

Online communities



Learning Outcomes

- After attending this lecture and reading the additional literature, you should be able to:
 - Explain what an Online community is
 - Technical and social definition
 - Different types of communities
 - Understand what type of problems can raise in online communities
 - Understand how to design for sociability

What is an online community?

- Depends on who you talk to
 - Sociologists
 - Computer scientists
 - E-commerce entrepreneurs
 - Community members.....

Broad definition

- On-line communities have a purpose are supported by technology and are guided by policies
- **Important dimensions are**
 - Where does the community exist?
 - only virtually or has a physical presence
 - Why does the community exist?
 - Primary purpose
 - How does the community exist?
 - Type of software
 - What is the community history?
 - Size and for how long the community has existed

Technology oriented definitions

- Online community are described by the software that supports them
 - Chat
 - Bulletin board
 - Mailing lists – Listserver
 - UseNet - Newsgroup
 - MUDs (Multiuser dungeons)
 - MOOs (Object-oriented MUDs)
 - Immersive graphic environment
 - Social Network Platform (more recently)

Synchronous

- Chats, MUDs, MOOs, Immersive graphic environment

The screenshot shows the Active Worlds Gateway interface. The main window displays a 3D virtual environment with several avatars and a chat window. The chat window contains the following text:

larger set of avatars? For more information go to the Help menu and select Registration.
ciao ci sono italiani??
"Diac":
Gatekeeper M: hi LittleGirl :)
Gatekeeper M: ciao Diac :) there are Italian worlds here
"Mathilda": i'm italian
Gatekeeper M: hi Mathilda :)
Cablecar Gal: it's nice to see you milo
"Diac": ciao mathilda spiega un pò , che è la prima che entro probably
"LittleGirl": Thanks, Officer.
"slave joe": just noticed that my 300mhz mchine's quiet slow in here
Cablecar Gal: arty do you want some water
"Mathilda": no qui c'è bisogno che qualcuno spieghi a mel
arty: poisoned???????

The help window titled "How To Move Around" contains the following text:

[What's new in version 2.2?](#)

Moving with the keyboard

You can use the arrow keys on the keyboard to move. All of the keys you need to move around and change your view are located on the number pad, which is on the right side of a standard extended keyboard. The diagram below indicates what each key on the numeric keypad does.

Move Forward	Look up	Fly Down			
First Person View	7 Home	8 Up	9 Page Up	+	Fly Up
Turn Left	4 Left	5	6	Turn Right	
Third Person View	1 End	2 Down	3 Page Down	Enter	Stop All Movement
	In5	Del			Send Text
Move Backward	Look down				

Moving with the mouse

- Active worlds (1)⁶

Synchronous

- Characteristics
 - Messages are short and conversation moves on quickly
 - May accommodate large numbers of participants
 - May accommodate for private conversations
 - Participants register
- Advantages
 - Sense of immediacy
 - Real time
 - Newcomers can learn easily
 - Good for brainstorming (generating tasks)
- Disadvantages
 - Must be on-line at specific time
 - No time to reflect
 - Several conversations may appear at the same time and messages can get inter-twined
 - May require special download and configurations
 - There is no log

Asynchronous

- Bulletin board; UseNet – Newsgroup (pull technology)
- Mailing lists – Listserver; (push technology)
- Characteristics (push technology),
 - visitors have to register
 - List may be hosted by company/institution or individually purchased and supported
 - Messages can be delivered as they arrive or collected into a digest by a moderator
- Advantages
 - easy to use,
 - no special equipment needed,
 - time to reflect,
 - registration may create a feeling of community
 - useful in the consolidation of the results from a brainstorming session and ideas evaluation, intellectual tasks, and Judgement tasks
- Disadvantages
 - registration may discourage participation,
 - lists with large number of posting may be overwhelming to users,
 - everything posted come to everybody,
 - context for responses have to be provided by including part of previous messages
 - Difficult to respond to a particular message in a digest

