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77. Virtual Community Design, Participation and Success: A Strategy-as-Practice perspective

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Abstract

With increasing participation and interaction in online communities, creators and participants in these communities are interested in enhancing the interactions, promoting ongoing interest and building a sense of community. These outcomes involve developing and implementing strategies which will achieve the desired objectives. Given interest in the strategy and governance mechanisms in virtual communities, in this paper, we examine ongoing strategizing of the stakeholders of an online community, through a strategy-as-practice perspective using a qualitative approach of content analysis. This longitudinal perspective, over a period of nine years, provides insight into the strategy praxis, practitioners and practices related to strategizing for the ongoing development of this online community. Stakeholders negotiate strategies which seek to provide preferred interaction modalities given the support or constraints of the IT-enabled environment.

Keywords

Virtual communities, strategy-as-practice, blogs.

1. Introduction

Participation in virtual communities has gained increasing popularity over the last several years, as these communities provide opportunities for interaction among participants with common interests (Martínez-López, Anaya-Sánchez, Aguilar-Illescas, & Molinillo, 2016). With increasing participation and interaction in online communities, creators and members of these communities are interested in enhancing the interactions, promoting ongoing interest and building a sense of community. Achieving these outcomes involve developing and implementing strategies which will achieve the desired objectives. Members may have expectations of involvement in decision making and strategy-making in relation to the virtual community. Vesa and Vaara (2014) advocate for increased analysis and understanding of the processes involved in strategy collaborations in a virtual context.

Leimeister and Rajagopalan (2015) outline key areas of community management within virtual communities, and highlight the need for research in these areas. The types of activities involved in managing a community, roles of the operators and members of virtual communities, and associated governance mechanisms are elements in identifying effective strategies for virtual communities. They argue that “Each VC does have its own view of community management, and each VC must thus be analyzed separately” (Leimeister and Rajagopalan, 2015, p.11)

Issues related to governance may include who has the decision right (Brown & Grant, 2005; Sibai, Valck, Farrell, & Rudd, 2015; Weill, 2004), and in some virtual communities, some stakeholders may express the view that their decision-making capabilities are limited. This paper examines involvement in strategy and decisions from the public discussion threads in a virtual community. This is relevant for research and practice, given the continued interest in IT governance in various settings (Brown & Grant, 2005) and the need for research to explore the effects of types of virtual community management on the success of virtual communities (Leimeister & Rajagopalan, 2015).

The dynamic nature of the structure of online communities, related to various participation levels, formats and supporting technologies and systems, provides a platform on which to build an analysis using a strategy-as-practice perspective. The importance of strategy in this context is reflected in the definition of strategy articulated by Jarzabkowski, Balogun and Seidl (2007, p. 14) as “a situated, socially-accomplished flow of activity that has consequential outcomes for the direction and/or survival of the group, organization or industry”. There are a number of possible persons or roles involved in strategizing in virtual communities, with the focus of developing strategy in relation to the direction and longevity of the group. The strategy-as-practice perspective examines the strategy praxis, strategy practitioners and practices, exploring the actual ‘doing of strategy’ – the work by the actors and tools involved in their actions and interactions on a day-to-day basis. Online communities present an interesting sphere in which to examine these issues, as there are many stakeholder practitioners involved in these activities, such as the community hosts, moderators, and general participants, with different perspectives to be considered. The area of strategy in virtual communities is currently understudied, and further studies could facilitate an exploration of the concept of open strategy in online organizations (Vesa & Vaara, 2014).

With calls for increased research in the area of strategy-as-practice (Jarzabkowski and Spee, 2009; Whittington, 2014), this paper examines strategizing in the development of online communities. This allows for contributing to the gap in knowledge in two key areas of the typology presented by Jarzabkowski and Spee (2009) – individual practitioners and micro praxis and the intersection of aggregate groups and micro praxis. Further, the study enables contribution to the gaps identified for further research needed in the areas of strategy, governance and community management in virtual communities (Leimeister and Rajagopalan, 2015; Vesa & Vaara, 2014).

