

Online Communities: A Brief Overview



By Terry Baker

The Internet and World Wide Web have had a profound impact on the way we work, play and interact with one another. For many of those in the non-profit sector, it is one of the most exciting changes taking place in the way we work in, with and view communities. This paper will review the impact of the Web, its implications to the non-profit sector, the kinds of online communities which exist, offer some suggestions on setting up and facilitating an online community, including handling conflict and very briefly touch on what to expect in the future.

Introduction

According to the UCLA Internet Report (Lebo, 2000), the speed with which the Internet has been assimilated is unprecedented. While it took 46 years for electricity to reach 30% of American homes, it took the telephone, 38, the TV, 17 and the Internet a mere 7 years. The Web itself is changing so quickly that some say one web year is equal to three real years (Woolley, 1998). The rate of transformation is breathtaking, notes Lebo.

“The technology that supports the Internet is expanding with virus-like speed. The Internet’s capacity to carry information doubles every 100 days. Earlier this year, the number of online, indexable documents passed the one billion mark. Every 24 hours, the content of the Worldwide Web increases by more than 3.2 million new pages and more than 715,000 images. Late last year, the total number of hits on U.S. web pages passed the one billion per day mark. E-mail, perhaps the most basic of online services, continues to grow beyond all expectations, and with its expansion come intriguing new questions about how interpersonal communication and commerce are changing. The number of electronic mailboxes worldwide jumped 84 percent to almost 570 million in 1999. While in 1998 the U.S. Postal Service delivered 101 billion

pieces of paper mail, estimates of the number of e-mail messages transmitted that year range as high as four trillion.”

In the past 25 years microprocessors have become 65,000 times more powerful and have dropped in price almost as dramatically. Fibre optics and communications satellites have made the costs of transferring huge quantities of data negligible and the development of packet switching has made the Internet more efficient than any other medium (Environmental Law and Policy Centre, 2000).

Most of the information available is American but the Canadian figures are even more dramatic. In a recent global e-commerce study, Canadians were found to be the third most frequent global users of the Internet, Americans were fourth. Sixty per cent of Canadian adults have used the Internet in the last month (2001) compared to 57% of Americans. Forty per cent of users are women compared to the U.S. average of 31% (Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2001). On a more personal note, the UCLA Internet Report shows a strengthening of existing bonds and an increase in friendships formed on the Net. According to their survey the Internet has encouraged respondents to increase contact with others and communicate more with their family. Some users have friends they are only in contact with online while others have developed their friendships beyond the Net, making it a new source of human contact. According to ForumOne, which hosts over 270,000 communities, relationships are by far the most popular focus for groups

(Boetcher, Duggan & White, 1999). The Internet is not just about technology; it is about community.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2001) survey of non-profits reported that 87% of non-profits were on the Web or in the process of getting there in 2001, an increase of 21% over 2000. Of those surveyed, 32% said their websites were dynamic, offering more than an electronic version of their brochures. Of these, 44% were able to solicit and receive donations electronically, 54% had the ability to recruit and match volunteers and 63% were able to link visitors to their database. Fifteen per cent of these said they used Internet-based services to improve their organizations. Over half of these said they were looking for advice and/or downloadable tools for board development, strategic planning assistance, organizational structure options and information, staff and/or volunteer-development tools, evaluation, team-building tools and legal compliance information. Many nonprofit leaders in the Pew study (2000) said the web made them more efficient, helped them to communicate better and assisted them in developing more sophisticated relationship management but it had not yet been incorporated as part of their daily work routines. In a recent study of 900 nonprofits in the U.S., Michael Gilbert (2001) found that 64% of nonprofits do not collect e-mail addresses on their website, 75% cannot survey their stakeholders online and 78% have no e-mail strategy.

Online Communities

What is online communication? It is conversation that can take place with only one person or hundreds of people simultaneously. It is conversation that does not depend on geographical location or social hierarchies. It is a place where people can commune with others on topics of their own choosing. It is, in fact, a virtual village or community for what is a community but a series of interactions between community members? The definition of online community that most would agree with, however, is that it is a computer-mediated space where groups of people come together for some common purpose or activity over a period of time forming webs of personal relationships. Quentin Jones (1997) also sees a need to differentiate between the medium and cyberplace from the message or online community. Jones states an online community must meet four conditions: “(1) a minimum level of activity (2) a variety of communicators (3) a virtual common public space where a significant portion of interaction group CMCs occur.”

