

Social Networking and Communities

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The Social Networking and Communities mini-track is now in its 11th year at HICSS, having begun at HICSS-43. This mini-track is concerned with social media and other social technologies and their interrelations with networks and communities (online and offline) in the context of personal life, education, work, politics and society. “Communities” is taken broadly to include (for example) communities of inquiry, interest, or practice, and networks of individuals that display community-like activity. Both virtual communities and social media use that supports or complements geographically based community are in scope. We focus on relationships between social phenomena and technologies, including how social phenomena are embedded or emerge within technological settings, how communities use technologies to further their goals, or how technologies otherwise influence or are appropriated by social actors. Analyses of individual behavior are considered to the extent that they inform understanding of collective phenomena in technological settings.

For HICSS-53 we received 19 submissions, out of which 9 were accepted and 3 were referred to other mini-tracks that better matched the papers. The accepted papers were grouped into four themes—peer communities, politics, communities of practice and social capital, and brand communities—illustrating the diversity of work on communities and technologies.

Papers on peer communities include peer production and question/answer platforms. Our nomination for best paper is “Quality in peer production systems – impact of assortativity of communication networks on group efficacy”. Rychwalska, Talaga, and Ziembowicz used network analytic methods on traces of communication in a sample of Wikiprojects to test the hypothesis that cohesiveness of private communication within collaborating groups increases the quality of their products. They find that egalitarian communication contributes to product quality more than hub-dominated communication. In “Learning with comments: An analysis of comments and community on Stack Overflow”, Sengupta and Haythornthwaite

conduct a content analysis of that platform to derive nine categories of comments that demonstrate support for learning, knowledge, and community. Although the tasks are different between these two papers, we believe that in the future simultaneous application of network analytic and content analysis methods hold promise for understanding how both the content and structure of individual actions lead to productive outcomes in networked collective activity.

Two papers examine roles of social media in the largest democratic elections on the planet, namely in India. In “The Anointed Son, The Hired Gun, and the Chai Wala: Enemies and Insults in Politicians’ Tweets in the Run-Up to the 2019 Indian General Elections”, Gonawela, Kumar, Thawani, Ahmad, Chandrasekaran and Pal code tweets thematically as criticism, insults, humor, and positive regards. Quantitative analysis of retweet patterns find that negative tweets are significantly more popular, corroborating in the Indian context the assertion made elsewhere that Twitter is conducive to negative rhetoric in politics. Charles, Meena and Pal conduct an ethnographic study of grassroots political workers in an Indian Parliamentary election, examining both their offline and online work to understand the impact of digital media on such work. In “Grassroots Campaign in Technology-Enabled Elections: Madurai and Thiruvananthapuram in 2019 Indian Elections” they identify “Internet-supported” and “Internet-based” actions that also vary on the threshold of application in terms of various costs. Digital media, in offering new potentials for political action, increase the demands on the repertoire of grassroots workers in both traditionally offline and digital practices.

Our third pair of papers are less tightly related to each other, but continue work on two central topics of SNC research: communities of practice and social capital. “From Handpress to Handheld: Rare Book and Special Collections Libraries forming the #LibrariesOfInstagram” by Bregman, Bell and Sparks is a case study that can be read as a mixed-methods digital ethnography with sensitivity to platform affordances (though authors do not use these phrases to describe their work). The study illustrates

the “potential for the dynamic and networked nature of the platform to support user engagement and institutional community development.” In “Examining Interactions in Social Network Sites through the Lense of Social Capital”, Musembwa and Paul define social capital as benefits gained by membership in social structures. They use a structural model of how technological, cultural, linguistic, and other factors influence Trust and Reciprocity, and in turn a “Sense of Community” that provides such social capital. They find that identification needs, trust, reciprocity sense of community and effective communication have greater impact than the specifics of social networking media configurations.

Finally, continuing a trend of the past few years we received several papers on brand communities and customer engagement. Based on responses to an online questionnaire, Liao, Huang, Wang and Lin investigate community satisfaction in the context of managing brand communities on social media. Their paper, “Understanding the antecedents of consumer brand engagement by managing brand communities on social media”, uses structural equation modeling to examine relationships between perceived interactivity, community engagement, community

satisfaction, and consumer brand engagement when using social media to interact with other members on smartphone brand Facebook pages. In “The Role of Social Media Technologies in Service Innovation: Perceptions of Exceptional-customer-engaged Value Co-creation”, Wu, Xie and Xiao focus on how “exceptional customers” can be identified and leveraged to provide “service innovation”, the addition or improvement of a service that is put into practice by firms and customers acting together. Their paper is a case study of similarities and differences across two corporate cases.

This collection of papers reflects the diversity of social networking and community studies. Peer production, informal learning, politics, communities of practice and online communities, and brand communities are investigated with methods such as ethnography, content coding, network analysis, and structural equation modeling. HICSS is an excellent venue for cross-fertilization between disciplines and research communities. A broad range of theory-driven and data-driven perspectives and methods are brought to bear on the understanding of socio-technical systems, and will be brought into dialogue with each other in the conference sessions.