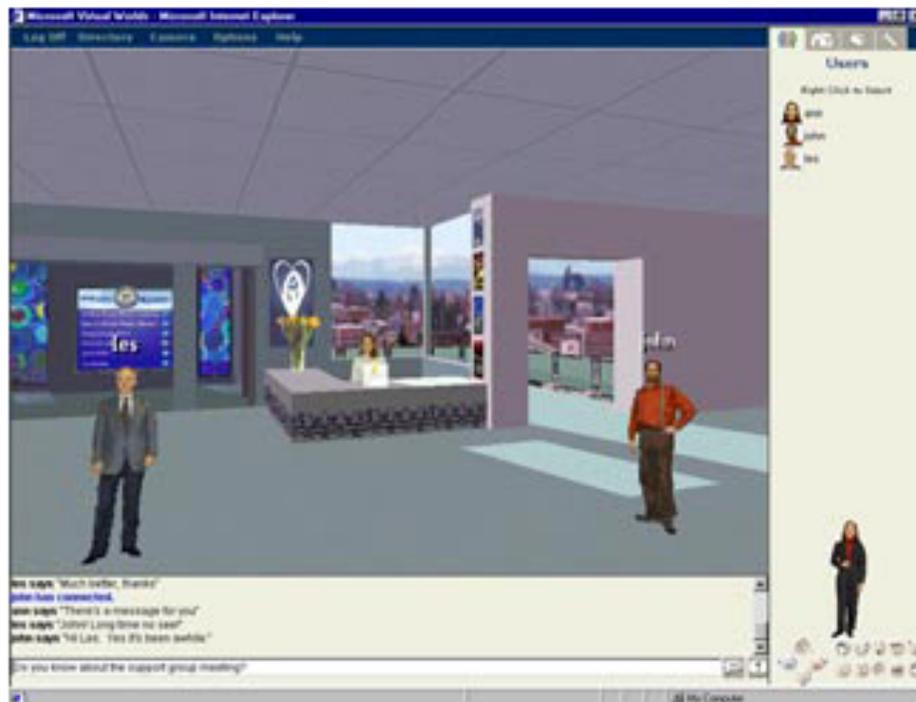
Social definition

- On-line communities are social congregations of individuals which meets and Interact on the Internet.
 - Members have a shared goal, interest, need or activity which provides the primary reasons for belonging to the community.
 - Members engage in repeated active participation and there may be strong emotional ties between participants.
 - Members have access to shared resources and there are policies for determining access to those resources.
 - There is a shared context of social conventions, language and protocols.