The new reality of online communities has a number of implications for non-profits. It is a “safe” way for people to socialise where they will not be judged by how they look or how wealthy they are but by what they are interested in. If there is any hierarchy on the web it is among those who are best able to articulate their views. It is an ideal venue for support groups, particularly if they are geographically dispersed. Visitors have an opportunity to simply observe,

engage and even try out new behaviours. A major disadvantage is the lack of context. As it has been frequently noted, 70-80% of communication is non-verbal. It relies on the tone of voice, the personal presentation, the emphasis of certain words, the use of personal space and physical and facial movements. None of this can be conveyed online except through the use of emoticons or “smileys”, small icons which use keyboard characters to designate certain emotions such as happy -- :). Acronyms are also used to a great extent such as “IMHO” (in my humble opinion). These augment the range of communication but can never approach that experienced in face-to-face discussion.

The Internet also enables nonprofits to do more and deliver a wider range of services. Much in the way of information, resources and technical assistance is available online providing non-profits with the ability to achieve long-term sustainability. Not only are web-savvy organisations able to obtain free information and resources on the web, however, they can offer their communities many of their “old” services online. Databases, information and resources are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week reaching far more people than could be managed in old ways. Chat groups may be easier than meeting onsite for some support groups and online tutoring and mentoring is possible with virtual volunteers. An e-mail newsletter may be the glue that holds many communities together and can be done with far less effort and even fewer resources than a paper newsletter. Finally advocacy is also, in many ways, easier on the Web using e-mail to reach not only group members but also the very individuals the

group wishes to influence. Information such as an MP database, online workshops on writing communications plans and online discussion forums to talk about strategy can make online advocacy even more effective and efficient online than it is onsite.

Unfortunately the Internet has also raised expectations. The performance of non-profits is often judged in light of what corporations, which have far greater resources to invest in the latest technology, automation and trained personnel, can achieve. Furthermore, Andrew Blau (2001) speaks of the dangers of “category killers” in the same sector that dominate their fields to the extent that smaller organisations can no longer compete. Larger sites are more attractive to visitors, which solidify their dominant status taking more visitors away from the smaller sites. A spiral then develops in which larger sites attract more funding and/or more sponsors giving them the resources to build and enhance their sites even more making them even more attractive to visitors and sponsors. With greater resources, large organisations are able to invest the time, energy and dollars that smaller organisations cannot afford. Forrester Research (2000) predicts that eventually no more than three companies will survive in each major e-commerce category.

On the other hand, smaller organisations can band together to provide a larger presence and share the costs of accessing or providing common services. Many services can be outsourced so that huge training costs are not incurred. Online

sites also have the ability to raise funds in ways they never could before. Through “Click-and-Give” sites, commercial sponsors give cash to designated organisations when they visit the site and have seen the sponsor’s ad. The visitor’s “click” initiates the “give”. “Shopping to give” enables organisations to earn some percentage of the overall profit of stores that sponsor them. “B2Bs” (business to business) offer nonprofits free software and technical assistance in building and expanding websites. The Internet also significantly reduces the costs of replication and distribution of information. Essentially all the resources are spent in the first copy of any information resource since the cost to replicate and distribute them electronically is virtually nil.

The Internet may well be the locus of choice for education. Information from a multitude of sources is available at a click in a browser and hyperlinks will take you directly to the information you are looking for in the document and provide other links for even more information on the topic. The computer never gets tired; it is always available even at 3 in the morning and for that personal touch, e-mails and online chats give you the metaphorical “high touch”. Many universities are exploring and have implemented long distance learning programs. According to the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2001) about 500 large corporations have already created virtual universities. Unfortunately, since anyone can put up a website and there is no governing body, the information may not be entirely reliable. Furthermore, participants often engage in online conversation the same

way they do when they speak. Speech may be evanescent; however, CMC, its derivative is not.

Finally, geography and time are irrelevant on the computer (unless, of course, you are doing live broadcasts or chats). Information and conversation are as easy with someone in Thailand as they are with the person next door. People can join forces on a project in workgroups from several countries through the Web. Conversely, if your agency is defined geographically, your local “franchise” may be facing competition from other sites (Blau, 2001)

Kinds

Communication may be characterised as the exchange of information between two or more individuals. Immediate communication is described as “synchronous”, which basically means communication that occurs at the same time. Communication that does not occur at the same time is described as “asynchronous”.

Asynchronous media includes e-mail, newsletters, listserves, newsgroups and bulletin boards and are best suited for discussions where participants want to thoroughly analyse an issue. They are not good for reaching quick decisions and sometimes a few people can dominate a group making it seem as though

everyone feels the same way they do, a fact with which not everyone in the group will necessarily concur (Smith & Kollock, 1999).

