

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

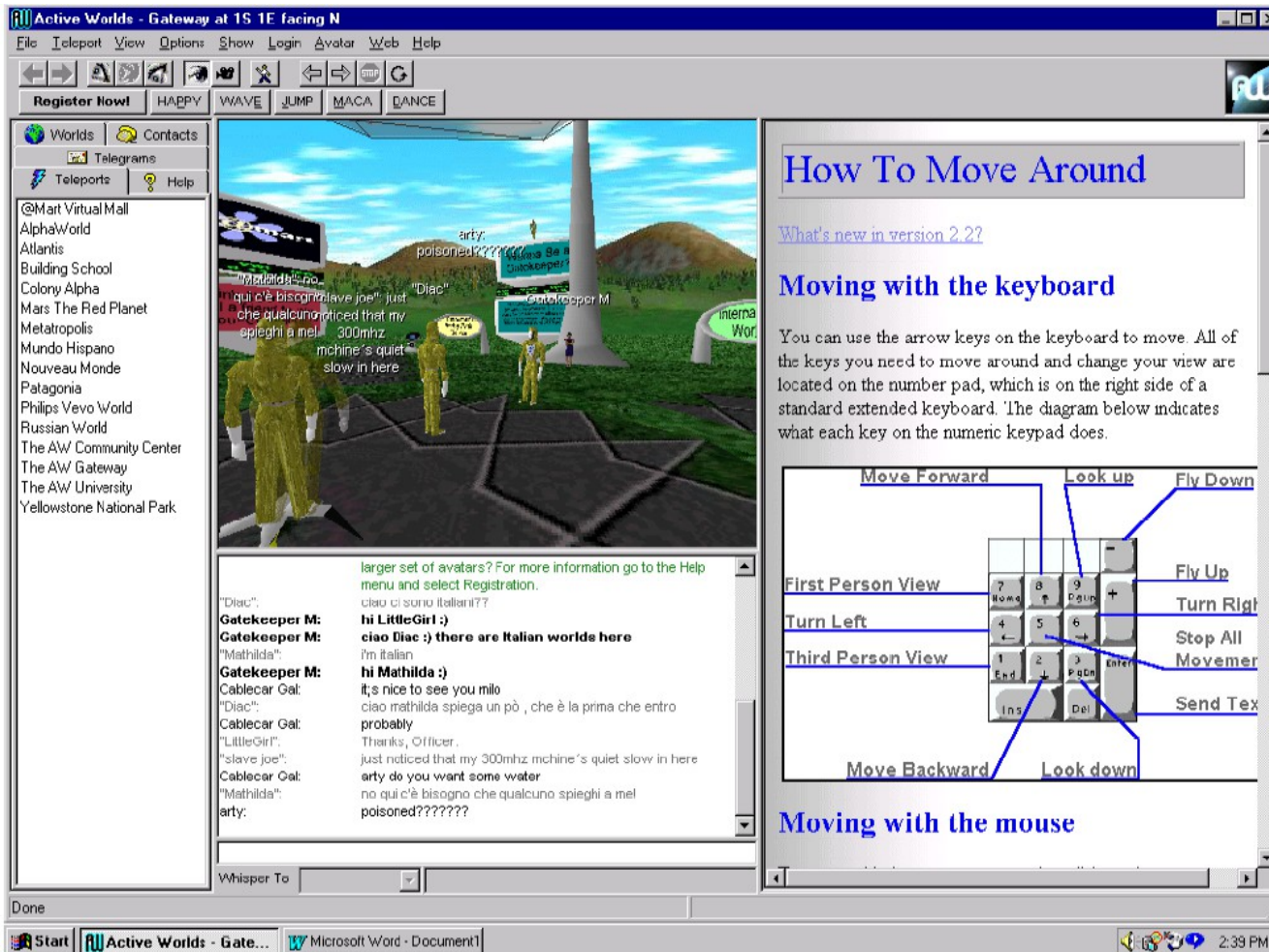
- On-line communities have a **purpose** are supported by **technology** and are guided by **policies**
- **Important dimensions are**
 - **Where** does the community exist?
 - only virtually or has a physical presence
 - **Why** does the community exist?
 - Primary purpose
 - **How** does the community 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



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.