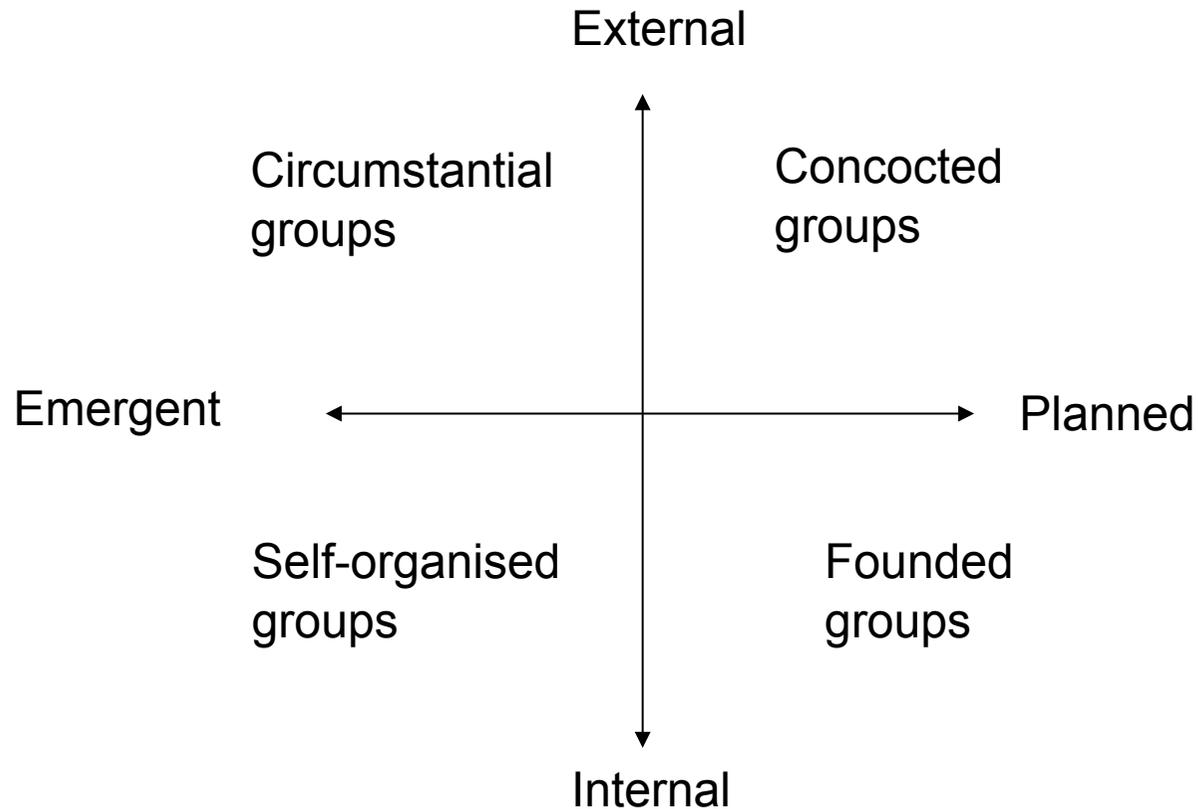
Relationship

- The strength of a interpersonal tie can be measured by
 - the amount of time invested in maintaining it,
 - the emotional intensity and degree of intimacy
 - The level of reciprocal services
- Strong tie: parent-child – partners - friends
- Weak tie: classmates, theatre groups, mailing lists
- Online communities tend to generate weak ties, but can also generate strong ones

