Chapter 48

Virtual Research Communities: From International Patterns to Local Implementations

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ABSTRACT

This chapter considers virtual research community as a socio-cultural phenomenon and a new type of social computer-mediated interactions that originates as a consequence of individual choices and research needs. It argues that the virtual research communities bring together perspectives from macro and micro-socio-cultural influences, traditional culture-based characters of communication of academics and researchers and experiences that are historically rooted in local history or way of development. Furthermore the authors hope that the history of Russian Communication Association institutionalization and development will not only help to explore controversies and problems of local virtual research communities, but will also assist in better understanding of how international patterns of virtual communities could be successfully implemented in local socio-cultural contexts.

INTRODUCTION

Today there is much thinking about nature and features of virtual communities, their design and institutionalization (Nilesen, 2000). The interest to virtual communities as specific structures of social interaction in computer-mediated environment (Ginetsinsky, 1997, Webster, 2002, 10) does not only originate from their impact on the traditional understanding of professional communities and their social practices. It is also boosted by the ample opportunities they offer for innovative modes of computer-mediated interpersonal communication and collaboration of professionals, who have similar interests, needs and goals (Leonov, 2002) and want to work together.

Similar to many other professional communities, the international research community has been influenced by technological boom and tremendous developments in computer and communicative technologies. This phenomenon was described earlier in the well-known papers of McLuhan (McLuhan,
1962), who studied the influence of technology (e.g. internet as a “global village”) on human communication and the processes of overcoming communication barriers in time and space, which followed the creation of new telecommunication tools (so-called “technological determinism”) (Griffin, 2000, 313). Later many other scholars stressed the impact of the internet on the effective development of the skills of the members of the virtual communities, highlighting its role in creation of “collective intelligence”, which is coordinated by the members of the virtual community in real time and space (Levy, 1997) and in serving as a source of civic organizational involvement and new personal friendship, a synthesis of all the opportunities of modern information technologies, and group and individual forms of communication (Katz, 2002, 352).

On the one hand virtual communities manifested themselves as a consequence of individual choices and needs. Their origination and further social shaping came as a response to the increased need for innovative modes of communication (Meyrowitz, 1985) of individuals, who were not only competent to deal with rapidly changing events, but also possessed knowledge and skills to grasp issues and events well beyond their homes and national borders, to anticipate, understand and intelligently respond to them (Mazurek et al., 1999), to communicate, share and learn from others (Jankovski, 2007). On the other hand they represented a new socio-cultural phenomenon, an innovative type of varied social practices that were undertaken in the environment that was influenced not only by a complex of social needs, but also by social construction of technology (Barnes, 2003, 239, 330), i.e. by the process of mediamorphosis (Fidler, 2002).

Understanding a virtual research community as a social and cultural phenomenon allows viewing it as dependent on a number of micro- and macro-social influences and peculiarities. These could have both negative and positive impact. To illustrate, some researchers, who investigate the effects of the internet on society, criticize it for holding back the development of interpersonal communication, trust and destroying “the social capital” (Putnam, 2000; Wellman et al., 2001; Katz, 2002, 117). Therefore, virtual communities are sometimes perceived negatively as communities that lack stability (Beninger, 1987; Katz, 2002, 114), individual culture and are unable to substitute the traditional one (Van Dijk, 1999; Huff & Syrcek, 1997; Katz, 2002, 117).

Positive perceptions of virtual communities are linked with the impact of the environment of virtual interactions that allows communicating (reading and writing e-mails, reading and writing messages on the forums and discussion boards, reading circulars and responding to them, etc.) synchronously and asynchronously, publicly and privately with a variety of tools (Scully, 2008), that range from e-mail (Tomlinson, 1972) to newsgroups, Usenet (Ellis, Truscott, Bellovin, 1980), mailing lists, BITNet (Fuchs, Freeman, 1982), IRC (Oikarinen, 1988), WWW (T. Berners-Lee, 1989), first social nets (classmated.com), blogs, podcasts, Wiki, and Web 2.0 (cited in Rozina, 2005).

Strong impacts of technology on the virtual communities make scholars tend to focus their research endeavors on them. Doing so, they usually support their reflections with some generalized references to historical processes of virtual interaction or fragmented descriptions that follow from one culture to another, from one social group to a different one, from mass media to mediation (Baym, 2007, Bermejo, 2007, Katz, 2002, 7, McQuail, 2007, Rosenberg, 2004, 589). As the effects of technology on virtual communities are added by socio-cultural factors, including traditional patterns and the character of interactions, specific social and cultural experiences, histories of virtual communities, which have embraced more cultures and social groups (Wood, 2001; Rozina, 2005), still need exploration. It is in this light that the Russian Communication Association is presented in this chapter which explores typical features of the virtual research communities.
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