

Outline the origins and potential future of Online Communities

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Introduction

Online communities have grown from a small number of mostly technical users to being one of the most dominant forms of Internet communication. Ostrow (2011) tells us a “very real stat...Facebook has passed 800 million users (which Facebook measures as users that have logged in during the past 30 days)”. While this may currently be the largest site of this type it is by no means the only one. There are a large and growing number of social networking sites all that offer the sense of community. Evans (2011) states, “In 2010, there were 12.5 billion devices connected to the Internet. Looking to the future, Cisco IBSG predicts there will be 25 billion devices connected to the Internet by 2015, and 50 billion by 2020.” From Flickr to Usenet the amount of data that online communities generate is massive. The topics that are covered can range from comics to cancer support groups and everything in between. From these groups we’ve seen complex behaviours that can cause as much bad as they can good.

Firstly we will look briefly at a technical history of the web. Then we will move on to a closer examine of what community means and how this has changed on the web. Finally we will examine what these changes could mean and where this could lead us in the future.

A brief technical history of online communities

The Internet was created so that people would be able to share, create or communicate large pieces of information over large distances. So is it any wonder that nearly as soon as the Internet was born people started using it as a social medium. Smith and Kollock (1999, pp 5) tell us that “Email and discussion list are the oldest...form of interaction on the internet...email is often used to go beyond a one to one interaction...When people direct a series of messages and responses to the list, a group discussion can develop”. This is at the root of all online communities the human wish to communicate. The Internet has allowed large groups of people with similar

interests to communicate, as they have never been able to before. But there were problems using such a simple system. Lee, et al (2003) explains, "it is also very easy to abuse, creating useless junk email or "spam" which can alienate the audience". So from this starting point of email discussion groups there were weaknesses in the system and a new approach was needed. This came in two main ways these are known as the Usenet and Bulletin board systems (BBS).

The Usenet is a massive network that consists of newsgroups covering a wide range of topics and cultures. Any user can create a newsgroup then any other users can post information whether it is useful or problematic. Smith and Kollock (1999, pp 6) tell us that "tens of thousand of newsgroups are carried over the Usenet, each containing from a few dozen to tens of thousands of messages...the Usenet has no central authority, no single source of power that can enforce boundaries and police behaviour". So with this system there is no central control figure, in theory this would make the system unusable. However this system has been around since nearly the birth of the Internet and is still functioning today. Another type of online communities around at this time centred on BBSs (Bulletin board systems) these are similar to forums and like the other technologies previously discussed are asynchronous. Borders (2009) explains, "The first BBSes were small servers powered by personal computers attached to a telephone modem, where one person at a time could dial in and get access. BBSes had social discussions on message boards, community-contributed file downloads, and online games".

The next stage was to move from asynchronous communication to synchronous, this came in the form of text chat. Preece, et al (2003 pp 3) tells us that "Typically, conversations are rapid and each individual comment is short ... Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was developed in 1988 by Jarkko Okarinen. Instant messaging made famous by ICQ and AOL Instant Messenger is somewhat similar to chats in that communication is synchronous and very rapid". Text chat and instant messaging speed up the flow of conversation over the net and showed the potential for rapid communication and collaboration.

Each of these technologies was to play a part in what became known as social networking. All the current social networking sites are based on and include elements from each technology. Borders (2009) tells us that “The first social networking website was SixDegrees which let people make profiles and connect with friends in 1997”. The name is a nod to the idea of six degrees of separation between you and any one else on the planet. Since then there has been a large number of social networks and popularity ebbs and flows like the tide. At one point MySpace was the largest but Facebook has taken over the social networking scene and far outreached any site to come so far. But, with Google+ and serious worries about Facebooks’ privacy policies could what happened to MySpace also happen to them.

At around the same that MySpace and Facebook were beginning to gain prevalence a new sort of online community was growing. This one revolves around graphical gaming worlds and these games create millions in revenue for their creators each year. They can be seen to have started in the 80’s with MUDs (Multi user dungeons) but progressed in the 90’s to being fully graphical playable worlds. Oxford (2011) explains, “it was the more graphical MMORPGs like Ultima Online (1997), and EverQuest (1999) for the PC that brought MMORPGs to a mainstream audience. MMORPGs proved compelling primarily because of their social elements”. So these games enabled players to communicate and play together they could form alliances and trade items. This has created a whole new sorts of communities where people can join and discuss their playing styles or games. Now nearly all social-media sites have some form of game interactions. Oxford (2011) tells us “Social games have proven tremendously successful for numerous reasons, but one of the biggest reasons is accessibility ... Communication is also a huge part of what makes social games so appealing. It’s one thing to engage friends and family members in small talk on Facebook. It’s much more gratifying and fun to get them to help you build up your farm”. So the element of interacting online with your friends towards a joint goal is what makes these games more fun and the online interaction a richer experience.