HutchWorld

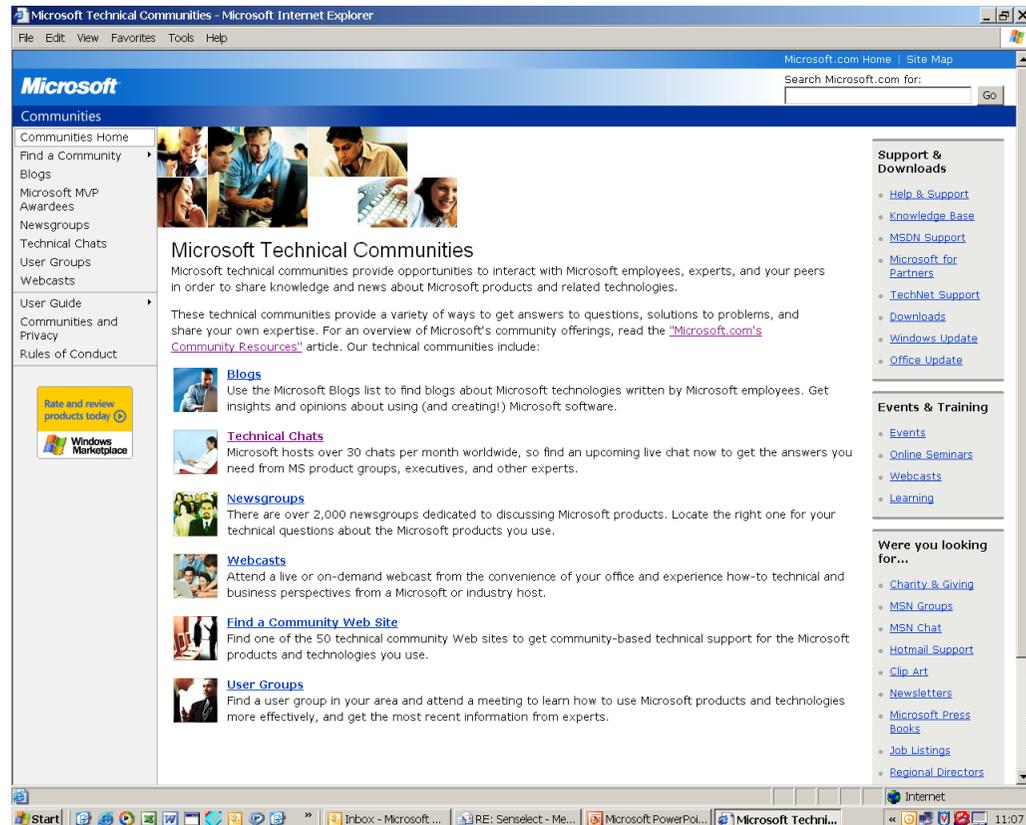


Group Formation Space



Communities of practice

- Professionals who share knowledge and resources
 - Members have a shared task, well defined roles and they offer professional emotional support as well as discussion



Health community

- Provide health related information, emotional support and empathy
 - May be developed by doctors,
 - Or patients to help fellow sufferers (e.g., Bob's ACL bulletin board)



