Matthew Farber
Assessment 1: Online Community Search

Exemplars of Online Communities

CreepyPasta and Reddit are exemplars of online communities because they meet the criteria detailed on the second page of this handout. Each has a unique participatory culture and members are engaged; they are not passive website visitors. Further, both websites exemplified the ability to come together when challenged from non-members.

The first exemplar of community is CreepyPasta (http://www.creepypasta.com), a short-form fan fiction forum for horror stories, or "microfiction." It is the Internet equivalent of sharing horror tales while toasting marshmallows around a campfire. (The website's moniker, "Creepypasta," is a corruption of "copy-and-paste" chain emails that asked readers to "copy-and-paste" a story, add to it, and then and pass it on. Copy-and-paste evolved as "copypasta," and, then, finally to "creepypasta.")

Like other participatory cultures, CreepyPasta features writing prompts, as well as rules and standards for contributors. There are several hundred stories vetted by members of the community. Readers rate stories using a feedback system, ranging from one to five stars. Moderated comments and story reviewing is fundamental in creating standards of practice. It also filters out "trolls"—individuals who negatively disrupt communities.

A high proportion of the "pastas" (short stories about as long as a blog post) involve Slender Man mythos. Like traditional campfire stories, Slender Man is a killer. (Slender Man evolved from a post in the Something Awful forum to CreepyPasta, as well as the fan art community, deviantArt.) The storyline is not unique to Internet fan fiction. It is a community-driven, transmedia folk tale. In early 2014, two girls from Wisconsin allegedly stabbed another girl because they wanted to prove the existence of Slender Man. The relatively obscure CreepyPasta community entered the news cycle. Mainstream, traditional news sources kneejerk reaction was to warn parents about the "dangers" of the Internet. The CreepyPasta community immediately replied; an entire genre of literature cannot be blamed for people's behaviors. The community took the intellectual "high road," thus exemplifying itself as an effective community.

Reddit (http://www.reddit.com/) is the second exemplar. It is a community of micro-communities. As of October 2014, there were over 3.2 million Reddit editors ("Redditors"), or content managers, and there were approximately 8,300 Reddit communities. Topics range from politics to music to humor. The barrier to entry is much lower than those on fan fiction websites. Any registered member can create a topic, known as a "Subreddit." There is no web of connections like in social media; anyone can interact.

Because anyone can create a community or comment on any thread, it is nearly impossible to monitor all content. A system of voting up or down ("upvotong") popular stories somewhat alleviates this issue. Reddit users are encouraged to follow standards, known as "Reddiquette." Some rules pertain to commenters who troll, or seek to stir up conflict. Another part of Reddiquette is the language used by members. Reddit's "AMA" ("ask me anything") chats have included Barack Obama and Tony Hawk.

Similar to CreepyPasta's ability to band together against mainstream criticism, the Reddit community defends itself from challenges. More specifically, the Reddit community supports an ethos of open content. In 2014, members protested so-called Net Neutrality ruling, which may restrict Internet bandwidth to certain websites.

Defining an Effective Community

An effective online community is a shared, informal learning space—even if the content is "frivolous, like celebrity gossip. There are often written (or unspoken) rules and guidelines posted for participants. It is often centered on a specific topic, such as a hobby. There is a shared identity with the community as a brand. Effective communities give members a sense of empowerment by being part of something. Participants may feel more in control of an online community than other aspects of life, such as work. Apprentices learning from masters typify effective communities. Furthermore, there are mixed levels of user engagement, ranging from help forums to participatory cultures and affinity groups to professional learning networks.

The author of this handout has previously conducted research on online gaming communities for a book. It included interviews of community members (e.g., fan fiction writers), as well as community managers (e.g., GlassLab Teachers Network). Amy Jo Kim granted image permissions for her work, including those on gamified communities. She was an early adopter in building online communities, authoring the book, *Community Building on the Web* in 2000. Kim's Social Action Matrix model posited that communities flourish if they give participants a place to socialize based on personality types. For example, some users prefer to express themselves, while others curate content or simply enjoy collaborating with others.

Communities break down when there is too much content pushed down from community managers. If a community grows too fast, it may not be scalable to continue to create meaningful interaction amongst its growing participants. Interestingly, communities sprout up mocking other dysfunctional communities. One recent example of note is the Twitter feed, Brands Saying Bae ("bae" is slang for babe; Pizza Hut tweeted "bae-con pizza" to its followers, which led to snarky community comments).

There are different levels communities on the Web, often based on function. Some offer short-term engagement. For example, the La Leche League community of nursing mothers may lose members once an infant begins a diet of solid food. On the other hand, a highly engaged community can be economically attractive to commercial websites. Community acceptance then becomes coveted by outside members, such as publishers of content. Steam, the video game streaming portal, has a "Greenlight" feature in which users vote on content to be added to the website. The social book club, GoodReads was purchased by Amazon.

There are also communities within communities. Facebook may be the most ubiquitous. The "Groups" feature trumps the site's social interconnections, in which users must friend one another. Typically anyone—friend or not—can join a Facebook Group. More open communities include Wikia, the for-profit wiki from Jimmy Wales (founder of the non-profit Wikipedia). Wikia has about 36 million wikis devoted to entertainment content, like television and game character pages.

The community manager is the conduit, connecting people and creating conversations. The goal of a community's manager is to create conditions in which users regularly, or habitually, visit the community. Exemplars are often organic, not forced, interactions. Some of the more effective models emerged as Twitter chats, organized by a small group of individuals who pose a few questions that are "hashtagged" (social tagging) at a specified time.

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