

Electronic communication or electronic communities: (Un)common messages from 'Generation Y'

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Abstract: - 'Generation Y' (sometimes abbreviated as 'Gen-Y', which could be identified as the 15-25 year olds possessing advanced computer skills) find themselves 'at home' when communicating/expressing themselves by using the interactive media, such as (mobile) e-mail, SMSs (Short Message Services, i.e. short text messages that can be exchanged through the mobile phone networks), blogs, instant messaging software, etc. The issue of feeling 'at home' with interpreting the social world in terms of electronically mediated interaction is often mixed (or even confusing) with the 'Gen-Y' (in)ability for more 'traditional' forms of social interaction. Therefore, it is important to raise the question of whether the theories/models of electronic community apply to electronic communication, as this might imply that the 'Gen-Y' just has a different outlook to social issues and community building than defined by the 'traditional' social approaches (if such things exist).

Key-Words: - Generation Y, Electronic communication, Mobile communication, E-community, Virtual community

1 Introduction

«*Per aspera ad astra*» (through path of thorns to stars) is an old Latin proverb that illustrates the nature of most evolutions regarding creation and practical implementation of various e-technologies. Blogging, SMS, instant messaging and other forms of electronic communication are no exceptions to the rule. Although they were considered to be «more fashionable» tools in the introductory stages of the new communication practice, today they represent a 'standard' tool for many; (re)defining the patterns and standards of international/intercultural communication. However, the initial expectations regarding the worldwide acceptance did not match/challenge the accelerated life cycle (introduction, growth, maturity and decline) of other 'fashionable' technologies, which proved to be only an 'instant wonder'.

Several previous studies suggest, along the lines of more traditional thinking, that the individuals, who do not fit into the mainstream patterns and routines of 'normal' communication, prefer electronic (online) to traditional (offline) communication [20]. On the other hand, online communication may prove to be a 'therapeutic' tool, which enables such individuals to develop their social skills and transfer those into the offline world [19].

However, the individual effects described by psychological research may be contrasted by the idea of virtual community – the intangible social structure, linking together individuals engaged in a certain, more permanent form of communication, mediated by an electronic medium, such as the Internet, mobile phone infrastructure, etc. In this manner, embeddedness into a larger social structure for the 'Gen-Y'-ers might not be an experience lost, but rather an experience (re)configured by new technologies. The common (individual) interests and traits may become the new social 'glue', lifting the limits of time and space to the communal developments and, thus, creating one of the new community forms [22]. It could be argued that the new generation(s) are just adapting to the new social realities instead of losing their ability to deal with the 'real' world behind the screen.

2 Innovative community forms in electronic media

Some electronic forms of personal communication, such as the electronic mail (e-mail) have often been discussed from the social point of view, while much less attention has been paid to the use of e-mail via mobile devices (mobile phones, hand-held computers/'Pocket PCs', BlackBerry and similar devices, etc.). Inadequate

attention has been also paid to the instant messaging (IM) platforms, usually provided by the major Internet service companies (including *Yahoo!*, *Microsoft MSN*, *Google*, etc.), as well as smaller, specialized competitors (e.g. the Israel-based *ICQ*). Some empirical evidence [17] suggests that the intensive use of IM could be linked to more intrinsic social motives, including the level of individual sociability, while the casual users tend to be more motivated by 'me-too' reasons. In addition, the same study has indicated that the intensive use of other electronic communication tools could be also linked to the more intensive instant messaging (ibid). However, such a finding might be interpreted both in terms of a *vicious circle* (i.e. inadequate social skills/attitudes lead to more intensive usage of the e-tools, which further deteriorates the situation), but also by a *virtuous circle*, stating that the positive effects of the initial experiences of virtual community belonging are intensified by using multiple and more advanced (or more appropriate) tools and techniques of electronic communication. Anyhow, this issue remains open for subsequent research.

Some Web sites, such as *MySpace* (<http://www.myspace.com>), *Facebook* (<http://www.facebook.com>) and many of their followers (such as the Croatian *Trosjed* – i.e. the 'virtual sofa' which can be found at <http://trosjed.net.hr>), have attracted a large 'following' of adolescents and young adults. Those who use such social networking services/Web sites are able to easily design their personal virtual spaces – 'profiles', along with photos, video clips and other multimedia, as well as use the included functionalities for receiving/sending their comments to other users, searching and locating other users, who share some common personal traits/interests, etc.

Probably the most important feature, along with the *personal profiles*, is the list of 'friends', which are being prominently displayed on the profile home page. Boyd [5] advises that, in this context, the term cannot be used in the traditional sense. Namely, the friends list, instead, serves as a signifier of the 'imagined community', consisting of other members of the same site who possess the social characteristics viewed as desirable (regardless whether those are real, or just constructed). By choosing a representation of the self via personal profile, as well as choosing and displaying the friend list, individuals create and manage social impressions, i.e. practice *impression management* [3].