The final stage that we will discuss has only really come around in the last few years and this is the social stream. Services like Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn now all have their own applications for smart phones and with current 3G technologies this means that we can be online all the time. There are all sorts of sites that allow us to share constantly letting people know exactly what we are doing at any given time. Borders (2009) tells us “Location-based social networking sites ... allow people to use their mobile devices to “check in” at public locations and be seen by other network members who are physically close by”. This newer type of online communities has people sharing their thoughts, images and even location constantly. I think of this new age as the true age of sharing. If you so wish you can put every little piece of information about yourself online sharing it with communities across the globe.

The growth in online communities has been a fast a diverse history coming from humble roots to having a huge online following. But, why do people join up to these sites and can an online community provide the same support as an offline one?

Defining what we mean by community

For many years there has been an argument that since online communities lack the face-to-face element it cannot be truly seen as a community in the traditional sense. One of the most traditional definitions of a community is linked to geographic region. The people that you live around or the neighbourhood you live in is known as your community. Lee, et al (2003) tells us “with the advanced development of information and communication technology, predominance of geography as a force of a shaping community is reduced. The communication network is enhanced and thus the virtual community arises”. So before the Internet community was primarily defined by geographic location, since the Internet has entered nearly every aspect of our lives this is no longer the case. People are just as likely to socialise online, as they are to meet in person and talk face to face if not more so. Wellman

(2001) defines “community as networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability support, information a sense of belonging and social identity”. This view has nothing to do with location and has stripped down the meaning of community to just a few focal points. The point that a community could be viewed as a support group that like minded individuals can join is an important one. This can be view as a framework that describes online communities. But how different is the online communities to offline ones? Wellman (2001) tells us “ Myopically fixating on the rapidly-developing Internet, hypesters, pundits and wired scholars have all wrongly proclaimed it to be a place apart. Yet systematic research shows that physical space and cyberspace interpenetrate as people actively surf their networks online and offline”. So Wellman is telling us that rather than being two separate entities online and offline communities have the flexibility to mix. For example in the comic book online community there is a huge number of message boards and chat groups dedicated to every type of comic. But, they also meet offline at conventions dressing as their favourite characters or just there to meet new people. A community is more than location it is a support network, a place to share your thoughts or somewhere to meet likeminded individuals.

A closer look at Internet communities

One of the most obvious and useful examples that show the strength of Internet communities is the work that has been done on the Linux kernel. Moon and Sproull (2002 pp. 382) tell us that “Linux...has been produced through a software development effort consisting of more than 3,000 developer and countless other contributors...it is difficult to provide a precise estimate of the number of programmers who have contributed to it”. The Linux kernel is the product of a massive number of people all working together towards the same aim. Would this have been possible before the Internet was created? The open source movement has been around since nearly the birth of computing but the amount of influence that the Internet has allowed the

community can't possibly be measured. Moon and Sproull (2002 pp. 397) go on to tell us that "Clearly, easy access to the Internet...is a necessary precondition of the kind of distributed work represented by Linux. Developers used the Internet for easy access to work products...and easy communication with other developers". So here they are saying that not only was the Internet an important part of the system; the entire project may have been impossible without it. With regards to the entire project and it could be viewed the whole open source community would be severely limited without the Internet. The Linux community is a great example of people working together online towards a joint goal. But, this is not the only type of community that we can see online.

Online support groups are also another large community on the Internet. People with illnesses or other problems can feel disjointed from society this leads them to feel isolated or alone. But with the advent of the Internet people can be put in to contact with others that have been in their situation so they can offer help and support. Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003 pp. 273) explain, "With the advent of the digital ... age alternative channels for support are more available, more accessible and can serve a variety of needs. ... The most well known are those serving cancer survivors, caregivers and people with chronic diseases". They even go on to suggest that support networks of this kind can help people's health both mentally and physically. Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003 pp. 267) explain, "There is some evidence for positive effects of support group participation... Such groups may be especially important for those whose own social networks have responded negatively". Providing support to people at what may be the lowest point emotionally of their life is an extremely important role. Even though the Internet may provide a non-traditional form of social interaction. It is shown that the availability of information and support may even provide a better community than the one the ill people find themselves living within. Albrecht and Goldsmith (2003 pp. 273) tell us "Electronic support is an opportunity for greater access to the health system, monitoring of conditions and disease, information and importantly a relief from isolation and loneliness".

