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ABSTRACT

Many of today's popular social networking sites allow for the emergence of communities of practice. These online communities encourage individuals to play and contribute in different roles. This paper presents four *engagement archetypes* that define how members engage in online communities. Specifically, we discuss the different roles that members take when engaging as online community members. Conclusions are drawn for the organizational practice of engaging with online community members and the new opportunities that can arise from such engagements.

Keywords

Online communities, community of practice, social networking, engagement, cognitive surplus.

INTRODUCTION

People apply their free time or cognitive surplus in the design and development of content, imagery, and wisdom in online communities[1]. They post opinions, write reviews, combine knowledge, and trade goods. Organizations have recognized that people are willing and able *community members* and have begun to explicitly foster their engagement. Have we all, at one time or another contributed to a Wikipedia page? Sent a tweet to Twitter? Posted a picture to Flickr? Accepted a Facebook invitation? These questions represent engagement that members take part in in an online community; an editor, a communicator, a photographer, a socialite. In each, benefit is realized for both the individual and the organization participating with the online community. For the individual, participation is an act of donating cognitive surplus (Shirky, 2010), building knowledge (Germonprez, Hovorka, & Gal, 2011), or engaging community change (Germonprez & Hovorka, 2011). This paper provides insight into member engagement types when participating with online communities.

The ways that members engage with Twitter is different from the way they engage with Wikipedia. Each of these organizations has done well to realize that the 'social' of a socio-technical system is more than just lip service to members; it is a realizing that members donate free time, spend cognitive surplus on constructive projects, and do this free of charge if they are able to make a difference within the community (Shirky, 2010). "We [as members] function best when the depth of our knowing is steeped in an identity of participation, that is, when we can contribute to shaping the communities that define us as knowers" (Wenger, 1999, p. 253). In this paper, we investigate what engagement types that members can take within online communities. We do not expect a one-size-fits all role for community members, we expect that the in some cases we aim to develop our personal identity, in other cases negotiate information (Wenger, 1999).

Wherever we may be and under varying boundaries and conditions, we are now consistently engaging in activities that directly impact online communities. We are eager to contribute but we also expect to our efforts to be regarded well. As organizations begin engaging members in this domain, a domain that requires community interaction, we consider four *engagement types* that define how members engage in online communities and therefore contribute value to an organization and society. We build on the community of practice work of Wenger (1999) and provide a practical perspective of the role that individuals can play in online communities. We focus explicitly on members of online communities as organizations become increasingly dependent on the allegiance of members; an allegiance is the primarily built on engaging the different roles of members (Wenger, 1999). Only from knowing the available types of member engagement can organizations move forward in the hopes of participating in this domain. In this paper, we discuss the different roles that members take when engaging with online community members. Conclusions are drawn for the organizational practice of engaging with online community members and the new opportunities that can arise from such engagements.

The following section presents a background on online communities and their usage. We then present our four *engagement types* that define how members engage in online communities and therefore contribute value to an organization and society. The following section further highlights two of the four types with a discussion of member engagement in online communities. The final section presents a discussion summary and provides some ideas for future research.

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[1] In some circumstances people go beyond their free time to utilize such tools.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

In recent years, online communities in social media and networking websites have become common across the globe. *Online communities* allow for individuals to 1) create a public (or semi-public) profile within a restricted system, 2) define a list of users (or friends) with whom they share a connection, and 3) view and traverse these connections within the system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Types of online communities include blogging/microblogging (Wordpress, Twitter), social networking (Facebook, LinkedIn), multimedia sites (YouTube, podcasting), wikis/bulletins (Wikipedia), presence applications (FourSquare, Yelp!), and virtual worlds (Second Life, Teleplace). Online communities depend on an engaged membership for their design, maintenance, and overall valuation. With these communities, relationships, content, and practices are shared and disseminated through social interactions, changing the way that individuals communicate, meet others, and seek entertainment.

Today, online communities are considered to be more popular than personal e-mail (Nielson, 2009) with over 80% of Americans engaging in them each month (Corcoran, Elliott, Bernoff, Pflaum, & Bowen, 2009) and 73% each week (Page, 2010). Based on individual company statistics in 2010, social networking site Facebook has over 400 million users and LinkedIn has over 60 million (Grove, 2010; Rao, 2010). Additionally, social media site, Twitter has over 50 million tweets per day and YouTube has over 1 billion views per day (Grove, 2010). Interestingly, the company LinkedIn announced their 60 millionth member on Twitter.

