Foreword

I remember someone once said that if you put two people in a room and tell them not to speak with one another, they will sooner or later always “disobey this order” and start talking. Humans have a basic desire to communicate with one another, a desire that cannot be controlled by others. And now with the multitude of internet devices no further than an arm’s length away, the walls of the room have disintegrated. Individuals are pouring online – interacting effortlessly with anyone, anywhere, and anytime, as is evidenced by the popularity of numerous social media sites. The most well-known example today is Facebook, with more than 500 million active users who are connected on average to 130 friends and 80 community pages, groups, and events, and whose founder just received the Time Magazine 2010 Person of the Year award.¹

It is through this interaction among individuals that communities arise. Communities have always been at the center of human interaction and as such have been the focus of attention of both researchers and practitioners alike through time. While the number of definitions of community abound, communities tend to have two characteristics: 1) a web of affect-laden relationships among a group of individuals and 2) a commitment to a set of shared values, norms, and meanings, along with a shared history and identity.² There is a feeling of “we-ness in a community; one is a member”³ and community is generally thought of as being in direct contrast to society, in which self-interest, individualism, and competition reign⁴ (Tönnies, 1887; Durkheim, 1893; Weber, 1978, von Krogh 2002).

These community characteristics extend as well to the online environments of both 2D and 3D virtual worlds where virtual communities, also known under names such as electronic communities, online communities, electronic networks, and webs of knowledge, have experienced unprecedented growth. These communities take all forms: from local interest groups to global professional communities and from customer communities to user innovation communities to open source communities. As the list of different virtual communities grows, so, too, do the questions related to them. Some of the more fundamental questions relate to how online communities differ from communities based on physical co-presence and face-to-face interactions as well as does participation in online communities create positive change in people’s lives or foster a decline in social capital⁵ (Quan-Haase & Wellman, 2002). Other questions relate to community dynamics such as how online communities are created and sustained and to member issues such as identity and why do members voluntarily contribute their own time and resources to the community. Firms and organizations are also interested in understanding how they can leverage online communities for their own value creation, such as through design, innovation, brand, and service communities. Finally, there are a number of technological questions such as what do mobility, participative web services, and pervasive computing mean for virtual communities as well as methodological questions related to how can we observe and study virtual communities.
While previous publications on virtual communities have touched on one or more of the above issues, few publications have brought together a set of contributions that cater to a wider audience. Not only does this book enable its readers to gain a clear understanding of virtual communities and their related advantages and challenges from a variety of applications and viewpoints, but it also provides a practical understanding of the tools with which to implement and observe these communities.

We are quickly moving into a time in which a) internet devices are becoming increasingly cheaper and just as accessible to people in developing countries as in developed countries and b) communication technologies are advancing our ability to interact with others regardless of differences in language and culture in both 2D as well as 3D worlds. As a result, virtual communities promise to change much of society, politics, and the economy as we know it. This book is of importance as it provides its readers with an understanding of this phenomenon, and my hope is that it will both enable and inspire these readers to leverage virtual communities in such a way that society, politics, and the economy will be positively shaped for future generations.

This book provides a state of the art holistic coverage of virtual communities that discusses the different facets of virtual communities, from technology (e.g. infrastructure, modeling) to social impact (e.g. participation, identity, governance) passing by different aspects and applications.

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ENDNOTES


