

Expanding the Research Scope for Internet Enabled Neighborhood Communication Platforms

Gabriel H. Mugar
Syracuse University
337 Hinds Hal
Syracuse, New York 13244
gmugar@syr.edu

ABSTRACT:

The value of an Internet Enabled Neighborhood Communication Platform (IENCP) is typically framed in research as a tool to increase the stock of social capital in a neighborhood. However, these studies are narrowly focused on the outcomes of the technology and provide little detail regarding the activity of expertise sharing and information behavior on such platforms. By limiting the focus to the outcomes, we risk fetishizing the technology and losing site of their socio-technical characteristics. The need to expand the research scope to understand the expertise sharing and information behavior on such platforms is greater than ever in the face of growing numbers of IENCP's across the world. If continued research on IENCP is to contribute to their design and management, a greater level of detail on how users share information on such platforms as well as where the platforms fit into users information seeking habits is required.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.1.1: Systems and Information Theory: Value of Information

General Terms

Management, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Knowledge Sharing, Expertise-Finding, Information Seeking, Computer Supported Collaborative Work, Human Information Behavior, Social Networks, Social Capital, Community Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

An Internet Enabled Neighborhood Communication Platform (IENCP) is understood here to be a set of digital resources that supports socializing among residents of a specific physically-bounded neighborhood. Commonly used IENCP's range from listservs [14][8] to more comprehensive social networking platforms like Boston's Neighbors for Neighbors (www.neighborsforneighbors.com) or Portland's Bright Neighbor (www.brightneighbor.com). An IENCP enables conversations that typically focus on topics relating to the well being of the neighborhood, such as discussions on how to deal

with crime, or the organization of communal activities and events. Some IENCP's also include directories and maps of local institutional resources [e.g., 14].

Most often, IENCP's are framed as enablers of social capital, with the common hypothesis and conclusion being that using IENCP's will increase communication among neighbors and therefore boost each individual's personal stock of social capital [14][8][11].

This view of social capital most typically draws on Coleman's [2] description of an individual's stock of people that they can call on in a time of need; Granovetter's [7] description of weak ties, where an individual's capacity for social mobility exists in the information they get from the relationships they have with people outside of their close circle of friends and family; or Kretzmann and McKnight's [12] Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) model, where the development efforts are best aided by taking stock of the resources (human and institutional) that already exist within the community.

While there are other approaches to conceptualizing social capital, these three perspectives represent the dominant view on IENCP's, with researchers demonstrating through a range of studies that the uses of such platforms may boost social capital stock through their capacity to act as repositories for information about local resources, facilitate convenient asynchronous communication between neighbors, and introduce neighbors that typically would not have the opportunity to interact.

2. A BROADER VIEW OF IENCP

While current research helps in making the case for the value of IENCP's in supporting vibrant and healthy neighborhoods, there appears to be no research that provides a detailed account of how these platforms impact the information seeking behavior of those that use them, nor has there been any attention paid to how their design and management impacts the activity of expertise sharing. By detail I mean to imply a scope that, for example, moves beyond simply identifying asynchronous communication tools as features of IENCP's that support interactions among neighbors. Expanding beyond the current scope might, for example, give attention to the impact that design and management decisions have on the social dynamics amongst users of asynchronous expertise sharing tools on IENCP's. Additionally, attention might also be given to how the IENCP's fit into the daily information seeking behavior of the users.

If the research scope does not expand beyond celebrating the outcomes of using IENCP's, we risk fetishizing their technological presence and avoiding critical socio-technical questions that need to be asked about the uses of these technologies.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

iConference '12, February 7–10, 2012, Toronto, ON, Canada.
Copyright 2011 ACM 1-58113-000-0/00/0010...\$10.00.

By addressing the IENCP's as socio-technical ensembles we will reduce the potential for a repeat of what IT researchers see as a trend of unsuccessful implementations of potentially valuable technologies such as knowledge management into the workplace, collaborative work support, and communities of practice-enhancing systems. Across all three of these relevant areas of scholarship, detailed empirical studies suggest that a disregard for how the new technology might impact the existing social norms and users needs leads to disuse or even misuse. It would be a shame for the study of IENCP's to follow the same path [9].

3. SOURCE FOR THE EXPANDED FRAMEWORK

To redress this, I propose the following fields of research as starting points that could lead to new directions in research with the goal of producing detailed analysis of how IENCP's impact the stock of social capital in a neighborhood: Information seeking behavior [5][6] [16][17] and expertise sharing [9][3][1][10][13].

Broadly, information seeking behavior can be defined as the study of how individuals go about addressing deficits in knowledge when faced with an obstacle. It can look at topics ranging from the horizon of resources that users refer to in times of need [16] to the behavioral characteristics of individuals that impact they way in which they seek information and the types of sources they prefer [15].

Generally, expertise-sharing research is concerned with how organizations know what they know [4]. The research is conducted in the domain of formally defined organizations, such as research labs or corporations [13]. Here the research examines the characteristics of the technology and the organizational culture that support the sharing of information within the organization. Research often provides a detailed analysis of the different roles users and technology play in the various moments and outcomes of expertise sharing.

