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## Editorial: Web-based communities after five years of evolution

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**Biographical notes:** Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor at the University of Twente, the Netherlands. His research concerns the way web-based communities develop. He is the initiator of the yearly conference *Web-based Communities* and chairs the conference *e-Society*. Currently he is one of the members in the EU project 'Study on the social impact of ICT', which attempts to find sensitive indicators for the effects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Its underlying question is whether ICT is just a catalytic trigger that speeds up the processes that are already inherent to a certain application domain, or it makes its own contribution to the orientation of societal sectors such as education, healthcare and community life.

Margriet Simmerling is a Peer Consultant/Senior Manager in R&D projects in the area of e-society and web-based communities. She participates in the Advisory Board for the Dutch Ministry of Economical Affairs and is active as an expert and reviewer for the European Commission. She designs and moderates e-learning modules and workshops in the domain of education technology and psychology at the PhD level.

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This is the first issue of Volume 5 and a good moment to stand still and overlook the landscape. Where did the early intuition on online- and web-based communities match and where did it fail? Chronologically, the line nowadays is from ideology to services. The early MUD Object Oriented (MOO)<sup>1</sup> were labelled as 'Metaverse'. 'Snow Crash' in the mid-1990s was a prelude to Active Worlds (1997) and finally, 'Second Life' (2003). The introduction of Linden Dollars and later, open source and massive multiplayer online games, has brought the attention to entertainment rather than socialising. After one lustrum of this journal, we have seen a growing interest in how the web triggered new ways for people to find each other, organise themselves and sustain enduring relationships. In its ultimate form, these can be called 'communities'. One of the contributions of this journal has been to clarify more precisely what we understand by communities; even we have seen how the key notion of community is affected through

the web. Its most striking effect is that online communities have evolved towards essentially networked structures where physical proximity plays an ever smaller role. At the same time, it has become apparent that Face-to-Face (F2F) meetings offer directness and an appeal that is hard to emulate via online communication. In its most analytical stage, we may say that F2F situations offer one-to-one evidence on if the conversational partner has his/her full attention on your partnership. In its organisational aspects, we have seen that the web-based community offers a large spectrum of just-in-time contact. Volatile contacts may come and go for the sake of situational factors like complementary needs, problematic situations, information needs and existential crises. We have seen that both the web-based user inter-/intraface and the nature of the communities' topics have an impact on the way cooperation evolves. As an ongoing background research question, we further scout specific research frameworks to describe web-based communities. The more specific research framework for studying web-based communities comprises the following questions: How can we do research on web-based communities? How can we collect information that we cannot collect via the existing research methods that are used for traditional media, such as television, movies, *etc.*?

In the first article, Bishop proposes a genre theory in media research and a web-based community is considered to be one of the many media a person can use. But the research methods from traditional media are not easy to transfer to the web-based community domain. The question is how researchers can collect the information that is not collected via the research methods that are used for traditional media. The article 'Enhancing the understanding of genres of web-based communities: the role of the ecological cognition framework' introduces the ecological cognition framework as a useful basis for the design of a genre analysis methodology for web-based communities. The users of web-based communities are active towards the technology providers.

The user group of a community is of crucial importance to the value of the community. Therefore, the mechanisms between the users and providers are explored and improved more and more.

Who is using who? There used to be a time when people believed that the forces of global commerce dictated user practices. In the following articles, the authors indicate that there are communities with a real two-way interaction between the user and the provider. Different settings are addressed: a museum, gaming for kids, city life, Information and Communications Technology (ICT) education and Multiple Sclerosis (MS) patients.

Collins *et al.* describe how the visitors of a museum use mobile phones to map online community resources to a physical museum space. The interaction is based on the curiosity of the visitors that is simulated by the context of the museum/exhibition. The authors conclude that such a web-based community gives the experts the opportunity to use and reuse the existing knowledge/data and adapt it to the curiosity of the museum visitors. In their article 'Using mobile phones to map online community resources to a physical museum space', a specific situation in Bletchley Park Museum where visitors have the opportunity to use their mobile phone to bookmark their interest during their visit is decrypted.

Another interesting user environment is the online hotel for children called Habbo Hotel. It is an online entertainment service that is similar to Second Life, where children can communicate, play games and create content. Slot explores the user-producer interaction. Technology is used by the user for communication with the Habbo Hotel management. Half of the Habbo users send their voluntary advices. In the

article ‘Exploring user-producer interaction in an online community: the case of Habbo Hotel’, Slot concludes that it is time to rephrase the research question of ‘how do online communities incorporate services like Habbo Hotel’ into this question: ‘how do users incorporate services like Habbo Hotel in their lives?’

In the article ‘Personal networks as a case for online communities: two case studies’, Calvi compares two projects. The first project is a community content sharing project. The users are willing to use mobile technologies. The second project is an individual virtual network. The paper abstracts the commonalities between the two cases to derive the principles.

Ziovas and Grigoriadou share their experience on the issues that concern the connection of different communities (researchers, teachers and students) that are involved in computer science teaching in secondary education. In their article ‘Connecting communities through ICT: boundary crossing and knowledge sharing in a web-based “community of communities”’, they conclude that it is very important that groups are not discouraged. Thus, they propose a mechanism to support the classification and storage of the different member groups.

Heikkinen describes a study that concerns an internet course called ‘Power and Support from the Net’. The course was developed for people with MS. Heikkinen indicates the purpose, conditions and results of the course. She concludes that the input of peers is very important for the users. The other interesting finding is about privacy. The discourse in web-based communities tend to spend more efforts to its communication style than in face-to-face meetings. This is a good reason to focus research on the sensitive issue of privacy in web-based communities.

Coming up with new tools for finding information is a challenge. The last two articles of this journal are devoted to this step forward.

In the article ‘The requirements and design principles for large-scale collaboration and decision-making on the web’, a new software tool is proposed by Brentano and Agah. The application is designed to be the next step in online collaboration tools and called the Web Collaboration Project. After the introduction to the problem and background information around trust metrics, forums and software tools, they describe the requirements and design principles. The authors conclude that such systems will be needed in the future to meet user demands.

The last article of this issue, ‘Community-supported collaborative navigation with FoxPeer’, addresses a recommendation system to simplify and speed up searches for relevant information in the web. Vivacqua *et al.* present FoxPeer, a Peer-to-Peer (P2P) tool to assist in web communication. They describe an experiment to evaluate FoxPeer and make recommendations for additional improvements. They conclude that “by having the added capacity to determine who has recommended what, people will have an added incentive to engage in discussion and interaction”.

It was a great experience to work with these 20 authors who come from seven different countries. We would like to give extra thanks to the members of the editorial board. Without their valuable input, this journal would not be the same.

We wish that this issue of the IJWBC is again an inspiration to you.

## Note

- 1 MOO is a text-based online virtual reality system to which multiple users (players) are connected at the same time.