The literature related to strategizing and the development of online communities is discussed in the next section, followed by the methodology for this study. The findings are then discussed followed by the implications for research and practice. The content analysis presents the ongoing strategizing that occurs in this online community, and reflects some of the stakeholders’ roles.

2. Strategizing in Online Communities

While there are many definitions of online or virtual communities, a working definition which encapsulates key elements is presented by Preece (2000, p. 10) who states:

“An online community consists of:

- People, who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles such as leading or moderating.
- A shared purpose, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provides a reason for the community.
- Policies, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide social interactions.
- Computer systems, to support and mediate social interaction, and facilitate a sense of togetherness.”

Preece’s (2000) definition highlights the focal area of social interaction, and its integration across people, policies and the supporting computer platforms. Lee, Vogel and Limayem (2003) note that there are different views on the classification of types of virtual communities and present some of the more commonly referenced classifications and types. The variations in types of virtual communities are further highlighted as Sagers, Wasko and Dickey (2004) draw on the literature to show their usage within and across organizations and within groups without organizational affiliation for support, discussion, knowledge exchange and sharing.

Further, Yoo et al. (2002) found that managing strategy influenced sense of community and participation of members in virtual communities. This member participation and sense of community was also related to the quality of the supporting information systems. Whittington, Cailluet and Yakis-Douglas (2011) suggest that there may be increased transparency in strategy processes enabled by supporting technology and communication tools such as blogs. This reflects the need for increased understanding of the development of strategy, ongoing strategizing and implementation within the virtual community. Further, as Galliers (2004, p. 237) articulates, “[t]he process of strategizing, with a view to gaining a shared appreciation of the context in which this strategizing is taking place, is just as important, if not more so, than the decisions made as a result.”

Rothaermel and Sugiyama (2001) discuss some of the strategies involved in building a virtual community. There are several components involved in virtual communities, as it reflects the use of information and communication technologies to support interaction based on interests and the building of relationships. Sangwan (2005, p. 8) indicates that “Studies which view virtual communities as a platform for management of strategic partnership between a host and its members are few, even though success of a virtual community depends on dyadic relationship which aims at member or user satisfaction.” Further studies on the strategy practices developed by moderators are needed. Clan governance has been discussed in relation to the community management aspects of online communities which facilitates the contributions of members in decision-making and group norms (Sibai et al., 2015). Further, Kling and Courtright (2003) articulate the role of technology in developing communities and the differences observed between “IT-led” and “IT-supported” strategies in online communities and electronic forums. The interaction between the moderators and community members, and the form of governance is an important area and requires further research (Sibai et al., 2015).

Given the dynamic nature of virtual communities, strategy-as-practice is a useful perspective from which to analyse the intersection of praxis, practices and practitioners. The combination of

calls for more research using the strategy-as-practice perspective (Jarzabkowski & Spee, 2009; Vesa & Vaara, 2014), in tandem with calls for greater depth and examination of details of knowledge sharing and interaction in online communities (Hara & Fichman, 2013), and community management and governance mechanisms in virtual communities (Dennis, Minas & Lockwood, 2016; Leimeister and Rajagopalan, 2015; Sibai et al., 2015) provide a basis for this study.

3. Methodology

In order to explore the evolution of a series of online interactions over a period of time, we selected an online community that has been active for a number of years, since 2005. This dynamic community evolved from and is centered around a blog which is written by tennis analyst Peter Bodo. Tennis World involved a community of tennis enthusiasts located at the tennis.com website. The blog had been active for a number of years, and evolved into a dynamic community. The blog was purposively selected, given the empirical observations which could be facilitated related to a series of online interactions over a period of time on the design and governance mechanisms. While the blog has approximately 3,600 moderator posts each with several comments for the period 2005-2014, the analysis focuses on the blog discussions related to the strategy and strategic practices of the virtual community.

