

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)
 - Mobile Network Platform (NOW)

Synchronous

- Chats, MUDs, MOOs, Immersive graphic environment

The screenshot shows the 'Active Worlds - Gateway at 1S TE facing N' window. The interface includes a menu bar (File, Teleport, View, Options, Show, Login, Avatar, Web, Help), a toolbar with navigation icons, and a status bar with buttons like 'Register Now!', 'HAPPY', 'WAVE', 'JUMP', 'MACA', and 'DANCE'. On the left, there are panels for 'Worlds' and 'Contacts' with a list of virtual worlds including '@Mart Virtual Mall', 'AlphaWorld', 'Atlantis', 'Building School', 'Colony Alpha', 'Mars The Red Planet', 'Metropolis', 'Mundo Hispano', 'Nouveau Monde', 'Patagonia', 'Philips Vevo World', 'Russian World', 'The AW Community Center', 'The AW Gateway', 'The AW University', and 'Yellowstone National Park'. The main 3D view shows a landscape with hills, a sky, and several avatars. A chat window at the bottom displays messages from users like 'Diac', 'Gatekeeper M', 'Mathilda', and 'Cablecar Gal'. On the right, a tutorial titled 'How To Move Around' explains keyboard controls for movement and viewing, accompanied by a diagram of a numeric keypad with arrows indicating key functions.

How To Move Around

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.

			←		↑		→	
7	8	9						
4	5	6						
1	2	3	Enter					
Ins	Del							

Diagram labels: Move Forward, Look up, Fly Down, Fly Up, Turn Right, Stop All Movement, Send Text, Look down, Move Backward, First Person View, Turn Left, Third Person View.

Moving with the mouse

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

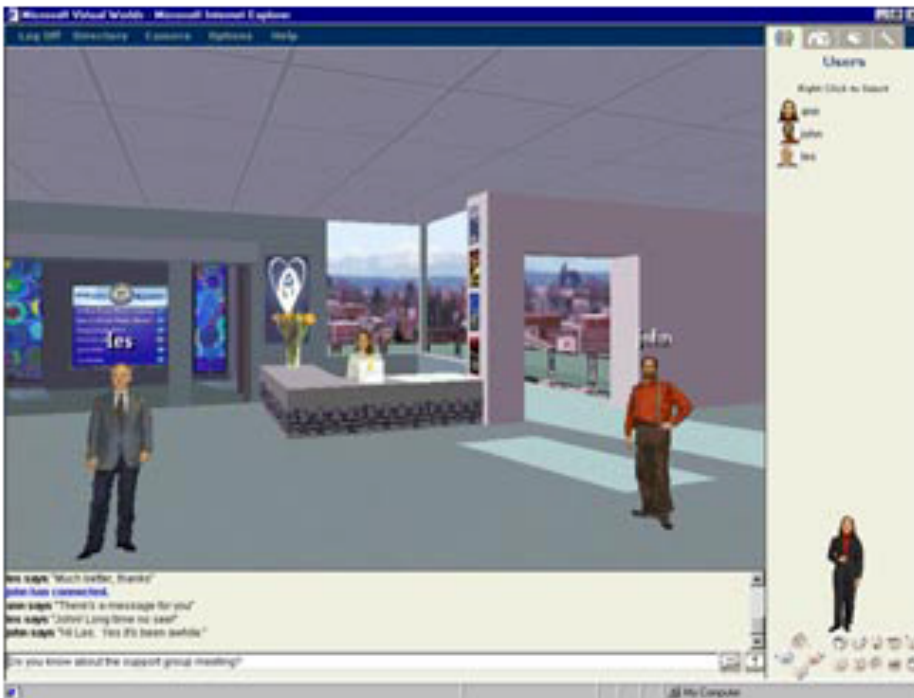
Social definition

- On-line communities are social congregations of individuals which meet 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 relationship 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 support strong ones

HutchWorld



HutchWorld

- Virtual Worlds to enhance social support and information exchange among caregivers and patients
 - **Information services:** contact information, links to the institution's web site and related web sites, Seattle guides for transportation, shopping and restaurants.
 - **Social services** Bulletin Board Service, notes, gifts and email exchange, real time communication in 3D environment and text chat area.
 - **Diversiory services** users can make music together by interacting with sculptures in a 3D environment, create a personal journal, web browse and play games.
- Microsoft Research & Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center



