Ethical and Behavioral Standards in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT: The term "community" once meant a group of people living together in a local neighborhood or perhaps it meant a group of people that met at a certain time and place to talk and enjoy each other's company. However, the world has grown smaller as technology has advanced, and people are now reaching out via technology and the virtual world to build worthwhile connections. This has given rise to the popularity of online communities. Online communities are formed by people from all different backgrounds who share a common interest or goal (Johnson 2014). Any person can be a part of any community, even if they have never met in person. This link is a blessing and a curse because, while it brings people together, it also brings together their geographical, socioeconomical and even cultural backgrounds. Differences in these can clash and wreak havoc on the sustainability of the online community if guidelines are not outlined. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to reveal a rationale for ethical and behavioral standards for online communities as well as an overview of how my personal worldview influences said rationale. It will also include a set of standards so both management and participants can ensure a respectful and beneficial community experience.

KEYWORDS: online community, rules, behavioral standards, ethical values

Rationale for Ethical and Behavioral Standards

Whether an extension of a business or a stand-alone entity focusing on a certain topic, online communities are a popular way to exchange information in the digital landscape (Bapna, Benner, & Qiu 2019). Online communities evolved from chat rooms and forums that were easily self-contained to stand alone web pages and groups created on social media platforms. In turn, this has changed how word-of-mouth information is spread across the Internet.

From Facebook to YouTube to Pinterest, there are a number of different digital platforms available online, and each offer online communities, or groups, where users can contribute information, ask questions, etc., based on the groups' interest category. Facebook and YouTube are the most widely used (Perrin & Anderson 2019); however, newer platforms such as TikTok are slowly gaining ground. These platforms are a crucial aspect to developing and sustaining online communities as they are the building blocks that support online social interactions (Spagnoletti, Resca, & Lee 2015). However, their formation and foundation can be heavily influenced by assumptions derived from their creator's ethics, morality and values -- i.e., their personal worldview.

Personal Worldview

My personal worldview is simple. I value my worth and the worth of others based on trust and understanding. I remain authentic to who I am and what I believe. It is hard enough to navigate in this technology-driven world where bullying, fat-shaming, and other negative behavior seems to thrive. I will not contribute to that because that is not how God sees me, or anyone. God has plans for me based on the way he designed me, and anything else is just noise.

As for ethical values, I identify more with the "Golden Mean" first posited by Aristotle. I am empathetic by nature and tend to mediate any situation by listening to all sides of an issue and taking time to digest and discern the meaning of each side before I respond.

Proposed Standards for Management

Every community needs rules and guidelines for what is acceptable behavior and activity on their platform. Developing these before launch will clearly define what is allowed and encouraged, as well as frowned upon, forbidden, and what could lead to ejection.
The four crucial standards that management should start with are:

> 1) Privacy;
> 2) Accuracy;
> 3) Property, and
> 4) Accessibility.

In this digital age, concerns about privacy are one of the contributing factors whether someone will participate in an online community (Pan, Wan, Fan, Liu, & Archer 2017). Management should ponder questions about privacy, such as: "What information is required and under what circumstances?" and "What safeguards are put in place to ensure the data is secure?" Answering these questions ahead of time will install a set of rules clearly explained that users must accept before allowing to participate within the community.

An online community will not flourish if its reputation is tainted due to false content. Therefore, accuracy is vital because an organization is only as good as the information it disseminates to participants. To combat this, management must identify certain personnel to monitor and delete user-generated content deemed unacceptable or unverifiable (Kim, Moravec, & Dennis 2019).

Online communities are built to share content in a digital environment, but who owns what information? Management should set clear guidelines regarding property management, so when the lines are blurred (or crossed), there is a clear understanding of the consequence. In this way, the organization is "steering" users toward proper and legal interactions (Reischauer & Mair 2018).

Digital technology has advanced user connectivity; however, there are still drawbacks for those with unique needs. For example, any videos where people are speaking is useless for the hearing impaired unless captions are included. Ng and Schofield (2017) posit that adaptive and universal design approaches with forms, font sizes, and alt. text are necessary (and sometimes legally required) to ensure a worthwhile experience for users with disabilities.

Proposed Standards for Participants

The general term "netiquette" is applicable when describing how to "behave" in an online environment. Therefore, it is important to understand the "culture" of the online community one is looking to join. This includes:

1) Respecting the rules of the community;
2) Respecting others in the community;
3) Practicing self-regulation; and
4) Engaging with others.

First, respect the rules of the community. Management has set the rules as a way to ensure civil behavior and conform to certain legal standards. Also, people join the community to contribute to and benefit from the interaction (Johnson 2014). Frequent disregard for the rules will likely backfire, resulting in negative feedback and the likelihood of being banned from the community.

Second, respect others within the community. The term "agree to disagree" applies in this instance. People generally do not join a community to be bullied or hated upon; they are looking

to be uplifted, inspired and educated. Those that are antagonists online (a.k.a. trolls), can have lasting impacts on others and are not acting on consensus of good faith (Asprey 2019).

Third, practice self-regulation. This means be as authentic online as in person. It may seem enticing to create a fake profile as a version of the self one wishes to be; however, this could create a discrepancy between the ideal self and the ought self, resulting in greater psychological discomforts (Huang, Zhao, & Hu 2019).

Finally, engage with others. There is an implied give-and-take scenario when engaging online. If one is only taking, they are not offering anything worth contributing to other members. An online environment is only sustainable through user-generated content; therefore, the more contributed, the more likely the community will continue to be a worthwhile source (Bapna, Benner, & Qiu 2019).

Conclusion

Online communities can be developed with or without much forethought; however, it is wise to discuss and establish ethical and behavioral standards ahead of time in order to better facilitate and sustain any online community. These standards should cover both the management and participant side of the platform and will differ depending on who is chosen to manage and who decides to participate; but overall, they will help all parties maintain proper decorum and respect within said community. It will also help reinforce discipline for disruptive or uncooperative members.

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