



Introduction to the Special Issue: Online Communities

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Abstract

The Internet has impelled scholars to expand their views of organization. In 2005, *Organization Studies* called for papers about online communities that would stretch the field of organization studies. The articles in this special issue use empirical research and theory to re-examine fundamental questions of organizational boundaries, community, and member motivation.

Keywords: Online communities, electronic groups, Internet.

Introduction

The Internet is changing the scope, boundaries, and dynamics of social and economic interactions. It supports human communication unconstrained by distance in time and space. It provides a platform for loose coalitions and organizational groups that can organize and disband with minimal cost, and for long-standing association among large groups of people who share a common interest. These developments create challenges for the traditional organization of human endeavor and for our conventional theories of organizations.

Over the past twenty years, we have gained substantial insight into the dynamics of small-scale, short-term electronic groups. Now that more than 100 million people worldwide have access to the Net, we should expand our theoretical and empirical focus to understand the dynamics of large-scale online communities. Some online communities are composed primarily of people who have no pre-existing ties with one another and who interact primarily, if not exclusively, over the Net. These communities range in technical and commercial sophistication from Usenet discussion groups to complex multiplayer fantasy games supported by proprietary software. Other online communities are extensions of pre-existing political, charitable, social, and business organizations. Still others began online and later established offline offices. Online community structures and processes are beginning to have some important effects on traditional organizations and on their members.

The goal of this Special Issue is to stretch the field of organizational studies by focusing especially on online communities. To make progress, we need to challenge our conventional theories of human organization with carefully crafted empirical observations and theoretical reflection on online communities. Doing so will change and improve organizational theories, and increase their applicability to new organizational forms. We need to reconsider mainstream

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theories of organization that were developed at a time when human communication was primarily face-to-face and mediated by the printed word. Factories were composed of people working under the same roof. Commerce and politics were mainly local. The reality of large numbers of people forming new types of organizations across space and time is, historically speaking, a new phenomenon, which requires understanding in its own terms. Such understanding is likely to profit from an interdisciplinary approach, using insights and employing methods from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

Contributions to this Special Issue

The articles in this special issue illustrate something of the variety of online communities evident today: a knowledge system in a French bureaucracy; an informal learning community for London cabbies-in-training; a technical support community for a computer products vendor; a book review repository for an ecommerce firm. They illustrate a variety of sponsor models and motives: a formal bureaucracy's support for employee knowledge sharing; a self-organizing informal learning community; corporate sponsorship for customer sales and service support. They also illustrate a variety of ways in which online community members may relate to one another offline. In the French bureaucracy, offline relationships existed before online ones were created. In the cabbies-in-training community, even though all members were physically located in the same city and had offline relationships with the same officials, offline relationships among the members themselves did not exist. In the corporate-sponsored sites, members had no offline relationships with one another.

In the first article, Emmanuelle Vaast (Vaast 2007) offers a multi-year investigation of an online knowledge system for one group within a French bureaucracy. Her developmental analysis reminds us of the importance of a historical or temporal perspective in understanding online communities. She documents how, over time, technology changes, access to technology changes, use of technology changes, the meaning of using technology changes, the relationship between online and offline information changes, and the status of community members changes. At the same time, she highlights the 'emergence of continuity' between online and offline practices. As online practices became more consequential over time, the offline bureaucracy partially co-opted them and was partially changed by them. Vaast is the only author in this issue who offers a developmental perspective on online communities. Each of the subsequent empirical articles in this special issue takes essentially an a-historical, cross-sectional perspective on online communities. Nevertheless, readers should remember that the current state of any online community is the result of historically evolving choices, practices, and relationships with the offline world.