HutchWorld (2)

- **Concept evaluation**

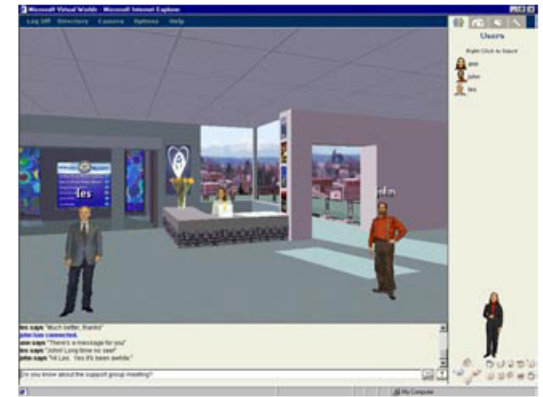
- Meetings with patients, caregivers & medical staff early in design
- Observations in hospitals, schools, and research facilities
- What: functionality, usability, individual and group effects
 - Physical world metaphor, social support, restricted entry

- **Prototype evaluation**

- Early prototype tested on site with real users
 - Organisational effect: problems with technology deployment (staff training)
 - Functionality: chat-room did not achieve critical mass, asynchronous communication was needed
 - Individual/group effect: users felt obliged to talk
- Later prototype tested at Microsoft
 - Usability

- **Operational evaluation**

- portal version: limited field trial



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 is a search bar with the text "Search REI.com" and "Enter a word or item #". To the right of the search bar are links for "Shopping Cart" (containing 0 items) and "Your Account" (You are not logged in). Below the search bar is a navigation menu with links for "REI.com", "REI-OUTLET.com", "REI Adventures", "Stores & Events", and "Gift Registry".

The main content area features a "MEMBER THANK-YOU!" banner with a large "SAVE 20%" coupon code "DVD25" for one regular price item. Below the banner, there is a "NOT A MEMBER YET?" section with a "THIS IS WHERE YOU BELONG" headline and a call to action to join today for a one-time \$15 fee.

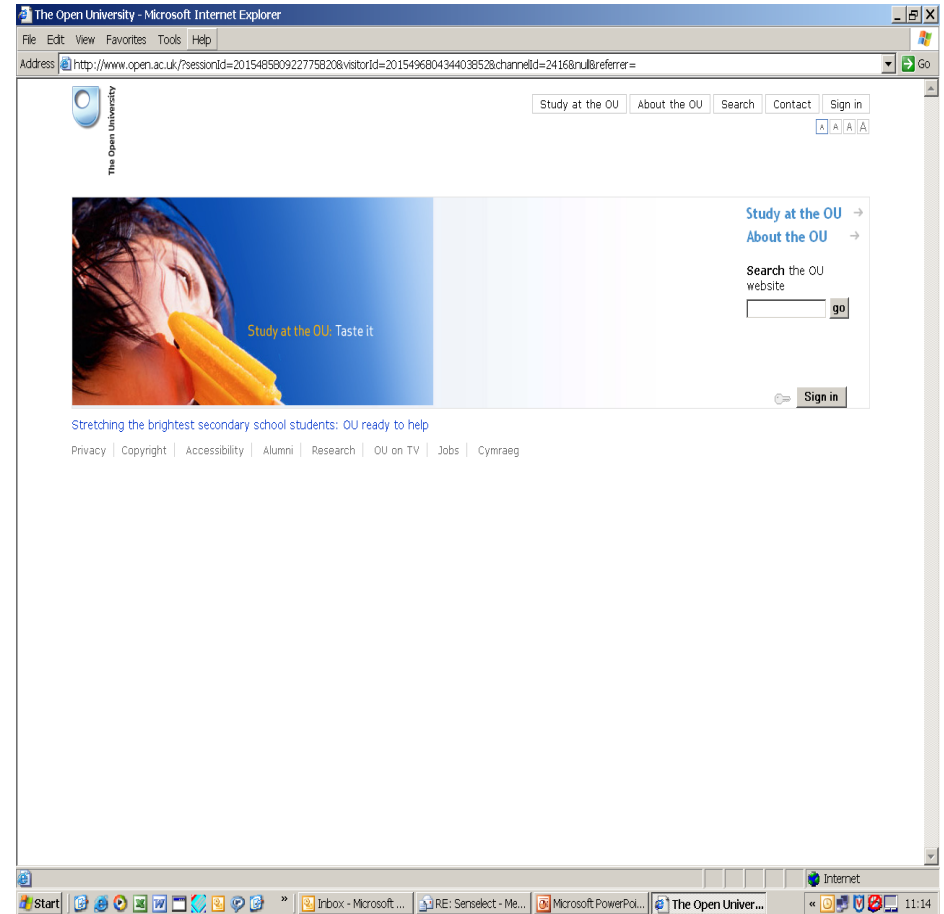
On the left side, there is a vertical navigation menu with categories such as "Clothing & Outerwear", "Snow Sports", "Gear Shops", "How to Choose Gear", "Gift Services", "More Ways to Shop", "REI E-mail Center", and "REI Membership".