This may prove as a very difficult task, as the social networking sites usually compress social networks into a single category ('friend') and display those publicly, which may link one to socially objectionable individuals and provoke misinterpretations of one's public image [3]. In addition, the very term *friend* can be interpreted

from different viewpoints, as it can be even used to denote (and signal) completely different forms of social relationships – from intimate relationships, to persons referred to as 'friends' in front of others, just in order to 'save face' [4]. These all represent significant problems in creating a 'digital body', representing the person in the range of e-communities he/she will join during his/her lifetime. Other challenges, usually not even comprehended, yet addressed by the 'Gen-Y'-ers are the *persistence, searchability, replicability and low control over the personal information once entered into the online service*. In essence, it might 'follow' an individual into other social contexts (such as background checks performed by the prospective employers), where it might be (mis)understood and/or (mis)interpreted [6].

This has probably been the reason for the appearance of specialized social networking sites, with *LinkedIn* (<http://www.linkedin.com>) being the most popular means of connecting professionals into virtual networks. Such specialized online services might be the solution to the problems of interpretation, although they might not be open to the 'Gen-Y'-ers: for instance, *LinkedIn* is a commercial online community, which accepts individual professionals only and helps them connect on the basis of previous education and work experience. The more 'general' e-communities will probably continue to be burdened by the problems of interpretation and simplification of social networks.

As the different communication tools/technologies actively compete with each other, the social networking online services are easily substituted and/or replaced by *Web logs (blogs)*. Blogs can be defined as online platforms enabling individuals to keep their diaries (i.e. collections of 'blog posts', related to different subjects), as well as featuring the multimedia and capability to capture comments from blog visitors. In the same manners as the personal 'profiles' on *MySpace*, *Facebook*, or a similar service, multiple blogs are usually hosted by one or more major provider, either at the national (see, e.g. the Croatian *Blog.hr*, located at <http://www.blog.hr>), or the global level (such as the *Blogger.com*, located at <http://www.blogger.com>). Blogs can be also searched by major Internet search engines (such as, for instance, the *Google Blog Search*, located at <http://blogsearch.google.com>), which makes it easier for individuals to find and connect with other bloggers, writing about similar subjects and/or sharing similar interests/attitudes.

Some authors believe that the intensive communication via blogs may be considered as a form of virtual community, provided that the blog possesses 'digital artifacts', which make it comparable to a *virtual settlement* [2]. Namely, the virtual community environment should contain, at least, a *minimal amount of public interactions, encompassing different forms of*

communication, over an extended period of time [cf. 14]. In the case of blogs, Blanchard [2] argues that the virtual community could be found in a blog if it can sustain a steady flow of publicly available comments, enabling (preferably) both author-reader, as well as reader-reader communication. In addition, the blog software should enable the authors to link back and forth to other community members' blogs, i.e. to create a so-called 'blogroll', in order to let the virtual social system develop. Another useful technological feature in the 'Blogosphere' (which is the term for the social space created by bloggers) is the 'link-back', or 'track-back', a software feature sending acknowledgment to a blogger that another person has linked to an entry on his or her blog. In addition, relevant information from the article linking to one's blog is also being automatically transferred [24], enabling the spanning of discussion over several blogs (i.e. within a certain *blog community*).

Most of the existing studies are of technical nature (e.g. looking at the issue of the tools/approaches appropriate for identifying the community patterns – see, e.g. Chin & Chignell [7]). However, it will be important for further research to analyze the use of blogging in different social contexts, such as business settings [18].

Another technology, which can be identified as a tool for the virtual communities, is the *Wiki concept*, enabling the Web site visitors to change the content provided by the original developer and, thus, participate in the online publishing process. Wikis truly enable a community to develop around a common theme, activity, or interest, as usually showcased by the largest collaborative online encyclopedia (available at <http://www.wikipedia.org>). The attractiveness of Wikis to the 'Gen-Y'-ers could be attributed to a certain level of 'playfulness' which is associated both to the complete lack of restrictions related to participating in Wiki communities, as well as by the values of openness and freedom associated with such a collaboration model. Additional appeal can be found in the (apparent) absence of hierarchy (or, at least, a very flat hierarchy model) of the Wiki-centered social structures, which usually leads to the high levels of individual empowerment and diversity among the participants/members of related social processes [cf. 8, pp. 21-30]. However, the inherent lack of internal control, internal conflicts, as well as the vandalizing ('defacement') of Wiki-based Web sites by aggressive outsiders sometimes result in 'editing wars', which could lead a Wiki community to an agonizing collapse.

3 Mobile communication platforms and the virtual community building

Mobile phones seem to be a constant companion of many individuals in Western-type societies, but their social attraction is especially extended to adolescents and younger adults (i.e. 'Gen-Y'-ers), who may view them as a source of personal freedom, or even an expression of their individuality. Namely, Geser [9] emphasizes that the functioning of the societal systems is being changed due to mobile phone use, as *individuals are being empowered to communicate with other individuals of their own choosing and, thus, create their own social environment(s)*.

