Social Objects and their Role in Building a Community

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Abstract. Building on the premise that thriving online communities are usually built around social objects, the paper discusses the motivations for participation in two communities based on the use of Facebook as a platform.

Keywords: Social networks, communities, motivation, social objects

1 Introduction

Online communities are elusive ensembles. Their members come and go, their involvement evolves over time, and their motivations are varied.

Open Source developers get involved in specific projects "to scratch their own itch"[1]. This basically explains the intrinsic motivation of many users of social media today: users of social bookmarking services like delicious, photo sharing applications like Picasa and Flickr or social citations services like CiteULike find value in using these applications for managing their own resources in the first place. The collaborative aspect is only coming second.

However, most of the social networking services that were adopted by large numbers of users and supported the formation of online communities are built around objects. Engestrom[2], quoting sociologist Karen Knorr-Cetina[3], talks

about "*object-centered sociality*": photos, bookmarks, citations, music and activity streams are all "social objects" that serve as pivots for networking and community building.

In a paper presented in 1987[4], Jonathan Grudin stated: "When those who benefit are not those who do the work, then the technology is likely to fail, or at least be subverted", statement that became later known as "Grudin's Law". The beauty of social media applications is that the users are not coerced to "do the work". They are there by their own will, doing as much "work" as they want, and benefitting as much as they can of other users' work.

Social media applications have proven very effective lately in supporting the development of various networks and communities, both online and in the real world. Online communities develop and flourish quicker than ever, because social media applications and search engines have made it so easy to find other people who share one's interests. From knitting blog rings to patient support groups, forums for discussing online gaming mods, gardening wikis and dating websites for farmers, everything was enabled by the deployment of web 2.0 technologies.

However, the main problem for those attempting to either build a new social networking service nobody thought about yet, or build a community because they think one should exist, is how to attract users and motivate them to come back.

In our opinion, online communities are difficult to build. They have to be fostered, cared for, encouraged and supported continuously. Online communities cannot be engineered. Better collaborative tools will not simply make them happen. In order to come to life, an online community needs a reason to exist. Using existing tools, already embedded in the mundane practices of users, has resulted in numerous thriving communities. The role of community facilitators is often ignored, and it is often forgotten that communities are made of people. Some communities seem to appear naturally, while others need a lot of adjustments before they can function properly. In our paper, we would like to look at two examples where existing, widely used applications like Facebook, Twitter and blogs have proven efficient in building online communities. In section 2, we will briefly introduce these two cases and the methods used for data collection. In the following section, our findings will be presented in more detail. Section 4 is reserved for a discussion of successful practices in supporting and developing a community. We will conclude with a number of open questions that we would like to suggest for discussion at the workshop.

2 The Two Cases

The two cases are online communities the author has been involved in for the last 12 months. They were chosen because they illustrate two different approaches on building online communities. Both are based on Facebook, but they are using the functionalities offered by the social networking platform in different ways.

The first one is an online community of people with an interest primary in Italian food and secondary in local news. The community revolves around a local food blogger, Lorraine, who is the owner (together with her husband) of a small café in the vicinity of the University of Limerick. Instead of using her own name on Facebook, she preferred to speak in the name of their business, La Cucina Limerick.

The second community is a support group for patients with acromegaly, using a Facebook group as platform. The group was created as a companion for a website, AcromegalyCommunity.com.

For the past 12 months, the author has been doing participant observation in these two communities, writing notes, collecting screen captures and interacting with other participants. The purpose of the observation was to record the evolution of these communities and make note of various strategies employed.

3 The Findings

3.1 LaCucina Limerick

La Cucina is a café situated in the proximity of the University. The Facebook profile presents it as "a little piece of authentic Italy in Limerick". Lorraine, the owner of the café, started blogging in 2007 and acquired quite a large audience by posting Italian cuisine recipes accompanied by good quality pictures, and by regularly answering to the comments that were left on the blog.
Creating a Facebook account was a normal continuation of this interaction, accompanied by running an active Twitter account. Currently, all three platforms are used in combination and linked to each other, nevertheless avoiding content duplication.

The community has 2731 members as of April 10, 2010 – people and businesses who befriended the account on Facebook. Some of them are local, but many of the so-called friends are living abroad in places as far as New Zealand and share an interest in Italian cuisine.
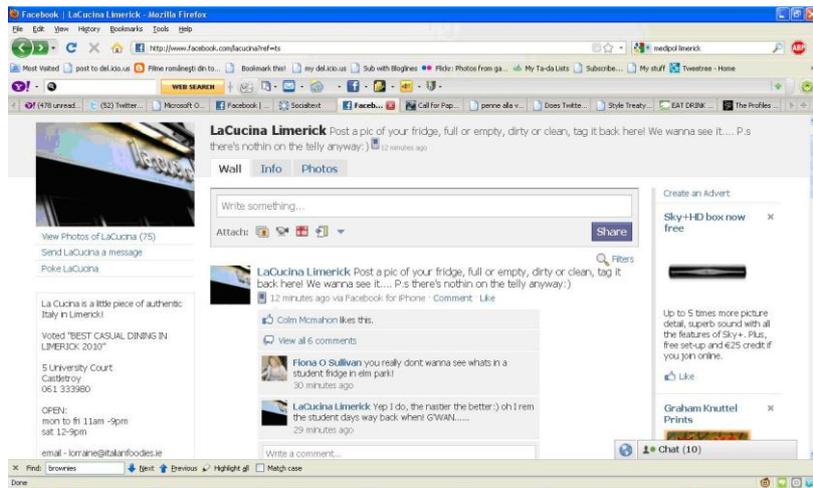
The blog counter on http://italianfoodies.ie/ shows 198,000 hits (probably since the move from blogspot) last year.

