Chapter 1.4

Online Communities and Social Networking

Abhijit Roy
University of Scranton, USA

INTRODUCTION

Technology has enabled communities to move beyond the physical face-to-face contacts to the online realm of the World Wide Web. With the advent of the highways in the 1950s and 1960s, "communities" were created in suburbia. The Internet, on the other hand, has over the last two decades, enabled the creation of a myriad of "online communities" (Green, 2007) that have limitless boundaries across every corner of the globe.

This essay will begin by providing a definition of the term "online communities" and then describing several typologies of this phenomenon. The various motivations for joining communities, how marketers create social bonds that enhance social relationships, as well as strategies used by firms in building online communities are also discussed. We conclude by discussing strategies for managing online communities, leveraging them for social networking, researching them, as well as directions for future research.

DEFINITION

A "community" refers to an evolving group of people communicating and acting together to reach a common goal. It creates a sense of membership through involvement or shared common interests. It has been considered to be a closed system with relatively stable membership and demonstrates little or no connection to other communities (Anderson, 1999).

With the rapid growth of the Internet, the geographic boundaries constraining the limits of communities are no longer a factor, and the functions of maintaining a community can be fulfilled virtually from anywhere in the globe. This is the basic essence of an online community, which is also synonymous with e-community or virtual community. Several authors have attempted to provide a formal definition of the term for semantic clarifications. The major definitions are as follows:

- Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public

discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993)

- Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media, rather than face-to-face. (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke 1997)
- Computer mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member generated content. (Hagel & Armstrong 1997)
- Online Publics are symbolically delineated computer mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions. (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000)

While Rheingold (1993) provides one of the earliest definitions of the term, and one that is most quoted in the literature (Kozinets, 2002), many may question whether "with sufficient human feeling" is a necessary condition for online community formation. Romm et al.'s (1997) definition may not sufficiently distinguish it from general Web sites. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) emphasize member generated content, while Jones and Rafaeli (2000) use the term "virtual publics" instead of online community. Others, like Bishop (2007), have pointed to the phenomenon of "desocialization" or less frequent interaction with human in traditional settings, as a consequence of an increase in virtual socialization in online communities. Based on the above definitions the term may be simply defined as a group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet.

TYPOLOGIES OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Online communities come in different shapes and sizes and may have memberships of a few dozen to millions of individuals. These communities may extend from active forums like discussion groups and chat rooms to passive ones like e-mails and bulletin boards. Given that these communities are not geographically constrained, their size can be much bigger than typical physical communities and many millions of them exist on the Internet. Uncovering archetype or gestalt patterns is fundamental to the study of social science and research, and several authors have proposed classification schemes for configurations of online communities.

Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003) in their review of classification schemes of online communities identify Hagel and Armstrong's (1997) and Jones and Rafaeli's (2000) typologies as being the most popularly referenced. Kozinets (2002) too delineates four kinds of online communities. These three typologies are reviewed, and a further popular typology of affinity groups proposed by Macchiette and Roy (1992) as applied to the online environment is also proposed.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) propose four major types of online communities based on people's desire to meet basic human needs: *interest, relationship, fantasy,* and *transaction.* Jones and Rafaeli (2000) further segment these communities by *social structure*, that is, communities formed based on social networks, for example, online voluntary associations, cyber inns, and so forth, and *technology base*, that is, types of technology platforms, for example, e-mail lists, Usenet groups, and so forth.

Kozinets (2002) proposed the four types of communities as *dungeons*, that is, online environments where players interact, such as for online video games, *circles,* (interest structured collection of common interests), *rooms* (computer-mediated environments where people interact socially in real

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