Over the years of activity, the blog has created different fora for interaction on various topics. The archives for blog entries and comments on a range of topics were examined. A systematic analysis of messages over a period of time provides for a longitudinal analysis of the activities in a virtual community, and facilitates the study of the virtual environment through virtual ethnography or netnography (Kozinets, 2002; Paccagnella, 1997). Content analysis has been recognized as an appropriate method for research on virtual communities (Burnett & Buerkle, 2004; Porter, 2004). Through content analysis, themes among issues and interactions among participants were explored. Content analysis is a method which is used to explore the meaning and relationships in data, text, and images (Krippendorff, 1980). Wasko and Faraj [2000, p. 163] highlight that it “provides a richness to the data and a deeper understanding of the actual motivations underlying participation without imposing a pre-determined theoretical structure.” Thematic content analysis “connotes the analysis of storylike verbal material, and the use of relatively comprehensive units of analysis such as themes” (Smith, 1992, p.4). Responses are classified into descriptive categories (Smith, 1992). The content analysis was conducted using the following steps. First, all the data collected from the archives was examined. A group of themes were then identified while reading through a set of posts. The other posts were then examined to identify similar or new themes. The themes used in this study were then selected and data were categorized under these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Issues were aggregated under each theme based on the topic or area in which they most frequently appeared and were referred to in the posts.

The blog is organized into several different categories, many of them reflected in the archival organization. Archives are also organized by month and year. The content analysis and discourse presented reflect the ongoing strategizing within the community.

4. Findings

A thematic analysis of the blog archives revealed key themes that the community strategized around – the technology and information systems platforms to support interaction, and the social interaction rules in two categories – blending the core theme of the blog with the social discourse, and creating a welcoming environment for the comments of new or intermittent posters as they interacted with the ongoing posts of the regular participants in the virtual community.

4.1 Information Systems Platforms to Support Interaction

The inter-dependency between participation in the online community and the features of the platform on which the blog is hosted were evident in the content analysis of the interactions. For example, participants in the community were very vocal about their opinions of a new interface that was presented unexpectedly in 2009. This development created an awareness in the community with the realization that the community was subject to the decisions of the parent company and blog hosting company. Another change in format occurred again in 2012, and prompted much reaction again among older and newer members. The importance of the features of the information systems platform were reinforced as part of the strategy discussion as participation in the community entailed also comfort and familiarity with the user interface, mode of interaction, and ability to keep track of comments. This was noted in a post by the blog creator which engendered a discussion with 738 comments:

“Mornin', everyone. Well, there's a lot of housekeeping stuff to talk about today, starting with the changes in the Typepad blog format. I was caught by surprise myself yesterday, when only 25 comments appeared when I checked the site at around 6 PM. It took me a little time to figure out that Typepad had suddenly adopted a pagination format for its blogs, so that you only see 25 comments at one time, and then must click on the Next (page) icon and link (in blue, at the end of each set of 25 comments) for the next 25. The least Typepad could have done is send an alert that this was about to happen, no?”

Anyway, we're exploring all our options in terms of tweaking this new format, or even reverting back to our original "master list" format. This new approach is irritating to all of us, so let's hope we can change it back. However, I've noticed that many other websites/blogs also use the paginated format, and I guess I've always accepted that. We may have to adjust to a new system here, although there's no doubt that it may obstruct the habitual, easy and free-flowing communications we've enjoyed in the Comments. Bear with us while we see what, if anything, can be done.” (Pete, 2009)

This resulted in ongoing discussion, and over the next few days, participants were updated on the ongoing discussions with the service providers, and were also asked to vote on options for working with the modified blog format.

“As most of you undoubtedly know, Typepad (who provides blogging software) did an unannounced software "update" that has altered the dynamics of reading and posting comments here, mostly by way of paginating the Comments. ... So I need you to vote - should we keep the present system (oldest comments appear first), or have the most recent comments appear first? Please take the time to express your opinion below.

