Guest Editorial Preface

Online ‘Tells’ and the Management of Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

For over a decade, virtual communities have emerged in myriad of forms to foster new virtualities for socializing, networking, professional development, collaborative work and advancement of scientific endeavour. Throughout these years, researchers from different disciplines embark in a variety of efforts to gain insights to what makes these communities viable in virtual settings, how new media are implicated to foster, enable or constrain online encounters and the degree to which such new structures (re)create and/or enhance culture. A primary focus in recent scholarly works has been on theoretical models, engineering tools or technical instruments used to decode how virtual communities are formed, become stable, maintain their momentum and grow in size and scope. Although this thrust of research, which is largely informed by social theory, makes useful inroads to understanding community management in virtual settings, it dismisses or undermines the practice these communities become engaged in – what is actually being done online and/or offline. As a result, very little is known about the artifactual properties of technology underlying these virtualities, the way technology is implicated through practice, the extent to which online and offline practices intertwine to determine community success or failure, and how new practices emerge across disciplinary boundaries and application domains.

This special issue concentrates on understanding communities through analysis of virtual tells and remains of humans as they become co-engaged in practice. Specifically, it seeks to explore the explanatory power of virtual tells and their potential contribution towards improved understandings of structural and behavioral facets of communities, the knowledge possessed by their members, but also the way this knowledge is (re)constructed and implicated by individual or collective activity. The term ‘virtual tells’ refers to data which can be used to reveal certain configurations of people, artifacts and social relations that emerge through recurrent co-engagement in a designated practice. The virtual nature of tells implies that they exist online or that they can be derived as by-products of processing and analysis. Moreover, it is useful to distinguish tells that are retained within virtual settlements from other types of tells that take the form of observable patterns of social behavior.
detected by social surveys, interviews, or social network analysis. For data retained within virtual settlements, their collection is enabled or constrained by inscriptions in technology (i.e., the settlement’s Application Programming Interfaces – APIs), determining the type, form and range of online tells. Data collected through qualitative inquiries and social surveys do not necessitate the existence of virtual settlements, thus they are not limited in the sense that online tells are. At times, they may lead to richer data sets capable of explaining a wider range of phenomena provided that researchers make careful steps in defining data elements, data collection phases and the means for analysis. Nevertheless, there is no guarantee that such data will be collected in sufficient quantity and quality to facilitate explanation of the phenomenon under investigation.

THEMES AND FOCUS OF THE SPECIAL ISSUE

Analysis of communities through the lens of virtual tells has received substantial attention in recent years, resulting in a scholarship that seeks to improve existing theories on information systems research and engineering practices. As a result, there have been prominent debates on a number of issues, with one standing out very promptly:

Is it communities as pre-existent social structures that define the activities members engage in, or is it the activities themselves that generate a community by forming the ‘glue’ that holds together a configuration of people, artefacts and social relations?

For researchers keen to examine phenomena in virtual community settings, responding to this question has various implications on the choice of suitable methodology, unit of analysis and appropriate technical instrument. If it is the pre-existent structure of the community that defines activities at any time, then perhaps an appropriate methodological stance is to concentrate on analyzing those structural and/or behavioural facets of the community that enable it to sustain togetherness over a period of time. The focus of such an undertaking, typically, is on available knowledge and the material remains of the community with researchers aiming to reveal the community’s common practices, toolsets and acceptable patterns of behaviour. Nevertheless, due to the distance separating the researcher from the phenomenon being studied, the resulting analytical insight is likely to dismiss ‘hidden’ or embodied operational routines adopted by community members in their daily activities. Thus, it may not be possible or appropriate to reach conclusions on how available knowledge has been used, modified and extended. If on the other hand, it is the activities (as constituent elements of a designated practice) that generate community, in the sense of establishing the glue that holds together a configuration of people, artefacts and social relations, then perhaps, the focus should be on cultural remains that unfold elements of the ‘hidden’, the situated and the embodied properties of those activities. This may offer insights to understanding the collective wisdom of the ensemble, as well as why and how it has emerged and become confined to a particular cause.

