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Rahul De

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore

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SOCIAL RESISTANCE AND THE SELF IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Rahul De'

Indian Institute of Management Bangalore

rahul@iimb.ernet.in

Abstract

This paper examines the phenomena of social resistance over the Internet as an important current component of activities in virtual communities. It also examines the various instantiations of the self over the Internet. Research in virtual communities has focused on issues of design to facilitate commerce or information interchange, and on the relations in societies that define or are shaped by technology use. The issues considered in this paper straddle both streams, and provide new focus areas for studying virtual communities.

Keywords: Social resistance, self, virtual communities, Internet society

Introduction

Virtual communities on the Internet constitute an active area of research in both business and social science disciplines. This topic brings under its fold a wide range of issues, spanning many disciplines. The objective of this paper is to highlight two issues connected to virtual communities, those of: Internet society as an active arena of dissent and the instantiations of the self (on the Internet). Both these issues point to significant trends in the various facilities of the Internet and as such require careful study. The literature in Information Systems (IS) has studied various aspects of virtual communities quite extensively, including virtual teams, virtual organizations, virtual enterprises, and the issues related to information sharing, cooperation, collaboration, trust, etc. The literature in the social sciences has examined the very nature of virtual communities, their organization, scope, rationale for existence and their implications on society. The research reported in this paper dwells on issues rarely considered in the IS literature, but that has a presence in the social sciences. The paper outlines a set of hypotheses about virtual communities bearing on social resistance and the self that have implications for organizations.

Virtual communities are defined as groups of people that communicate via the Internet. This is the broadest possible definition. However, the particulars of communication and the medium are important. Research shows that many characteristics finally define virtual communities: the notion of community, personal relationships, norms and expectations of behavior, attachments, dependence, and frequency of use. The principal distinction in the research is the understanding of communities on the basis of their observable properties, which may be engineered, or on the basis of their underlying sociology. A brief discussion of the literature elaborates this point.

Ridings et al. (2002) show that virtual communities have to be understood as social networks in a 'virtual' space that bring people together for some purpose. One binding force is trust and their research shows that trust is central to the sustenance of the group and its ability to generate participation and contribution. Their motivation for the study is the insight that can be obtained on the digital economy and its consequent value in marketing campaigns and market research. However, it will be noted that trust is not an essential binding force in all virtual communities. For example, in online gaming communities trust is not an issue at all, the electronic environment of the game ensures that players play by the rules. In another study, Raybourn et al. (2003) examine 'cultural markers' used to define particular communities. The research identifies cultural cues that will help strangers identify others as also belonging to the same community to facilitate information sharing and communication. In both cases, the papers directly address issues related to retaining members and facilitating electronic interchanges for commercial benefit.

Other research on virtual communities examines deeper propositions about society and the relations within societies that shape technology use or that are shaped by technology formations. With a view to examining emergence of newer forms of society this

research (Stevenson 2002, Burkett 2000, David 2003) assumes that deeper questions about the role, access, and impact of technologies need to be asked, on an epistemological basis, before the questions about the manipulations of technology for commercial reasons are addressed. The fundamental assumptions are: the move to the “information society” is not necessarily inevitable, that the diffusion of technology is not also a metric of the advancement of a society, that the information society is more democratic and participatory, and that “given enough information we can solve all the world’s problems”(Burkett, 2000).

The phenomenon of social resistance on the Internet refers to a particular usage of technology that enables groups of people, loosely or densely bounded, to actively engage against an over-arching, hegemonic power (Conway et al., 2003). Technology is manipulated and organized to support formations within groups and the emergent resources, of such formations, are then used in the resistance. The resistance may take many forms, those of organizing, activism, or of counter-propaganda, and in each case technology plays a central role in coordination, information dissemination, and information gathering, amongst other uses. Another aspect considered in this paper is that of the ontology of the self as it is defined in digital space. The self, defined as an understanding of being, of consciousness, is instantiated in multiple ways on the Internet and as such allows for many forms and roles (Wallace, 1999). Individuals who participate in virtual communities instantiate themselves in certain ways that are not always tied their real selves. It is thus crucial to understand these constructions or instantiations of the self to fully understand localized and particular interactions on virtual communities.