Tennis.com is making a vigorous effort to engage the Typepad providers to determine if we can reverse, alter, or tweak the changed format. I have no news to report on that yet. But Tennis.com is also in the midst of a re-design and server upgrade, and there's a chance that we may have options other than Typepad at your disposal. So stay tuned, and please try to live with the present situation. (Pete, 2009)

Responses from the community reflected the involvement of regular posters in offering their opinions in relation to key strategic aspects of the community:

“Pete, during match call days, the bottom up display of comments might both be useful and also kill the suspense. And on days with say, 10+ comments per minute, this could be well, too many pages.” (gh, 2009)

“Just throwing this out there...on some sites, you are offered a choice of most recent or first comments displayed...I am assuming that is not an option??” (rd, 2009)

Further communication regarding the change reflected an examination of possibilities and suggestions on strategies for the way forward:

“If any of you have suggestions on how we can create a chat room within the bubble of TW, which is what the *Your Call* and *Crisis Centers* have become, please send it on. For example, if we can embed a link in every post that takes you right to what is, in effect, a streaming conversation a la CC posts at their peak a few months ago, that may be the way to go. I will be discussing this and other options with the Tennis.com team and others in the days to come. It doesn't appear that we can ever be what we were, but maybe we can minimize the changes and, who knows, maybe even improve the overall experience. It's an awkward time to have to deal with this, so thanks for being patient.” (Pete, 2009)

Continuing with analysis of posts in the following year, it is observed that ongoing deliberations on the strategy for the group were articulated:

“One problem we encountered was that TennisWorld wasn't entirely new reader friendly, what with a lists of headlines like: USA vs. UK DC CC Day. Nor do headlines like Watercooler, or Your Call, demand reading on. The main issue was that I never wanted to turn TW into a message-board, with X-number of conversations going on at once, ad nauseum. But I also wanted to foster a sense of community and give everyone a chance to be heard. That's how TW ended up where it is today - fast approaching 1,000,000 comments posted.” (Pete, 2010)

Further articulations of the strategy were seen as the blog continued over the years. For example, this post notes a shift:

“Mornin'. The long-time readers among you will welcome this reprise of our traditional Grand Slam and Master Series Crisis Center post. It's always been the place where match-calling and comments on ongoing play are most appropriate, even though CC (and Your Call) are no longer regular daily features. That's mainly because of a shift in our Internet strategy and the current MO at Tennis.com. I'm glad, though, that most of you regulars have

been able to navigate the daily posts and carry on that well-established sense of community for which TennisWorld is so well known.” (Pete, 2012)

Following the change later in 2012 by the parent organizations to a new hosting platform (livefyre), members of the community highlighted their role in trying to make things work:

“I am not sure how to do this, but we all should get paid for the amount of testing we are doing on livefyre and kind of bugs we are finding.” (chg, 2012)

This was interspersed with trying to strategize re the continuity of community norms while handling the change to the new system:

“Pete's post has been up for a while. I think the general unwritten rule is to stay on subject for a while, but after that, general tennis-related conversation, and even some not tennis-related, is ok. Especially with the new Livefyre system, much of the discussion has centered around that.” (Shr, 2012).

In discussions re issues that surfaced in 2014, users queried whose responsibility it was to have the issues fixed – the parent organization, the blog writer or moderator, or the hosting company. In response, one user posted an answer that had been received:

“Livefyre says it's a java script error, and that they've been in contact with t.com on how to fix it. I think Shr should handle it from here.” (MV, 2014)

With the ongoing strategizing about technology to facilitate interaction on the main platform, there were also proposed strategies related to the community's interactions across different media types:

“As you all are aware, the TWibe has made its presence known on Facebook via our group, TennisWorld > Real World, and it's time for us to conquer a new social networking website - Twitter! (Soon to be TWitter. Ha!) Okay, so it's pretty tough to conquer a website that hosts millions of members, and unlike in Facebook, I can't create a TW group there, but I thought we could still use it to connect with one another. Many of us already have!” (J, 2009)

