

Determinants of the Development of Community in Computer Networks

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The term „Virtual Community“ is very popular at the moment. It is used to denote phenomena as disparate as portal sites, community networks, chat rooms, intranets, and others. Often, the development of a community around a given communications infrastructure is taken for granted and the only questions raised pertain to which technical features would be most popular. With the usual time lag, an American insight is becoming accepted in Germany, too: that a “database is not a community“ and that the chance to communicate does not automatically and without social control lead to desirable consequences.

None of the aforementioned technologies is deemed to either bring about community with necessity or to have no potential at all to facilitate its emergence. Instead, this article suggests a taxonomy of virtual communities with regard to their geographic area covered, their purpose or thematic orientation, the mode of coordination and regulation (initiation, norming, and control) of social action and the technical implementation. These factors determine the availability of thematic, cultural, and social resources as well as the perceived social presence of others and the cognitive ease of interaction. They, in turn, effect and influence the type, intensity, and continuity of social binding in such a virtual community.

After the theoretical part, we describe an experiment, in which in ILIAS, the online learning community of the University of Cologne’s Faculty of Economics and Social Science, some of these factors have been manipulated systematically to determine their relative importance.

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