

Online Communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability

Jenny Preece

John Wiley & Sons, 2000

ISBN 0-471-80599-8 424 pages Price: US \$34.99 Soft Cover

The advent of the Internet as a communication medium has led to the emergence of a new social phenomenon: online communities. While some of the many attempts to build and initiate these communities, either as part of eCommerce solutions or as knowledge sharing mechanisms have been successful, others often disappear unnoticed.

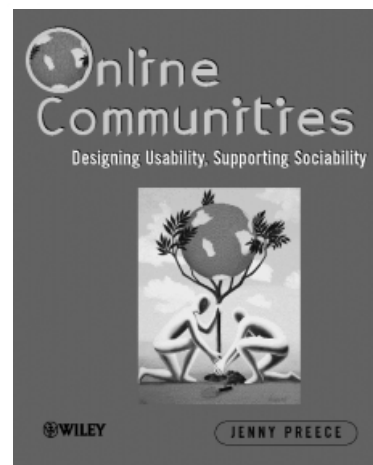
So why do some communities survive and evolve while others disappear? What are the important factors to be considered in order to build a successful community?

To answer these questions it is important to remember that online communities are enabled by information and communication technologies and are therefore social *and* technical phenomena. Thus the design guidelines and methods needed must consider both aspects in an integrated manner.

The book *Online Communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability* provides a valuable contribution to this discussion and presents an integrated view on community building. According to its author, Jenny Preece, “Supporting sociability and designing usability lays the firm foundation on which online communities can grow and thrive.”

The book identifies usability (the front end of technology) and sociability (the expression of community needs) as key issues that have to be considered in an integrated manner during the process of building communities. It comprises 12 chapters which are grouped in two parts: Part One (Chapters 1-6): Getting Acquainted with Online Communities, and Part Two: Developing Online Communities.

Sociability, according to Preece, focuses on social interaction between humans and usability on human–computer interaction. When computers mediate in human communication, human–computer interaction becomes an integral part of human–human interaction. There is therefore a close interrelationship between those two parts of online communication. Key ingredients of sociability are: 1) the purpose of the community, 2) the people and 3) the policies of interaction. Usability is concerned with developing computer systems, which consider the cognitive abilities and needs of users and result in easy-to-use systems, which can be learned rapidly and enable a low error rate during using. Jenny Preece explains the relationship between these two aspects with the metaphor of buildings and their influence on inhabitants and by the following example: “...deciding whether to have a registration policy and what its content should be is a sociability concern; determining how to present the policy (deciding which font type and size and interaction style to use) are usability concerns.”



The second part of the book starts with chapter 7 and provides a detailed guideline for building communities. The guidelines consider in holistic manner usability, sociability and technical issues.

The author illustrates the application of proposed community-centered guidelines with two case studies. The first case study demonstrates the application of community-centered development during a redesign of the community Down's Syndrome Online Advocacy Group (DSOAG), which is dedicated to support of interaction among scientists involved in Down's syndrome research and parents of children with Down's syndrome. All steps of the development process are described in detail and problems and solutions are discussed.

The second case study describes the redesign of the Quiz Bowl Community. By following the community-centered development approach a new solution was designed and developed, which integrated extant resources, included a Web site with documents, subject lists and a bulletin board. The case study describes all steps of development from community needs assessment, over technology selection, implementation and testing to welcoming and nurturing the community. In summary, the two case studies provide a useful illustration of how community-centered development can be adapted to the specific circumstances of a particular community.

Each chapter of the book finishes with a short summary of guidelines, a description of expected results from each step as well as examples of questionnaires and case studies. Lists for further reading are also provided.

The book ends with a speculative view of the future and identifies areas for further research: communities and culture, consideration of ethical issues, adaptive interfaces, multilingual and interlingual support, security, scalability as well as human–computer interfaces capable of revealing behavior and representing content and emotion.

In conclusion, *Online Communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability* provides a good balance between theory and practice. It considers in an integrated manner social and technical aspects of the development process. It is a well-organized, comprehensive and high-quality guideline for community-centered development of online communities, which represents a highly recommendable text for developers of these communities, as well as students, community organizers, investors and moderators.

Katarina Stanoevska-Slabeva

Institute for Media and Communications Management, University of St. Gallen, Mueller-Friedbergstr. 8, 9000 St. Gallen, Switzerland
Katarina.Stanoevska@unisg.ch