

How does the creation of an online community relate to its physical counterpart?

18Jan06

Beth Granter

Since Rhinegold's 'The Virtual Community' was printed in 1993, much has been written on the use of relatively new spaces for communion online, including focused studies on MUDs (Multi User Dungeons) (Cherny, 1999: 247-296), IRC (Internet Relay Chat) (Shaw in Jones 2002: 134-143) or, as in this case, forum based communities (Preece, 2001: 345-375).

I intend to use the term 'online' as an alternative to the term 'virtual' which is often used to describe the same concepts but has been criticised for its implication that online spaces are somehow less authentic than physical, offline ones (Cerulo in Rhinegold, 2000: 367).

Rather than looking at a new or established online community as many other studies have done, I am interested in the evolution and use of a new forum community, which has a physical counterpart that is already established. Related studies have looked at examples of towns and villages - geographical communities' movements into and within an online realm (Wilmersdorf, 2003; Zook, 2002). There is still, however, currently a deficit in studies of the relationships between online and offline communities (Nip, 2004).

Using Sussex University LGBT group as a case study, I am interested in whether and how a flexible online community mirrors its physical counterpart and whether it reflects the physical environment of the community or alters its online environment to suit its needs. The developer of an online community should "work closely with members to understand their needs, to select appropriate software, and to develop good sociability and usability" (Preece, 2001: 346). As an active member of this local community, I was able to understand the dynamics and structure of the group and attempt to mirror these when initially building the online space, whilst also encouraging member co-operation and influence on the designs. Rather than creating a chat based system, a forum seemed more appropriate as it allows "community memory... some record of what was said or done in your absence" (Rhinegold 2000: 183).

Discussions with the group's committee identified criticisms of the existing website for using too much Flash which future members could not edit and which did not work on all browsers. Ease of editing pages and forum administration for future members played a factor in the simplicity of the designs and choice of forum provider (see Fig 1). The existing LGBT website was also criticised for being 'too gay', i.e. too colourful. The importance of discretion was identified as a factor to take into account when designing the site, due to many users potentially viewing the site from public computers, libraries etc. and a number of users assumed to be sensitive about issues of sexuality.

Many members of the Sussex University LGBT group are familiar with international online queer communities such as 'gaydar.com' so I hoped to incorporate a similar structure in the new local site. The ethics of running this project were discussed with the Sussex University LGBT committee and it was resolved that the research aspect of the project should be made clear on the site.

Although geographically connected, this group is also based on all members identifying as a sexual minority student or at least being interested in queer issues. The fact that most users of the group, by definition, identify as LGBT or queer adds another aspect to this study. A queer community's use of a message board system has been studied in Hong Kong, but this online community had existed prior to the study commencing (Nip, 2004). The creation and development in the early stages of an online queer community in relation to its offline counterpart will be different because the online community is at a different stage of evolution. Also, due to being a student group, members are assumed to change each year with the general active membership period being a maximum of 3 years offline, the duration of a typical undergraduate degree. LGBT students' use of the internet was shown to differ from that of straight students as a result of needing to "develop successful rhetorical strategies for dealing with the [LGBT specific] conflicts that education, community, and society [imposes] upon them" (Peters 2004).

Minority groups' use of the internet in general may vary from the status quo for similar reasons - they often have more reason to take advantage of the freedom that anonymity and 'safe spaces' bring. Indeed, it seems that, "Liberated from the normative gaze of both institutions and society, identity cannot be verified and attached to the embodied user and behaviour is not constrained by 'real space' norms and values" (Wilson, in Holmes 1997:150).

In registering, avatar pictures are not restricted to photographs of users' real faces. Not only does this increase the freedom of how a user may portray themselves by building up a chosen identity, but the opportunity to make these declarations may be therapeutic in itself (Burke, 2000). Additionally, attractiveness and clothing style can greatly influence a person's social ranking and relationships in the physical queer community. With these cues greatly reduced or even removed completely online, the online community would be expected to function slightly differently and for relationships to be based on other, less visual cues. According to Shaw (in Jones, 1997: 142), "gay culture has an extraordinary visual bias and [IRC is] a refreshing non-visual break". However, in the case of the Sussex University LGBT community, many members are already familiar with the physical appearance of other members due to meeting them offline.