In the second article, Drew A. R. Ross (Ross 2007) describes an online self-organized community of people in training to become London cabbies. Every member of that online community shares a common relationship to a very specific offline world — 'all 25000 streets ... [and] every public facility and space

in London' — and to an offline formal bureaucracy, the Public Carriage Office and the examiners who control the licensing process. Ross draws upon Goffman's theory of region behavior to explain how the online community functions as a private 'back region' to support cabbies-in-training during their learning process. He observes that members can take social and academic risks in the online community that would jeopardize their licensing chances if they were visible to the offline authorities — the 'front region'. The theory of region behavior provides a sociological modification to the social psychological theory of reduced social context cues as an explanation for the 'candour' seen in online communities. As Ross points out, this theoretical perspective is applicable only when people have the opportunity to move from one region to another — in this case, from invisible online to more visible offline and back again.

The third and fourth articles investigate online communities in which the relationship between the online and offline world is relatively one-dimensional and utilitarian. Both articles investigate online communities sponsored by corporations in the service of sales or service support. In both cases, volunteers offer online help to customers or potential customers of the corporate sponsor. In the third article, Naren B. Peddibhotla and Mani R. Subramani (2007) investigate contributors to the online repository of book reviews at Amazon.com. Arguably, a repository is not a community — it is merely an archive for individual opinions. Yet the authors demonstrate that a subset of prolific contributors — a critical mass — is motivated by the desire to help others as well as by self-oriented motives. This subset of contributors posts many more reviews, higher-quality reviews as rated by readers, and earlier reviews than the average contributor. The authors do not demonstrate a direct impact of the critical mass on actual book sales, which would be the definitive link between the volunteer reviewer community and the commercial product sales world. Nevertheless they deepen our understanding of online communities by demonstrating that even in an online forum with minimal opportunities for direct social interaction — the public document repository — volunteers are motivated by the desire to help others. The critical mass may have a commercial impact through the way it sustains the reviewing community and buyers' interest in and use of the site for shopping.

In the fourth article, Caroline Wiertz and Ko de Ruyter (Wiertz and de Ruyter 2007) investigate how a firm's customers can function as unpaid technical support personnel through the medium of a firm-hosted online technical support community. The authors find that participants feel more loyalty and commitment to the online community than to the sponsoring firm, a finding that problematizes the concept of boundary between a firm and its customers. Moreover, they demonstrate that attributes of individual contributors moderate the relationship between commitment to the community and quality of contribution. Their recognition of the importance of individual differences reminds us that community members are not homogeneous and should not be treated as homogeneous in our theorizing and investigation.

The fifth article, by Yuqing Ren, Robert Kraut, and Sara Kiesler (Ren et al. 2007) offers a perspective on online communities quite different from that of the first four articles. Rather than empirically investigating online communities,

the authors investigate alternative theories of affiliation that are relevant to community member motivation and the design of online communities. They explore common bond theory, which explains community attachment in terms of individuals' bonds with one another; and common identity theory, which explains community attachment in terms of people's identification with a group, or common goal or interest. They point out that community design influences how members become attached to a community and whether they are willing to expend effort on its behalf. It is appropriate to conclude this special issue with an article emphasizing the role of design and theoretical perspectives on design. For the first twenty years or so in the history of online communities, from approximately 1975 to 1995, there were comparatively few types of online communities, with the dominant form being email and bulletin board shared-interest discussion groups. Today we see a proliferation of community types — from massive multiplayer online games to volunteer software development communities. We see a growing interest in and recognition of the interconnections between online and offline worlds. To the extent that organization scholars contribute to the design of online communities, we can rigorously refine and test our theories in unprecedented field experiments.

Conclusions

It is incumbent on us, as guest editors, to reflect on what our special issue does not do. We note, for example, that all of the empirical articles in this issue drew from existing theory to explain their findings. None of the authors critically engaged with shortcomings in existing organization theory or proposed significant modifications to existing theory. By the same token, each empirical article investigated a single online community. We have no comparative cross-community studies. The Ren, Kraut and Kiesler (2007) design article makes predictions that could be tested in comparative designs. We look forward to reading other publications in other outlets that build new theory and present comparative investigations.

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