Two points are worth noticing. Firstly, both research paths focus on ‘remains’ of the past (i.e., what brought people together or what activities have taken place) to raise claims on prominent stand points and value sets. Secondly, in both cases the analysis does not rely so much on the quantity of the material remains revealed, as on relational properties that bind together a time period, a designated place or space and certain artefacts. Therefore, it may be argued that both analytical strands should be followed with care for two main reasons. One is that by nature of such inquiries, fine-grained conclusions are weak and hard to codify as this would require some sort of evidence of recurrent co-engagement in a practice or a linguistic domain. The other is that lack of material remains does not guarantee that a community did not exist, or had
no contribution to the evolution of a culture. Consequently, any account of community as long as it is grounded on the material remains and artefacts of a past period should be carefully motivated and justified. On the other hand, it is precisely these artefacts and remains that when revealed or appropriated hold the promise of invaluable insight. It is in this light that the present special issue of the International Journal of Virtual Communities and Social Networking on “Online ‘tells’ and the management of virtual communities” attempts to investigate theoretical, methodological and engineering challenges related to:

a) How elements of community life are revealed through the activities that people undertake across online and conventional settlements and

b) What (new) technology inscriptions (i.e., novel types and forms of connectivity, abstraction, plasticity, boundary crossing, etc) are needed to facilitate collaborative engagement and knowledge management within or across practice domains

THE CONTRIBUTIONS

Five contributions have been selected for this special issue. The paper by Dimitrina Dimitrova (Sociology Department, York University, Canada) and Emmanuel Koku (Department of Culture and Communication, Drexel University, USA) concentrates on traces of online and offline management practices in collaborative research networks and how these traces can be used to analyze highly distributed communities of practice. Their discussion supports the view that online and offline practices are intertwined to the extent that defines a duality in the life of professional communities of practice.

The contribution by Chris Kimble (European Management, Université Montpellier II, France) provides a critical assessment of the explanatory value of online tells for understanding community life. By reflecting on the contribution by Dimitrova and Koku (in this issue), the author claims that online tells are (only) the by-product of online communication – the residue that remains after an activity has taken place – they are not the activity itself and do not tell the whole story. This leads the author to revisit the long running structure-agency debate among social theorists and to conclude that, ‘it is the interplay between agency and structure that is of interest rather than the crude concepts themselves, and it is here that the methodological challenge lies’.

The article by Ben Daniel and Richard Scheweir (University of Saskatchewan, Canada) examines a virtual learning community. It makes use of social network analysis techniques to analyze ties and relationships among individuals in the learning community and interviews to explore the members’ perceptions of their learning community. Their study highlights how social network analysis can lead to powerful visual and mathematical representations of patterns of interactions within the community and reports on the members’ perceptions of community engagement online by accounting for reflecting on sense of community, identity in the community, shared understanding, boundaries, participation and social protocols, peer support and reciprocity, autonomy and social resilience, trust and awareness.

The contribution by Demosthenes Akoumianakis (Department of Applied Technologies & Multimedia, Technological Education Institution of Crete, Greece) discusses pre-requisites and constrains for tracing cross-settlement community life. It builds on a ‘practice lens’ that conceives of virtual communities as enacted cyber-structures revealed through cultural artifacts and facilitated by affordances inscribed into virtual settlements. The paper’s core argument is that it is the presence or absence of key affordances that determines not only what is retained as online ‘tells’ in a virtual settlement but also the type and range of cultural artifacts as well as the use such artifacts are put into across virtual settlements.

Finally, the paper by Shaoke Zhang, Hao Jiang, and John M. Carroll (College of
Information Sciences and Technology, Pennsylvania State University, USA) investigates the modality of social identities in the ecology of Facebook-mediated community life. Their study makes use of scenario-based interviews and analysis of online remains such as status updates, posting on walls with replies, tagged in photos, Facebook events and groups to provide useful insights to social identity management in a popular virtual settlement.

CONCLUSION

The articles presented in this issue demonstrate promises and challenges of studying community life using virtual tells and remains. They have been compiled by researchers across scientific domains, adopting different perspectives on the issue and highlighting the compelling need for interdisciplinary insights. Clearly, there are prominent topics of on-going and related research which are not covered in this special issue. For instance, theoretical insights informed by practice-based studies, ethnographic accounts of virtual ensembles and excavations of semantically rich cultural remains may improve our understanding of virtual boundaries, how they are established or alleviated and most importantly how they are crossed to create new joint fields of expertise. Emerging technologies, such as knowledge visualization, data mining and large-scale social computing platforms are also likely to have a catalytic impact on communities and their life online and/or offline. In light of the above, this special issue constitutes a small step in attempting to explore the ingredients of emerging cyber-societies, their enacted structures and pre-requisites.

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