E-mail is the most frequently used medium and with good reason. It is easy to use, personal and a call to action. Unlike most other electronic media, e-mail has become incorporated into most work routines. E-mail newsletters are communications from one to many which include hyperlinks to “push” people to get more information from the website. They are good for passing on news, conveying information about new website material and as calls for action (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

Listserve are managed by one person like e-mail newsletters, but unlike newsletters, readers can respond to one person, many people or the whole group. In many cases, a listserve moderator approves each message before being sent out to the rest of the group. Listserve are popular because anyone who is online can be reached, they are convenient as the messages come directly to the e-mail box and inexpensive since messages can be composed and read offline. A list can remain dormant for weeks and suddenly breathe new life with one message precipitating an avalanche of others. On the down side, respondents sometimes need to read through two or three levels of quotes to understand the context of the conversation and you can not choose which thread of conversation you want to follow as they all come to you (Woolley, 1998). Messages are not always sequential, sometimes hard to get, talkative groups

can produce an overwhelming number of messages and “spammers” can access the list and flood the group with ads (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

Newsgroups are much like listserves except that you need to subscribe to them, download the titles of the newsgroup and decide which ones to read. Newsgroup postings do not automatically come to your mailbox; you have to use a newsgroup reader, often included with browsers and e-mail software, to check them. Discussions are not usually moderated and since they are carried over the “Usenet”, which has no central authority that can enforce boundaries and monitor postings, can become quite acrimonious.

Bulletin board systems (BBS), sometimes called conferencing systems or fora, enable people to leave messages on a particular site that will be read later, not unlike posting messages on a cork bulletin board. Unlike e-mail which is a “push” medium, BBS are “pull” media, requiring action on the reader’s part to access messages. BBS can be divided into “threaded”, which divides messages into topics in which messages are attached to the posts that are being responded to, or “linear” boards which post messages sequentially, much like a conversation. Threaded boards are neatly organised and are good for discussions on which readers need to find topics quickly whereas linear boards are great for having conversations online and for building relationships. Both boards can accommodate high volume discussions in a way that does not overwhelm the reader, readers can choose which conversational thread they will

follow, each message is contextualized and therefore better understood by its placement among other messages and they provide a sense of place (Woolley, 1998). Both boards allow relationships to build over time and provide a rich environment for sharing ideas especially when enhanced by a skilled facilitator.

On the down side, online fora are time consuming, open to misinterpretation because of lack of conversational cues and require commitment on the part of participants who must be motivated to log on. Threaded boards are difficult to keep organised because in real life conversations drift. To see the next message, you often have to load a new page. With linear boards, it is difficult to find information, achieve closure or reach a decision (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

Synchronous media refer to online communications which are immediate such as instant messages, broadcast events, chat rooms and Multiple User Domains/Dungeons (MUDs). Synchronous media are good for reaching consensus and for those who can not attend, a transcript is often available. Conversely, the challenges facing live facilitators are often greater than those faced by asynchronous facilitators. Timing is difficult, especially when participants are dispersed across time zones and spontaneity, rather than considered responses, are dominant (Duggan, 2000).

Instant messaging is perhaps the “warmest” medium enabling quick responses, help, shared comments and relationship-building. ICQ (I seek you), PowWow and AOL’s Instant messenger are good examples that allow you to see immediately who is online and available to talk (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

As people have access to faster Internet connections, broadcasting is gaining popularity. Internet broadcasting, like TV, allows one presenter to communicate with many which enables hosts to disseminate information, sponsor question and answer periods with guest presenters, conduct polls and implement training (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

When the term “online community” is considered however, it is perhaps the image of “chat rooms” which most readily comes to mind. Chats involve many participants who communicate to one another on a particular topic on a website in real time. Like cable TV, chat rooms have specialty channels such as history, sports or comedy. Unfortunately, many chat rooms are Java-based, allowing access only to users with Java-compatible browsers. Although HTML chat is almost universally accessible, it is “clunkier” than Java. Internet relay chat (IRC), which has existed the longest, requires special software to use (Duggan, 2000).

Although it is true that socialising is probably its most popular use, chat can be useful in a number of work-related ways as well. Guest speakers may interact

directly with 20-30 participants or hundreds when a moderator pre-screens questions and poses them to the guest. Team meetings can be held in chat rooms when workers are dispersed throughout the country to work on common projects and reach decisions quickly. It is ideal for distance education and product and support desks. Discussions may be continued after the live chats in related asynchronous fora (Seltzer, 2001).

Overall chat rooms are a great way to generate energy and enthusiasm, best suited when decisions must be made with all participants, real-time discussion is important, a guest speaker is needed to answer questions and sessional transcripts are needed. Conversely, access issues make it difficult for everyone to participate and it can become complicated to cope with multiple threads of conversation (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999).