This is even more important for teenagers/young adults, who may use the mobile phone to *circumvent the forms of social control*, perceived as limiting to their personal freedom. For example, some teenagers might wish to stop using their mobile communication devices if they feel that their parents use them for 'excessive' control [1]. On the other hand, the mobile phone sometimes even becomes a useful 'hub' in selecting friends and emotional partners, as the act of providing someone with your mobile phone number represents the act of establishing trust, signifying the beginning of a more committed (social) relationship.

For instance, a study on Japanese youth [12] suggests that they wish to create more personal spaces within a changing, but still traditional society, by using their mobile phones. Parental control and the lack of space in urban housing are replaced by meetings in 'neutral' spaces (instead of homes) and complemented by short text messages (SMS), mobile electronic mail, or similar means of electronic communication. Taking into account that parents are often not so 'tech-savvy', such a form of communication is regularly preferred to talking on the 'fixed' phone, which may be monitored by other household members [10]. The lack of technical skills essentially removes many parents (and other traditional figures of social authority) from the gate keeping position, as they may not perceive the social potentials of electronic communication.

Except providing the entry to the social groups/networks not structured and controlled by the sanctioned social authorities, the technology may be also used to exit the inappropriate social context/structure. The 'exit barriers' from an unwanted social situation may be as low as changing the mobile phone number, which proves to be relatively easy, in case of using pre-paid mobile phone cards. A relatively easy manner of switching mobile phone numbers can also enable young individuals to 'schizophrenically' switch their identities and adapt them to changing social situations, as the real (offline) world moves toward a more stringent manner of controlling identity and behavior (motivated by the prevention of tax evasion, identity fraud, or even terrorism).

In this manner, new virtual social spaces are created ad-hoc, with public transportation and long queues being the ideal social places for the occasional drifting away from the 'real' (offline) into the personal online community. However, in another study, Ito & Okabe [11] propose the existence of 'full-time intimate communities' for heavy users of mobile platforms, who seem to expect from their virtual community members to be continuously available. Such isolation from the physical surroundings may be analyzed in terms of diminished social skills and/or the very interest for their own social environment, but generalizations might prove to be difficult. Namely, the Japanese society may represent a special case [21] due to the intensive Japanese motivation to avoid all unnecessary disturbances in social situations, as well as the common cultural characteristic related to 'cocooning', i.e. creating privacy within public spaces (by reading a book, listening to music on a portable device, etc.).

The 'cocooning' concept is of utmost importance for further empirical research on individualization vs. community-building patterns in using new technologies. Namely, although means and technologies of electronic communication enable individuals to disrupt the 'natural' barriers of time and space, they also disrupt the 'normal' flow of interpersonal communication in the physical environments, traditionally used for social interactions (restaurants, cafés, public transportation, etc.). Some individuals tend to create small, private 'cocoons' by using their mobile communication and entertainment devices (mobile phones, MP3 players, 'Pocket PCs'...), instead of interacting with the social environments which they do not find attractive enough [13]. Another, to a certain extent, similar approach to the physical/offline social environment is referred to as 'camping'. It is related to the extension of work activities outside of offices and other traditional work-related settings by using notebooks and different means of mobile electronic communication [13].

The multimedia capabilities, being continuously added to the mobile platforms, also add their bit to the transformation of the existing communication practices and patterns. They might be used in order to achieve some practical tasks, but also as open opportunities for 'paparazzi'-style communication, capturing images that may be considered as inappropriate by those being photographed and widely shared by posting to the Internet, or sent to another mobile platform via MMS - Multimedia Messaging Service, which opens additional social issues and challenges [16]. With multiple media offering prizes to the readers/viewers who submit the attractive news content (including photographs, videos and other multimedia content captured by multimedia-equipped mobile devices), the issues of privacy and the manner in which ordinary people start to practice

journalism become hot topics for contemporary social science.

4 Instead of a conclusion: Challenges for further research

It is difficult to reach definitive conclusions related to the electronic community-building and its effects in shaping the social outlook of the 'Gen-Y'. As demonstrated, the development of electronically mediated communication possesses a lot of potential for community-building, which is being proved even by the commercial organizations which start setting up online 'customer communities' as a tool of increasing customer satisfaction and loyalty [23]. Consequently, simple 'how-to' manuals have appeared, providing advice to those wishing to purposefully design different kinds of online communities [15].

The potential of individual technologies for virtual community-building, as well as their social impact, will be definitely evaluated over an extended period of time. However, the issue of 'cocooning' vs. building the new/alternative sets of social skills and outlooks in virtual communities does not depend on a single technology, as the existing studies indicate that the heavy users tend to 'mix and match' multiple tools of electronic communication. Further research will need to empirically assess whether these users could be identified as being 'on the forefront' of developing new (virtual) social structures.

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