Minitrack: “Online Communities in the Digital Economy”

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Virtual Communities have been studied from a variety of perspectives. Examples range from communities of interest to communities of practice, from gaming communities to communities of transaction. More specifically, community building and community management may be factors of key success in the digital economy. They may represent new business models in the digital economy, as well as being new venues of social interactions and social relationships. The communities we target may be constituted as communities’ platforms, Internet shops, portal sites, reputation systems, educational, groupware systems, electronic auctions, billboards, peer-to-peer file sharing infrastructures, enterprises or organizations. Product-centred communities are relevant for online companies, as for example the reader community at Amazon.com or mutual support groups for software development. Other communities might enhance offline communities and other forms of social networks, like support groups, fun and discussion groups, technical and service communities and more.

Online communities differ in their orientations and platforms. Nevertheless, there are common features which all types of communities share: group interests, joint practices, collective ontologies with common semantics as well as normative issues. Communities are a sociological phenomenon. They can foster a social atmosphere for interactions and transactions. In this mini-track we tried to highlight common denominators and differences among and between communities.

The online mini-track has accepted six papers that deal with various aspects of virtual communities (cognitive, information control, Archie-types and use) using various methodologies and style (conceptual, case-study, quantitative and triangulated combining both qualitative and quantitative methods). The first paper “Towards an Ecological Perspective on the Evolution of Online Communities of Practice” by Sheng-cheng Lin and Fu-ren Lin explore communities of practice through an ecological theoretical framework. The authors have developed a community of practice ecosystem model, which serves to describe changes within time in this system. The second paper “A Bridge to Home: The Use of the Internet by Transnational Communities of Immigrants” by Celene Navarrete and Esperanza Huerta explores how offline communities, and more specifically transnational communities of immigrants maintain sense of community via the Internet. They argue that the unique characteristics of communities of immigrants (e.g., shared histories, common country of origin) shape the nature and dynamics of their interactions online.

The third paper “Developing an Online Business Community: A Travel Industry Case Study” by Rosemary Stockdale and Michael Borovicka discusses the aspect of companies that create and maintain online communities as part of the relationships with their customers, while focusing on a case study of a travel company. The fourth paper “Examining the Cognitive Style Effects on the Acceptance of Online Community Weblog Systems” by Will Wai-kit Ma and Theodore H.K. Clark sheds light on the cognitive usage of blogs by users. Their group analysis has detected two types of users “the intuitive” and “the analytic” which were different in terms of performance, expectancy and effort expectancy. The fifth paper “The Impact of Social Types within Information Communities: Findings from Technical Newsgroups” by Tammara Combs Turner and Karen E. Fisher has applied an information communities framework to online technical groups, identifying four types: members, mentors, managers and moguls. Additionally they have examined the impact of these social types on information flow. Finally, the sixth paper “Gatekeeping in Virtual Communities: On Politics of Power in Cyberspace” by Karine Barzilai-Nahon has explored the ways and meaning of information control in virtual communities, while underscoring the sensitive balance among the main stakeholders: regulators, service providers, community managers and members of communities.