

Exploring the Common Ground of Virtual Communities: Working towards a 'Workable Definition'

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Abstract

Much of the literature on virtual communities evolves around classifying the phenomenon while much empirically constructive work on the topic has not been conducted yet. Therefore, the research discussed in this paper proposes to explore the actual field of the virtual community (VC). By means of a comparative ethnographic research we will attempt to define virtual communities in terms of their inherent social activity, the interaction between the groups of people and the information and communication technology (ICT) and the meaning attached to it by its members.

Keywords: Virtual Communities, ethnography

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1 Introduction

This paper will report on the initial propositions, research questions and approach of the explorative research of working towards a 'workable definition' of virtual communities. It will also present its preliminary results and the 'work to be done' which will ultimately form the basis of moving beyond defining virtual communities, i.e., actually designing and deploying one.

2 Concepts and issues

For now we will postulate that all virtual communities at least consist of, on the one hand, groups of people – in this paper referred to as 'community of practices'² – and, on the other hand, information and communication technology. However, it should be noted that we do not make any distinction between for instance commercial and non-commercial communities of practices.

2.1 Virtual? Community?

In order to derive at a workable definition of virtual communities, we need to first explicate the constituent parts of the term: 'virtual' and 'community'. This 'what's-in-a-name exercise' will lead the way to a basic understanding about: The extent to which virtual communities refer to physical phenomena and what makes a virtual community a *community*.

According to the 9th edition of *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'virtual', in the case of computing, refers to "not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so". This definition implies that the virtual space created and mediated by ICTs is evolving as a completely new world. Adherents to this view assert for instance that the virtual space will become a placeless space in which hierarchical differences are negligible and in which more democratic interpersonal relations exist. Instead, we contend that the virtual consists of more or less the same features as does its real life (RL) counterpart e.g., in terms of gender (see Boudourides and Drakou, 2000). What will emerge in the virtual will be the extension of present forms and practices of interaction and construction of meaning.³ If any, the virtual space could conceal or, the opposite, act as a magnifying glass of certain features and attributes of communities of practices such as their mode of interaction (or, lack of interaction); prevalent power struggles, and issues such as openness and trust. Hence, we assert that in exploring virtual communities we should not 'disembed' them from their offline reality.

² Communities of practice "... in brief, are groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise ..." (Wenger. & Snyder: 2000: 139).

³ "A virtual community comprises all dimensions of a community: economic, political, social and cultural ones" (Benschop: 7).

'Community', the other constituent of the term virtual community, entails most of all that its members have something in common with each other and hold a specific 'sense of belonging' (see Cohen, 1985). Hence, in investigating virtual communities, we should gain an understanding of this common ground, that is peoples' individual experience of participating in and their attachment to the community.

2.2 Situated 'Interactional' relationship

We hold that a virtual community is and becomes what its participants⁴ perceive it to be (*interpretation*) and how they use it accordingly (*practice*). Apart from the conviction that people's perception of and behaviour in the virtual community affects its development it is in turn also the ICT that affects people's behaviour in it. This means that the ICT is supporting and enabling⁵ as well as transforming the social behaviour of the people engaged in the virtual community.⁶

Central to our approach, therefore, is that we hold that a virtual community must be perceived as an outcome of the 'interactional relationship' of ICT and the socio-cultural formation in which it is deployed. Understanding virtual communities entails the realisation that the ICT and its socio-cultural context affect each other simultaneously (not necessarily proportional though).

Altogether, we contend that a virtual community is a constellation of attributes⁷ - not a simple equation or just a random constellation of properties - given a specific context and a specific community of practice interacting with a specific ICT. In this study we are exploring the attributes of various virtual communities and their situated character (of design, development, use and interpretation) in order to, ultimately, build a socially and culturally embedded virtual community that fully exploits the possibilities of contemporary ICTs. This quest requires explicating the 'visible' as well as the 'invisible' attributes of virtual communities; that is, of both its community of practice and its ICT. The visible, or first level attributes refer to their superficial characteristics such as form, structure and the kinds of applications used. The invisible attributes refer to the underlying structures and the social processes of virtual communities such as the unwritten rules, routines, rituals and power struggles existing within the community as well as inscribed in the applied ICT.

⁴ We deliberately speak of participants, instead of users. The reason for both is that: The virtual community is in constant transformation (we are not making any distinction between the phases of virtual community development); by participating the community the users transform it as well and; most 'end-users' are also designers.

⁵ "A virtual community is a community in which most interactions are *enabled by information technology*" (De Moor, 1999: 3) [emphases are ours].