Multi-User Domains/Dungeons, or MUDs, as they are more often referred to, are text-based chat rooms, originally created in the 1970s to play adventure games. People meet in rooms where they interact with others in “real” time. Participants are able to move from “room” to “room”, solving problems, creating and moving objects and building new spaces. Many are now used as social gathering spaces. Individual or groups, which generally own the MUDs and provide the hardware, software and skills to run the system, are generally known as “Gods”. “Gods” may devolve some of their power and prestige to “wizards” who will share in the responsibility. As computers become increasingly powerful and

sophisticated, MUDs are expanding to include real-time video and audio interaction tools in 2-D or 3-D spaces. Each participant's visual representation online, called an "avatar", is able to interact with others online in real time (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999) (Smith & Kollock, 1999). MUDs have been criticised for enticing participants away from real-world interactions into fantasy lives. Many see it as yet one more venue to interact with others in a social setting much as they would at a party, however. For some it is an opportunity to try out new behaviours in a non-threatening context making it easier to employ these behaviours in real life.

Process

Before creating an online community, you might want to consider the following:

1. Define Your Audience – Where will you find your potential members? What issues drive them? What kind of equipment will they be using? Do they live in the same time zone or are they spread out? How will you attract them and keep them? How computer-savvy are they? Are the issues they want to discuss of interest to the larger community or private or sensitive such as illness-support groups?
2. Establish Goals – Why do you want to create the forum? How does it fit within your organisational format? Is it to increase site readership, share

resources, brainstorm or encourage casual conversation? (Duggan, 2000)

Some groups meet to get to know one another, some to plan and organise, some to build and strengthen relationships, others for work and yet others for play. Whatever it is, it is important to tell participants the reason for the forum and their role in it.

3. Determine Your Technological Needs – Do you want to meet on a synchronous or asynchronous basis? Do you want to use a push medium such as e-mail or a pull medium like a BBS? Will you house the forum on your website with your web server or take advantage of the free services such as Yahoo!Groups? Do you want visitors to register first and get a password which instills greater commitment and honesty but a lower participation rate? Or will you let participants be anonymous, increasing the size of the community and allowing ease of entry at the expense of losing some control and the increased risk of spamming (the equivalent of online junk mail)? Will your site be so complex you will need a highly trained person to maintain it or will existing staff suffice (Coate, 1998)?

4. Choose Your Hosts – Will your forum be moderated, giving you more control, or not, minimising the work involved? If you do have hosts, will they be paid? What kind of a role do you expect them to play? How much and what kind of training will be required? Where can you get resources, support and ongoing feedback for them (Boettcher, Duggan and White, 1999)?

5. Establish Ground Rules – Lay down the law before you create the forum, work out ways to deal with problems ahead of time, make sure your hosts know them and post them in the forum so participants are also aware of them (Duggan, 2000). Make sure they are as simple and few as is practicable. Once the community has solidified, you can re-visit the situation and create a new set of rules (Rheingold). Consider dividing up responsibility for different jobs such as cybrarian and greeter. Do not forget the three rules of confidentiality that should be a part of every forum’s “netiquette” (online etiquette): Do not re-post anyone’s posting without permission, do not spread personal information from one group to another, and, if you are in a position of privilege such as the backer-up of information, treat all information at your disposal with the utmost of confidentiality (White, 2000).

6. Start Small – Begin with one conference with 8-12 topics. Visit other communities to see what the “hot” topics are (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999). Think about what online experiences you can provide participants that will augment their interest such as online training sessions or regular chats (Duggan, 2000). Create an extended universe in the form of links to other sites, produce searchable pages of information of interest to your members, encourage member-generated content, ensure that whatever you provide is geared to the user level of your community and make the site grow organically (White, 2000).

Online Facilitation

Online facilitation involves the creation and maintenance of dialogue, helping members to establish their goals, build a place where they can exchange ideas and encourage all to contribute and work through specific activities (James & Rykert, 1998). However, unlike face-to-face facilitation, online facilitators must also contend with the added challenges of dealing in a text-dominated medium with none of the physical cues that substantially enrich oral communication.

Good online facilitators incorporate the qualities of therapists, facilitators and technicians. Boettcher, Duggan and White (1999) believe online hosts should be empathetic, authentic, congruent and hold others with unconditional positive regard. They should be open to self-growth and inspirational, know their strengths and weaknesses, be objective and neutral, have a tolerance for ambiguity, be capable of conceptual and systematic thinking, be good listeners, keep the discussion on track, be able to ask questions that lead to insight, read the patterns involved in group communications and be conversant in all the media involved in online communication.

The following are basic guidelines from a number of other long-time moderators.

