

Chapter 1

Introduction to this Volume

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ABSTRACT

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, practitioners, system designers and policy makers. All interested in analysing and understanding how these communities form, develop, nurture social interaction, influence various technological design and implementation, enhance information and knowledge sharing, support business and act as catalytic environments to support human learning. This Chapter provides a general overview of virtual communities and introduces the reader to the various themes covered in this volume as well as the geographical distribution and institutional affiliations of contributors to the volume.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW OF VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Understanding the historical development of virtual communities requires a closer look at the history of the Internet. The Internet came into inception in 1969, when the United States Department of Defence Advanced Projects Research Agency (DARPA) established a computer network designed to endorse the existence of information beyond a susceptible, central location as a means

of defence against the possibility of nuclear war. Through this network—Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET), came the development of a system which would act as a channel for “democratic information and distribution. 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, e-mail, and then followed by

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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 for virtual communities. Though virtual communities might seem like a new phenomenon, there is a historical trend to their development.

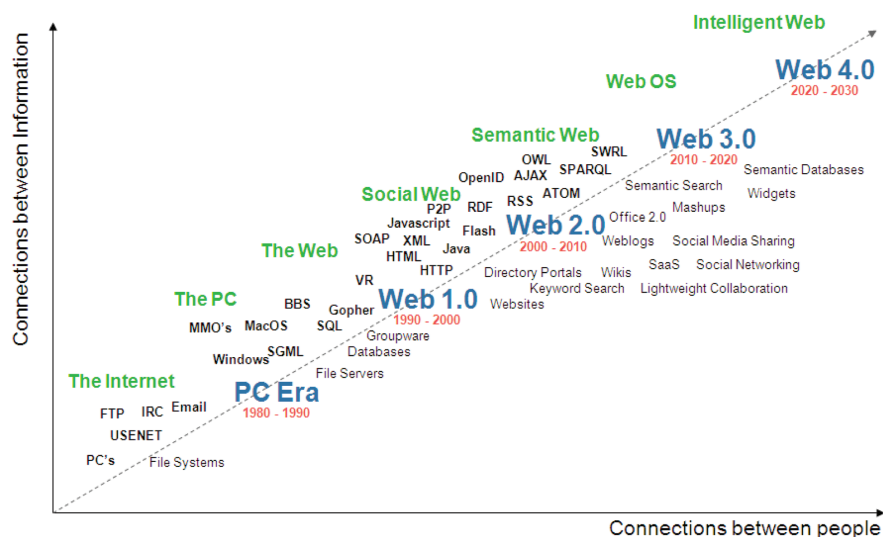
About four decades ago Licklider (1968) predicted the emergence of technology enhanced social systems—he referred to these systems “online communities”. Virtual communities, in his view, consisted of geographically separated individuals who would naturally group themselves into small clusters to work together or work individually on some issues of interests. Online/virtual communities, he suggested would be communities not of common location, but of common interest. This prediction became accurate as there are many virtual communities that are based around common interests and goals.

In some of the literature explored, virtual communities developed prior to the instigation of the Internet. They started to mature with the development of the Web technologies. The early examples of virtual communities included UseNet, with millions of users all around the world. Usenet

was established in 1980, as a distributed Internet discussion system. Membership in Usenet consisted mainly of voluntarily contributors and moderators. There were also other early virtual communities; Minitel in France and Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL) in the United States of America. The WELL, was established in 1985 and many researchers have investigated its cultural manifestations and reported in several books (e.g. Reinghold, 1993). Many of the WELL’s members voluntarily contribute to community building and maintenance (e.g., as conference hosts). The WELL, as described in its site “provides a literate watering hole for some articulate and unpretentious thinkers”. Other writers claimed that the Minitel preceded the World Wide Web and that it existed since 1982 and was accessible to its members through the telephone lines. Further, it was stated that from its early days, members of Minitel could make online purchases, make train reservations, check stock prices, search the telephone directory, and chat in a similar way people do over the Internet today.

In modern times, Slashdot is perhaps one of the most popular virtual communities. Slashdot hosts technology-related forums, with articles and

Figure 1. Historical development of virtual communities



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