The first section of this paper discusses the constituents of the society of the Internet. This society of the Internet has its own characteristics and properties. In the second section of the paper the self as instantiated on the Internet is discussed. The self as it is constitutive of society and as it is constituted by it is examined in the context of virtual communities.

Society

Wellman and Gulia (1997) state “...members of virtual communities take for granted that computer networks are also social networks spanning large distances.” In this sense the aggregate of virtual communities constitutes social networks or the society of the Internet. The structure of this society is defined by the patterned organization of the network members and their relationships (Wellman, 1996). This definition enables analysis of the society of the Internet by social network constructs, as also by political constructs.

The period from 1994, after the release of the web browser Mosaic, till the turn of the century saw the upsurge of what was termed as E-Commerce and that grew into a much-hyped and much-invested proposition that followed a predictable cycle of boom and then bust. The value propositions of e-commerce, as realized in business-to-business, business-to-consumer and consumer-to-consumer models, survived and are now beginning to show promise (and profit). What was happening simultaneously with the business explosion of the web was the alternative use of the Internet as an organizing medium, as an activist space and as a medium for counter-propaganda. These phenomena were not necessarily unnoticed, or in any way secretive in nature, but they did not occupy the front pages of the media and they did not attract investors. These phenomena were both defined and adopted by people in various capacities to advance a cause, an idea or simply act.

There are 605.60 million users of the Internet worldwide, as estimated by the Scope Communications Group (www.nua.com), a Dublin based company. Given that there are about 6.2 billion people in the world (Population Reference Bureau, prb.org) as a whole, the number of Internet users is about 9.6% of the total population. In comparison to television, where the estimates are around 4 billion viewers around the globe, the reach of the Internet seems to be small, but there remains a crucial and defining difference: the Internet enables users to participate in the content whereas television does not. Television and other media have tremendous reach but only as broadcast sources, a few control the content broadcast to many. The Internet society may be further characterized as follows:

There is no censorship of this society. Many governments and organizations that include Internet Service Providers, though, have defined an “acceptable use policy” that specifies the limits of this free speech, in terms of limiting pornography, spam, etc.

The infrastructure of the Internet is indestructible, in that the distributed nodes can be individually removed or disabled however the larger network thrives on the remaining nodes (this is a consequence of the cold-war-defense protective design of the Internet).

The society is, largely, monolingual as English dominates the flow of communication even though many languages thrive, particularly in Europe.

The society has evolved and continues to evolve its social norms of communication, expression, exchange and behavior.

The society is easily accessed and most communities remain open, rather than exclusive.

The society includes multiple forms of communication, including voice and images and video along with text, and the costs and ease of producing content in these forms remains relatively inexpensive.

The society freely distributes its infrastructure, the software part, in the form of servers and protocols that may be adopted by anybody around the world.

Various communities and groups have emerged in the society of the Internet. These communities are distinguished by thematic content and the delivery mechanism. Free service providers such as Yahoo Groups support thousands of informal groups, with restricted or unrestricted access, that define communities in the broadest sense. Other types of communities include chat rooms, multi-user gaming, *metaworlds*, and interactive video and voice (Wallace, 1999). Communities may form and disband easily on the Internet. The Internet is thus a “virtual” space that is not constituted by physical objects of land, bricks, cement, furniture, but of a collection of files, folders and accounts. These digital assets may be created as quickly as they may be destroyed; what perpetuates them is the common interest of the community. Further, the members of this community may be widely dispersed geographically, and so may the files and accounts of the community, their physical presence and a geographic location at any point of time being irrelevant to their functioning.

