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# ENERGIZING ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION IN INFORMATION-CENTRIC ONLINE COMMUNITIES: LIBRARYTHING, GOODREADS, AND THE IMPORTANCE OF BOUNDARY SPANNING (Poster)

**Abstract:** Users often engage with and are motivated to participate in information sharing in information-centric online communities, within and across community boundaries. This poster focuses on key implications for engagement and motivation in online communities from a study of LibraryThing and Goodreads and the roles they play in existing and emerging communities. The design, development, leadership, and administration of information-centric online communities should highlight and facilitate the creation and sharing of translation processes and resources; make clear expressions of and continually negotiate community norms, values, and normative behaviours; and support and facilitate—but not force—social tie formation and everyday life information behaviour.

## **Résumé:**

### **1. Introduction**

An important element of users' information behaviour is engaging with and being motivated to participate in information sharing. Such sharing is popular in information-centric online communities, within and across community boundaries (e.g. Fisher & Julien, 2009; Kazmer et al., 2014). Expanding on an earlier lightning talk (Worrall, 2015a), this poster focuses on key implications for engagement and motivation in online communities from a study of LibraryThing and Goodreads and the roles they play in existing and emerging communities.

## 2. Background and Framing

Online communities are computer-mediated, social aggregations of people on the Internet that interact and form personal relationships over time (Rheingold, 2000); true, socially-constructed human communities (Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997). Information sharing within and beyond such communities is frequent and significant behaviour (Fisher & Julien, 2009; Talja & Hansen, 2006), with boundary spanners playing important roles (Bechky, 2003; Kazmer et al., 2014; Kimble, Grenier, & Goglio-Primard, 2010). Successful sharing requires users' engagement, which can be encouraged by providing structure for supporting the translation of meanings and the negotiation of coherent and common understanding (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). Such structure for new or continued engagement can include stating a clear purpose, explaining membership and rules, developing help pages and lists of frequently asked questions, providing direct help when and where needed, facilitating information seeking, and encouraging leaders to stimulate continued interaction (pp. 604, 608-609).

Users must also navigate synergies and conflicts presented by the characteristics and contexts of the communities involved (Ardichvili, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2006; Talja & Hansen, 2006). Jaeger and Burnett's (2010) *theory of information worlds* is an explicitly multi-levelled theory of communities centred around socially constructed information, with synergies and conflicts possible (Burnett, 2015) around five core concepts of

- *social norms*, the written and unwritten rules of right and wrong guiding a community;
- *social types*, how people are perceived, as socially constructed, in a community;
- *information value*, the relative value judgments of information within and beyond a community;
- *information behaviour*, incorporating "the full spectrum of possible normative [information] behaviour" (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010, p. 23), including "the many ways in which human beings interact with," search for, use, and share information (Bates, 2010, p. 2381); and
- *boundaries*, where communities may "come into contact with each other" (Jaeger & Burnett, 2010, p. 8) and may or may not share information.

At the boundaries common infrastructural objects can play significant roles, theorized by Star and Griesemer (1989) as *boundary objects* which are used within and adapted to multiple communities "simultaneously" (p. 408). Their overlapping meanings and understandings require processes of negotiation and translation between users and communities so they can "work together" (p. 389) and continue to engage; these processes help maintain "coherence" between different communities and their characteristics (p. 393).

## 3. Method

I examined the roles LibraryThing (librarything.com) and Goodreads (goodreads.com) play as boundary objects in the existing and emergent communities of their users. Data collection methods were chosen in alignment with broader study goals and based on the framework above, with data analyzed based on key concepts from the theory of information worlds and boundary object theory. Details of data collection, analysis, and roles identified are available elsewhere

(Worrall, 2014, 2015b). This poster draws on qualitative content analysis of 519 messages from and interviews with 11 users of nine existing LibraryThing and Goodreads groups to examine the relations between users' engagement; community characteristics; and negotiation, translation, and coherence processes. All names used herein are pseudonyms.

