

Chapter 1.8

Cyber–Identities and Social Life in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT

Information and communication technology gradually transform virtual communities to active meeting places for sharing information and for supporting human actions, feelings and needs. In this chapter the authors examine the conceptual definition of virtual community as found in the traditional cyberliterature and extend it to accommodate latest cyber trends. Similar to the ways that previous social and mass media dissolved social boundaries related to time and space, cyber-communities and social software seem to also dissolve the boundaries of identity. This, in turn, questions the trust, privacy and confidentiality of interaction. The authors present a way of classifying and viewing self-presentation regarding cyber-identity management in virtual communities. It is based on the characteristics that cyber-surfers prefer to attribute to themselves and accordingly present themselves to others. In so doing, the authors coin the terms for five distinct phenomena, namely

nonymity, anonymity, eponymity, pseudonymity and polynymity. They subsequently compare and contrast these terms, summarising information from their investigation, and outlining emerging questions and issues for a future research agenda.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberspace and virtual communities are often described by features such as structure, setting or formation. From the view point of the user more important than the features are the social qualities. One of the important social features is the sense of community. Sense of community is often described as a set of subjective experiences of belonging, mutual respect, and commitment that can be gained only through participation (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). It is not just the space but the people with their collective experiences. Furthermore, human empowerment in designing for sociability and usability for socially acceptable information and

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communication technology has become a research and development issue of increasing importance (Preece, 2000; Earnshaw et al., 2001; Berki et al., 2003). Online communities cannot merely be built, only facilitated in order to provide platforms for people to come and form a community of their choice. This emphasises the human factor within design and research of cyberspaces.

Cyberspace does not have physical borders but social life within cyberspace does have expression boundaries as well as norms and rules for behaviour. These boundaries for social actions and behaviour are either inherited by the structure of a certain e-space or different social software, i.e. discussion forums and work spaces, or imposed by the designers and users of e-spaces. In order to succeed, online communities, e-spaces and other electronic congregations need regular users. Cyberspace does not exist without electronic inhabitants; otherwise it is a deserted cyber place. Recent studies show that the degree of success and functionality of virtual communities is incorporated and built through trustworthy group interaction (Werry & Mowbray, 2001). The rise of social software technologies and online social networks impose new challenges for law, security and trust, identity and interaction (Kollock, 1999; Kimppa, 2007; Berki et al., 2007). The challenges go sometimes so far as to raise questions related to democracy and citizens' degree of participation in private or public virtual communities (Wilhelm, 2000). The existence of cyberplaces also challenges the definition of membership since within digital worlds inclusivity and exclusivity have totally new semantics or terms of definitions with different applications and tools to facilitate membership management.

Boundless digital spaces also challenge the ways of participation. Entering cyberspace concerns issues of identity and identification. The possibility to participate in online communities anonymously may ease the entrance to digital worlds. Some participants, however, may dislike anonymous people and they, instead, gravitate

towards digitally eponymous people welcoming them in an electronically-mediated social environment. To some extent identity, both in real life and cyber life, can be seen as composed of similar qualities. Notwithstanding, questions of security, safety and trustworthiness are often associated with cyberparticipants and their identities. In real life, however, identities are not that often questioned, authenticated or even doubted.

Understanding cyberspace requires exploring the meaning of individual and group (collective) identities, in particular how they are built and how they affect interaction and participation (Renninger & Shumar, 2002; Georgiadou et al., 2004). Arguably, the identity shared by the cyber-societies participants should be empowering to facilitate participation and support communication. An overpowering group identity might block communication and create difficulties in promoting innovative ways of thinking and functioning. A shared, cohesive identity, used by eponymous or anonymous people facilitates the development of mutual trust among the participants and balances communication within a group. On the other hand, a pseudonym or plenty of names may decrease certainty and control in interaction but still increase the willingness to communicate. Technology-mediated-communication is often seen as faceless and task-oriented. However, it seems that communication in cyberspace may speed up initial interaction as well as self-disclosure, which, in turn, may facilitate interpersonal connections and building of relationships (Walther, 1994; Walther and Burgoon, 1992). Without doubt, anonymity, pseudonymity and eponymity affect trustworthiness, credibility and security of e-transactions and e-interactions (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004).

There is a multiplicity of people in e-spaces: e-learners, visitors of different chat rooms, participants of electronic interest groups, and members of support groups and e-communities, all with different needs and different aims (see e.g. Werry & Mowbray, 2001; Jäkälä & Mikkola, 2001; Renninger & Shumar, 2002). In cyberspace, group

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