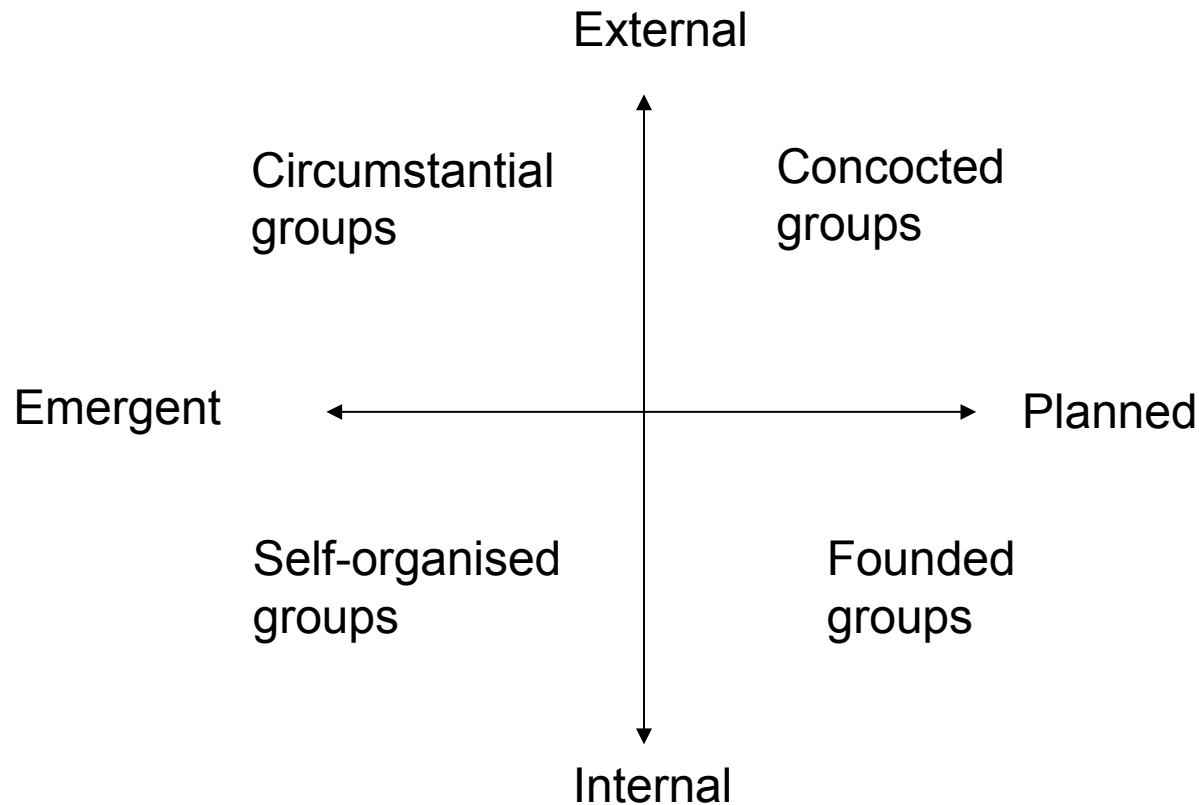
Relationship

- 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)



