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TC 510

Paper 1

Spring Quarter 2001

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The Information Design of Community-Building: What Turns a Web Space Into a Virtual
Community or Community Network

While I had read Howard Rheingold's 1993 edition of *The Virtual Community* shortly after it was published, my interest in online communities and community building really didn't develop until I spent some time in 1997-1999 as the volunteer webmaster for the Seattle Tilth Association, a Seattle-based non-profit organization focused on promoting organic gardening and sustainable agriculture. While I was at Tilth, we worked to build the web site as a presence and resource for their community, and my interest in what turns a web site into a promoter of community was formed.

Since I know many of you have come to this paper familiar with some, but not all of the subjects, let me first briefly state some definitions of the three important subject areas: virtual communities, community networks and information design. Virtual communities "consist of people who interact over a period of time and form human bounds of some kind through such digital technologies as email discussion groups, bulletin boards, and real-time chat" (Farkas and Farkas 134). A community network, according to the Association for Community Networking (<http://www.afcn.net>) is a "community-based creation and provision of appropriate technology services." Robert Jacobson (1999) states that the practice of information design "is the systematic arrangement and use of communication carriers, channels, and tokens to increase the

understanding of those participating in a specific conversation or discourse” (4). For my purpose, I will treat virtual communities and community networks under the same overall heading of building community, because their information designs share many common ideas.

This paper will speak to the issue that there are certain design considerations which are critical for successful, long-lasting community building on the web that may have no importance or may have lesser importance in a non-community-oriented web site. I will address six of the most important considerations in this paper, but it is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Anyone desiring more in-depth coverage of this topic should see the “Other Community-building Resources” section at the end of this paper.

So, what aspects of information design influence community-building? Many authors have suggestions. I have summarized information in six key areas.

Involving End-Users in the Design Process

Vaughan and Schwartz (1999) suggest that involving the user population in the information design process is key. Along the same lines, Rosenbaum (1998) states that community networks must find out from their user population what they want in the way of products and services (517). Vaughan and Schwartz point out that too often one or at most a very small number of expert users have total responsibility for designing an entire community network from the ground up, and that too often the people who are supposed to benefit from the network, average users, are left out of the design process (588). This leads to the network not serving the needs of the users it had hoped to attract.

There are some potential problems with involving end-users in the design process. One problem is that they may not be familiar enough with the Web and its capabilities to be able to contribute usable design ideas; but this can be managed by finding ways to introduce proposed

end-users to Web technology (Vaughan and Schwartz 1999). Another problem is pointed out by Andy Carvin in a 1998 keynote speech, when he comments that “it’s impossible to move ahead [with a design] when there is a multitude of voices yet no individual leadership making the final call.” Carvin states further that “a community network really needs to have an individual who can articulate a vision, focus on a mission, and take responsibility when things go wrong, and receive the appropriate kudos when things go right.” So, it is important to draw a line between soliciting user opinion in the design process and making final decisions between what may be very divergent ideas generated during the process. Someone must make the final decision or the project will be significantly hampered. The goal is the product, not the process. To sum up, as Anderson (1999) says, “collaboration is dynamic, often messy, confrontational, uncomfortable, and chaotic” (248), but can be well worth the time and effort.

Keep the Lines of Communication Open in the Design Process

Howard Rheingold (2000) speaks in-depth on the subject of The WELL’s (<http://www.well.org>) sale in 1994 to new owner Bruce Katz, and the resulting chaos that ensued, largely because, as Rheingold says “Katz lacks good listening skills and didn’t seem to understand that he needed to communicate with the WELL community himself, in our medium, in a way that showed some basic understanding of our norms” (331). If you are the community’s leader, it is important to keep your community as happy as you can. It should go without saying that not everyone will be happy with everything you do, but you should strive to not make anyone unnecessarily upset at your actions, and this is usually accomplished through good communication. A good current example of poor communication in a community is the March 2000 example where all Major League Baseball web sites, which had up until then been under the control of each club, were taken over by Major League Baseball and dramatically redesigned,

and in many instances content was standardized or removed, particularly from sites which had innovative content such as the Seattle Mariners. One only has to look in the Fan Forum link on the Mariner's web site (http://mariners.mlb.com/NASApp/mlb/sea/homepage/sea_homepage.jsp) to find out how unpopular this move was, and I would argue that this poor reaction was also due to a lack of communication. A current example where there is good communication going on within a community about design changes can be seen off *Salon's* (<http://www.salon.com>) home page "Premium: The first seven days," found directly at http://www.salon.com/letters/editor/2001/05/02/premium_progress/. This is a continuing discussion of *Salon's* decision to start charging money for a premium service.

