

## Parallel Session D

### Digital-Media & Information Technology for Creative Communities

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## BUILDING CREATIVE COMMUNITY ONLINE: PLACEMAKING ON THE WEB

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### ABSTRACT

*People now more than ever are using the Internet to communicate and connect with others who share the same interest. That is why building creative community online becomes very important, to unify like-minded people anywhere despite the geographical divide, who in turn will inspire and motivate each other in sharing, learning and creating even more. However, building an online place for creative community requires some understanding of the character of the community, and respond accordingly.*

*This paper will try to capture the challenge of building and maintaining online creative communities. Because each has distinctive characteristic and therefore the issue cannot be generalized, I will put my focus on craft communities.*

*Keywords: online communities, craft communities*

### INTRODUCTION

People now more than ever are using the Internet to communicate and connect with others who share the same interest. One of the reasons is because the Internet eliminates the physical distance one has to travel in order to meet others with very specific interests and values. It is not easy to find even one, let alone a community.

In today's society, community boundaries that is based on values may be more common than boundaries based on geographic proximity. Proximity assumes the importance of physical presence to share ideas, values create emotional bonds and the ability to share ideas easily across great distances (Ulrich, 1998). The Internet extends this concept by removing both geographical and time barriers and lets people communicate easily with others all over the world. Like every communication network, the Internet is all about establishing and reinforcing connections between people (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).

That is why building creative community online becomes very important, to unify like-minded people anywhere despite the geographical divide, who in turn will inspire and motivate each other in sharing, learning and creating even more.

As a relatively new medium of communication, the Internet is rapidly becoming part of our everyday life. According to Internet World Stats [1], as of March 2008, there are 1.407 billion people use the Internet, with world growth average of 290% in the last 8 years.

This data shows us that this technology is spreading fast and becoming more and more accessible, it would be a waste if we don't use it to connect local and global creative minds in the form of online communities for the purpose of sharing creative experiences and even further, to empower local communities.

## **BUILDING ONLINE COMMUNITY**

The common understanding of online community is a group of people getting together and get to know one another over a computer network. However, online communities rarely exist only online; many have offline physical components. Either they start as face-to-face communities and then part or all of the community migrates on to digital media, or conversely, members of an online community seek to meet face-to-face. Communication is hardly ever restricted to a single medium; usually several media are used depending on what is most convenient at the time (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). The actions and interactions in online forums are closely intertwined with participants' projects and pursuits in their offline lives (Bakardjieva, 2004).

Online communities can communicate through several different systems. The most widely used types right now are electronic mailing lists, Web-based message boards or forums, and blogs.

### **Why people join online communities?**

There are many reasons or motivations of why people participate in online communities. To exchange information, seek emotional support, make friends, recreation, entertainment, find a job, or to sell something. For online communities dealing with personal interests/hobbies, the most popular motive is to exchange information, and the second is to seek friendship (Ridings & Gefen, 2004).

This is particularly true for craft communities. Crafting communities have always existed, usually consisting of a group of crafters in the same neighborhood or town who get together occasionally to exchange tips or work together on joint projects. Crafters like to talk about their crafts and share the experience of creating it (Crabe, 2002). Activities that happen in a craft community are generally show and tell: showing their works, telling how it is done, and exchanging tips, tricks, and ideas.

The types of crafts they do themselves are vastly varied in category, but there is one thing that is noticeable. In the past few years, there has been a re-emergence of do-it-yourself-ism among young people, as a kind of activism against mass production.

In January 2008, an article titled "Arts and Crafts Find New Life Online" in Business Week wrote about this issue, mentioning several online DIY and craft companies : "Many of these companies say they trace their lineage to the open-source technology movement formed in the '90s by computer programmers who wanted to create software anyone could build upon. Rather than one expert teaching people how to do something, the open-source movement underscored how groups of people could share expertise and build on that knowledge. Now this mindset is rapidly spreading. Says Elizabeth Osder, a visiting professor at the Annenberg School for Communications at the University of Southern California: "There is this resurgence of interest in DIY and then the desire to bundle up pieces of information and share them in an open-source way.""

Their crafts are usually a new twist to traditional crafts, and integrate new technologies. For example, instead of crocheting lace and doilies like the older generation of crocheters used to do, they made i-Pod holder or rockstar doll. Instead of knitting flower motifs, they prefer skulls and bones motifs [2]. Although many also still enjoy the traditional style and making their crafts as a pastime.

