Encouraging and Maintaining Engagement in Online Communities: The Importance of Translation and Coherence

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Abstract

This brief position paper argues that an important element of encouraging and maintaining engagement with an information-centric, information and communication technology (ICT)-supported online community is to support and facilitate the processes of translation and coherence. Based on the literature and a recently completed study of the roles that LibraryThing and Goodreads play as boundary objects in the existing and emergent communities of their users, leaders of online communities should focus their engagement on the processes that create resources for translation and coherence to facilitate further knowledge sharing and creation, the development of common ground, and enhance the role of the online community and its technology as a key site for engagement in information behavior and activities. Consideration of translation and coherence are vital for users' continued engagement with an online community and the technology that supports it.

Keywords: online communities, translation, coherence, engagement, information and communication technologies

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Acknowledgements: Thanks to LibraryThing, Goodreads, and study participants for their cooperation and assistance, and to Michelle Kazmer, Gary Burnett, Sanghee Oh, and Deb Armstrong for their help and feedback during the study informing this position paper. I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of a Beta Phi Mu Eugene Garfield Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship towards this research.

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1   Introduction and Background

This position paper puts forth the argument that an important element of encouraging and maintaining engagement with an information-centric online community supported by information and communication technologies (ICTs) is to support and facilitate the processes of *translation* and *coherence*. In a recently completed research study, I examined the roles that two digital libraries and online communities, LibraryThing (librarything.com) and Goodreads (goodreads.com), play as boundary objects in the existing and emergent communities of their users. The focus was on the roles that LibraryThing and Goodreads— and the ICTs they provide—play in the translation between and coherence of existing communities and in the potential convergence of new communities. Using data from content analysis of, a survey of, and interviews with users of nine existing LibraryThing and Goodreads groups, and informed by social informatics and sociotechnical systems theory and research, this study helps improve our understanding of how users translate and negotiate shared characteristics such as information value, social norms, and information behavior and activities.

A theoretical framework was used to conceive of LibraryThing and Goodreads as boundary objects (Star, 1989; Star & Griesemer, 1989), with conceptualizations of *translation* and *coherence* taken from Star's boundary object theory. Translation is "the task of reconciling [the] meanings" and understandings of objects, methods, and concepts across communities (p. 388) so people can "work together" and remain engaged with systems and communities (p. 389); coherence is the degree of consistency between different translations and social worlds. Boundary objects play a critical role in translation and "in developing and maintaining coherence" between and across communities (p. 393). Social worlds (Strauss, 1978) and information worlds (Burnett & Jaeger, 2008; Jaeger & Burnett, 2010) were selected as the most appropriate lenses on community for the study. Further details of the study, its background, and the data collection and analysis process are available (Worrall, 2014, 2015), with further publications to come on key findings and implications. This position paper focuses on those most germane to encouraging and maintaining engagement in an online, information-centric, ICT-supported community.

2   Becoming and Staying Engaged

Relevant to the findings of the study vis-à-vis engagement is the work of Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003, p. 609), who developed a list of nine questions that users may ask as part of becoming an engaged member of or maintaining engagement in an online community, with implications for the community and its social context (or "sociability") and usability. These questions speak to the coherence of common and shared social norms and rules, valuing of information, and information behavior and activities. Having such coherence will allow meanings and understandings to be reconciled between

different users and user communities. Preece and Maloney-Krichmar suggested providing structure for supporting translation and coherence, such as stating the purpose of an online community in clear terms, explaining membership and rules, developing help pages and a list of frequently asked questions that explain how the community works, providing direct help when and where needed, facilitating the information seeking and searching process, and encouraging leaders to stimulate continued interaction.

3   Relevant Study Findings

In my study, many of these were present in one LibraryThing group where pages and threads had been created to introduce the group, its rules, and its members. Having these resources present for those new to the community or needing a refresher appeared to serve well in helping facilitate translation between members and the overall coherence and engagement of the group as a community around LibraryThing and its technology as a boundary object. Across most of the groups studied, technology was important to the coherence of existing communities and to continued engagement by users in them. The technology implemented by LibraryThing and Goodreads allowed users to discuss and interact, organize and catalog, and engage in information behavior and activities. Many behaviors and activities focused on the creation or maintenance of both organizational and community structure. This included social norms and rules that were established to guide threads and groups; and social annotations, lists, ratings, and reviews that served to organize books, series, and authors. LibraryThing and Goodreads, as ICTs, were found to play a strong role as technological boundary objects in maintaining this structural coherence and furthering engagement.

The translation and coherence of information values also played a vital role in encouraging continued engagement. These findings will be covered in greater depth elsewhere at the iConference (Worrall, 2015), but it is the often-invisible process of translation of values and its potential to lead to cohered information values that is most important in a values-based role for LibraryThing and Goodreads and in maintaining users' engagement. Better understanding of where divergences and disagreements exist allows coherence to continue over time without major conflict, ensuring users continue to engage in the community despite those differences. LibraryThing and Goodreads were found to serve an implicit and often key role in facilitating this process for users from the groups studied.

4   Conclusions and Implications

While limitations in the study design and data collection limit the generalizability of these findings, their transferability to other online community contexts is believed to be quite high when combined with the literature, and leads to implications for the design and development of and practices within online communities and the ICTs that support them. Leaders of online, information-centric, ICT-supported communities—including moderators, boundary spanners, and others with high visibility—should focus their engagement on the processes that create resources for translation and coherence, such as but not limited to the help pages recommended by Preece and Maloney-Krichmar (2003) and seen in one LibraryThing group in this study. Boundary spanners should play a significant part in these processes. The coherence of the resources to the community as it changes should be maintained in order to maintain engagement, with further translation of meanings and understandings for existing and new members taking place when necessary. This sharing of existing knowledge will facilitate further knowledge sharing and creation (Ardichvili, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2006); encourage the development of common ground (Davenport & Prusak, 2000); and enhance the role of the online community and its technology, as a boundary object, as a key site for engagement in information behavior and activities. Sharing of values, bridging of values and norms, and translating knowledge between contexts also encourages greater levels of knowledge sharing and engagement (Ardichvili, 2008; Bechky, 2003).

Those designing and maintaining online communities and related ICTs should ensure that clear expressions of site-wide social norms and rules, understanding of what types of information are valued, and expectations for normative information behavior and activities are made explicit, following Preece and Maloney-Krichmar's (2003) suggestions. At the same time, community managers and technology developers must be willing to be engaged in a translation and negotiation process with users and the other existing communities they are part of about the meanings and understandings behind these expressions. This will help maintain the coherence and engagement of the broader community. Highlighting translation processes and resources for users and encouraging leaders within the online community and its sub-communities to do so will facilitate the negotiation and reconciliation of users' intended meanings and understandings of information and knowledge, and thus their continued engagement with the online community and the ICTs that support it.

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