At the bottom of the page, there is a "PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE" section with a photo of Dennis Madsen and a "2005 BOARD BALLOT" section with a call to action to cast a ballot.

http://www.rei.com/rei/coupons/member_dividend.html?pcm_re=hq*hq2*Coupon_details

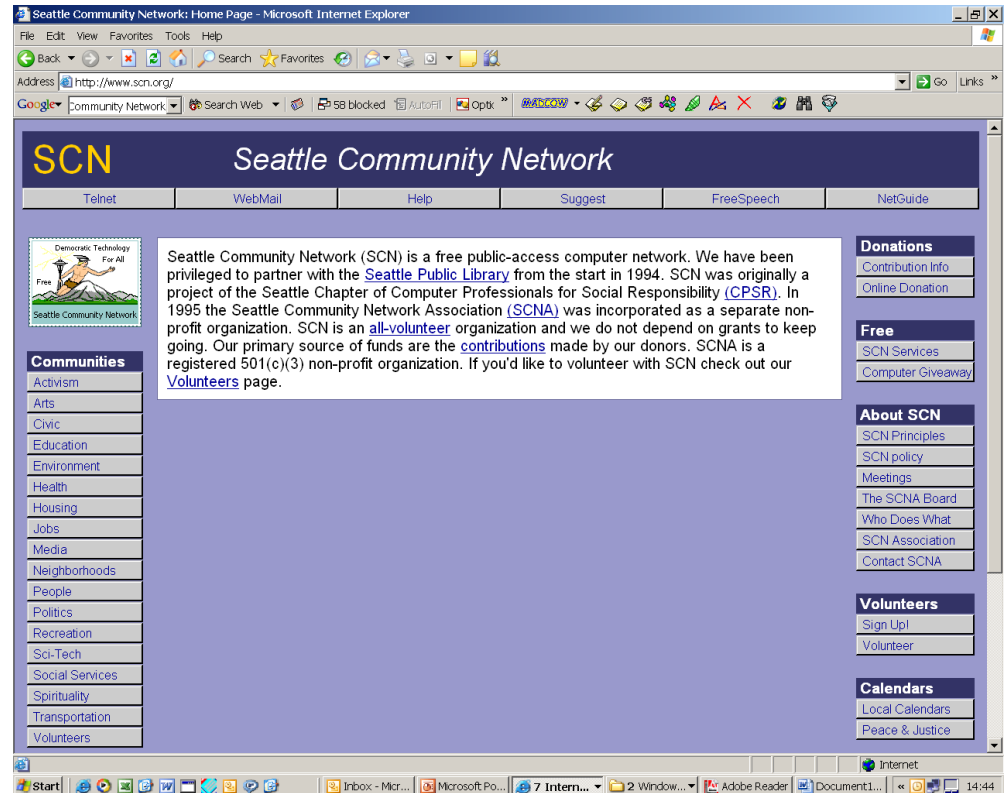
Education communities