⁶ This 'enabling and constraining view' is derived from Anthony Giddens' Structuration Theory and has exhaustively been discussed in the IS literature.

⁷ An attribute is "a quality regarded as a natural or typical part of sb/sth" (Oxford Advanced Learner's dictionary, 1995: 66).

2.3 Control or cultivation or spontaneous commitment⁸?

Another issue that we come across in the literature is the issue of *sustaining* a virtual community. Supposedly, a virtual community is *self-organised* in that "... it is *not created by managerial mandate* and may not even begin with the intention of becoming a group" (Prusak, 1997: 15). [emphases are ours] For this reason it has often been asserted that the virtual community as a tool of, for example, knowledge management, is a paradox of management. For, the real value of the virtual community is said to lie in the *spontaneous* gathering of people with shared interests or aims, that is, the self-organising principle. Thus, actively managing the formation of such constellations would go against the very grain of its principle.⁹

Since participant-generated content and interaction are of prime importance "... a radically different approach to management must be followed in which a high degree of autonomy is ceded to members, and managers display a "gardener's touch" (Hagel and Armstrong in Werry, 1999). Although we do argue that albeit a large degree of self-organisation is necessary, sporadic direct intervention is requisite in order to sustain a viable community. Hafner (1997), for example, describes an incidence of a woman being expelled from the Well. The woman had a long history of abusing participants, and flaming them. Initially, the moderators did not react because they wanted the community to handle it by itself. But also because the woman made many outrageous posts which incidentally enhanced the sense of belonging within the community. In the end the moderators were forced to expel the woman after all though (for reason of intrusion of privacy of the participants). External intervention thus appeared to be ineluctable in this case.¹⁰

How to create and sustain commitment of participants without interfering with the natural growth of the virtual community but with preventing it from dying a slow death, requires also to be researched in various contexts. How and by what are people motivated to interact, generate content and share information in a virtual community? Would the solution lie in a moderator or content 'manager' gardener's- style?

Consequently, apart from focussing on the virtual community as a constellation of certain attributes, we should also investigate/perceive virtual communities as dynamic phenomena requiring constant monitoring, feedback and adaptation of the ICT.

⁸ See Wellman and Gulia (1999).

⁹ The virtual community as a tool of knowledge management becomes in that case a rather artificial and frightening tool geared towards the distillation of the so-called tacit knowledge of people. This relates to Werry's critique of some of the ways in which contemporary business models seek to commodify community, to organize and regulate social interaction, and to control practices of online knowledge production" (Werry: 13).

¹⁰ A lesson learned from this is that in order to make a community you may need some kind of conflict or a confrontation with outsiders. When confronted with the 'Other', the group will posit itself as a whole.

3 APPROACH

In order to investigate both the situated attributes of virtual communities and how to keep them viable, needed is: (1) an evaluation of the available ICT involved and its 'workings'; (2) a characterisation and assessment of the social dynamics of the community of practice and; (3) an understanding of the interpretative flexibility of the virtual community (that is to say, of both the ICT and the community of practice). Accordingly, the research activities will be directed towards: explicating the descriptive (*what and how*), functional (*use and purpose*) and normative definition (*ascribed meanings*) of both the community of practice and the deployed ICT.¹¹ Defining virtual communities functionally, descriptively and normatively will enhance our comprehension of what they consist of, their purpose, how people perceive them and what people want them to become.¹²

To begin with, the descriptive definition of virtual communities contains the most obvious or superficial - first order - features of the community of practice and the deployed ICT and will be constructed according to its texts, e.g.:

- *Community and membership profiles*. These will, as we presume, provide us information such the amount of participants involved, their educational and working background, gender, and nationality. Other documents like 'business' plans will presumably reveal also the rules, regulations and procedures about what is expected to be proper conduct in the virtual community.
- *Plan of requirements of the ICT infrastructure and the documentation of the design and deployment of the ICT*. On the basis of these texts we will be able to draw up a (historical) reconstruction of the information and communication technology; its structure, the kinds of applications and the preceding decision-making processes.

Secondly, the functional definition will be derived at from an introspection of the community in terms of its actual practice (*social activity*). Such an introspection should incorporate, amongst others, the manners and degrees of socialisation of the participants of the community; their actual conduct of interacting as well as a reconstruction of their 'interactional' history (to be deduced from the log files, or in technical terms "referrer"). This will ultimately reveal issues such as: the degree of openness; the unwritten rules of conduct, routines, habits, rituals and; the prevailing power structures and struggles (deduced from the ways of addressing each other and well possibly the division of space).