1. Topic management – Content drives community and that is why the creation of topics is so critical. Each topic needs to be relevant, interesting and attractive to a large number of participants. Going out into the larger world and finding relevant information from current events, similar sites and reference sources can generate new ideas for topics. Encourage the creation of more topics from members. Some ideas brought up by you or other members may be lost in what is happening at the moment and should be re-surfaced at a more appropriate time. Make the content easy to follow by titling each of the threads clearly and posting the goal of each topic. Seltzer (2001) reminds hosts to keep the space free from spams and disallowed content. Later summaries and FAQs (frequently asked questions) can be posted to make it easier for members to find information (White, 2000). To enrich the site, include white papers, diagrams, photos, video clips and encourage members to work on shared documents, consider time-limited activities or topics to generate activity, bring in outside perspectives and opinions, have interesting people online who have an interest in and knowledge of the topic and experiment with the focus of the topics (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999). What do you do with topics that seem to be dwindling? One option is to combine two or more topics together into a larger category. Rheingold also suggests posting a list of topics letting members know they will be retired unless there is interest in keeping them going. Some topics are seasonal in nature and can be e-introduced at appropriate times of the year. Williams (1997) advises that recycling old topics should be

considered on an ongoing basis. As your conference is constantly refreshed by newbies, they may also want an opportunity to engage in topics core members have long since lost interest in.

2. Understand and Be Able to Work with a Variety of Participation Styles -

Boettcher, Duggan & White (1999) identified 15 styles of participation and described how their energy could be harnessed in the creation of healthy communities. About 10% of all members, referred to as “core participants” are believed to create about 90% of activity. “Dominators” are core participants who set the pace, tone and content of the chats. Although they can dominate the conversation, making it difficult for others to participate, they can contribute ideas to enhance the community and are the best candidates for hosts, cybrarians and greeters. For every active poster, there are estimated to be 10-100 “readers or lurkers” who represent a huge potential for membership. “Linkers, Weavers and Pollinators” participate in a large number of groups. They do not usually invest the time needed to appropriately engage in deeper conversations and can sometimes disrupt the flow of existing dialogue. They are, however, able to help the community by making it aware of what is occurring in other groups. Even “flamers” who enjoy challenging, even hurting others, can be useful in workgroups and brainstorming through a process of “creative abrasion”. Analogous to the class clown, “actors and characters” can lighten the atmosphere of the community but their antics can also interrupt “serious” conversations. “Energy creatures” are so objectionable that they are able to

mobilise the entire community into a state of revolt. Although they can have a devastating impact on the group, they can also wake up “sleeping” groups and help them reach deeper levels of conversation. Their sensitivity to the smallest slight can be annoying to the rest of the group but “defenders” can also act as an early warning system that can alert everyone to new dynamics in play.

“Needlers” are those who seem to have a hobbyhorse, a point they return to time and again. As annoying as they can be, they can sometimes prevent the group from avoiding important issues and are important sources for new ideas. The ignorance of “newbies” of group netiquette can disrupt the process but the energy, enthusiasm and new ideas they bring more than make up for it.

Otherwise known as the politically correct police, “Polyannas” can be a positive influence but can sometimes drive other participants crazy and their reluctance to get into conflict can make resolution of issues difficult. “Spammers” usually refer to those who inundate groups with advertising of their product but they can also refer to the way some participants react when they do not feel heard. “Black and white folks” are those who hold their positions intransigently and for whom winning is often the only goal. Although they are often able to ask the tough questions that no one else can, they do not like it when the tables are turned and tough questions are asked of them. “Shades of gray folk” are the wafflers of the group who find it difficult to take a firm position on anything and avoid conflict. On the other hand, they are also the ones who are able to combine two polarised positions to create completely new viewpoints. Although their advice is

invaluable, the “untouchable elders” can stifle the input of the rest of the group who may be in awe of them.

As Duggan (2000) noted, the roles that participants change with their depth of involvement progressing from strangers to passers-by, to lurkers, to participants to regulars. Duggan provides some tips to facilitate that process. To convert strangers to passers-by, the most important task is to make the community at large aware of your group. This can be achieved by writing a regular newsletter, staging events and publicising them on search engines, hosting chats and publicising them and encouraging members to bring in new members. To convert them from passers-by to lurkers, the main job is to move them from the website onto your group by highlighting the group on the web page, making sign-on easy and encouraging participation through posting regular surveys. To convert lurkers into participants, the main task is to create as welcoming a community as possible. Be sure to send a message to new members within 24 hours of their request. To convert participants to core regulars, the key task is to encourage frequent participation. Add personal profiles of members, databases and searchable discussions and ask the membership for help in administering the group.

3. Building Relationships among Members - One of the main functions of the host is to encourage members to interact with one another. Help them to become active listeners, to react to others' postings. Encourage them to take

ownership of the space, to mentor and help one another and assist in facilitation of the group. Ask them to talk about themselves to enable them to get to know one another (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999). Use e-mail to praise, support and in some cases, defuse situations in a sensitive fashion and use e-mail, instant messages and the telephone to respond to any communications you receive promptly (Duggan, August 15, 2000). Carol Ann Ogdin (1994) argues that the larger the group, the greater the likelihood a small number will dominate the dialogue. She suggests dividing the larger community into smaller groups of 3-4 in a buddy system or learning group to help them get to know each other in a more intimate way that helps to build trust.