According to my observation, there are several types of craft communities on the Internet:

1. Discussion groups in the form of electronic mailing lists or newsgroups.
2. Web-based message boards or forums, whether it is merely a forum site or integrated within a larger and more complex website. These can be created by individuals for the sole purpose of channeling people's hobbies and interests, or by businesses who wanted to market their

- products or services, generating customers, provide customers' support, or gain customers' loyalty and take it to fundamentally new levels (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997).
3. Social networking between craft bloggers. Each crafter has their own blog, and they exchange links with other craft bloggers, visit each other's blogs (in bloggers' term: blogwalking), communicating through comment form or chat box, thus creating a sense of community living in a neighborhood.
  4. Online social networking service dedicated for crafters. Each crafter get their own profile page, they can add friends with other members, and so on. It is similar to MySpace or Friendster, but specifically for arts and crafts enthusiasts.
  5. Online marketplace for crafters. This type of online community provide a place for local crafters to sell their handmade goods to a global market.
  6. Combination of two or more of the above. Any of this type of online communities can be used to build a network of crafters which in turn, if properly managed, will give great benefits to its members.

## PLACEMAKING ON THE WEB

### How do we define place in an abstract space such as cyberspace?

To qualify as a *place*, spaces must be defined and ordered in meaningful ways (Ching, 1979). A place describes the territory that we build and its boundaries are defined by a sense of being inside, by a feeling of coherence between the space and what is in it (Chastain, 1999).

Based on these definitions, one can argue that in terms of the World Wide Web, a website is a place because it has clear boundaries : a specific web page address or URL (Uniform Resource Locator). The URL defines the 'inside' of the place on the Web, and anything that doesn't share the same main URL is considered the 'outside'.

*I tend to agree with the definition of place explained by Ronald Lee Fleming in the book "The Art of Placemaking", that "Place is not merely what was there, but also the interaction of what is there and what happened there." (Fleming, 2007).*

For online community website as a place, "what happens there" is what matters most, because the interaction between users is the purpose of online communities. This can be observed in web-based forums or message boards. There is not much to appreciate in the terms of design. Sometimes the community builder just use blank template, add categories, and start the conversation. The healthy dynamics of members' participation and engagement in the discussions happening inside is the one that makes the site a good place for the community.

Whether on the web or in the physical world, the characters of a good place for a community is generally the same. According to Project for Public Spaces (PPS), an internationally recognized organization for information and resources about Placemaking, there are four basic characters that make a good place :

- It promotes sociability
- It offers lots of things to do
- It is comfortable and attractive
- It is accessible

PPS also identified 11 key elements or principles of Placemaking for transforming public spaces into a vibrant community places [3]. Not all are applicable in building community website, but there are several main ideas that are similar:

- Create a place, not a design: think of the community that will use the site.
- Look for partners: brainstorm and develop ideas with others.
- Have a vision: create activities, strategies to make the site comfortable for the community.
- Start with petunias: you cannot expect to do everything right initially. Experiment with small improvements that can be tested and refined.
- Triangulate: make the connections between community members by using choice and arrangements of different elements.

- Form supports function: understand how the community use the site.
- You are never finished: the success of any good place is due to how well it is managed. Be open to the need for change and having the management flexibility that respond to the needs and opinions of community members.

*The last point shows how the management of the place is critical to community life. Howard Rheingold, an online community pioneer, once wrote "Virtual communities won't automatically emerge or grow in a healthy manner simply by adding a forum or chatroom to a web page. The forces that draw people and our attention away from anything as abstract as written discussion in cyberspace are strong, and action must be taken to glue people together." (Rheingold, 2000).*

*One of the things that are very important in keeping people together, is to ensure that community members feel valued. Members will leave when they feel unappreciated. On the contrary, when members feel highly valued, accepted and recognized, they will become the recruiter for the community (Goldsmith, 1998).*

Hagel and Armstrong wrote that there are stages in online community building, and one of them is creating "switching barriers" which the key focus is to make it increasingly difficult for members to want to leave the community. This stage includes:

- Fostering personal relationships between members. Apart from encouraging members' participations in discussions, the community organizers can also achieve this by promoting online and offline events and gatherings.
- Improving community functionality, by picking up cues from usage patterns to develop more user-friendly interfaces and designs.

Nevertheless, any online community builder also cannot neglect the design of online place, especially when it comes to community websites (not mailing lists, newsgroups, or message boards). There are a great deal of things that has to be considered.