Virtual communities exist and people flock to them because they derive economic benefit from such participation. Researchers (Kollock, 1997, Butler, 2001) argue that incentives for participation include gifts and public goods, and benefits derived from reciprocity and sharing. Participants gain from resources such as information, influence and social support that are quantifiable as utilities or economic benefits.

When theorizing about the diffusion, spread or acceptance of a technology in society it is of interest to consider not only the extent of the diffusion but also to bear upon the changes that the technology introduces in the structures and functioning of the society. These changes may be studied in different ways. An interesting aspect of change introduced by technology in society has to do with how the un-empowered, or marginal, can use technology to challenge dominant forces and the powerful (Kamat, 2002, Conway et al., 2003). Technology becomes a tool by which people can reinvent social relations or recast themselves in power relations; technology mediates the opposing dynamics in society and posits newer social formations. The following sections describe three radical uses of technology in society: one to organize resistance to war; another to actively challenge and shut down funding for hate groups; and a third as a counter-propaganda medium. These examples constitute brief case studies of the uses of technology; the general characteristics are obtained from the literature and other cases.

Organizing

On February 15, 2003, in over 600 cities around the world millions of protestors took to the streets, marched, chanted and waved banners against the impending bombing of Iraq by a US-led coalition. Cities such as London, Berlin, Rome, Johannesburg, Kiev, Kuala Lumpur, Manila, and Sydney saw massive turnouts, and in London one commentator said that it was the largest protest of its kind in the history of Great Britain. Many have since stated that February 15 saw the largest coordinated people's protest of any kind in history. The coordination of the entire protest in 75 countries was managed through the Internet, through websites, email and listservers. Although the message for the protests was carried forth in conferences (such as the World Social Forum and the Asia Social Forum), meetings, teach-ins and local rallies, its worldwide coordination was effected through the Internet. Some characteristics of the organizing process are:

Although local government and elected officials were involved in individual capacity, there was no government-level official sanction or involvement in the organizing.

The organizers put forth a common message, cutting across languages, cultures and religious affiliations.

There was an explicit agreement on the general character of the protests, emphasizing non-violent, civil disobedience techniques.

The funding for the organizing was borne entirely by contributions of the people, without any corporate or governmental involvement.

The Internet formed the backbone for the organizing, in that the plan was formalized over the Internet but further communication at the local level was effected through community radio and other media that was available to those without Internet access.

This facet of the society of the Internet, of a space for organizing, contrasts sharply with the one written about in the mainstream media – where the Internet plays a role in leveraging business processes or in feeding content to passive consumers. Even though the protests were eventually “unsuccessful,” as the US-led coalition did go to war against Iraq, the organizing of the protests represented a significant event in the global society of the Internet. The organizers relied on the openness, the English language (mainly), absence of censorship, the rapidly developed norms of organizing, the multiple formats of data exchange and the widely available free software to successfully coordinate the rallies.

Activism

The Internet also provides a medium for direct action for a cause, in addition to its support capabilities. Email campaigns are widely known and used by people and organizations around the world. Some are designed to be irritants, as in the campaign by some students at the University of California, Berkeley, to jam the telephone lines of a notorious televangelist (who had been embroiled in tax-fraud and sex scandals) by programming a computer dialer to incessantly dial the toll-free number, while others are directed at canvassing and lobbying public officials via email, SMS, fax and pager messages. The Internet provides a medium, perhaps unrivaled in history, where the rich, influential, and powerful have known and public addresses that the powerless can access to put across their message. And even though the messages may be scanned, filtered, pruned and altered by layers of intermediaries, both human and non-human in nature, their impact is direct and tangible in many cases. This mode of activism has the following characteristics:

The activists may be geographically distributed, where the target of their activism is a known entity with an address on the Internet.

The actions may be performed by humans or by software agents acting on behalf of humans (as in the case of denial-of-service programs unleashed by hackers).

The Internet permits both synchronous and asynchronous actions, where the action may be suited to the demands of the situation.

