

A Community Membership Life Cycle Model

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Abstract—Web 2.0 is transforming the internet: Information consumers become information producers and consumers at the same time. In virtual places like Facebook, Youtube, discussion boards and weblogs diversified topics, groups and issues are propagated and discussed. Today an internet user is a member of lots of communities at different virtual places. Real life group membership and group behavior has been analyzed in science intensively in the last decades. Most interestingly, to our knowledge, user roles and behavior have not been adapted to the modern internet. In this work, we give a short overview of traditional community roles. We adapt those models and apply them to virtual online communities. We suggest a community membership life cycle model describing roles a user can take during his membership in a community. Our model is systematic and generic; it can be adapted to concrete communities in the web. The knowledge of a community's life cycle allows influencing the group structure: Stage transitions can be supported or harmed, e.g. to strengthen the binding of a user to a site and keep communities alive.

Index Terms—Community Membership Life Cycle Model, Virtual Communities, Online Communities, Life Cycle, Social Network Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Web 2.0 is ubiquitous in the net. Personalization, customizing, user-created content and participation of the many are the fundament, Web 2.0 is built on. In the old internet, virtual places ("sites") communicated mainly unidirectional: A fixed number of information producers (authors) created the content for masses of information consumers, the "site visitors". Web 2.0 is changing this by making everybody not only an information consumer but also an information producer. Toffler ([Toffler, 1984]) suggested the term "prosumer". A new kind of mass communication media is currently being established, letting masses of information creators communicate with masses of information consumers. Thousands of different virtual places have been built: Discussion boards on every thinkable topic are available in the net, where one can discuss the latest news of roadsters, the Swine Flue or politics. Weblogs and Twitter [Twitter Inc., 2009] are changing the media and the journalistic world enabling us to participate, for example, in Iran's current political development. Facebook [Facebook Inc., 2009] as a social networking platform lets users share personal content and media. Flickr [Flickr, 2009] is specialized on pictures. Xing [Xing GmbH, 2009] describes itself as a business platform. All this places we call virtual communities. The phrase "virtual community" has first been used by Rheingold [Rheingold, 1994], [Rheingold, 2000]. He was participating in an early online community called the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link). Already in 1994 he

wrote "... virtual communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer [...] networks" ([Rheingold, 1994] p.57). Rheingold describes virtual online communities similar to real life groups and communities: "In cyberspace, we chat and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, perform acts of commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games and meta-games, flirt ... We do everything people do, when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens" [Rheingold, 1994] p.58].

Complementary, Lazar and Preece [Lazar and Preece, 1998] defined four attributes of a virtual online community:

- 1) People, who interact socially to satisfy their needs and/or perform roles.
- 2) A shared purpose, such as an interest, need or service as a common goal.
- 3) Policies in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, rules or guides.
- 4) Computer systems, to support the social interaction.

We argue, along Rheingold and Lazar and Preece, that virtual communities can be seen in some ways like traditional, offline communities.

In chapter III we will give examples, how a systematic, generic community membership life cycle can create benefits. Chapter III gives an overview of related work. Our own approach to a community membership life cycle will be introduced in section IV. We finish this article in chapter V with a conclusion and references to future work.

II. MOTIVATION

Success of virtual communities is closely related to the group structure of its members. We expect many sites, like Facebook, Youtube [YouTube, 2009], Xing, Flickr, the local chess club, a MMORPG¹ guild and many more to be interested in as many members as possible. Many users make a platform a quasi-standard in its competence field. By this, depending on the individual business model, we expect advertisement fees, direct user fees or other forms of income to increase. The importance of a critical mass of users is pointed out for example by [Armstrong and Hagel, 2000]. Increasing the

¹Massively Multi-Player Online Role Play Game. These are games played online with several hundreds or thousand players.