

Chapter VII

Virtual Communities

INTRODUCTION

The growth of virtual communities and their continuous impact on social, economic and technological structures of societies has attracted a great deal of interest among researchers, systems designers and policy makers to examine the formation, development, sustainability and utility of these communities. For examples, researchers are interested in analysing and understanding how these communities foster social interaction, influence various technological design and implementation, enhance information and knowledge sharing, support business and act as catalytic environments to support human learning. Over the last two decades, the growth in research into virtual communities, though fairly diverse, can be broadly categorized into two dominant perspectives—technological determinism and social constructivism. The basic tenet of the technology determinism research is that technology shapes cultural values, social structure, and knowledge.

In technology-related fields, such as Computer Science and Information Systems, significant attention has been given to understanding technological developments and how these changes influence social structures. The social constructivism perspective, on the other hand, posits that knowledge and world views are created through social interaction. These theories assert that a society's practical knowledge is situated in relations among practitioners, their practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities.

Irrespective of social or technological determinism, virtual communities are communities built around relationships among people. They breed different kinds of relationships anchored by unique social connections other than cultural, ethnic, racial, tribal or geographical (place-based) communities. The intensity and types

of social connectivity in virtual communities vary from one community to another but they also share common features in that they might be based on common interests, passion to learn new trade or language or keeping abreast on development in a particular area of interest.

This chapter provides a general overview of research on virtual communities. It describes two particular types of virtual communities relevant to the analysis of social capital described in the book; virtual learning communities and distributed communities of practice. The goal of the chapter is to provide an overall context in which social capital is reported in the book. The chapter also describes other areas in which virtual communities are currently used. These include education, healthcare, business, socialization and mediating interaction among people in Diaspora.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Understanding the historical development of virtual communities requires a closer look at the history of the Internet, since these communities predates the history of the Web. The Internet came into inception in 1969, when the United States Department of Defense Advanced Projects Research Agency (DARPA) established a computer network designed to sanction the existence of information beyond a susceptible, central location as a means of defence against the possibility of nuclear war (Hartley, 2002, p. 122). Through this network, known as ARPANET, came the development of a system which would act as a channel for “democratic information and distribution (Hartley, 2002, p. 122). This system advanced during the 1970s, with hosts being connected to the ARPANET as well as the subsequent appearance of state-funded computer networks, which later became known as the Internet.

The pioneer technologies that supported virtual communities, started with the electronic mailing systems or simply email, then followed by listservs and notice boards and then discussion forums. In 2000, various forms of websites supported by a wide range of Web technologies (Illera, 2007) became the mainstream environments supporting interactions in virtual communities. Though virtual communities might seem new, in fact, there is a historical trend to their development. About four decades ago Licklider (1968) predicted the emergence of technology enhanced social systems—he referred to these systems “online communities”.

Online communities or virtual communities in his view consisted of geographically separated individuals, who would naturally group themselves into small clusters to work together or work individually on some issues of interests. Virtual communities, he suggested would be communities not of common location, but of common interest. This prediction became accurate as there are now millions of virtual communities that are based on common interests and goals.

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