Thirdly, the normative definition of the virtual community will be constituted according to the so-called 'narrative infrastructure'; that is, the stories people tell about themselves and others as well as about the

¹¹ See Hanseth (1996) for approach.

¹² This is what Van Lente and Rip (1999) refer to as the 'script of expectation statements'.

virtual community and their relationship with it.¹³ The narrative infrastructure will reveal what meanings people attach to the virtual community and may also reveal how "story-lines may structure action before the fact and how *prospective structure* emerges" (Van Lente and Rip, 1999: 217).

Altogether, a characterising of the virtual community will be drawn by means of its *texts, practices* and *narratives*. This involves the following research methods:

- The study of archives and documentation *on* and observation *in* the virtual community;
- participant observation and description *in* and *of* the actual practice in the virtual community in order to recognise patterns and regularities (the purpose of which is to reveal 'what actually is instead of what ought to be') and;
- conducting unstructured interviews with the various participants involved in the virtual community.

When direct observation and description are involved the term *ethnography* is often referred to.

Ethnography¹⁴ – in the sense used by anthropologists - entails participant-observation, frequent and often informal interviews, and the cultivation of insiders known as 'informants'. In addition to meeting the participants of the virtual community, the informants, online, that is conducting a *Virtual ethnography* (Hine, 2000; Markham, 1998; Paccagnella, 1997), face-to-face meetings will be conducted as well.

4 THE WEBGRRLS CASE

WebGrrls¹⁵ is a community with a relatively long history. It started in 1995 and has grown into a world-spanning community. An interesting aspect of this community is that the participants are empowered to shape their community themselves. In fact, the community is built by its members from the very beginning. A group of likewise minded 'Grrl's' met (New York city, 1995) and decided that there was a need to create a platform for: "... women from diverse backgrounds, talking up a storm about our big common interests – the internet and the World Wide Web".¹⁶ More importantly, they wanted to create an online place for women to help each other in making their entrance to the new medium (the Internet); in using the technology, and in learning to find jobs and to network.¹⁷

¹³ We tend to define ourselves through defining the 'Other' – the Other referring to other members of the community, other communities and the technology.

¹⁴ "Ethnography means literally ... to write a people, to help construct a people's identity by writing them" (Hess, 1992: 4).

¹⁵ <http://www.webgrrls.com>

¹⁶ <http://www.webgrrls.com/history>

¹⁷ <http://www.webgrrls.com/history>

The meetings, like the first one, in which they decided to start an online community, continued and in half a year they had over 200 participants. In 1997 they officially went international and organised an event in which women from all over the world participated through online chat¹⁸. That meeting also initiated the start of the various international 'Chapters'. And, within four years after the start there were more than 100 Chapters.¹⁹ These Chapters are actually based in the various different (RL) countries and regions. They are part of the WebGrrls community but have complete freedom in creating their own website and range from simple pages with only information to fully interactive websites with many features²⁰.

Most of the participants are tied to the internet professionally, as can be seen by browsing through the "WebGrrl of the Week" archive.²¹ They participate by sending in content for the website, going to the community meetings, and eventually also by setting up their own local Chapter of WebGrrls. It is abundantly clear that the participants not only look for information but also actively support the notion of the 'helping hand'. As one of them said: "*I got my job through WebGrrls, before that it helped me to stay informed and inspired about working on the web, "WebGrrls was my support group"*".²²

5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Analysing 'grrls' actual behaviour by participating ourselves, analysing the log files and interviewing the participants will be the next steps in our research. At the same time we will start with the ethnography of at least one other virtual community in order to provide the comparative data. This will be a community which has different ways of getting participants to co-operate than does Webgrrls.

¹⁸ Internet Relay Chat

¹⁹ <http://www.webgrrls.com/faq/#1>

²⁰ See for instance the Austrian chapter: <http://www.webgrrls.at/index.phtml>, and the New Zealand chapters: <http://www.webgrrls.org.nz/>.

²¹ <http://webgrrls.cybergrrl.com/wfs.jhtml?archives/wotw/index2.html>

²² Martina Kauter, Senior Producer and Designer, Cybergrrl.Inc.

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¹ Classifying virtual communities as 'The Forum', 'The Club', 'The Shop' or 'The Bazaar'(Klang and Olson). Also in Jansen et al. (1999) we read about the Chat virtual community, the Expert virtual community and the Innovative virtual community.

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