The Internet also permits anonymous action, where the activists are not obliged to leave a trail of their identity.

As an example of activism on the Internet, consider the case of the Campaign to Stop Funding Hate (CSFH), a loose coalition of students, professionals, workers and artists who banded together on the Internet to stop the flow of dollars from non-resident Indians to sectarian hate-groups such as the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or the National Self-Service Organization) and its affiliates in India. In October 2002, the CSFH released a document titled “A Foreign Exchange of Hate: IDRF and the American Funding of Hindutva” simultaneously in India and on its website (www.stopfundinghate.org). Newspapers and the television media in India carried reports and interviews with the authors of the report that said that companies such as Cisco, Oracle, Sun, Microsoft, AOL, etc, were being used, through the means of matching funds, to contribute large sums of money to the IDRF (India Development and Relief Fund), a Maryland-based charity that was a front organization for the RSS and its affiliates. CSFH had used information available on the websites of the RSS organizations in the US, as well as public documents available from government resources to conduct their research. After releasing the report, the CSFH set up petitions, letter campaigns and an FAQ on their website to further inform the world media and donors about the activities of IDRF. The repercussions were immediate - many of the corporations stopped their contributions to IDRF and many media channels carried reports on the exposure. CSFH sustained its efforts in publicizing the IDRF's activities and stories appeared in major newspapers such as the *Financial Times* (report by Luce and Sevastopulo, February 20, 2003) and in the *Wall Street Journal* (report by Banks, Feb 18, 2003).

Counter-Propaganda

Propaganda means the methodical propagation of a particular doctrine or the material spread by the advocates of a doctrine (Webster's Dictionary, 1984). In lay terms propaganda connotes a negative sense of forcing an idea or political philosophy on people by clever demagoguery, manipulation or persuasion. Herman and Chomsky (1988) state that the mass media in the United States of America performs the role of inculcating individuals with values, beliefs, and codes of behavior by means of propaganda. When the media are controlled by those in power and those who have money, by their "propaganda model" they posit that news and information over the media are filtered to determine news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow government and dominant private interests to get their message out to the public. A similar view is held by Bagdikian (1997), who states that the major media in the USA are controlled by a handful of corporations whose interests are always positively presented, and whose influence over citizens, through control over the images and text of the media, is more powerful than schools, religion, parents and even the government itself.

The Internet is also a rich source of news and information but it is not under the control of governments or wealthy private interests (one can add as a caveat that the government of the US funded the development of the Internet, still maintains the backbone, and through an act of legislation made it open to the public). In this respect it is not party to the propaganda issued by the other media. As was pointed out earlier, the Internet enables users to post news and messages as much as to consume. In recent times, the Internet has become a de facto source for alternative news and viewpoints. Ninan (2003) notes that the Internet is now beginning to upstage the mainstream media, tv and newspapers, as the main source of news for 'news junkies' all over the world. After having "shattered the insularity of Western public opinion," the Internet is providing alternative viewpoints to the mainstream and "moving on to shaping it." The Internet reverses the propaganda intent of the controlled media in that alternative viewpoints can thrive and prosper. Mainstream media ventures such as CNN, BBC and many others have set up web sites that cater to this need of news-seekers on the Internet, in many cases to continue their propaganda efforts, however they remain far from dominating the content.