Building an online place for craft community requires understanding of the targeted users, so it can facilitate its members to be able to dynamically share and exchange creative ideas and experiences, and the strategy to attract new members as well as gaining members' loyalty. It is important to first recognize the purpose of the community and the needs of the group, because it will dictate which system to apply and what tools to use. In a sense, it is similar to placemaking, only it happens on the Web.

Below are some issues to consider in building an online craft community:

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1. Who are the targeted users? (e.g. age demographic, location)
  - Younger demographic tend to be more familiar with using the Internet and web tools.
  - Users from developing countries generally have slower and costlier internet connection -> consider website loading time.
  - Different time zones can be difficult for real-time events like video conferencing.
  - Non computer-related background users prefer sites which are simple and quick to use, as opposed to sites with complex navigational structure, or with unnecessary moving images, or which take a long time to access (Nielsen, 1996).
2. What are the objectives for the site?
  - Online marketplace should apply shopping cart or catalog software.
  - Website intended for craft tutorials better be able to display images or multimedia applications.
3. What kinds of activity are expected to happen in it?

Although not every activity requires specific web tools, there are some tools that can support the variety of activities that happens in a craft community. For example, if the website is going to host a crafting along event (doing one type of project together), it is better if every participant can track

progress of the project they are doing using a progress meter tool. Or if there is going to be a competition, there should be some kind of image gallery to display the submitted works.

It is not the intent of this paper to dwell on the topic of website design. Rather, it tries to give an insight of which tools or web applications that suits the character of craft community and make it a good place for them.

## **EMPOWERING LOCAL CRAFT COMMUNITY**

*The practice of empowering craft community through the Internet has been done in the past by using third party. "Traditional crafts have been linked through regional online networks linking local craftspeople and entrepreneur, showcasing examples of local crafts and cultural practices, and providing opportunities to develop e-commerce and marketing. Sometimes the online e-commerce networks developed serve particular isolated and disadvantaged communities"*  
(Marshall, Taylor, & Yu, 2003).

The Internet is becoming more accessible now in developing and even underdeveloped countries [4], increasing the opportunity to showcase local crafts to global market. Website building software and information are easier to access, crafters can use free blogs or website provider to market their own crafts. They can register their website to business directories or list their products in an online marketplace to reach broader market.

However, in my opinion, the marketing of local crafts should not be the main goal of internet usage by local craft communities. Rather, it should be used more as a source of information and references for the purpose of enriching local craftpeople's knowledge of their field of crafts and beyond.

From my conversations with crafters from developing countries (e.g. Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Kuwait) it is not easy to find needed resources for their crafts, particularly quality craft books. As a source of crafting knowledge, they are limited and hard to find, not to mention expensive. The Internet can bridge that gap by providing similar information to that contain in books.

Engaging in online communities also important for crafters to build not only social and marketing network, but also education network. Members of the community can help others learn by sharing their knowledge, especially from those with readily available resources to those with limited resources.

Here I present an example from my own experience as online craft community administrator: A community of women in a village in Cianjur, Indonesia, crochet men's traditional headgear known as kopiah for a living. Unfortunately they only know one pattern to crochet, and the community trainer from nearby university thought they desperately need to diversify. He did not know where to find the information. He found my craft community website and contacted me to request information about new patterns that are actually quite abundant in the Internet. In this case, the trainer use the Internet to find information and resources that can expand local community's crafting knowledge and skill.

By enriching local crafters' knowledge and skill, the variety and quality of the crafts they do increase, thus increasing the opportunity to compete in the global market.

## **CASE STUDY**

### **1. Etsy.com**

In its About page, Etsy.com describes itself as an online marketplace for buying and selling all things handmade, but that is not all. It is also "a community and a company". The Brooklyn, New York based company was founded in 2005 by four New York University students to provide a place for craftspeople to sell their handmade creations. In just three years,

Etsy is now a company with fifty employees, a community with over 650,000 members, and a marketplace with over 120,000 sellers in 127 different countries. It is the largest online marketplace for people to buy and sell handmade crafts. Their mission is "to enable people to make a living making things, and to reconnect makers with buyers." while their vision is "to build a new economy and present a better choice: Buy, Sell, and Live Handmade."

Observing the website of Etsy.com, it is clear from the design that this website targeted younger demographic Internet users, particularly from English speaking developed countries. The use of hand drawn graphics represents the 'handmade' feeling, parallel with the company vision and mission. Clean design also serves the function of the website: putting sellers' products as the main focus for everyone who visits.

