

Chapter 10

Negotiating Meaning in a Blog-Based Community: Addressing Unique, Shared, and Community Problems

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses how members of a blog-based community share problems and support each other in the problem solving process, both sharing knowledge and offering support. Problems are divided into three categories, unique, shared, and community, each having its own particular norms for presentation, knowledge sharing, and resolution. Additionally, processes may differ based on discourse that centers on one individual blog versus discourse that spans multiple blogs. Findings show that intersubjectivity, norms, roles, and individual ownership of virtual space all are important elements contributing to the problem sharing and solving process.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual communities exist for a multitude of reasons. They may support work, learning, and personal development processes; provide a common arena for information sharing; or serve as entertainment and social spaces. In some cases they bring together people already organized as a community, providing additional means of communication. In other cases, the technology provides a platform for uniting people with mutual interests who might otherwise never meet. They may be

closed and highly private (e.g. membership-only portals and listservs), they may flow and be defined through extended personal networks (e.g. accessible to people noted as friends of friends, such as is done on various social networking sites), or they may live out their existence in plain view (e.g. public web pages such as most blogs and Twitter feeds). Regardless of the specific context, interpersonal interaction is the underlying objective of participation in a virtual community.

Online information seeking is a fairly common activity with ever increasing numbers of people

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turning to the web for answers to their questions and solutions to their problems ranging from simple and fact-based to complex and subjective. Trustworthiness of information becomes an issue for many of these people. Individuals can readily publish to the web so long as they have a computer and Internet access, with no vetting of content for accuracy or quality. A simple query in a search engine can yield pages of results: some accurate and some not; some empirical and some opinion-based; and some from reviewed or filtered sources and some not. Such is the beauty of the Internet and the simultaneous challenge of using it in an information seeking capacity.

If we marry these two concepts of virtual community and online information seeking, it becomes apparent that in the nexus is a possible solution for narrowing the expanse of the information landscape, increasing the pertinence and (perceived) reliability of one's online knowledge seeking and problem solving experiences, and encouraging a more personalized approach to the whole experience. The result, whether intentional and by design or merely a byproduct of the users' actions, is a knowledge sharing community.

In this chapter, I present a study of how a blogging community serves a knowledge sharing function for its members, with a particular focus on how members share their problems and then help each other by providing support, guidance, and information. The community is one of loosely networked sole-authored blogs written in a diaristic style. The bloggers generally do not know each other off-line, and many use pseudonyms which prevent actions like Googling each other, but they are bound by a shared profession: academe. In the blog world, they have sought interactions with like-minded others. Collectively, and in addition to socializing, these bloggers engage in knowledge sharing and problem solving processes on a regular basis. They do so informally, and without labeling their actions as such.

BACKGROUND

Virtual worlds do not exist in isolation from the physical world; what happens in one space readily influences the other. Bloggers, for example, frequently make connections between their online and offline worlds, which may represent actual friendships transcending the different media (Takhteyev & Hall, 2005) or may take the form of shared stories moving from one medium to another. Friendships that form online may not be as strong as those existing in the physical world (Cummings, Butler, & Kraut, 2002), but they can provide social support and contribute to a person's sense of well-being (Baker & Moore, 2008). Further, there are distinct purposes that those online relationships serve, such as providing support in contexts where face-to-face settings might be uncomfortable or unavailable.

The term "community" is one that has been used in an overly general sense, particularly with respect to online communities. Seemingly any collection of people drawn together by common interest or shared membership on a web site has been referred to as a community, a designation which becomes problematic given that community development requires more than just the ability to communicate in the same space (Kling & Courtright, 2003). In this paper, I use the term community to refer to collections of people who interact online on a regular basis, who have established online identities and are known to each other, and who exhibit collective characteristics such as trust, norms, and shared purposes. As such, communities are not mere message boards but are trending toward (if not actually representative of) what Wenger (1998) calls a Community of Practice.

Virtual communities exist based partly on the principle of reciprocity. Both socio-emotional and informational exchanges are likely to occur when a sense of virtual community has formed among participants (Ellonen, Kosonen, & Henttonen, 2007). The rationale for engaging in online

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