The relationship between the online environment and the offline environment that members experience depends on the extent of their control and influence on both. The way gay men use IRC in relationship to their offline lives has been described as, "[creating] a context for an idealized concept of gay culture which is necessarily rooted in and leads to their lived homosexual experiences" (Shaw in Jones, 1997: 142). Steps in a similar direction can be seen in this case study by members voting for the entertainment themed environment and not the supportive environment (see Fig 2), although more time would be necessary to track potential changes in the preferred environment and how these reflect fluctuating emotional states of members.

Democracy is an important factor in the running of the group, with committee members elected annually and important decisions presented to group members at meetings. One difficulty that was brought to committee attention was the how to make new members feel more welcome and reduce 'cliqueyness' within the group. "Democracy online refers to the ideal of governing a virtual community through online debates and votes" (Rhinegold 2000: 338).

To increase online democracy, registered members are invited to introduce themselves and it is less clear how close members are 'in real life' when the whole group isn't physically visible at one point in time. A poll was introduced to allow

users to vote on their environment (see Fig 1) and committee members voted on the new logo. All registered users are able to post in any topic and to start their own discussions.

Most descriptions of community describe a core of regular participants and a larger group who drift in and out of the social spaces where members communicate (Preece, 2001: 87). This was observed in the physical LGBT group and to some extent, in the online space, with certain members being more vocal than others and a number of members being present but silent participants in the community. Even if silent, these members must feel they benefit in some way by joining the community.

“Every cooperative group of people exists in the face of a competitive world because that group of people recognizes there is something valuable that they can gain only by banding together” (Rhinegold, 2000: xxviii).

These benefits may include finding and sharing information, organising social events or campaigns, socialising and flirting. ‘People awareness’ is necessary for a successful community. This “is provided as ‘peripheral awareness’ that can be drawn on where relevant and ignored where not” (p27, Churchill et al, 2002), such as counter statistics, ‘who is online’ data and messaging systems (see Fig 3).

The environment that a community is situated in can have an effect on the dynamics and structure of that community. In the physical world, the community’s environment is often dictated by its geography. The meeting space for the LGBT group is influenced almost completely by its members but outside of this space the group has little influence. The LGBT room itself is very colourful, most information available is of a therapeutic or supportive nature, and the only ‘facilities’ available are for coffee making. Meetings are organised around a queer issue discussion topic, usually lead by one member, followed by plans for entertainment events and sometimes campaigns. As it seemed unclear what the main focus of the group was (support, campaigning or entertainment), three alternative websites with a focus on each were created as an environment in which the forum could be situated. Concerns about the existing website that it was ‘too gay’, i.e. colourful, were taken into account in the design whilst still trying to incorporate the rainbow flag which is representative of LGBT groups internationally. A new logo was also requested at meetings. The chosen logo was used on event tickets and posters and also on the new websites and forum, thereby connecting the two spaces (see Fig 4).

Interactivity and members’ individual control over their community environment are two factors identified as important in supporting a community. The community space I constructed aimed to be a ‘Collaborative Virtual Environment’, defined as providing “a terrain or digital landscape that can be ‘inhabited’ or ‘populated’ by individuals and data, encouraging a sense of shared space or place” (Churchill, 2002: 5).

Interactivity and control to support such a shared space was encouraged on the forum by making registration a necessary step in order to make posts. Registration involves creating a profile with flexible detail, choice of anonymity and representation of user identity (see Fig 5). The intention is that as “in a MUD... by creating your identity you help create a world” (Rhinegold, 2000: 152). Interestingly, a number of members chose to link their profiles to existing alternative online profiles from the wider online queer or social community, such as gaydargirls.com or myspace.com, and many used the same usernames even if they did not link to the other profile. People who went on to make their ‘real life’ identities known through posts often chose to use a screen name rather than their given name. According to Reid,

“The uniqueness of names, their consistent use, and respect for – and expectation of – their integrity, is crucial to the development of online communities” (in Rhinegold,

2000: 187).

Registration also gives users a choice of 'skins' for their forum allowing further personalisation and control.

One member used the forum's private messaging service to suggest an interactive calendar for members to add events. This suggestion was implemented and embedded within the structure of each version of the website. This kind of direct influence on the environment of her online community hoped to encourage her and other members to remain active within the community as it would feel more like 'their' community rather than something that was dictated by outside control.