ONLINE COMMUNITY MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

Wenger (1999) describes communities as "social designs directed at practice" and suggests that these communities are essential to "an organization's competence and to the evolution of that competence" (pg. 241). Wenger (1999) points to boundaries, locality, negotiation, and learning as critical parts of a community. While each of these factors constitutes deeper investigation in their own right, we focus on understanding community members themselves. If an organization aims to work with community members and treat them as engaged people, a home for member engagement must be provided. We expect different communities to attract different members; particularly around the two characteristics of 1) members being able to *identify* with the community and 2) members being able to *negotiate* the content of the community (Wenger, 1999). From these two characteristics, we expect members to engage in communities in different roles. We do not expect a one-size-fits all role for community members, we expect that the in some cases we aim to develop our personal identity (i.e., identification), in other cases negotiate information (i.e., negotiability), and in others balance between the two (see Figure 1).
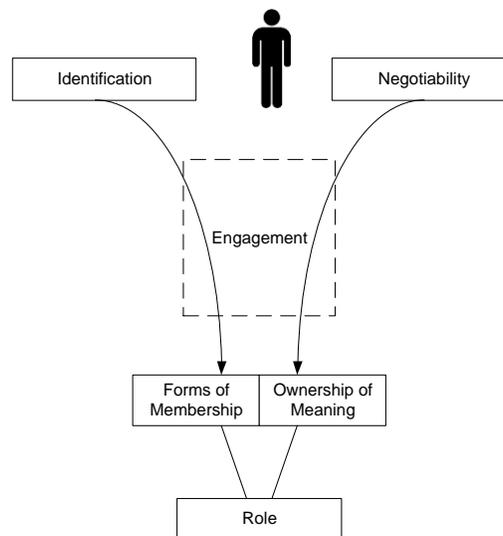

Figure 1. Identification and Negotiability in Online Member Role Formation

An individual can engage an online community through identification and negotiation. The characteristic of identification would allow an individual to relate to a community of practice, while the characteristic of negotiation would allow an individual the ability to influence the community's structure, content, and trajectory. Through a process of engagement, the identification characteristic provides an individual with a feeling of membership. On the other hand, the process of engagement allows individuals interested in the negotiability characteristic to feel a sense of ownership for their

contributions. Ultimately these two characteristics (i.e., identification and negotiability) along with the process of engagement lead to the creation of one's role in an online community.

Different members can approach online communities with varying degrees of identification and negotiability. For example, an individual can have a high degree of identification and a low degree of negotiability towards one community and the opposite occurrence towards another online community. We believe that the different roles that people take are defined by the types of engagement they are participating in. Table 1 presents our classification of four proposed types of member engagement along with a listing of example organizations. Each area of the matrix is described in more detail below.

		Identification	
		Low	**High**
Negotiability	**Low**	*Role #1: Reviewer* In this role, organizations ask individuals to engage in the review of products, services, or experiences. *Examples: TripAdvisor, Yelp!, Epinions*	*Role #2: Microblogger* In this role, individuals to engage in frequent, public information sharing. *Example: Twitter, Jaiku, Plurk*
	High	*Role #3: Content Contributor* In this role, organizations ask individuals to engage in content production. *Example: Wikipedia, Flickr, StumbleUpon*	*Role #4: Social Networker* In this role, organizations ask individuals to engage in social networking. *Examples: Facebook, Reddit, LinkedIn*

Table 1. Classification of Types of Engagement

Reviewer: Low Identification/Low Negotiability

Where identification and negotiability are low, members engage as *reviewers*. This category is an online word of mouth, where members exchange opinions and experiences about products and services. Research in this area has found that when an organization adds a technology feature to their online store, which encourages individuals to exchange reviews, there is a significant increase in the number of products sold (Mitchell & Khazanchi, 2010). As a *reviewer*, identification is low as members are speaking towards a particular product or trip location; the focus in on the item in question and not the posting commenter. Negotiation is also low as opinions are a personal, non-negotiated form of content contribution. Other members are not able to negotiate content that is not their own and postings represent the singular reactions from individual members.

Microblogger: High Identification/Low Negotiability

Where identification is high and negotiability is low, members engage as *microbloggers*. In this type of engagement, members engage to share their feelings, reactions, or updates. The difference lies in this engagement being largely centered on the member and their legion of followers. Members play a role where they are frequently expressing themselves in a public forum. As *microbloggers,* identification is high as members develop a strong sense of self in an online public community. The negotiability in this category is low as the messages often represent a 'stream of consciousness' from a member with little correction or negotiation of the content.

Content Contributor: Low Identification/High Negotiability

Where identification is low and negotiability is high, members engage as *content contributors*. In this type of engagement, members develop content through a negotiated processes (Germonprez, et al., 2011). Members reflect and act on content that is intended to have permanence for a larger audience. As a *content contributor,* members are not focused on developing a personal identity but on developing content that represents a neutral point of view and explicates correct knowledge for a public readership. At any point, the content can be negotiated but periods of activity often correspond with in-person activity and members engage with each other to correct or update the published content in order to create a correct and stable object.

Social Networker: High Identification/High Negotiability

Where identification and negotiability are high, members engage as *social networkers*. Members network, share, and build ideas in these forums with a high sense of communal loyalty and dedication. As a social networker there is high identification as members develop their self in an online public community largely centered on themselves and their followers. Additionally, negotiation is high as a social networker due to the in-person activity and member engagement with each other.

In this role, members are able to personally identify and enact change. As an example, in 2010 Greenpeace suggested Nestle was supporting deforestation and threatening orangutan habitat. In response, social networkers posted pictures and comments to Nestle's Facebook in protest, representing personal identification with the issue as well as a clear public negotiation of Nestle's public image (McCarthy, 2010).