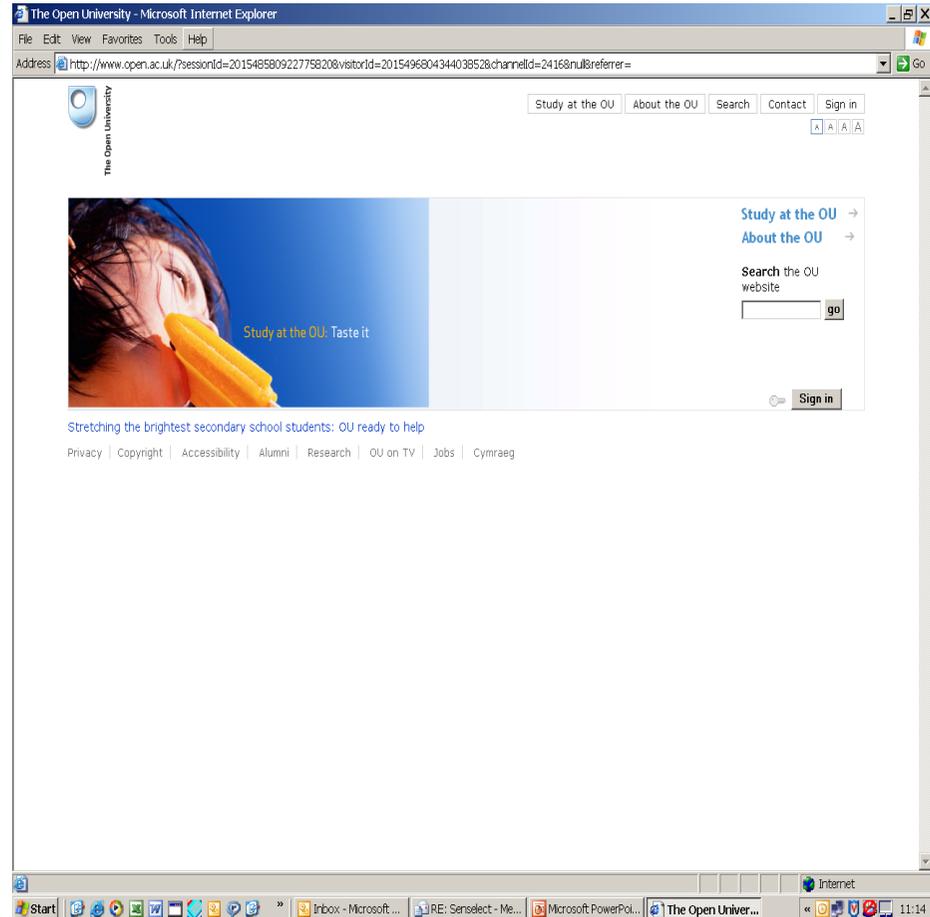
E-commerce communities

- Means for enticing customers to a site and build bonds of loyalty
 - May exist solely on-line (Amazon); or also off-line
 - Help increasing trust

The screenshot shows the REI.com website interface. At the top, there's a search bar and navigation links like 'Shopping Cart' and 'Your Account'. The main content area features a large 'MEMBER THANK-YOU!' banner for REI Members, offering a 20% discount on one regular price item with coupon code DVD25. To the right, there's a 'NOT A MEMBER YET?' banner encouraging users to join for a one-time \$15 fee. Below these are several smaller promotional banners: 'GET YOUR GEAR FOR SPRING' with a coupon, 'PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE' from Dennis Madsen, and 'REI GIVES' information. At the bottom, there's a '2005 BOARD BALLOT' section. The browser's address bar shows the URL: http://www.rei.com/rei/coupons/member_dividend.html?cm_re=hq*hq2*Coupon_details

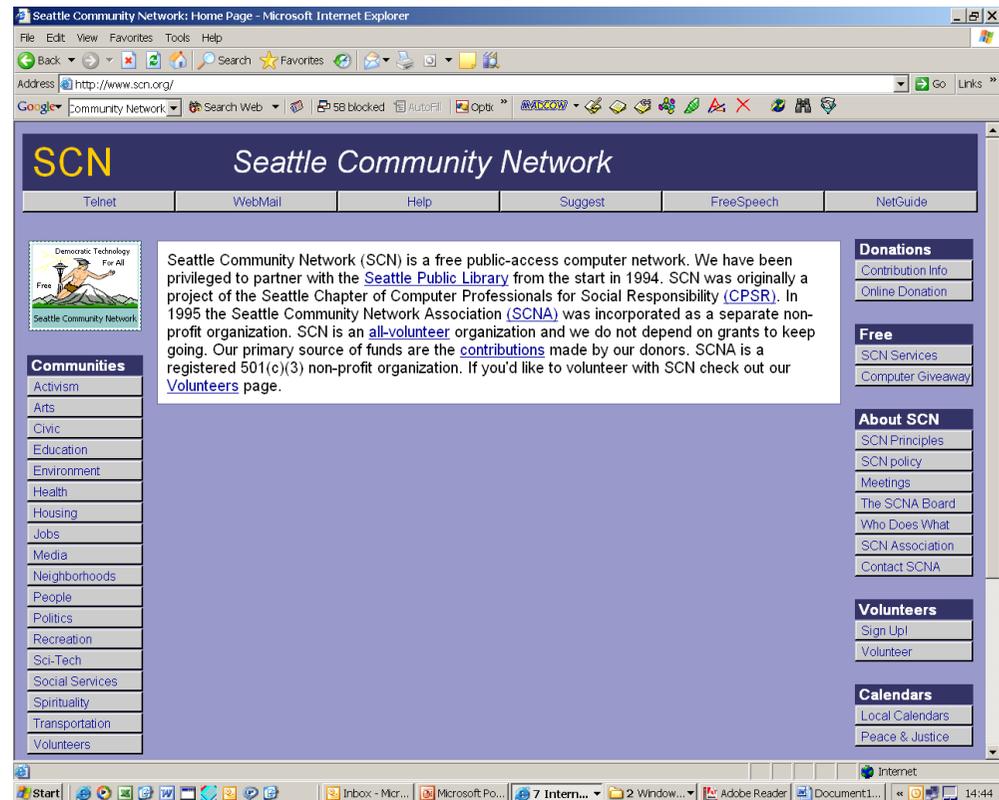
Education communities

- Learning anytime anywhere
 - Support communities for a class that meets in person weekly
 - Distance education communities
 - MOO environments