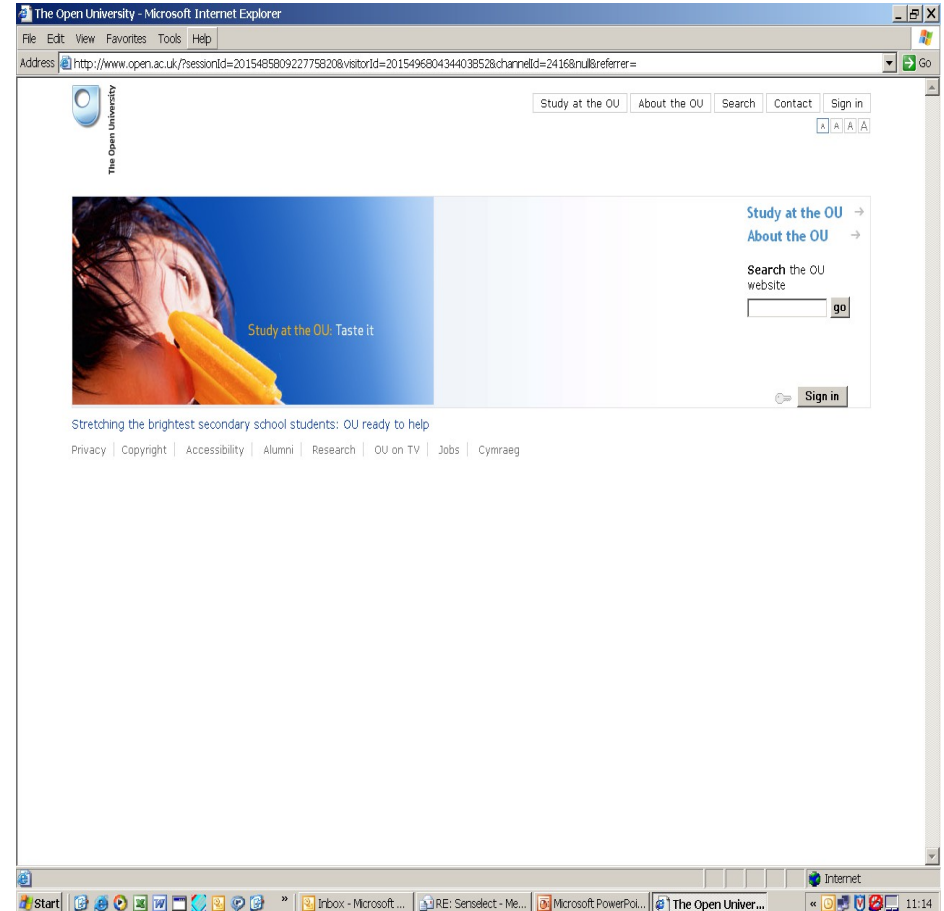
E-commerce communities

- 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 in a Microsoft Internet Explorer browser window. The address bar displays the URL: http://www.rei.com/rei/coupons/member_dividend.html?Pcm_re=hq2*Coupon_details. The website features a green and white color scheme. The top navigation bar includes links for Home, Shop All Categories, Ordering Questions, Shipping Info, Contact Us, and Help. A search bar is prominently displayed 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). The main content area is divided into several sections. On the left, there is a vertical menu with links for "Clothing & Outerwear", "Snow Sports", "Gear Shops", "How to Choose Gear", "Gift Services", "More Ways to Shop", "REI E-mail Center", and "REI Membership". The central part of the page features a large "MEMBER THANK-YOU!" banner with the text "REI MEMBERS SAVE 20% ON ONE REGULAR PRICE ITEM" and a coupon code "DVD25". Below this banner is a "GET YOUR GEAR FOR SPRING" section with images of outdoor gear and a "PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE" section with a photo of Dennis Madsen. At the bottom, there is a "2005 BOARD BALLOT" section with a link to "Cast your ballot".

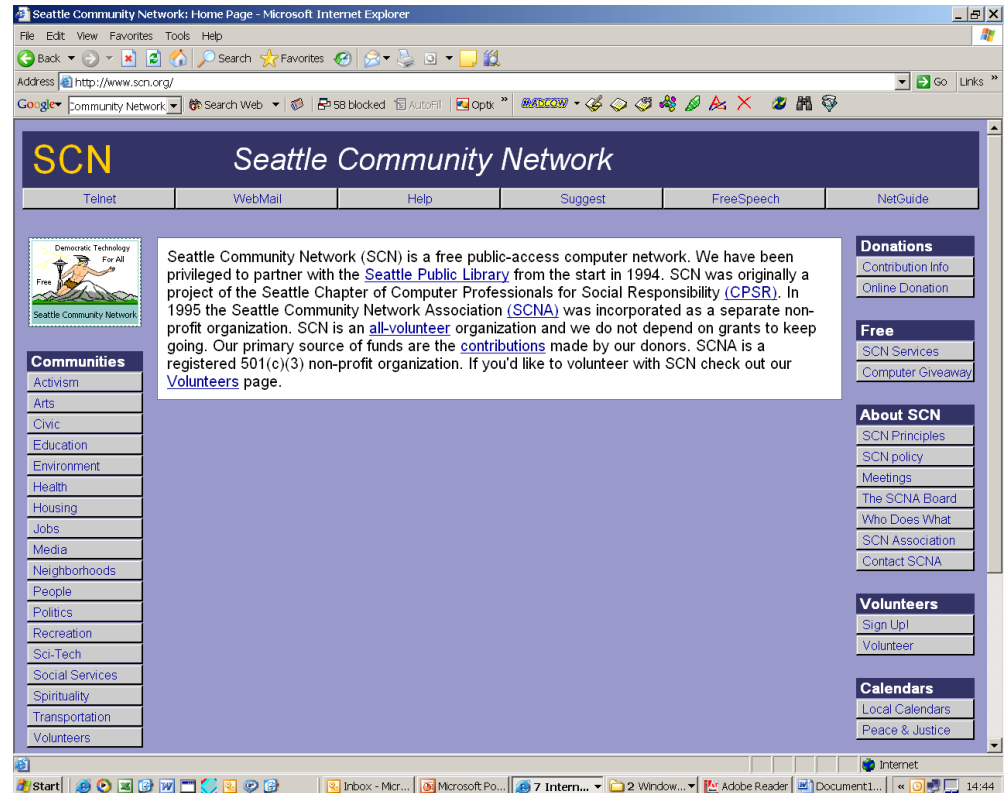
Education communities

- 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)

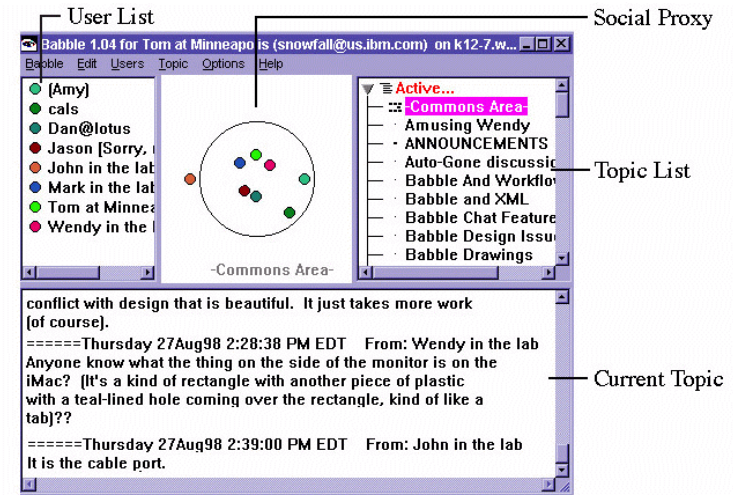
Social loafing

- 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