- 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

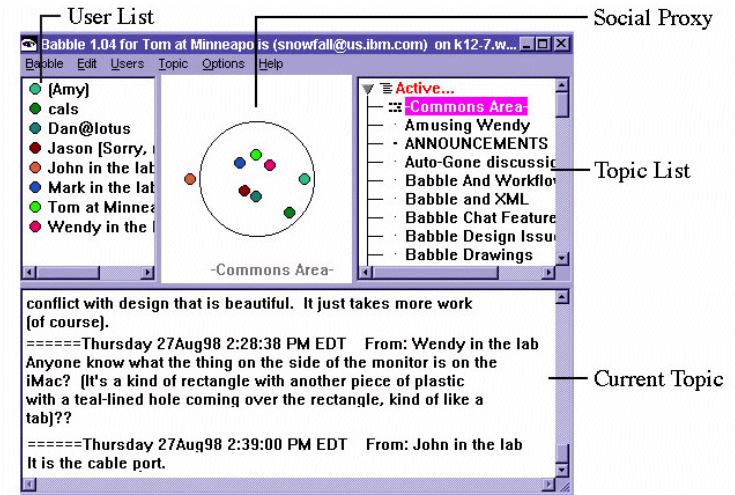
- Possible solutions

- 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)

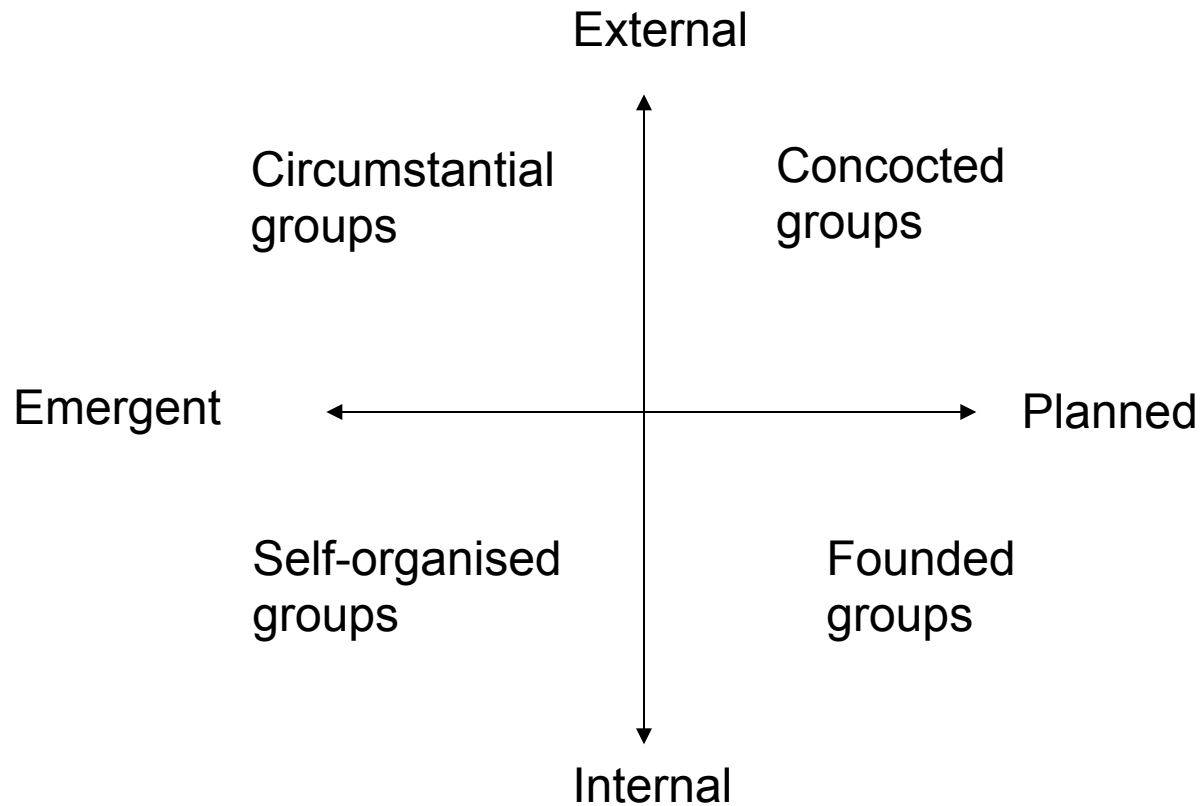
De-individuation

- 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.

Group Formation Space



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