Communities network

- Physical communities supported by an online network
 - People can meet on-line and physically



Problems with on-line communities

- Social Loafing
 - tendency of individual group members to reduce their work effort as groups increase in size
- Diffusion of responsibility
 - The belief that the presence of others makes one less responsible for the events that occur in that situation
- De-individuation
 - Loss of a sense of individuality and a consequent weakening of social norms and constraints
- Group-polarisation
 - The group tend to enhance shared pre-existing views (more extreme attitudes, opinion)

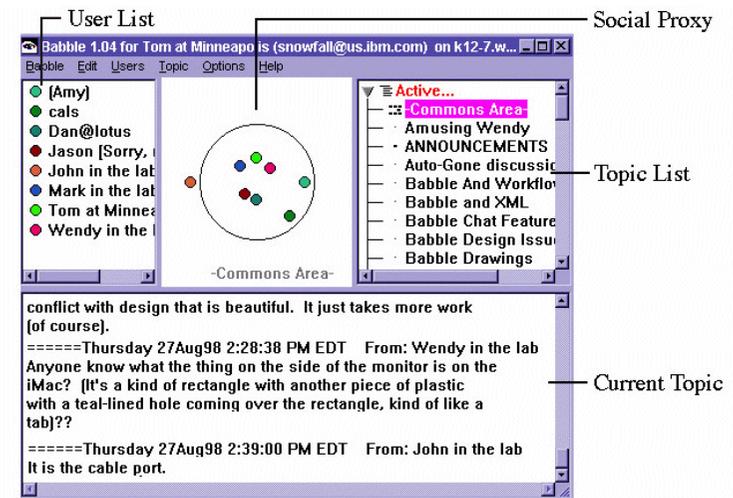
Social loafing

- Lurkers

- Critical mass – 50% of work hobby, and social mailing lists had no posting in 4 months

- Possible solutions

- workspace awareness
 - Every member of the team can see what the contributions and activities are of others.
 - Some visualisation of activity for each member may be desired such as implemented in the IBM Babble system.
- Motivate the user
 - Communicate to users that their effort is important
 - Make contributions identifiable
 - Communicate to users that they are unique



Diffusion of responsibility

- Inaction, lurkers
- Possible solutions
 - Encourage empathy
 - Social presence
 - Clear statement of community purpose
 - Create relationships and strong ties
 - mechanisms that allow members to evaluate and contribute to the state-of-mind of a community
 - Voting, opinion poll
 - members may express their opinion anonymously by stating whether they agree or disagree with a particular (controversial) statement.
 - Members should also be allowed to suggest questions that are voted on
 - desired actions should be rewarded,
 - roles should be assigned to participants,
 - records of past behaviour should be available (reputation management)

De-individuation

- Flaming – negative interactions, inappropriate or offensive behaviour
 - US laws regarding obscenity and community standards
- Possible solutions
 - Moderators
 - Issue warnings or ban offending members
 - Encourage participants to explain themselves
 - Make salient participants identity
 - Home page
 - Avatars
 - Registration

Group polarisation

- Extremism, racism, discrimination
- Possible solutions
 - moderator
 - Support decision making
 - encouraging ways in which a community can be influenced by elements outside the community.
 - guest accounts which people who are not part of a community can use to insert comments on the communities goals, prevalent opinions etc.
 - trusted third parties who will check for convergence on unacceptable views and opinions.

Summary

- Online communities indicators
 - Shared interests, experiences or needs
 - Engaged in supportive and sociable relations
 - Sharing resources
 - Developing a sense of shared identity (feeling of belonging)
- Many type of online communities
- Good design should support usability + sociability