4. Establish and maintain protocols – Try to be consistent in the way you present your forum. If it is asynchronous, ensure there is a space or topic for introductions, for help and for announcements (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999). Keep everything in its logical place – social chat in social spaces, specific content in its own place, and so on. If it is synchronous, establish a regular time that is mutually convenient for all participants, spend 5-10 minutes on introductions and 5-10 minutes for wrap-up. Introductions should represent an opportunity to draw people into the conversation and identify their strengths and interests while the wrap-up should encourage ideas for subsequent sessions, provide an opportunity for everyone to obtain the groups' email addresses or URLs and get them excited about the next

session (Seltzer, 2001). Welcome new participants by name, respond to any questions they may have promptly and provide them with orientation materials (Boettcher, Duggan and White, 1999). White, Boettcher and Duggan (2001) advise hosts to periodically clarify the purposes of the conference and circulate clear, explicit “ground rules” to remind members about conference netiquette. Finally hosts help members use the conference tools, showing them how to start new topics and guiding them on “what goes where” (Boettcher, Duggan & White, 1999). They explain the accepted ways of quoting or formatting and reveal how misunderstandings can occur in a text-dominated environment devoid of normal conversational cues (Rheingold).

5. Good hosts model the behaviour they want others to emulate - Use first names, assume good intent, be a good listener, be explicit, ask for clarification when needed and count to 10 before posting a message when you are upset advises Boettcher, Duggan & White (1999). Do not put too much information in one post; break it up and make it more readable suggests Seltzer (2001). React to participants’ postings, especially when no one else does, answer questions promptly, reinforce participation with thanks and praise, keep discussion on track, post timelines and reminders, let everyone know when you will be away for extended periods, ask members for feedback and use e-mail for reminders, positive reinforcement and to invite those have been missing for a while to come back (White, Boettcher &

Duggan, 2001). Allow conference members to receive e-mail summaries. Notify them when new responses are posted to topics of interest and let them know when someone has responded to their postings (Woolley, 1998).

6. Publicise It – Make summaries of your chats, post them to the website, submit your site to search engines and send a message to your community that the transcripts are available for view. Not only are chats often more popular after they have been held, they can significantly boost traffic to your website as well. Find out where potential members keep up-to-date and post information about your site. Consider putting your URL on everything such as news releases, ads, correspondence, e-mail messages and business cards. Network! Post to other newsgroups or communities (Boettcher, Duggan and White, 1999).

Dealing with Conflict

According to Moussou & White (2000), there are five key characteristics of online communications that can engender conflict.

1. Lack of non-verbal cues – How much is conveyed by the pacing and inflection of one's voice, the use of personal space, the nod of one's head and eye contact? How do communications change when the gender, age, race, personal appearance and state of health readily apparent in face-to-face communication are missing? Less than half – some say as low as 20-30% of

communication takes place through the content or words, which make up online communications. Without these contextual clues amplifying the text, misunderstandings are bound to occur.

2. Potential impersonality of medium – Sitting in front of a computer is different than sitting with another person or group of people. No matter what you type, it does not pronounce judgement, disapproval or otherwise socially sanction or condemn what you have written. Any interaction with other people is beyond the black box in front of you, both in space and in time. It is therefore not surprising that online communications can release behaviours that are usually more inhibited in face-to-face communications.
3. Issues of asynchrony – If one person checks into a conference once a day and another checks in once a month, their perception of time may be vastly different. This can lead to feelings of being ignored in the case of the frequent visitor and feelings of being “pushed” by those who are not as keen.
4. Public vs. private spaces and perceptions. – Not everyone has the same perception of what is “public” and what is “private”. Culture, gender, upbringing, personality and the degree of “safety” and “trust” engendered by the community as a whole all impact on how we feel about sharing parts of our lives with others.
5. Limitations of reading and writing – Unlike writing a letter that we carefully proof before signing our name and mailing, we tend to treat online communications more like speech. This can easily result in misunderstandings as we fail to contextualize our remarks and read the

postings of others equally devoid of context and can give rise to heated arguments based on assumptions that have not been clarified.

Two additional factors affecting online communications also come to mind.

6. Anonymity – Many communities enable participants to use pseudonyms online. This can be quite liberating enabling those unable to communicate in the “real” world to become more sociable. Unfortunately anonymity also removes the onus for taking responsibility for one’s acts. Given the socialising influence of societal sanctions against aggression, those who must answer in the real world for any aggressive or hostile acts are less likely to practice them. Freed of these constraints through anonymity, this “social brake” is released. Most online community members are responsible, just as they are in the “real world” but they can be equally, if not more, victimised by those whose aggressive tendencies remain unchecked.
7. Participation – Members who spend 20 hours a month in the community may feel more ownership and have a greater stake in the community than those who flit in and out. A flippant or negative remark made by someone with little at stake in the community can incite a great deal of resentment among those who may have a greater sense of ownership because of the time and effort they have invested.

