in most **online communities**, there exists a “90-9-1 rule” for levels of participation, where 90 percent are defined as “lurkers”, 9 percent are occasional contributors of **UGC**, and only 1 percent are active contributors. Kollock and Smith (1996) describe lurkers as free-riders, i.e., non-contributing, resource-taking members. This is also referred to as the “free rider problem”.

Therefore, this chapter aims to understand who the typical participants are, why and how they participate, and what types of participants that exist in terms of different user types characterized with their particular usage pattern inside the community. This coherent approach will determine what level of participation different user types or user groups are ready for, and how designers should adapt to a diverse population of users. Nevertheless, rapid changes in users’ habits and technological advances are continuously reshaping the new media landscape (Brandtzaeg, 2007), and the situation regarding user needs and “participation” in online communities poses some important design challenges:

- To support the move from a text-based to a more complex multimedia environment. New online communities can, in fact, be described as a micro-Internet, an “all-in-one-place solution” that features a convergence of diverse Web 2.0 functions and services, such as blogging, chat, wiki, e-mail, video, book marking and photo. A synthesis of different Web 2.0 technologies with the community is a typical trend of several of the communities we are studying in this chapter, but also holds for more well-known communities such as Facebook and MySpace. A huge challenge is that most users cannot cope with this complexity associated with a combination of Web 2.0 technologies, and most users can’t create

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