4. HOW THESE FIELDS MIGHT EXPAND THE RESEARCH SCOPE ON IENCP'S

From the perspective of the user's experience on an IENCP, literature on expertise sharing can give us an understanding of the dynamics of interaction between users as well as the psychological characteristics that support or hinder activity on the platform. It can also give us insight into the role the managers of the platform can play in making it a viable environment for knowledge sharing and creation. In addition to offering possible research methodologies, expertise sharing literature would help in defining the concepts for researching the phenomenon of expertise sharing, something that is also missing from existing research on IENCP's.

From the perspective of how the IENCP fits into the lives of the user and their information seeking habits, literature on information seeking behavior would allow us to understand where on the seekers horizon these platforms exist, which could give a researcher a "how," "why," and "when" description of the seeker's relationship with the IENCP. In addition to providing methodologies for researching where the IENCP fits into the neighborhood resident's information seeking experience, the field would also help to strengthen the conceptual definitions

that go along with understanding the activities that take place in and around IENCP's.

Possible research questions could include: What role do active participants on a listserv play in terms of expertise sharing? How does the IENCP influence the information seeking strategies of neighborhood residents? What are the cultural characteristics of the platforms that support or hinder expertise sharing? What technical features of the platform support or hinder sharing? What is the frequency of visits to the platforms for active users and less active users and why? What topics generate the highest volume of sharing?

5. CONCLUSION

The need to move beyond the existing research paradigm of IENCP's is urgent. To not engage in detailed analysis of the social and technical features of these platforms and how they relate to the outcomes of increased social capital is a great disservice to the users, designers, and administrators of the booming number of new IENCP's around the world. Without an understanding of the information seeking habits of constituent users, IENCP's will be implemented without an attempt to be part of resident's information seeking ecosystem. Without an understanding of how and why users share knowledge online, the expertise sharing tools of IENCP's will not be used to their full potential. Overall, the importance of expanding the research scope is to avoid an outcome where the proliferation of new IENCP's end up becoming squandered opportunities for community engagement.

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Ackerman, M.S. and Halverson, C. 2004. Sharing Expertise: The Next Step for Knowledge Management. *Social Capital and Information Technology*. M. Huysman and V. Wulf, eds. MIT Press. 273–299.
- [2] Coleman, J.S. 1988. Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital. *The American Journal of Sociology*. 94, (1988), S95–S120.
- [3] Cross, R. and Borgatti, S.P. 2004. The Ties That Share: Relational Characteristics That Facilitate Information Seeking. *Social Capital and Information Technology*. M. Huysman and V. Wulf, eds. MIT Press. 137–161.
- [4] Davenport, T.H. and Prusak, L. 1998. *Working Knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.
- [5] Dervin, B. and Nilan, M. 1986. Information Needs and Uses. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*. M. Williams, ed. Knowledge Industry Publications, Inc. 3–33.
- [6] Fisher, K. and Naumer, C. 2006. Information Grounds. *New Directions in Human Information Behavior*. A. Spink and C. Cole, eds. Springer. 93–111.
- [7] Granovetter, M.S. 1973. The strength of weak ties. *American Journal of Sociology*. 78, (May. 1973), 1360–1380.
- [8] Hampton, K. and Wellman, B. 2003. Neighboring in Netville: How the Internet Supports Community and Social Capital in a Wired Suburb. *City & Community*. 2, 4 (Dec. 2003), 277–311.
- [9] Huysman, M. 2004. Design Requirements for Knowledge-Sharing Tools: A Need for Social Capital Analysis. *Social Capital and Information Technology*. M. Huysman and V. Wulf, eds. MIT Press. 187–207.
- [10] Huysman, M. and de Wit, D. 2003. A Critical Evaluation of Knowledge Management Practices. *Sharing Expertise*. M.S. Ackerman et al., eds. MIT Press. 27–56.

- [11] Kavanaugh, A.L. and Patterson, S.J. 2001. The Impact of Community Computer Networks on Social Capital and Community Involvement. *American Behavioral Scientist*. 45, 3 (Nov. 2001), 496–509.
- [12] Kretzmann, J.P. and McKnight, J. 1993. *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A path toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community's Assets*. ACTA.
- [13] Lave, J. and Wegner, E. 1991. *Situated learning*. Cambridge University Press.
- [14] Pinkett, R.D. 2002. *Creating Community Connections*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology.
- [15] Savolainen, R. 1995. Everyday Life Information Seeking: Approaching Information Seeking in the Context of “Way of Life.” *Library & Information Science Research*. 17, (1995), 259–294.
- [16] Sonnenwald, D.H. 2005. Information Horizons. *Theories of Information Behavior*. K.E. Fisher et al., eds. American Society for Information Science and Technology. 191–197.
- [17] Warner, E.S. et al. 1973. *Information Needs of Urban Residents*. Department of health, Education, and Welfare.