4.2 Facilitating Core Community Discussions and Social Interactions

The interaction between the blog creator, moderators and participants on the balance between social interaction and focus on the main topic of tennis was seen through the content analysis. The success of a community-based feel and resulting interactions on other topics had to be balanced with the challenge of still accommodating new/irregular posters or those who participated solely for the tennis conversation. It is possible that a sense of exclusivity would also not engage them further. This challenge was articulated by the blog creator:

“... on the subject of keeping TW both community-based and friendly to lurkers and other outsiders. Keeping TW sufficiently targeted on tennis and a place where members of our community can connect with each other. Many of you have gotten to know each other quite well, so it's only natural that we've had to deal with the OT [off-topic] issue. So just to clear up any confusion, here's our current vision: It would be great if y'all could keep on topic for each of my regular posts, but some drift is okay.

Our main administrative challenge lies in not being overly regimented, while retaining enough structure and purpose to please the vast majority of our readers, who are first and foremost interested in the tennis, and to keep chaos at bay. You can expect us to step in and nudge you toward an OT thread, or advise you to stay on-topic, when the occasion calls for it. We're just trying to fine tune the machine, and it's a pretty delicate operation that often depends on the ambient conditions of the day.” (Pete, 2007)

“TW has been up and running for almost four years now, and if I've learned one thing through that time it is that TW is a liquid entity.

So I'd like to do three things today: First, ask how you all feel about the present nature and direction of the site. Do you all feel comfortable and secure coming here? (Pete, 2008)

A number of responses from a range of participants reflected different views as they discussed possible strategies:

“Pete: TW is an entirely different Tennis forum compared to 3 or 4 I've been on. And this is the only place that has made me hang on to it for more than a month; it's all because of the reasons you mentioned above..” (AGSF, 2008)

“Pete - I think this is a terrific site and format - so, I would not change a thing. I agree your site rules are fair a lot going on at once - you just have to be able to multi task here.” (b, 2008)

“Pete/Mod -

I'm only an occasional poster, and this would require a technology change to the blogs, but I would love it if there were some sort of hierarchical structure to the comments. There are comments to the actual posting, then the more conversational comments to comments, and without some differentiation, I find it too tiring to sort through on most days.

Thanks for asking for feedback and keep up the good work!” (mw, 2008)

“I love this website a lot, too much - One thing that bothers me sometimes, however, is the timing of the 'your call' posts.

I mean, the tournaments this week are played in Europe and Russia. Play on 10.7 started over what? 8 hours ago?

I find that to be distracting, and causes difficulties in locating the live discussions, or sometimes interrupt a good discussion in the middle once a new YC or CC is up. I rather the YC post go up a little early than a little (or a lot) later.” (Or, 2008)

“Pete, let me say again that you've created a wonderful place here, with a lot of passion.

Thanks for the way you run things out here.” (cp, 2008)

This format of incorporating strategy discussions in the general flow of blog conversations was also seen with a response by the moderator highlighting the current format in which the blog operated and thanking participants for their suggestions.

“Many thanks, everyone, for weighing in. . . we now return to your regularly scheduled programming.” (Pete, 2008)

Regular posters also identified with a role of being involved in the blog's decisions and operations. This was intertwined with their identification of the blog as a community that supported ongoing interactions both on the main topics and any other topics that posters felt comfortable with as community. The excerpt below is based on an impending decision to remove one of the threads related to 'off topic' community discussions, and illustrates the combination of perceptions related to roles and participation in strategizing and decisions of community members:

Date: 11/1/2010, Sunday Housekeeping

NP, 2:22am

“BTW if Pete wants to get rid of the YC format entirely he should make that clear. Good luck keeping this place devoid of any OT talk, though. It's bound to creep in sooner or later.”

A, 2:28am

NP: wasn't there a rule at one point that you had to stay on topic on the red meat posts for a few hours, then it was okay to go OT? do you remember that? i think it was 4 or 5 hours. I'll admit to not being any more clear on what pete wants after reading this post.

