Foreword

If you go back to the earliest days of virtual communities, methods were simple: journalists and researchers participated, and then wrote about it. Lindsy Van Gelder met “Joan” (who was really “Alex”) on Compuserve in 1983, and wrote “The Case of the Electronic Lover” for Ms. Magazine in 1985 (Van Gelder, 1985). Howard Rheingold got advice from a friendly pediatrician in the middle of the night, chatting with friends on the WELL in the early 1990s (Rheingold, 1993). When Judith Donath was engaged to be married, she hung out on the brides group on USENET and then used concepts from animal behavior to understand what she observed (Donath, 1998). Just explaining the medium to the public and to scholars was half the battle. Applying established theory to understand your personal experiences was cutting edge.

At the time of this writing in 2010, virtual communities/social computing are now part of mainstream popular culture. The medium is pervasive in industrialized nations, and mobile computing is growing explosively in developing nations. As virtual communities have accelerated in popularity, our need to understand them has grown commensurately.

Our teenagers are gaming and texting, our elderly parents are renewing friendships online that are 50 years old, and our businesses are locating and vetting new suppliers on other continents. What does it all mean? How do we begin to tease apart the evolving socio-technical system that is the Internet today?

With the rise of the importance of social computing comes a need for a wide range of methods to study these phenomena carefully. In this volume, Ben Kei Daniel has pulled together a global, savvy group of authors to survey a broad spectrum of methods and approaches. These methods borrow from a variety of disciplines. Ethnographic methods have their roots in anthropology, and social network analysis has its roots in quantitative sociology. Semantic network approaches have their roots in computer science and artificial intelligence. Conversation analysis comes from linguistics. And that doesn’t mention work in this volume coming from researchers in management, geography, mathematics and education. Most of the tools and projects described in this volume draw on not just one of these disciplines, but use multiple approaches in a complimentary fashion. Together, these chapters provide a window on our growing methodological sophistication in how to understand virtual communities.

Amy Bruckman
Atlanta, Georgia

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Amy Bruckman is an associate professor in the School of Interactive Computing at the Georgia Institute of Technology. She and her students in the Electronic Learning Communities (ELC) research group do research on social computing, particularly for educational applications. She is interested in the ways that we can design online communities to encourage individuals...
to create and share content online, and learn through that process. Dr. Bruckman received her Ph.D. from the MIT Media Lab's Epistemology and Learning group in 1997, her M.S.V.S. from the Media Lab's Interactive Cinema Group in 1991, and a B.A. in physics from Harvard University in 1987. In 1999, she was named one of the 100 top young innovators in science and technology in the world (TR100) by Technology Review magazine. In 2002, she was awarded the Jan Hawkins Award for Early Career Contributions to Humanistic Research and Scholarship in Learning Technologies.

REFERENCES

