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Online communities

CT434: CSCW

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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

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What is an online community?

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

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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

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Technology oriented definitions

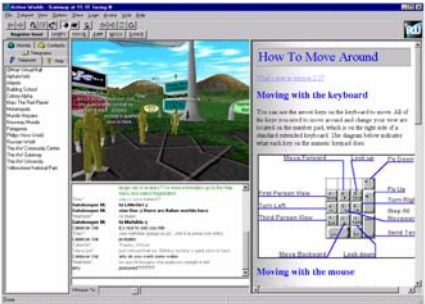
- Online community are described by the software that supports them
 - Chat
 - Bulletin board
 - Mailing lists – Listserv
 - UseNet - Newsgroup
 - MUDs (Multiuser dungeons)
 - MOOs (Object-oriented MUDs)
 - Immersive graphic environment

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Synchronous

- Chats, MUDs, MOOs, Immersive graphic environment





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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



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Asynchronous

- Bulletin board; UseNet – Newsgroup (pull technology)
- Mailing lists – Listserv; (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

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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.

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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

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HutchWorld

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Group Formation Space

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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




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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)



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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




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Education communities

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



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Communities network

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



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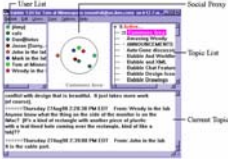
Problems with on-line communities

- 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)

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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

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Prisoner's dilemma

- Choice between collaborating and not collaborating
- Benefit of enough people collaborating (critical mass) = B
- Cost of collaborating = C
- Cost/benefit of collaborating (benefit – cost)
 - I. If enough people collaborate = B – C
 - II. If not enough people collaborate = 0 – C
- Cost/benefit of not collaborating
 - III. If enough people collaborate = B
 - IV. If not enough people collaborate = 0
- The bottom line = { III > I } AND { IV > II }

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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)

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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

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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.



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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

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Course-work 1 –

Scenario

- A large multinational company strongly relies on distributed works, but they are facing a number of difficulties as people do not appear to trust and support remote co-workers as they do with people they share the office with. As part of their actions to address this problem, the company is willing to explore the use of 'non-conventional computer-mediated communication tools', to foster trust building between remote locations.
- You are a consultancy team who has been given the task to evaluate this possibility by conducting user research on advantages and disadvantages of social networking platforms and their suitability in a business context.
- You have agreed with the company a standard procedure to perform the task, but you are free to add or modify any steps, providing you justify each decision.



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Scenario

- Consultancy team
 - Different cultural background
- Objective: provide recommendations on the use of a social networking platform to improve trust building in a remote team
 - Advantages and disadvantages
- Methodologies
 - Field study – diary,



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Procedure

- Individual work
 - Design a virtual space (or use the one you have)
 - Keep a diary on the use of your virtual space
 - Fill in a number of questionnaires related to your self and your design

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Group activity

- Collate all the data
- Perform affinity analysis on qualitative data (diary) and compute average values from questionnaire
- Have each site evaluated by 12 people (6 with similar cultural background, 6 with different cultural background) and check if the 'intended personality' is transmitted through the space
- Write a report

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