On January 1, 1994, an army of revolutionaries known as the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army) walked into San Cristobal in the Chiapas region of Mexico and took over its administration. The move had been carefully planned and the leader Subcomandante Marcos had readied a slew of reports, articles, press-releases and news broadcasts that were released to all available media, tv, newsprint, radio and the Internet, in a coordinated and sequenced manner. The movement had begun and gained momentum as a reaction to the NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) that the Mexican government had agreed to join and which subsequently resulted in massive displacement of labor, loss of livelihoods, loss of land to agribusinesses, and loss of resources to companies moving in from the USA. The Mexican state's attempts to thwart the revolution and its moral support were defeated by the steady stream of communiqués and press releases from the EZLN. Marcos used the Internet, particularly email, to broadcast interviews and opinions to people across the globe and particularly to those in Mexico who could not have received these through the state controlled TV and co-opted newspapers. Public sympathy grew for Marcos' campaign even as the population was able to express its dislike of the corrupt and inefficient government. The communiqués and press releases by the Zapatistas may be termed as "counter-information" or counter-propaganda, as it was intended to directly countermand the propaganda of the state. The press releases over the Internet reached activists for human rights, anti-NAFTA organizations and others through newsgroups and list-servers. The effect of these reports was that the repression of the Mexican government was often verified and publicly announced, much to the embarrassment of the state, and the awareness of the Zapatistas' ideology and sympathy for them grew around the world. In the words of Cleaver (1988), the Zapatistas formed an "electronic fabric of struggle to carry their revolution throughout Mexico and around the world."

The characteristics of counter-propaganda over the Internet are: the counter-propaganda can be generated by those without the power of the state or private business, and may not be stifled; the content of the counter-propaganda may be timed to the exigencies of the situation; and the messages may be targeted at like-minded and supportive groups around the world.

Self

The self has multiple instantiations over the Internet and in virtual communities. In every account that a person creates on the Internet, whether in a chat room or on a free email service, the person creates an additional identity. Each such identity is an instantiation of the self, and further, each such identity may point to the 'real' self or may direct the observer away from the 'real' self.

For instance, the online auction site eBay allows traders to create an online account that may be used for trading, buying or selling. This account is used for all commercial activity and eBay keeps track of the online person’s real self (and particularly the credit card or banking account). eBay has created a system of ratings by which popular sellers or buyers get high scores that improve their chances of increasing their trading volumes. Many traders who have received high feedback encourage potential buyers to examine their real selves, by directing them to personal or business web sites. On the other hand, consider the reports of ‘whistle blowers’ in organizations who report anonymously, via email, on their supervisors or colleagues. They make every effort to direct attention away from their real selves, for fear of reprisal or persecution.

We can delineate two broad categories of instantiations of the self in virtual communities: those that reveal the real self and those that elide. Research shows that most people who create online personas tend to project their real selves, as opposed to creating an alternate identity that differs dramatically from their own (Wynn and Katz, 1997, Bechar-Israeli, 1996). There are, however, several shades of gray in between the two broad choices of projecting the real self or a fictitious one, which are defined by the context and which correspond to role-playing with different responsibilities and commitments (Wallace, 1999). The two categories of the instantiations of the self, those of revealing the real and eliding the real, as mentioned above, refer to the intention of the persona creator, whether to hide the real self or to reveal it, and, as such, the various role-playing modes can be categorized into these two modes.

With these two categories in mind one can consider many possible ways of instantiating the self that are evident on the Internet. Table 1 depicts a number of possible instantiations of the self on the Internet. Each instantiation falls under one of the two categories. The table does not contain an exhaustive list of possible instantiations of the self; only a few examples are presented.

Table 1. Categories of Instantiations of the Self

<i>Revealing Self</i>	<i>Eliding Self</i>
Contracted Self	Anonymous Self
Mutable Self	Virulent Self
Reflexive Self	

The Contracted Self

Business researchers find that the online self remains contracted, or is only a fraction of the total personality of the real self. Valley (2000) found that people who negotiate via email tend to be less prone to share information and expectations of reciprocity are more rigid. In face-to-face meetings there is an exchange of social information that enables people to gauge others and repose trust in them. In online negotiations the self is withdrawn and guarded. This aspect of the self has to be contrasted against the tendency of other participants in virtual communities, mentioned below, who are bolder and more prone to open a wider swath of their personalities than they would face-to-face.