Discussions at meetings are usually directed by committee members about various queer issues with participation from the whole group encouraged. Any deviation from queer topics is discouraged as this is the purpose of the meetings and other discussion is only possible outside the meeting room in more sociable contexts. Without changing the intention of the forum space as a queer discussion forum, other relevant topics are possible. These kinds of discussions can strengthen ties within a community by giving more substance and personality to peoples' identities rather than all members merely sharing a sexual identity.

The 24-hour accessibility of the online community is an important factor, which hopes to solve organisational problems within its physical counterpart. Breakdowns in communication when organising events have occurred in the past within the community and the forum should help to reduce this. The fact that people can post their ideas not only as they have them but also after thinking out the way they want to present their ideas also means that the forum may provide an arena that is more accessible to individuals who are too inhibited to speak up at meetings.

"Some people – many people – don't do well in spontaneous spoken interaction, but turn out to have valuable contributions to make in a conversation in which they have time to think about what to say" (Rhinegold, 2000: 8).

Some of the most vocal members of the group at meetings however, have indicated that they are somewhat 'techno-phobic' and feared they would have difficulty navigating the website and using the forum. Although most of these members managed to register and make one post, as use of the internet was not in their daily routines, their influence and presence in the online community was markedly reduced in comparison to that in the physical community. Notably, when the original forum was lost, it was these members who did not re-register on the new forum and so have not re-posted (at the time of writing this). This appears to be a result of the predictability of the community failing (unavoidably – backups are not possible with phpBBforfree) and thereby greatly reducing usability (Shneiderman in Earnshaw 2001: 265).

As well as usability, sociability needs to be encouraged when planning an online community. A shared purpose of the community is necessary for good sociability (Preece in Earnshaw 2001: 268). By embedding the forum in alternative environments, various main purposes of the community are communicated to users. Currently Sussex University LGBT Online Community users can choose whichever purpose suits their needs best until an overall consensus is achieved through the forum poll. In conclusion, it seems that even in the initial stages of growth of an online community, the difference that computer mediation can make to the dynamics of a group are clear. For minority groups specifically, anonymity and control of identity formation may be especially important to the individual when joining a community. The publicity of declarations made online might allow members to feel they have a voice that is being listened to where in the physical community they may have

struggled to find their voice. Also, the highly structured democratic aspects of an online community are more easily enforced than in a physical community where issues such as social rank and confidence in public speaking might create undesirable hierarchies.

[Please note - the figures referred to are available upon request]

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Burke, S.K., In Search of Lesbian Community in an Electronic World, *CyberPsychology & Behavior* (Aug 2000), Vol. 3, No. 4: 591-604.

Cherny, L. *Conversation and Community: Chat in a Virtual World*, Stanford, CSLI Publications (1999).

Churchill, E.F., Snowdon, D.N. and Munro, A.J. (Eds), *Collaborative Virtual Environments, Digital Places and Spaces for Interaction*, Springer-Verlag London Ltd. (2002).

Earnshaw, R., Guedj, R., Van Dam, A. and Vince, J. (Eds), *Frontiers of Human Centered Computing, Online Communities and Virtual Environments*, London, Springer Verlag (2001).

Holmes, D. (ed.) *Virtual Politics, Identity and Community in Cyberspace*, London, SAGE (1997).

Jones, S.G. (Ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, London, SAGE (2002).

Nip, J.Y.M., The relationship between online and offline communities: the case of the Queer Sisters, in *Media, Culture & Society*, (2004) SAGE Publications, Vol. 26(3): 409–428.

Peters, B., Swanson, D., *Queering the conflicts: What LGBT students can teach us in the classroom and online*, *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004) 295–313.

Preece, J., *Online Communities: Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability*, Chichester, John Wiley & Sons Ltd (2001).

Rhinegold, H., *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, revised edition. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press (2000).

Wilmersdorf, E., Geocoded information incorporated into urban online services—the approach of the City of Vienna, in *Computers, Environment and Urban Systems*, Vol 27, No. 6, pp609-621 (Nov 2003).

Zook, M.A., Hubs, nodes and by-passed places: a typology of e-commerce regions in the United States, *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie/Journal of Economic & Social Geography*, Vol 93, No. 5, pp509-521 (December 2002).