What motivates people to participate here? The screenshot above is an example of the type of posts that encourage participation: "Post a pic of your fridge, full or empty, dirty or clean, tag it back here! We wanna see it…P.s there's nothing on the telly anyway:)" The suggestion sounds like an invitation to play an ad-hoc game, and people respond.

By analyzing the patterns of participation, we noticed that the mechanisms that seem to trigger the most responses are:

- offering a treat (free pizza, free tea pack);
- suggesting a cookalong (people are invited to cook following one particular recipe posted beforehand and are asked to post their stories afterwards);
- asking or giving advice regarding suppliers.

One of the most important factors that contribute to the creation of a sense of community is the fact that Lorraine answers to every comment and engages with the audience.

Their customers who visit the café tend to blog, tweet or post information on Facebook about the menu, the recipes and the owners. Social media consultants use them as an example in presentations.

3.2 Acromegaly Support

Acromegaly Support is a group consisting of patients and relatives of patients with acromegaly, a pretty rare medical condition. People use it to get in touch with other patients with similar problems to find out more about their condition and existing treatment.

It currently has 272 members from all over the world. Judging by the low incidence of the condition, the lack of awareness about it, and by the proportion of English speaking Internet users, the community seems quite large.

The group administrator spends quite a lot of time on it, trying to interact with every person who comes in looking for encouragement or advice. It is not the type of group where people hang out every day, they usually come looking for a particular piece of information or for moral support before surgery or radiotherapy.
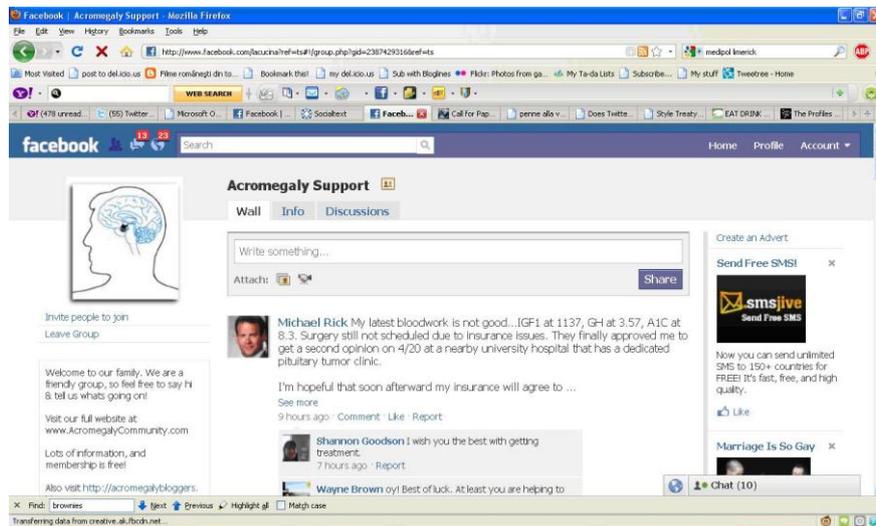
The motivation for participation in this community differs a lot from the first case. Here, participation is triggered by:

- the scarcity of information coming from real patients as opposed to that shared by medical staff and pharmaceutical companies;
- the difficulty of meeting people with the same condition in the same area;
- the need of patients and families to discuss with people who encountered the same problems and solved them;
- the availability of people who have gone through similar procedures to share their experiences.

4 Discussion

Obviously, the significance of the number of members of the two communities presented above is to be considered with care. Because it is so easy to make a "friend" or join a group on Facebook, many of these members are far from being active or getting involved. However, judging by the level of interaction reflected by the ongoing conversations, we are inclined to consider them successful, active communities. What motivates their member to participate? What are the social objects their interaction is built around?

In the first case, the social object is Italian cuisine. For some members it is a hobby, for others it is a business. Sharing "secret recipes", cooking "along", eating

in the physical café following the recommendations of others and talking about the people met there seem to be what maintains the sense of community.

In the second case, the social object is a rare medical condition: acromegaly. Members come back to share their own experiences and to read about those of others.

Various media are used for sharing information. Although text is still the most frequently used, photos and videos are also posted and shared.

Both communities play the role of "third places": they are neither workplaces, nor homes. But they are inhabited periodically by users/members that choose to consume and generate activity streams. There is no pressure to contribute and free riders are welcome.

Some of the reasons why members keep coming back and new members continue to join are related to intrinsic motivations:

- the need to connect with other people, to experience trust, conviviality, joy;
- having and expressing an opinion;
- reaching out for a support network, and also being part of one.

But there are also a few extrinsic motivations that we observed and that are worth it mentioning:

- free, open, easy and voluntary participation; both communities make use of the Facebook platform, making joining and participating extremely easy for people who already have an account;
- getting a voice and being heard - in both communities, comments are answered and contributions rewarded promptly;
- winning a competition and the fun factor in the first case; being the centre of attention in the second case.

5 Instead of a Conclusion

Based on the two cases presented, we would like to suggest a few topics for discussion at the workshop.

- How can we account for the different motivations for participating in online communities of various stakeholders? (e.g. business owner and customers)
- What are the ethical implications of using social media for "befriending" customers? Is there a danger to abuse customer motivations and manipulate intentions and affect?
- In a context where the boundaries between use and design are blurred, with users as co-designers of continuously under development applications, how can be research methods adjusted to suit the dynamics of observed phenomena?

6 References

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