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## Editorial: Five factors in making web communities to survive or fade

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**Biographical notes:** Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor at the University of Twente. His specialties are in advanced learning tools such as concept mapping, virtual reality and mobile learning. His research and teaching stretch from teacher education via the European Joint Research Projects to international projects under the auspices of UNESCO. His recent publications are on learners' preconceptions and representations that express pre-intuitive ideas before the actual learning may start: *Cognitive Support for Learning and Imagining the Unknown*. He is the Editor of several research journals and organises conferences in mobile learning, e-society and web-based communities.

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This special issue is partly built on the prior issue 'Web-based research networks and learning communities' with guest editors of the iPED Research Network under the guidance of Virginia King. The authors of the underlying Articles 3 and 5: Heather Conboy, Alan Brine and Jane Clarke and by Rebecca Clothey and Stacy Austin-Li have been so loyal to become integrated in this special issue with both accents on learning communities and on marketing aspects. The earlier issues of this journal have underlined the benefit of 'virtual' communities so far: its dynamics, its flexibility to capture actuality, etc. This time, we focus closer on the degree of realism that make online powerful in its commercial and its ideological sense as well.

- 1 The first step is to superimpose an 'instantiation': The fact that online shops struggle with anonymity and its clean abstract interior. Examples are E-bay, Amazon and Fashionchick: they have not been good in making its entrance more immersive or 'transporting' as moviemakers say. Instead of investing in its 3D realism, shops have strived towards ambiance; a certain intimacy for those who enter and should stay as long as possible. The real thing to come is the social atmosphere in a web shop; who are we expecting to meet? Here, we see immense possibilities: Would you like to have someone's opinion on what you plan to buy? Do you need to be convinced that your family should see how a new dress or suit fits you?, etc. The traditional shop typically welcomes the customer accompanied by the family, if it is about larger issues like booking a trip, a car, a pet and a house. Why not in case of a book or a mobile device? It seems that customers do not want to polarise family members; your choice may compromise the group you meet many times in future. So: who is potentially your sparring partner in the shop? Good virtual communities are free places for flowing discourse and meeting new friends unexpectedly.

- 2 The second is the principle of 'reciprocity': It is the contract that community members contribute to the degree as they expect to get back from the community as a whole. The romantic version is that community members permit themselves to invest in the collective as if it is a 'generalised other'. The more pragmatic version is the community as a standard formula for being accredited: 'accepted as subscriber' and having the right to claim collective support as if it concerns an insurance corporation. Web-based communities, nowadays, still embody a great deal of romantic 'membership'; the stage of balancing rights and duties still needs to come.
- 3 The third is 'translucence': The attempt to achieve transparency; (Chi et al., 2008). As new networking mechanisms develop, it is necessary to stimulate participation, trust and comfort. It needs special attention as the web demands new alertness for convincing citizens to 'jump in'. Inherent to new media is the 'novelty effect'; it reflects the belief that, because of its new appearance, a new medium would be better or opens doors that were not accessible before.
- 4 The fourth is a mix of navigational 'pragmatism' and the collective agreement on 'societal priorities' that leads new community members to navigate efficiently. Recommendation and journalistic review are highly effective methods to prune the wide landscape of potentials. The more successful social networking systems in the US like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and LinkedIn, they all rely on pragmatic prevalence; Nexopia, Bebo, Hi5, MySpace and StudiVZ are the ones that came up in western Europe and rely more on the youngster's generation. Decayenne, Tagged, XING, Badoo and Skyrock have just appeared recently and can only be overtaken by the more national systems like Orkut, Hi5, Friendster, Multiply, Orkut, Wretch, Xiaonei and Cyworld. They all have in common that its navigation comfort (Goldberg et al., 1992) seduces new members to subscribe and suggest that their networks get enlarged.
- 5 The fifth is 'online identity'. It is the mutual synergy between a person's self- and ideal image (Grohol, 2006). The web may help individuals to feel immersed in social networks, while in fact the virtual links are just quantifiers of fictitious derivatives like Google search hits. One can indeed speak of one's digital versus one's real status; frequency of reminiscence may suggest reputation or societal recognition, while in fact it is just the result of web artefacts. Even the newest tools like Google's tracking systems like Google Trends. Its rationale may be transparent, but still it is a mechanistic way of tracing large hybrid semantics without validated anchoring during its algorithm towards numerical outcomes.

The mentioned five big factors seem both a logical and an empirical source for closer predictions which social networking systems are going to survive or not. Its main power is in distinguishing the presence of the five factors; a gradual outcome on a 10-point scale can already be sufficient to reveal predictive validation. The articles in this issue have been ranked in terms of announcing touching decisive indicators. Let us go through them:

- 1 The article by Petter Bae Brandtzæg, Jan Heim and Birgit Hertzberg Kaare presents the relationship between various aspects of social capital: bridging, peer-bonding and family-bonding. They question what kinds of social relations are sought by the users of 'social network sites' and if the usage of those sites really contributes to the

coherence in the family. They find that web-based communication helps families to find each other and strengthen the relationship. They find family contact is not its main goal, but still the majority of the respondents experience web-based networks as a part of their daily communication routines, both to bridge new online contacts and to strengthen bonds with their existing offline ties.

- 2 Patricia Montiel Overall reports that web-based instruction has become a preferred learning method for diverse communities of learners. Her study outcomes plead for giving more attention to cultural diversity; both in the course structure and its content design. Her article asserts that a cultural competence model is needed in order to develop online communities. She announces a cultural competence framework for three domains: the cognitive, interpersonal and the environmental one. Finally, it brings a guide for designing web-based instructions.
- 3 Heather Conboy, Alan Brine and Jane Clarke introduce e-learning policies as a driver of change in educational institutions. As new message, they assert that the way of these policies may work out in totally different ways. They introduce qualitative research on the implementation of Web 2.0 in UK universities. They see its members' mind set as decisive. Its implementation may be problematic, resulting in change being more readily accepted by some groups and/or cultures than others. The key question here is if the Web 2.0's informal nature may result in the more formal strands of society where chances are taken or lost; the term disruptive technology is at stake.
- 4 Panayiotis Zaphiris and Amir Dotan in 'A cross-cultural analysis of Flickr users from Peru, Israel, Iran, Taiwan and the UK,' take the social photo site Flickr as a potential that potentially drives cross-cultural awareness as pinpointed by Geert Hofstede. Their study shows that users from Iran and Israel opted to use rather English to annotate photo collections. This was less for users from Peru and Taiwan as Spanish and Chinese finds larger audiences around the world. Users from Peru and Taiwan had only few tags in common, which could suggest that they are less interested in sharing the content they upload with a global, perhaps unfamiliar audiences.
- 5 Rebecca Clothey and Stacy Austin-Li alert that globalisation and web technologies created unprecedented opportunities for worldwide collaboration like the US-China Virtual Symposium. Drexel University School of Education, a leader in distance education in the US and Wainhouse Research, recognised experts in rich media communications, the goal of the virtual symposium was to create opportunities to collaborate across borders, share best practices and build professional networks without the costs and constraints of travel. The article discusses challenges and successes in using video to enhance a global online community in the context of an online symposium.
- 6 Dana Rotman presents 'WeTube' in YouTube – creating an online community through video sharing'. Her study aims to explore the growth of the YouTube online community through the eyes of YouTube users; how its members interact, shared purpose and culture. It clarifies how face-to-face versus mediated interaction leads away the visual from the textual communities.

What strikes our attention is the articles' closeness both to existing real-world communities and to the sociometric formalisms as in the five big factors of my introduction before.

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