Sue Boettcher (2000) suggests that online facilitators get used to the idea that they will never please everyone no matter what they do. If they do not control the “troublemakers”, they alienate the positive contributors who may decide to go to a more welcoming place. On the other hand, if members are policed too vigorously, complaints about censorship emerge, raising the hackles of those with authority issues and robbing the group of some of the positive results that can be achieved through the process of “creative abrasion”.

According to Boettcher, there are some actions you can take to minimise future sources of friction before they begin.

1. Software – Although it is time consuming, it is possible for the moderator to read and approve all communications before they are posted. To make that job easier, some software enables the facilitator to bypass all postings except those that are flagged by the use of some objectionable language.
2. Use facilitators to shape the discussion – Facilitators can model online behaviour and mediate between individuals via e-mail without disrupting the entire community.
3. Seed your community – Invite about 25 experienced message board participants you can rely on to create interesting conversations. They can make the space exciting and model the kind of behaviour expected online.
4. Give users filtering tools – If, for some reason, conflicts cannot be worked out between parties, filtering out objectionable parties’ postings can make the online community more pleasant for some.

5. Create a “terms of service” document – This should set out clear resolution procedures to be followed when behaviour becomes disruptive so when action needs to be taken, it will not seem arbitrary.

Williams (1997) also suggests that if it is the rules themselves which are in dispute, the best place to discuss them is in e-mail or a special conversational thread dedicated to that purpose so it does not disrupt the conference.

The task of a live online facilitator is challenging. Not only must conflicts be mediated, they must be dealt with in a short time frame under the public scrutiny of sometimes hundreds of participants in an atmosphere where responses are freed from normal social constraints. You will be called on to mediate everything from disputes between individuals to illegal behaviour such as posting credit card numbers. The following advice comes from a number of long-term facilitators.

Before replying to any objectionable postings, Moussou & White (2000) suggest the following be considered:

1. Use “I” statements not “you” statements – “The effective “I” statement includes three parts. ‘When I see/hear (behaviour), I feel (feeling), and what I would really like is (what is wanted).’”
2. Assumptions – With so much information missing from a typical posting, assumptions on the reader’s part often act as “gap fillers” filling in information when there is none. Assumptions necessarily come from the reader’s

personal attitudes and beliefs, past history and experiences. It is important to check these assumptions before acting.

3. Be an active listener/reader – As a writer provide as much context as possible so false assumptions will be minimised; as a reader reflect back what was said in different words to ensure you understood it correctly.
4. Perspectives – Understand that reality is more than just your perception of events; other may not see things as you do. Always characterise your perspective as that and not the “truth” or what “really happened”. Allow others to hold their independent view of what happened as well.

White (2000) also suggests not letting the resolution of the issue dominate the conference. Restate the problem as neutrally as possible, measure it against community guidelines or norms and, when conflict has reached resolution, let it go and get back to the discussions at hand as soon as possible. Avoid “one upmanship” and point-by-point defences that only make things worse. Whatever steps you take, advises Industry Canada, remember to give clear warnings and to escalate in an appropriate manner. Rheingold suggests facilitators avoid taking sides but not to avoid conflict entirely as it can be used to model the importance of civility in online discourse. Conflicts can be a wonderful opportunity to model respectful interchange. However, if mishandled, the conversation can quickly spiral downward.

In most cases facilitators will attempt to resolve issues quietly out of the glare of the entire community. Involving the community at large is reserved for more serious issues or for those matters involving the whole group. Many problems are caused by newbies who simply are not aware of netiquette in general or the guidelines of your community in particular. In these cases, individuals may only need a reminder of the guidelines and be informed that further responses of that kind will not be posted. Help people understand how they are projecting themselves if others seem to have problems with them. When you are unsure about the intent of the posting, Williams (1997) suggests you email the person directly and restate what they have said to ensure you have heard correctly. If you are still confused, ask if an insult was actually intended and find a way for the other person to handle the problem graciously.

White (2000) states that when someone complains to her about another person via e-mail, she will suggest that he or she ignore the other person or resolve the problem with that person directly. If this does not work she looks into the situation herself. Rheingold advises facilitators to encourage disputants to solve their problems on their own, or if that fails, to act on their principles publicly. Industry Canada (2001) suggests temporarily hiding disagreeable postings, inform the poster that they have been hidden and why.

If problems cannot be resolved quietly, the next step is to bring the dispute to the community at large. Even then, Rheingold advises, use your authority as online

facilitator in only the most extreme circumstances. Persuasion, not force, should be the major tool in your arsenal. Furthermore, advises Rheingold, put a time delay on your emotional responses. Sometimes exchanges can become quite heated and it is easy to lose one's temper. If you are unsure about what to do, White (2000) states, talk to a co-facilitator or a trusted member to get another perspective.