EXAMPLES OF MEMBER ENGAGEMENT WITH ONLINE COMMUNITIES

With an understanding of the four roles the public is asked to play when creating organizational and social value, we examine two types where there is variable interaction and negotiability within the online community. The first type is that with high identification and low negotiability (*microblogger*) and the second is that with low identification and high negotiability (*content contributor*) (see Table 2). These two types are discussed further in the following sections.

Company	Engagement	Summary
Twitter	High Identification Low Negotiability	A short frame message. High volume messaging. Many members with short lived information. Well suited for rapid emergent events
Wikipedia	Low Identification High Negotiability	A long arc message. High negotiation on the content with a goal of developing neutral point of view.

Table 2. Two Examples of Member Engagement Types

Microbloger: Twitter

Microblogging allows members to broadcast short messages to other members. In microblogging: 1) posts are brief and immediate, therefore they don't take much time or effort and 2) posts are technology agnostic, since microblogs can be written or received on most cell phones and other portable devices. Microblogging represents a form of engagement where members are able to interact with the public and members engage through the one-to-many nature of the technology. Microblogging is used for many reasons, including individuals philosophizing, posing questions to followers, or commenting to a discussion thread. Microblogging supports engagement in rebroadcasting information members have learned, to share links with friends, or organize meetings in public spaces. Microblogging can be used as a diary to record behaviors and activities, report local news, direct short commentaries to someone else, or just for venting to the public.

Previous research has looked at how microblogging, specifically Twitter, can be used in the work environment (Meyer & Dibbern, 2010). They found that microblogging allowed for the identity aspect of collaborative work more than more traditional software systems (i.e., office software or workflow systems) (Meyer & Dibbern, 2010). Specifically, work team members used microblogging for social interaction and knowledge distribution; illustrating engagement where identification is high. In the same case, content was shared (and even negotiated to some degree) in the arrangement of schedules and content but not in a reified forms captured within the online community.

Content Contributor: Wikipedia

Content contribution allows engaged members collectively generate and edit information. Content contribution is not simply the act of posting new information or a link to a page but an evolved process of negotiation, discussion, and reification in the ongoing design of ever changing content. Content contribution is about 'getting it right' through a process of public debate, where news items, political actions, and natural disasters are considered for their historical context as well as their current impact. Content contribution is about removing bias, providing neutral points of view, and vetting information before it is released as fact.

Previous research has examined the ways that members engage the content contribution system of Wikipedia (Germonprez, et al., 2011). They found was that engagement was a process of reflection and action and Wikipedia is best understood as a member designed community and not a reified information system. The ways that people engaged were based on negotiated practices that shaped the forms of the content and discussions associated with article creation with no clear sense of identity creation. In the case, the primary focus was on the processes around the development of content with little concern by the members in the creation of a personal identity.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper presents four *engagement archetypes* that define how members engage in online communities. Specifically, we have presented and discussed the different roles that members take when engaging as online community members. While each of these forms of engagement may be looked at singularly, it leads to emerging questions of how the forms engage each other. In the spring of 2011, Egyptian people helped bring down the Egyptian government. The classical tools of revolution were paired with the modern warfare enabled the different roles that people can play across the vast array of online communities. Such stories have many arcs associated with it from the initial spark of the Arab Spring in Tunisia to the inability of the Egyptian government to close the country's Internet border. These stories of engagement could include reaction and reflection of the Egyptian people and how different forms of engagement were used first to react to social change and second to reify social change. In this brief example, Twitter was used to provide a broadcast voice of the people, defining where to meet and how to protest. Microblogging acted as a megaphone for the people. Only after the protests were the events fully understood, negotiated, and reified as members played the role of content contributors to provide reification and history to the events through Wikipedia.

Recent events highlight that roles within online communities can be seen in the many forms that individuals engage online communities. These events include: 1) the 2009 Iranian citizen broadcast in the face of disputed national election results (Gaffney, 2010), 2) the 2010 Digg.com member rebellion against administrative changes that did not correspond to their expected forms of engagement (Germonprez, 2011), and 3) the 2011 UC Davis students organized in support of the international Occupy Wall St. protests. In all three cases, the roles that members played in online communities were a cornerstone in the timeline of how the events unfolded and became realized for a larger public. We argue that there are different roles online members can play in the creation of both organizational and societal value. In this, roles may be best understood, not a singular type that a person can play, but as a set of changing roles that different members play in an evolving arc of change and value creation.

Our understanding of the four different engagement types that members can take within online communities needs continued investigation. We expect to conduct further research to qualitatively and quantitatively test the proposed engagement types. As stated above, we suspect that this engagement may be looked at singularly or in various combinations. However, future research should be completed to fully understand these roles and their relationships. In extending this research we expect both theoretical and methodological contributions to stem from this line of inquiry as we consider the implications of citizen action and the conditions which researchers connect with this constantly evolving and changing form of human engagement.

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