Etsy also offer a lot of things to do, online and offline. Online, members can join discussions in forums, participate in online craft classes, chat with other members, read craft-related articles, or watch newscasts and live workshops in the Virtual Labs, a multi-user online video conferencing as an effort to bridge the gap between their physical workshop and the greater community all around the world. Offline, they host Craft Night every Monday in their 'labs' (which they broadcasted on their website), and other craft events.

However, when it comes to website orientation, one can be lost in it. There are so many pages to explore, so many things that they want to display, but the navigations are unclear. The main navigation on the left bar give the visitors choice of ways to shop, but the use of unfamiliar terms keeps the visitors wondering. What do Pounce, Treasury, Time Machine, Time Machine 2 stand for? The explanation only comes after the visitor click the "Buy" button on the top navigation bar (i.e. secondary navigation), that Pounce is to "Find items available for purchase from shops that have just sold an item, and from undiscovered shops waiting for their first sale", Treasury is "Hand picked featured items from our members", and Time Machine stands for "recently listed items". This pattern of unclear navigation repeats elsewhere in the site.

According to the administrators themselves, navigation is the main complaint from their users. However, the Etsy management is responsive to community needs and opinions, it is determined to solve the problem. In fact, the largest team in the company is the engineering team, to deal with website issues and development.

Despite the navigation problem, generally Etsy.com is a good place to be in. The community is thriving, online and offline.

## **2. Hobikriya.com**

Hobikriya.com is my own craft community website. I started to build it in early 2007 as an online forum to provide a place to interact between fellow Indonesian crafts enthusiasts all over the world, share information about all kinds of craft in the form of articles, and show their crafts. I built it on a free website platform which template is customizable. While building it, I was too focused to website appearance. I spent a lot of time making graphic buttons for navigations, arranging photos for header, customizing the pages to my own taste with my limited knowledge of website designing. I did not consider that with that much graphics in one page it will take a long time to load, especially for Indonesian internet users. I did it all by myself without consulting others.

After it was launched, problems immediately surfaced:

- Because it was a free website, I did not own the database of anyone who created an account required to join the community. After a person created an account with the webhost, he or she had to email the needed information to me (username, personal email, etc.). Simply put, the registration process was too long, members got frustrated at the first step.
- The category organization was fine, but some of the webhost's tools or features were not working as I expected. For instance, the forum feature should be fine for a single forum, but my website contained multiple forums in one page, it was hard to navigate.
- Too many graphics in one page made loading time slow, especially to the users with slower internet connection.
- I was working alone, it was not easy to maintain a community website with hundreds of members alone in my spare time from a shared computer.

Many more problems occurred. The website became uncomfortable to use, members were disappointed, they left the community deserted.

One year after it was launched, I decided that this community was too important to be neglected. I planned a major website overhaul. Because I could not afford to pay a professional web developer, I had to learn about website building by myself. Fortunately there are many open source software, complete with tutorials and related discussion, I managed to build a new and improved website for the community. Past mistakes became valuable learning points to determine which features are necessary, what steps to take to make the community thriving again. Now all members agree that the website is a more comfortable place to be in.

## CONCLUSION

Building online community is not as simple as adding a forum to a website. It requires understanding of the community character and behavior, so that the community organizer can recognize the tools and features required in the website which will facilitate the needs of its members.

Craft community activities generally involving show and tell, so the community builder should choose appropriate features to be applied in the community website, to be able to accommodate its members' needs.

Making a website for online community is similar to placemaking in the physical world. The main idea is the same, that is to create a place in which the community will feel comfortable living and socializing with others. It does not stop when the project is done. Rather, it is an ongoing process which requires dedicated community leaders and good management that respond to the needs and opinions of community members. Members in a good and healthy online community will benefit from their involvement: they can gain knowledge and experience, as well as broader social, marketing, and education network.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

[1] Internet World Stats: Usage and Populations Statistics <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>

[2] Crochet is a process of creating fabric from yarn or thread using a crochet hook. Knitting is a similar process but using two (or more) knitting needles.

[3] The 11 Principles of Placemaking from the Project for Public Spaces:

1. The Community is the expert
2. Create a place, not a design
3. Look for partners:
4. You can see a lot just by observing
5. Have a vision
6. Start with petunias
7. Triangulate
8. They always say "It can't be done"
9. Form supports function
10. Money is not the issue
11. You are never finished

[4] From Internet World Stats. Internet users growth in the world between 2000 and 2008: Middle East 1176.8%, Africa 1030.2%, Latin America/Caribbean 659.9%, Asia 363.4%.

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