Experiences with Civility and the Role of a Social Contract in Virtual Communities: A *Communitas* Model

Barry Kort, Rob Reilly, Nancy Williams

Barry Kort/Rob Reilly, Media Laboratory, MIT
20 Ames Street, Cambridge, MA 02139
Nancy Williams, Journalism and Communication Department,
Utah State University, 4605 Old Main Hill, Logan UT 84322
{bkort, reilly@media.mit.edu; nanwill@cc.usu.edu}

Abstract

Group policy-making for virtual communities is curiously problematic when it comes to civility standards—creating a *social contract*. Perhaps the concept of a social contract for the purpose of establishing norms of civil behavior is not on the minds of community policy makers. Perhaps what is on their minds is the establishment of well-defined enforceable rules; or perhaps they simply presume an adequate level of user sophistication that does not yet exist. Our analysis and model suggests the need for both rules and a suitable social contract to establish suitable norms of civil behavior.

Civility and Life on the Screen

It is troubling why group policy-making for things such as social contracts and civility standards in virtual communities is so problematic.

Communities are organic in nature and site owners can't make them successful or force them to grow. A site owner can only provide the fertile ground on which a community may grow, and then provide some gentle guidance to help the group thrive. Much of the challenge in fostering an online community is social, rather than technical [underline added] (Levitt, et al., 1998).

Howard Rheingold (2001) states that: "life of a virtual community can only emerge from human communication, and while the quality of that communication can be enhanced and evolved through technology, it is fundamentally governed by human, not technical factors." For example building trust and establishing empathy are important human elements.

Rheingold (2001) observes that: "Interpersonal dynamics can, in fact, be trickier online than in a physical" space,

presumably because of the limited 'emotional bandwidth' of online communication.

One important role for technologies is as the backbone for an invigorated, vibrant professional community…This will not happen, however without considerable effort to design the technologies and the social structure… (Hawkins, 1996).

Nancy White ("choconancy") (2001) observes that: "Just as in offline community spaces, there are a range of behaviors that community hosts will encounter. These mirror offline behaviors, but manifest [themselves] differently in the text-only environment. Without the non-verbal cues, we can misrepresent a person's actions online."

White (2001) states that: "Online group interactions do not always "happen" spontaneously. They require care and nurturing: facilitation. She continues to note that: "Facilitation is a balance between functions that enhance the environment and content, create openness and opportunity, and functions that protect the members from harassment. It involves the sacred rituals around freedom of individual expression while preserving something of *the common good*. It is juggling, tight-rope walking, often without a net." This indicates the need for a social contract—a need to support "sociability, relationships and trust building" (White, 2001). Such facilitators provide the all-important 'glue' that binds the social fabric.

The *Communitas* Model

There appears to be a 3-layered model, that we call 'Communitas' (see Figure 1). Successful online communities, that we are familiar with, are structured according to this model. The foundation layer of 'Communitas' is communications technology. This is the 'soil' out of which everything else emerges. Only about 5% of the population will muster the technical—and at times arcane—skills to create and develop the underlying Communications Technology.

Figure 1 – *Communitas* Model

The second layer of 'Communitas' is community building. This is the social and leadership layer where 90% of the participants spend their time getting to know their colleagues, identifying and understanding goals, missions, and issues of concern to the community, and building trust. If communications technology is the 'soil', Community building is the 'garden'.

Once community building has reached a level where there is a substantial level of participation, interaction, and trust, a remarkable third layer emerges. This layer can be referred to as 'communion'. Communion is a profoundly transformational relation of people-to-people and people-to-ideas. These are life-changing ideas and interpersonal relationships, which fundamentally redirect individuals to focus their time, energy and talent in ways that promote personal and professional growth, clarification of individual and community values, and adoption of meaningful personal and group goals. Communion is the 'fruit' of the 'garden' of community building, growing on the 'soil' of communications technology.

Implementing a Social Contract

So the next question is: "how to craft an online community in which Communitas flowers?" In our experience the key ingredient is a social contract, which establishes the terms of civility. The social contract sets forth the purpose and goals of the community and an agreement among the participants as to how they will interact, treat each other, and resolve conflicts. It has been our experience that communities fail when the social contract is abrogated. It has been our experience that communities are successful when they are founded on a mutually understood and agreed upon Social contract. Note that it is not possible to have an *imposed* social contract; a social contract can only exist if all participants voluntarily agree to it. [N.B. A social contract should eliminate the need for a police department by placing the responsibility for behavior on the participants. In otherwords, what a social contract does is make everyone a *host* -- it's not just left to one or two people to enforce civil behavior.] For this reason social contract communities tend to small private communities. Large public communities are not amenable to the social contract model. Large pubic communities with an open-door policy tend to run toward ill-mannered political factionalism. These communities do not support horizontal dialogue; they tend to be dominated by a small number of outspoken partisans who collectively construct what we charitably be referred to as a 'lunatic drama,' characterized by mutual disrespect. Such communities can be long lasting and even entertaining but they rarely foster insight, problem solving or personal growth. By contrast the small social contract communities can carry their participants along collaborative and profound transformational journeys.

References

Constant, D., Sproull, L., and Kiesler, S. 1997. *The Kindness of Strangers: On the usefulness of electronic weak ties for technical advice*. In S. Kiesler (Ed.), Culture of the Internet (pp. 303-322). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Corcoran, T., and Fuhrman, S. 1999. *Going to Scale: Building Effective Infrastructure*. Available online at http://www.upenn.edu/gse/cpre/docs/resrch/a-3.html

Cothrel, Joseph and & Williams, Ruth. 1999. *On-line Communities: Helping Them Form and grow*. J. of Knowledge Management, 3(1),54-60. Available online at: http://dsslab.mis.ccu.edu.tw/jkm/jkmV3N1/p054.pdf

Hawkins, J. 1996. In C. Fisher, D.C. Dwyer, and K. Yocam (Eds.) *Education and Technology*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Levitt Lee, M., Popkin, Laird, and Hatch, David. 1998. *Building Online Communities for High Profile Internet Sites*. Proceedings of INET 98. Available online at: http://www.comms.uab.es/inet99/inet98/1b/1b_3.htm

Rheingold, Howard. July, 2001. *Face-to-Face with Virtual Communities*. Syllabus Magazine. Available online at: http://www.syllabus.com/syllabusmagazine/article.asp?ID=4135

Wenger, E. 1998. Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity. Cambridge University Press.

White, Nancy. 2001. *Facilitating and Hosting a Virtual Community*. Available online at: http://www.fullcirc.com/community/community/facilitation.htm