The Mutable Self

The self in digital space is infinitely mutable. Multiple ‘avatars’ (Paniaras, 1997), multiple email identities, multiple identities in chat rooms maintained simultaneously or serially. In addition, advanced graphical displays map visual traits onto virtual selves, enabling complex emotional projections of the self (Ballin et al., 2002). The mutable self is a revealing self, as all incarnations point to one aspect of the real self. Most people, as was stated earlier, prefer to reveal some aspect of their own personality, albeit a compact, somewhat idealized one (Wallace, 1999). Subcomandante Marcos never revealed his real self. He used the fictitious title and name in all his communications to the world. But he insisted on conveying his political agenda and beliefs to the citizens of Mexico and to his supporters around the world that were his own, in an idealized manner (he never physically appeared in public without a mask).

The Reflexive Self

The Internet compels users who assume different identities to often reflect on their selves (as noted by psychologists (Wallace, 1999)). The user is conscious of his or her projected image and chooses words and actions that conform to a constructed, reflexive self. This “self-consciousness” shows up in text messages broadcast to groups, to chat room discussions and to website messages.

The Anonymous Self

Use of anonymous identities to 'flame' and to challenge authority are widely known and documented (Levy et al., 2002). Anonymity presents a space in which individuals can explore dimensions of their selves that would not be possible in real situations – thus the need to elide their real selves. For instance, many chat room discussions revolve around sexuality and personal politics that enable participants to identify with taboo forms of discourse. They may fantasize about sexuality and politics that would otherwise not be possible.

The Virulent Self

There are many instances of persons on the Internet who have unleashed a vicious form of their self, a virulent self, to threaten or harm others. In the case of the murder of Amy Boyers, the murderer placed his plan of committing the crime on a website before committing it [Grodzinsky and Tavani, 2002]. It was important for the murderer to realize his virulent self in the form of an online personality before committing the act. In other cases, persons have created virulent instances of themselves as avatars or players in multi-user domain games. They are ruthless in their play and project a devastating form that is totally alien to their real selves.

Conclusion

The use of virtual communities for organizing, activism, and counter-propaganda on the Internet are facilities that have grown not as a direct result of premeditated design by the users, but because of requirements that arose from the society at large. Those who look to the Internet for sustainable models of community or of commerce have to include in their analysis these serendipitous uses. Research shows that the 'social capital' (Uslaner, 2000) of the Internet may or may not be increased by such deployments; however, these phenomena are important and have to be included in the study of virtual communities.

IS research relies on a fundamental epistemology of individuals as economic actors who act, mostly, rationally, in their own interest, and in conformity with the implicit goals of the organization(s) to which they belong. Their actions may thus be understood from within this framework. With virtual communities and with the possibility of individuals exhibiting multiple selves, this framework becomes weak. Individuals acting as citizens (of their nation or of the world) need not act in a 'rational' manner, as understood in the context of the organization, if they are participating in political organizing, activism or counter-propaganda. An alternative set of hypotheses has to be generated to understand their behavior in the larger context of the society. For example, the issues related to monitoring employee email and Internet usage, a topic of much debate within the IS community, rely on assumptions regarding the individuals role and responsibilities within the organization. Monitoring of political activism or organizing requires a fresh set of decisions regarding what is to be considered a private political space within organizations. The meditations on the self point to the fact that targeting individuals for campaigns or for information extraction, for the purposes of e-business, would have to account for the various incarnations that users have adopted and how their perceptions would be mediated by such. Every construction of the self will exhibit traits, possibly, inconsistent with or extensions of the real self. Given that much research focuses on factors that help to enrich the virtual community experience (Rothaermel and Sugiyama, 2001), for instance, it is vital to include in this analysis the role of the ontology of the self, as the targeting seems to focus on an approximation of the real self. In the larger context of organizing, activism and counter-propaganda by virtual communities developed in this paper it is important to understand that the multiple instances of the self will shape future changes that these communities will be able to effect. Thus, understanding the role of the different instantiations of the self in virtual communities is crucial to understand the future of these communities themselves, and the larger society in general.

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