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SI 529: Analysis and Design of Online Communities

Syllabus

Course Overview

This course is intended to help students to analyze online interaction environments with an eye toward design. For the purpose of this course, a community is defined as a group of people who sustain interaction over time. The group may be held together by a common identity, a collective purpose, or merely by the individual utility gained from the interactions. An online interaction environment is an electronic forum, accessed through computers or other electronic devices, in which community members can conduct some or all of their interactions. We will use the term eCommunity as shorthand, both for communities that conduct all of their interactions online and for communities that use on-line interaction to supplement face-to-face interactions.

The course connects social science theories with the goals of online community managers and with the alternative social and technical design alternatives available to them. The central construct is the design claim: Alternative X will help/hinder the achievement of goal Y, in contexts Z. Such claims will be supported by empirical evidence from lab and field experiments, or from observational studies of naturally occurring behavior in extant online communities.

The course prepares students for roles as online community designers and managers. Each student will pick an online community to observe throughout the semester. Each student will document social and technical features and assess their impact on various design goals, thus providing case studies to support or refine design claims.

Learning Objectives

At the end of this course, a student should be able to:

- identify the major social and technical elements of an online community and, drawing on relevant social science theories, understand the implications of specific design choices on the community;
- guide an on-line community through the startup phase and the selection and configuration of new social and technical features and activities.

Pre-requisites

SI 502, which provides an introduction to the technologies of networked computing. Vocabulary and concepts such as "API" and "mashup" will be used freely in this course. In addition, students need to know what kinds of tools are available to support distributed, synchronous and asynchronous communication (e.g., chat, instant messaging, message boards, audio and video conferencing, live application sharing). Students who are unfamiliar with these but are comfortable learning new technologies on their own will have the opportunity to explore these at their own pace. This course will spend very little time explicitly teaching about technology, but will frequently assume it as background.

Texts

We'll be reading excerpts from a large number of books and articles. Generally, links to electronic copies are provided (to students logged into the site, not to anonymous users). Some optional readings listed in the syllabus are not provided-- you'll have to track those down yourself based on the reference provided in the syllabus.

We'll be reading large portions of the following books, and you may want to acquire them for more handy reference, if you can find them.

- Powazek, Derek (2001) Design for Community (Out of print)
- Kim, Amy Jo (2000) Community Building on the Web (Out of print)

Class Activities

Each week there will be assigned readings. Our engagement with these assigned readings will begin on-line, before the class session for which they're assigned, and continue in class. We will engage in four ways:

- **Description:** statements or questions about what the author claims.
- **Critique:** arguments about whether the author is correct or what the author has left out.
- **Connection:** how the claims or concepts relate to those in other readings.
- **Application:** how the reading applies to the communities we are studying.

The first three, description, critique, and connection, will occur in threaded commentary on the website entry for the reading. One student will be assigned to kick off the online discussion for each reading, by Tuesday at noon. Online discussion will continue through Thursday at midnight without instructor intervention. Either Sean or I (or both of us) will read through the discussion some time on Friday and add a comment or two. Discussion will then continue through the weekend. Usually, I will take another look on Monday morning as I prepare for the afternoon class session. *Each student is expected to contribute to the discussion each week, preferably to each of the threads when there is more than one.* In class on Mondays, I will usually lecture for the first half of the class, highlighting key points from the readings and online discussion, and use this as a launching point for live discussion.

There is a voting mechanism for the online discussion-- positive votes only. Especially highly rated comments will appear on the front page of the site. Writers of popular entries will attain glory, (not so) valuable prizes, and probably good grades as well. On the site, a vote from an instructor is treated the same as a vote from your peers. At the end of the semester, however, in assigning grades, I will account separately for votes given by the instructors and classmates, and weight more heavily those given by instructors.

The final mode of engagement, application, will begin through weekly student blog entries about how the readings for the week apply to students' selected communities. There is one required blog entry per week, not one per reading. The entry should be posted by Thursday at midnight. Based on the blog entries, we will select several students each week to present in class the application of the week's course concepts to their communities. Selected students will be notified by Friday at 5PM. Student presentations should last approximately

three minutes and focus on just one key idea. Screenshots may be shown, but not text PowerPoint. Expect seven minutes of Q&A on each presentation.

This is a 3-credit course, so you should expect to spend, on average, 12 hours per week on the course, over the course of the 14 week semester. Here's my approximate estimate of how that time would be split up:

- required reading (3 hours)
- class time (3 hours)
- weekly online discussion and blog entries (2 hours)
- major assignments (4 hours/week averaged over the term)

Assignments

- See weekly assignments related to class activities above
- Make an edit on wikipedia (by Feb. 2)
- Descriptive summary (5-7 pages) of the community you've chosen to study (due Feb. 9)
- Three short papers (5-7 pages) assessing design claims with respect to your community:
 - Design claim related to selecting and integrating newcomers and developing commitment (due March 9)
 - Design claim related to inter-group relations or regulating behavior (due March 23)
 - Design claim related to motivating contribution (due April 13)
- Design a rollout plan for a new community. 5-7 pages (due April 27)

Grading

- Online discussion of readings, 15%
- Wikipedia assignment, 5%
- Online blog entries, 5%
- In-class presentations, 5%
- Community description, 10%
- Four short design papers, 15% each

Grading Rubric for In Class Presentations

5 points per presentation

- 1 point for clarity of presentation
- 1 point for handling questions well
- 3 points for argument related to a design claim
 - 1 -- clear statement of the original design claim to be assessed
 - 1 -- evidence supporting or countering the claim from your community
 - 1 -- revised version of the claim (if needed based on evidence)

An Important Note on Plagiarism

At the University of Michigan and in professional settings generally, plagiarism is an extremely serious matter. All individual written submissions must be your own, original work, written entirely in your own words. You may incorporate excerpts from publications by other authors, but they *must be clearly marked as quotations* and properly attributed. You may obtain copy editing assistance, and you may discuss your ideas with others, but all substantive writing and ideas must be your own or else be explicitly attributed to another, using a citation sufficiently detailed for someone else to easily locate your source.

All cases of plagiarism will be officially reported and dealt with according to Rackham policies. There will be no warnings, no second chances, no opportunity to rewrite; all plagiarism cases will be immediately reported to SI's Dean of Academic Affairs.

Consequences can range from failing the assignment (a grade of zero) or failing the course to expulsion from the University. For additional information about plagiarism, see the "Academic and Professional Integrity Policy Statement" in the SI Master's Student Handbook, the Rackham pamphlet on Academic Integrity, and the Plagiarism document from the UM Libraries. If you have any doubts about whether you are using the words or ideas of others appropriately, please discuss them with your GSI or professor.

Accommodations

If you think you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and the way we teach may be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, we can work with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) to help us determine appropriate accommodations. SSD (734-763-3000) typically recommends accommodations through a Verified Individualized Services and Accommodations (VISA) form. I will treat any information you provide as private and confidential.