So far we've looked at the positive effects that online communities can have but what about the other side. As much as the Internet can be used for good it can also be used negatively. There are a large number of hate groups active on the Internet. Whether their motives be religious, racist or have other purposes the Internet gives them a free and largely unregulated place to speak their personal views. This may lead members of the group to commit violent actions offline or strengthen their already warped view of the world. Douglas, et al (2005) tell us "This phenomenon, called cyberhate, has taken the form of hatred against particular social groups... especially in the form of White supremacist sites, (it) is frequently seen to be a strong presence on the Internet". These groups use certain websites and message boards in a similar way that has been discussed so far. But, instead of using the Internet in a positive manner they use it to spread their personal message of hate. Douglas, et al (2005) explain, "Although free speech on the Internet is generally protected in the United States by the First Amendment to the Constitution, theorists argue that hate rhetoric and hate speech may rest at the border of protection when its long-term and indirect effects are considered". So these groups produce literature that is of an inflammatory nature, should these communities such as Usenet or the Internet in general be more strictly policed and censored. Do groups such as these have the right to free speech and should have that protected?

The future of online communities

The future of online communities has been in debate this year with recent scandals and even social problems being attributed to the use of social networks and online communities. Hughes (2011) tells us, "It is believed that much of the disorder during three nights of violence in London was orchestrated on sites such as Twitter". After the violence that erupted in London during the summer of 2011 the government has started looking at stronger controls for online communities. The US government has also talked about much stricter controls that would give them the ability to shutdown the Internet controlling access to it during times of unrest. This could show one

way that online communities could go in the future having stricter controls over what can and can't be said. There is a lot of evidence that the UK government is already constantly monitoring online communities. The case of Paul Chambers shows how closely these networks are being monitored. Bracchi (2010) tells us "It all started with a moment of grumpy sarcasm on Twitter ... A week later, he was in a police station being quizzed as a potential terrorist". One off hand comment on an online community and Mr Chambers lost his job and gained a criminal record could we see more of this in the future as the government improves its monitoring capabilities. I personally feel that we will over the next few years users will have to think much more closely about what they put online in case it becomes misconstrued. Just as it did in the case of Mr Chambers. Users may need to think about what they place online more carefully in the future as who knows who will be watching. The world of the Internet is based solidly on technology in the past few years we've seen the world of online communities expand ever greater. Many of the new handheld devices come with social media streams built straight into them now. This is a trend that I think we will only see more of being connected to the web has become a 24hr experience. Devices will become smaller and faster and will become ever more embedded into our life styles than they already are. Whether in the future one possible outcome of this could be computers actually built into our clothing could be another debate. Schiphorst (2009) actually created a garment based upon certain social interactions seen on Facebook. "using this frame work we created a wearable social network that encourages interaction unlike most wearable devices today". This could be one way that online communities may advance. In this age where sharing is constantly encouraged maybe everyone could metaphorically wear their hearts on their sleeve.

So we've discussed a couple of possible futures for online communities, but there should be another topic that we should look at. How much social media can a person consume? We are probably producing more information than at anytime in human history, but how much of it is important? Gordhamer (2011) states "As more and more media are integrated into social networks every day,

we're growing accustomed to knowing just about everything our friends are doing, thinking, watching and listening to". But what sort of effect can this be having on our society, how much time is spent just surfing social networks when time could be spent more productively. In the age of sharing how much information do you need to know about your friends, loved ones or the guy down the road. Online communities have moved from a stage where like minded hobbyist got together to talk about their chosen obsession. To where we are now, people sharing every little piece of information about themselves. As if where you're having dinner defines you as a person. Gordhamer (2011) goes on to say "people have a need to not only receive a constant flow of information but also to get quality information in ways that add benefit to their lives". In the future I think it will become more and more difficult to get truly interesting and informative information. This will be where companies like Google are looking to in the future making information more tailored to the individual. This will probably be included in the future of online communities as well. The whole point of web 3.0 is semantic use of data so this must have some sort of effect on online communities. Whether it is targeting certain groups of people for certain product or maybe connecting people with the same sorts of interests. That way an online community could be created that actually links people in to it instead of vice versa. Web 3.0 will be as big if not bigger change to the web than 2.0 it is much more user and experience focused. It looks more at how the data is used and will change a lot of user experiences online.

Conclusion

It is very difficult to judge what could happen next, the net has changed the world in ways people could never have imagined. Online communities have been at the heart of the web ever since its first inception. They will always be part of the web and are an ever more important part of the wider culture that surrounds the Internet. Rather than being something separate from the offline community online communities have enriched the lives of many people and done much to improve them. Online communities rather than being something

completely different hold a mirror up to society. People may act slightly differently to how they would in the real world. But, ultimately this can only be a good thing as Jones (1999 pp.217) tells us “It is an arena in which passions are inflamed, problems are solved, social bonds are formed, tyranny is exercised, love and death are braved, legacies are born, factions splintered and alliances dissolved. It is a rich arena for study by scholars, cyber communitarians and the curious”.

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