

Chapter 8.13

Social Interactive Media and Virtual Community Practices: Retrospective and an R&D Agenda

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ABSTRACT

This chapter attempts to consolidate concepts, ideas and results reported in this volume in an effort to synthesize an agenda and sketch a roadmap for future research and development on virtual community practices facilitated by synergistic combination of social interactive media. In this endeavor, the author revisits the notions of new media, communities and social practice, in the light of the preceding chapters and with the intention to pick up seemingly heterogeneous concepts and sketch the puzzle of social interactive media and virtual community practice. The ultimate target is to make inroads towards a reference model for understanding and framing online social practice under the different regimes constituted by new media and social computing.

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INTRODUCTION

In this volume we have been concerned with the design of virtual community practices as enabled or facilitated by a broad range of new media (i.e., social software, collaborative practice toolkits and emerging infrastructures such as Grids and Web 2.0) and performed by human collaborators in a variety of community settings (i.e., online communities, virtual communities of practice, cross-organization communities of practice, etc). In this effort, three key concepts stand out very promptly as primary challenges motivated by a variety of theoretical and / or engineering perspectives. These are the concepts of ‘new media’, ‘community’ and ‘social practice’. As discussed in the introductory tutorial (Chapter I in this volume), these concepts continue to pose numerous challenges since common

ground is yet to be established, despite years of study. Furthermore, it is also striking that very few studies have explicitly addressed how these three constituents are intertwined to shape new virtualities in a networked-society.

In light of the above, this final chapter of the volume, is concerned precisely with such an interplay between the constituents of the triad – new media, community and social practice – assuming that it is this interplay and tight intertwining that facilitates more enlightening accounts of a variety of novel forms of human communication and interaction across a broad range of community settings. Consequently, our intention in this chapter is to consider, in light of the preceding contributions, what are the prominent characteristic tensions shaping virtual community practices and how these can be conceptualized in a prescriptive frame of reference. In doing so, there are several challenges lying ahead of us.

Firstly, new media, communities and social practices are three concepts widely discussed and researched by scholars of various theoretical traditions, using however different frames of reference and units of analysis. This volume is just one example indicative of the breadth of perspectives and approaches followed by researchers. Consequently, there are no standard definitions, unified theories or consolidated engineering frameworks which holistically and exhaustively prescribe these phenomena per se, or the tensions between their constituent parts. For instance, we cannot explain with the required scientific rigor or empirical knowledge how different community settings or types emerge, how new media facilitate their formation and what practices are likely to emerge along the way.

Secondly, it seems that no single theoretical stand or engineering perspective is equipped with the necessary tools to provide the required insight. For example, pure engineering analysis of the new social media and applications may offer useful insight into technical and architectural abstractions, but fail to explain why some of them are

more successful as social software applications than others. On the other hand, social science perspectives and practice-based analysis into the new virtual practices go as far as explaining retrospectively the new status quo, rather offering means and tools for proactive design. For instance, there are social theories explaining prominent differences between interpersonal off-line practices and on-line practices, but no such theory could actually anticipate or foresee or motivate some of the new virtual practices through innovative design insights or guidelines.

Finally, it may be that aiming to investigate the intertwining between new media, community and social practice is useless effort, bound to fail. It may be that, as in many other domains of human endeavor, evolution and progress are processes grounded purely on biological events and phenomena rather than conscious theorizing or engineering practice.

In spite of the constraints and the danger sketched above, the chapter will attempt to bring some insight to the relationship between new social media, communities and social practice, in an attempt to contribute to a better understanding of their intertwining and its implications. In this effort, we will assume that the reader is aware of the contextual definitions, orientation and premises presented in Chapter I. This will allow the present chapter to concentrate on synthesizing common ground rather than analyzing the concepts per se.

Thus, the next section attempts to formulate an integrative view by discussing the ‘Community-media-Practice’ (CmP) grid – an instrument for assessing the existing status quo and envisioning future developments. Then, we use the CmP to gain further insight to the design of practice-oriented toolkits. To this end, we explore useful concepts such as ‘linguistic domains’ and how they are related to engaging in online virtual practices. Finally, the chapter is concluded by briefly commenting on the role design can play to facilitate novel practicing using new media so as to foster creative endeavors in virtual communities of various types.

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