This is interspersed with community participants sharing and re-iterating their thoughts on the approach that should be used. Some mediation is undertaken as well during the discussion:

Jwl, 2:41am

Didn't Pete say he was still thinking about it a bit?

I am still thinking about it too. It must be difficult for Pete to read all the comments so maybe sending emails if one wants to know one is heard is a better idea?

AM, 2:42am

Well next week we are going into the AO,there will be soo much posting going on. I wonder if there will be a more clear picture of where to go. Maybe there won't be.....

Some of the strategic outcomes resulting from discussions over the years, have included the placement of the Your Call thread on the main page, hosted by the parent company. Additional governance mechanisms have been developed with community members who have been active in formulating and implementing strategy serving as moderators.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explores online community participation and the role and practices of stakeholders in the community through a strategy as practice perspective. The study utilizes content analysis of an established online community to understand the dynamics of strategy creation. The paper aims to increase understanding of how participants themselves orient to and develop strategies for the ongoing development of the community. The findings reveal the context in which strategies were raised and considered and where final decisions were made. There have been calls for increased analysis using the strategy-as-practice perspective, and this paper has explored aspects where there have been calls for increased attention (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Balogun, Jacobs, Jarzabkowski, Mantere & Vaara, 2014). The strategy as practice perspective is also one that has much to offer in understanding how such communities emerge and develop.

The content analysis revealed that from the strategy-as-practice perspective, the blog was operating with the intersecting strategies of the parent company and contracted hosting company. The blog writer strategized and was aware of the contextual issues. While some decisions seemed to reside with the parent company, community members also felt connected to the role of strategizing, and participated in making suggestions, and hoped to strongly influence decisions at all levels of strategizing – parent company, hosting company and blog writer and moderator. This reflects the level of inclusion and transparency that technology may facilitate in the strategy process, from the formulation to implementation stages (Whittington, Cailluet & Yakis-Douglas, 2011). Vaara and Whittington (2012) highlight the need for increased analysis of strategy praxis and the activities involved in strategy creation. The authors highlight the role of sensemaking and the need for further analysis of actors within the strategy context. This paper seeks to contribute to this research gap. Strategy emerged reflecting strategy-as-practice, with calls from time to time for suggestions, discussed on an ad-hoc and as needed basis. Web posts articulating strategic decisions to be made receive some of the most comments on the blog, equivalent to some of the leading discussions. They tended to have key words such as ‘housekeeping’ and sometimes were prompted by a particular blog event. The need for an awareness of the agency of the blog community is important, along with the discursive processes associated with strategy making (Vaara and Whittington, 2012). The authors also note that studies of strategy emergence have received little attention and represent a significant opportunity. Similarly, the linkages with sustainable strategy are highlighted. Further, narrative analysis as built on in this paper is seen as a useful method to explore strategy using the strategy-as-practice perspective (Balogun et al., 2014).

Several strategy practitioners were involved at various levels and groupings as strategies emerged. The practitioners included the organization Tennis.com, the TennisWorld blog creator, key members of the team of virtual community moderators responsible for particular fora or sub-groups, regular posters who had been members for several years, regular new posters, old posters who posted less frequently, infrequent posters and lurkers. The website designers and information systems team were also part of the strategy practitioners. While the online discourse within the virtual community involved some of the strategy practitioners, the information systems team were not represented/ or identified in the online discourse. Similarly, the blog facilitated the group’s queries to the sub-contracted hosts of the blog platform. In this way, it helped with the perception of freedom to organize the blog as they would like. With reference to Jarzabkowski and Spee’s (2009) typology, the interactions between virtual community participants, the moderator, the parent company and the sub-contracted blog hosting company, represented aggregate organizational and extra-organizational actors reflecting on the meso-level of strategy praxis.

Recognizing that social networking sites are part of the daily practices of many persons (boyd & Ellison, 2007), strategy practices of engaging community members on social networking sites were proposed and supported by some of the strategy practitioners. In this community, we found that stakeholders negotiate strategies which seek to provide preferred interaction modalities given the support or constraints of the IT-enabled environment.

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