When dealing in the public arena, escalation of response is even more critical. Even if an objectionable posting is made, White (2000) suggests checking it out via e-mail first before responding online. If the person causing the problem is attention seeking, she further advises, keeping them out of the spotlight will defeat their hidden agenda and only if the problem persists should you bring it to the "front of the house". Industry Canada suggests posting a two-paragraph reply stating that you would prefer participants not to post that kind of message and use the second paragraph to get back on topic. Coate (1998) argues if someone says something controversial or offensive to leave it online and make a comment to the effect that the posting is an example of an offensive posting which "says a lot more about the person making it than the person to whom it is directed." White (2000) states that when problems are resolved in public, clear resolution procedures help. If there are none, offer one before starting the intervention, get agreement on it and follow through. Only in the most serious cases should you consider revoking privileges and it must be clear to the entire community why this drastic step was taken.

The issue of social order and control has become even more problematical in MUDs. Although each MUD has a comprehensive set of rules to guide it, there are still “outlaws”. There have been instances of “virtual rape”, harassment and other kinds of violence online and the response to these transgressions has been almost as violent as the crimes themselves. Transgressors can have some of their powers removed, be “gagged” so that the rest of the community can avoid them, have their online creations destroyed or be banished from the community altogether. In some cases, vigilante posses have been formed and “hired guns” employed to punish the transgressor.

The Future

What do we have to look forward to in the future? In his book, “Web-based Computer Conferencing”, David Woolley (1998) predicts that user interfaces will improve as HTML is replaced by such software as Javascript and dynamic HTML. As bandwidths increase and hyper text transfer protocols are improved, performance will be significantly better. He states that we will see more of the combination of media that is currently being explored. Automation of message notification and software that will make the creation of topic summaries easier will be used. Software, which now allows threaded structures to display responses in a continuous format to make it more conversational, and other software, which allows users to choose which mode they will view the conference in, will become

commonplace. Woolley envisions a future BBS showing live chat on one side of the screen and session transcripts on the other enabling the reader to go in and out of real time. "White board" capability will enable people to draw diagrams to communicate more easily with one another. The seamless integration of audio and video will make discussions far more realistic and speech recognition systems that convert speech to text may become commonplace. However, Williams is adamant that voice will never gain ascendancy over text. Text has greater precision, searchability and efficiency of storage. Furthermore, it is easier to read a message than to listen to it.

Peter Kollock is a sociologist who specialises in the study of co-operation, exchange and collective action in both face-to-face and online communities. He believes the key challenges in the future will be the integration of social interaction and social organisation in online communities. Without them, online communities become ghost towns. Using information provided by Axelrod (1984), Ostrom (1990) and Goodwin (1984), he came up with a series of recommendations to ensure online communities remain healthy and vigorous.

Arrange that participants will meet again, ensure they can recognise each other and provide a way for them to know how others have behaved in the past (Axelrod, 1984). Clearly mark group boundaries, impose sanctions in a graduated manner and use inexpensive conflict resolution mechanisms. Ensure that the rules created for using collective goods match local needs and

conditions, that participants can change the rules as needed and that these changes will be respected by those in control (Ostrom, 1990). Use software that promotes good discussion, invite talkative, diverse people at the outset, let the users resolve their own disputes, provide institutional memory, promote continuity, be host to a particular interest group, provide places for children and confront the users with a crisis.

Woolley (1998) states that the issue of identity will also need to be addressed. On one hand, registration of identity is important to conferences because of the dangers posed by anonymity; on the other hand, privacy needs are also of primary concern -- you might not want your identity in a gay chat room to be revealed to those at work. One way to get around this is to register your personal information with the conference organiser and use an online persona. However, if you participate in a number of conferences, the memory of your various personae and passwords may be difficult to remember. Woolley suggests that there should be a standard method for maintaining and verifying identities such as using one identity which could then be used across various conferences.

Woolley also argues for an easier way for people to find the "hot spots" which will describe how many people are involved in a discussion, how long they have been engaged in it, how recent it is and who the participants are. Collaborative filtering is another looming possibility. It looks at what topics you have entered

and seemed to find of interest and alerts you to other threads which may be of interest to you.

One of the greatest questions, Woolley muses, is will the Web be as popular in future as it is now? He thinks the answer is yes. Because it is not under any one firm's control, its fortunes do not rise and fall contingent on that of the host. Since its architecture is modular you can use the services of different companies for different functions and products. It is not one technology, but an amalgam of many. As one component becomes obsolete it is replaced by another without a blip to the rest of the Web.

Whatever happens, it is clear that the Internet will continue to have a major influence on how we view and participate in communities. This paper has provided a basic introduction to online communities but is no substitute for exploring these communities in depth on the web. The only way to understand is by becoming involved and being a part of it.

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