Time and Money and the Design Process

Non-profit community networks, generally speaking, operate from day one on a minute budget, though there are some exceptions such as Blacksburg Electronic Village (<http://www.bev.net>). So generally there is little money available for research into user wants and needs. Vaughan and Schwartz studied the particular case of HoosierNet (<http://www.bloomington.in.us>), a typical poorly-funded network, and worked on practical ways to acquire data from HoosierNet's proposed user population quickly before the site came online for the community at large. Whether a network is well-funded or not, their methodology is instructive. They decided to address the problem of acquiring user data quickly and inexpensively by determining whether there was a specific aspect of HoosierNet where design efforts could be focused, and chose the overall organization of headings and sub-headings in the web site. Also, they looked at whether there was a critical segment of the proposed user population who would be key to the network starting strong and could therefore be the focus of the design effort. They did their study using volunteer focus groups. The focus groups allowed

the selected volunteers to come together for a limited period of time, left plenty of opportunities for debate amongst the volunteers regarding the best and worst points of the web site, following the authors' study techniques. The authors made specific efforts to reduce anxiety about both the technology involved in the web site and in the expression of any criticism about the web site. The focus group was selected from "innovators," defined as "skilled computer users who were likely aware of HoosierNet," and "early adopters," defined as "people who were active in the community and involved in local issues" (589). Innovators were recruited from a list of 14 volunteers involved in HoosierNet's start-up effort. Early adopters were recruited from a list of community neighborhood associations and their officers obtained from the local county library. The first person listed under each organization was recruited for the focus group. A little fewer than half of each recruit pool actually participated in the focus group. The authors realize that over time HoosierNet will need to address the needs of additional user groups, but this particular population was selected to jumpstart the information design. While their methodology is not the only one possible, it certainly accomplishes the goal of acquiring data about a site's proposed user base, and is a worthy one to consider adopting.

Set up a Workable Ownership and Governance Model

The backbone of the information design of a community-building web site should be a sound ownership (if not commercially owned) and governance model. To promote democracy online, Rheingold (2000) suggests that a community's social charter be written before going online (339). "You need to specify the qualifications for voting membership, the mechanisms for campaigning and voting, the structure and power of a governing body, and mechanisms for recalling or impeaching that ruling body" (339). Hashing these things out online works poorly because the medium does not support consensus decision-making well (339). A computer

conference is a good place for all opinions to be heard before decisions are made, however (339). Online governance structures may not be needed until trouble arises, but it is efficient to anticipate that trouble will arise. For commercial communities, ownership issues can be particularly difficult. Rheingold (2000) found it was a mistake to accept venture capital financing for his first Internet start-up, a magazine/virtual community called Electric Minds, in 1996-97 (337-338). He speculates that venture capital is not a healthy way to grow a social enterprise, because venture capitalists want return on investment too quickly and a community cannot get off the ground and grow sustainably that quickly (336-337).

Consider Ethical Issues

Particularly when communities start to have a commercial orientation, ethical issues are an important concern (Rheingold 338). If you are building a community for dog lovers, should you accept funding from a dog food company? If the company insists on advertising itself on your community's site, where will the ads have to be placed to keep everyone happy? Rheingold raises an important question when he asks "How much commercial ownership are members of a virtual community willing to accept, in exchange for the technical and social resources necessary for maintaining the community?" (338). In practice, this can be a tricky question to answer. While tricky, questions such as these should not be ignored.

Information Design is an Ongoing Process

Additional areas of further investigation Vaughan and Schwartz identified were user views of images they want on the web site, further user group identification for site design and redesign focus groups, and adding communications components to the web site. This should allow HoosierNet to continue to meet the needs of the community. Particularly when funding is tight or when the design process relies on volunteers, making time for reworking an existing

information design can be difficult. Personally speaking, when I was an overworked volunteer webmaster and lone staff person working on the Seattle Tilth Association's web site more than two years ago, under constant bombardment with new content and good ideas generated by Tilth paid staff and the Tilth community at large, I can certainly say that it was very hard to revisit pages that were already "completed." Since there are still content and design elements I created on the current form of the web site (<http://www.seattletilth.org>) I'm sure the current webmasters face the same problem. The web is a dynamic medium, however, and design changes will be needed to continue to meet the needs of a web site's user base.

Summary

This paper addressed six key areas of information design in community building web sites:

1. Involving end-users in the design process.
2. Keeping the lines of communication open in the design process.
3. Time and money and the design process.
4. Set up a workable ownership and governance model.
5. Consider ethical issues.
6. The ongoing process of information design.

More information about other important areas of information design may be found under "Other Community-building Resources."

Other Community-building Resources

Rheingold (2000) refers people to 3 main books in this subject area: Jenny Preece's book (2000) *Online Communities: Supporting Sociability and Designing Usability*; *Hosting Web Communities* by Cliff Figallo (1998); and *Community Building on the Web*, by Amy Jo Kim

(2000). Another book in the subject area is *Online Communities: Commerce, Community Action, and the Virtual University*, edited by Chris Werry and Miranda Mowbray (2001)

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