Chapter 4

Exploring the Common Ground of Virtual Communities: Working Towards a ‘Workable Definition’

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INTRODUCTION

A great deal of the literature on virtual communities evolves around classifying the phenomenon while much empirically constructive work on the topic has not been conducted yet. Therefore, the research discussed in this paper proposes to explore the actual field of the virtual community (VC). By means of a comparative ethnographic research, virtual communities are to be defined in terms of their inherent social activity, the interaction between the groups of people and the information and communication technology (ICT), and the meanings attached to it by its members.

This chapter will report on the initial propositions, research questions and approach of the explorative research of working towards a “workable definition” of virtual communities. It will also present its “work to be done” which will ultimately form the basis of moving beyond defining virtual communities, i.e., actually designing and deploying one.

CONCEPTS AND ISSUES

For now we will postulate that all virtual communities at least consist of, on the one hand, groups of people – in this chapter referred to as “community of practices” – and, on the other hand, information and communication technology. However, it should be noted that we do not make any distinction between for instance commercial and non-commercial communities of practice.
Virtual Community?

In order to derive at a workable definition of virtual communities, we need to first explicate the constituent parts of the terms: “virtual” and “community.” This “what’s-in-a-name exercise” will lead the way to some basic understandings of: The extent to which virtual communities refer to physical phenomena, and what it is that makes a virtual community a community to begin with.

According to the 9th edition of The Concise Oxford Dictionary, “virtual,” in the case of computing, refers to “not physically existing as such but made by software to appear to do so.” This definition implies that the virtual space created and mediated by ICTs is evolving as a completely new world. Adherents to this view assert for instance that the virtual space will become a placeless space in which hierarchical differences are negligible and in which more democratic interpersonal relations exist. Instead, we contend that the virtual consists of more or less the same features as does its real life (RL) counterpart, e.g., in terms of gender (see Boudourides and Drakou, 2000). What will emerge in the virtual will be the extension of present forms and practices of interaction and construction of meaning. If any, the virtual space could conceal or, the opposite, act as a magnifying glass of certain features and attributes of communities of practice such as their mode of interaction (or, lack of interaction); prevalent power struggles, and issues such as openness and trust. Hence, we assert that in exploring virtual communities we should not “disembed” them from their offline reality.

“Community,” the other constituent of the term virtual community, entails most of all that its members have something in common with each other and hold a specific “sense of belonging” (see Cohen, 1985). Hence, in investigating virtual communities we should gain an understanding of this common ground, that is; peoples’ individual experience of participating in and their attachment to the community.

Situated “Interactional” relationship

We hold that a virtual community is and becomes what its participants perceive it to be (interpretation) and how they use it accordingly (practice). Apart from the conviction that people’s perception of and behaviour in the virtual community affects its development, we hold that, it is in turn also the ICT that affects people’s behaviour in it. This means that the ICT is supporting and enabling as well as transforming the social behaviour of the people engaged in the virtual community.

Central to our approach, therefore, is the conviction that a virtual community must be perceived as an outcome of the “interactional relationship” of ICT and the socio-cultural formation in which it is deployed. Understanding virtual communi-
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