#### **4. Findings**

By allowing users to discuss, interact, organize, and catalogue, LibraryThing and Goodreads' technology facilitated users' engagement and their sharing of information within and beyond group and community boundaries. Much behaviour created or maintained community and organizational structure. This included social norms established to guide threads and groups; for example, a thread started with "people can stop by this thread to chat ... but no spoilers until discussion opens please." Pages and threads introduced some groups, their members, and their rules; for example, April suggested Brad "check out this information thread [link] ... it will give you an idea of who all the players are." The resources groups created facilitated translation of information known by existing members for those just joining or revisiting the group, as seen by Brad's reply of "Thanks; I forgot all about it." Many groups contained threads explicitly devoted to off-topic conversations—"that thread lets you get to know the people" (Rachelle)—or were accepting of such across the group, understanding that having "the rest of your life ... creep in" (Miriam) helped build social ties. Boundary spanning occurred with some frequency: Jared introduced Mia to a related Goodreads group, Lindsey introduced people from one LibraryThing group to another, and Miriam invited people she knew across several LibraryThing groups to a particular topical thread. Use of technology features to organize books, series, and authors was also common.

LibraryThing and Goodreads played a strong role in maintaining structural coherence and furthering engagement, particularly through the translation and coherence of information values (see Worrall, 2015b), but not without conflicts. Goodreads groups frequently used group "shelves" (lists), but conflicts arose when Goodreads declared shelves could no longer be named to be derogatory towards authors. Tanya observed "many readers are highly incensed ... [and] have left Goodreads," while Rachelle agreed norms should be clarified: is Goodreads "a readers' site" or "an authors' site"? Some users and groups expected and accepted minor conflict, knowing to tread with care; LibraryThing user Melissa said "we try to ... moderate each other," and Rachelle stated those known to one Goodreads group would "not get kicked out right away" if they "overstep[ped] their bounds." Conflicts and differences in values could be forgiven—"Good show! We're a very forgiving group" (Brian)—or accepted in a strong community—" [members] would not slag you off at all; not even if you ... said you loved *Twilight*" (Ann).

#### **5. Discussion**

Perfect coherence was not necessary to ensure strong engagement in and motivation to use LibraryThing and Goodreads; a partially negotiated and translated understanding between users of common norms and values was sufficient. Negotiating and translating processes were often invisible work (Star & Strauss, 1999), not always noticed by users, which could lead to greater community coherence as a better understanding of disagreements allowed communities to come together without major conflict despite differences. This helped maintain participants'

engagement and motivation, as seen in multiple interviewees' comments. Online community design should make visible and highlight translation processes and resources for users, and allow leaders and administrators to construct and highlight them, to facilitate the expression, negotiation, and reconciliation of meanings and understandings and engagement in more frequent distributed knowledge creation and sharing (cf. Ardichvili, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2006; Kazmer et al., 2014).

Many groups were seen to align with Preece and Maloney-Krichmar's (2003) suggestions, with their users displaying high motivation and engagement. These findings stress that community leaders—including moderators and boundary spanners—should engage in creating informational resources, maintaining their coherence to the community as it changes, and further translating meanings and understandings when necessary. This facilitates further knowledge sharing and creation, encourages common understanding, and enhances the online community's role as sociotechnical infrastructure facilitating cross-boundary information sharing.

Online community designers, administrators, and leaders should ensure clear expressions of site-wide norms, understandings of what information is valued, and expectations for normative information behaviour are made, similar to Preece and Maloney-Krichmar's (2003) suggestions. Sometimes a community can close off other possibilities it has not considered, similar to groupthink (cf. Tsikerdekis, 2013). To ensure continued engagement and motivation, online communities must engage in continual translation and negotiation processes with users, discussing the meanings and understandings behind the expressions of norms, values, and expectations. Boundary spanners—like Jared, Lindsey, and Miriam—can help; their involvement may have alleviated the Goodreads conflict observed.

Online communities must also support and facilitate social tie formation, supporting the deliberate and serendipitous sharing of information—both topical and “off-topic” everyday life information (Savolainen, 1995)—that furthers true collaboration (cf. Marshall & Bly, 2004) and the convergence of values, norms, and culture into tight-knit communities. User profiles and “get to know” threads can help facilitate ties, allowing users to connect with each other, but the specific and collapsed contexts of online interactions should not be ignored (see boyd, 2014; Vitak, 2012). Providing optional-but-encouraged off-topic discussion spaces and user profiles allows for building of social ties without forcing social networking on all users or contexts.

## **6. Conclusions**

Designers, developers, leaders, and administrators of information-centric online communities should highlight and facilitate the creation and sharing of translation processes and resources; make clear expressions of and continually negotiate community norms, values, and normative behaviours; and support and facilitate—but not force—social tie formation and everyday life information behaviour. Further research should and will examine other information-centric online communities and their structure, values, and lifecycles, and the motivations—individual, social, and emotional—that encourage continued engagement and boundary spanning in such communities.

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