Chapter 3

Contributors and Lurkers: Obstacles to Content Creation in a Professional Online Community

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ABSTRACT

The long-term sustainability of online communities depends on the active participation and contribution of its members, but we have limited knowledge about why individuals do not post and how online communities can differ. This chapter presents an exploratory case study of contribution rates and lurking in a professional international online community that focuses on architecture and design in the Islamic world. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the community and the lurking behavior of its members. Using a web-based survey and log files, it asked three primary questions: Who contributes? Where do they contribute? And what reasons do members give for not contributing?

INTRODUCTION

The asynchronous and synchronous communication of Internet technology has facilitated the exchange of information across geographic and cultural boundaries. Groups of people who meet online and whose goal is to share information, ranging from formal work to social to recreational, are variously called communities of practice, networks of practice, learning communities, or simply online communities. Though the desire and enthusiasm for collaboration and sharing of knowledge in these communities is high, our understanding about the nature of who contributes, why, and more importantly why not, is much less clear. Our insight is hampered by limited empirical research and detailed data on the activity and participation rates of online communities. Though there has been extensive work done on discussion lists and Usenet newsgroups, most of these have been large-scale surveys aggregating many but often very dissimilar groups. With a few exceptions (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000; Wasco & Faraj, 2005; Schoberth et al., 2006), most studies have done little to describe the cultural differences and similarities between topic- or practice-based communities. As

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Preece (1999, p. 64) notes, with so many different communities forming, we need to know how they differ in terms of demography, focus or purpose, and the behavior of their members.

Key to the success of online groups is the lively and active participation of their members. We know that group members should be contributing, but we know far less about the demographic characteristics of who contributes and who does not, as well as the reasons for their reluctance or resistance to contributing. These are the issues that will be addressed in this chapter.

It is important to understand why group members choose not to contribute because if we can identify the obstacles that community members face, the managers and designers of online environments will be better able to cultivate a culture that encourages members to contribute freely and create the software that enables them to do so. Communities of practice vary in intent and size and because we currently do not know what is typical for particular types, studies such as this can help us begin to understand the range of normal levels of contribution.

The purpose of this study was to investigate ArchNet, a six-year old international professional online community, and to identify who contributes to the site, who does not, and what obstacles prevent them from participating more actively. Using a web-based survey and log activity reports, it is a snapshot of one particular online community at a single point of time.

BACKGROUND

ArchNet

ArchNet’s audience is made up of students and professional architects, urban planners, and designers interested in the built environment, with a special focus on the Islamic world. The site is free and open to all; access for viewing is anonymous, but contributing is not. Contributors must be registered and logged on to participate, and first and last names are a visible part of every posting. The site is made up of several areas including a calendar, digital library, personal workspaces, group workspaces, discussion forum, member profiles, and careers. Because of its hybrid nature, the site is difficult to categorize—the digital library with its large collection of images and publications has a different quality and purpose from the discussion forum, which is different again from the collaborative group workspaces.

ArchNet’s professional community of practitioners, educators, students, and researchers go to the site because of their work, but there are no work goals, and though it is intended to connect like-minded individuals, it is not meant to serve a social function. It is also somewhat unusual in that its target audience is intentionally more international than many web sites or discussion groups.

The site as a whole could be best described as a not-for-profit, open and regulated community (Plant, 2004), a community of practice (Wenger, 1998), or more specifically a network of practice (Brown & Duguid, 2001). As Henri and Pudelko (2003, p. 483) state, “A community of practice develops among people who, in the real world, are already part of a given community of practice, i.e. practise the same trade or share the same working conditions.” “For each individual, the virtual community of practice represents a means of investing themselves in the social or professional definition of their trade, to reinforce their professional identity, to enrich or perfect their daily practice while contributing to the practice of the community.” Architects, planners, and designers, like professionals from all disciplines, seek out opportunities for professional development (Sherer et al., 2003; Caffarella & Zinn, 1999; Marsick & Watkins, 1990) and for professionals in countries where access to professional journals and funds for international travel is limited, Internet technology offers a tremendous advantage. The aim of ArchNet is to support this community and provide an environment for sharing information.
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