
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Dr. Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor at the University of Twente and a part-time Professor at the Fontys University of Applied Sciences in the Netherlands. His specialties are advanced learning tools such as concept mapping, virtual reality and mobile learning. His research and teaching stretch from teacher education via the European Joint Research Projects to international projects under the auspices of UNESCO. His recent publications are on learners' preconceptions and representations that express pre-intuitive ideas before the actual learning may start: *Cognitive Support for Learning* and *Imagining the Unknown*. He is the editor of several research journals and organises conferences in mobile learning, e-society and web-based communities.

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This is the first issue of Volume 4. In just three years, the *International Journal of Web Based Communities* venture has matured indeed. The career of this journal goes in close synergy with the annual conferences from 2004 until now that can be found under the website of IADIS¹: *International Conference on Web based Communities*.

Looking back to the thematic spectrum that was exposed in this journal, we may say that the community 'metaphor' has proliferated; the essence is what we call Web 2.0: information and transactions derive its meaning from the social context. What we may finally conclude is that the web will slowly give up its documentary nature and become essentially a meeting point.

Let us just reflect a bit and see where we have come from and what can be expected in the next two years, which completes the first lustrum of this particular Web-Based Community (WBC). The fast development of WWW-based communities is obvious if we contrast the inventory by the American Life Project in 2001 with the notion of social networking on the web today.

As the web evolved from an informational into a communicative infrastructure, it became apparent that communication rests both upon pragmatic needs and culture. Face-to-face communication is superior in the sense that it offers a high bandwidth for verbal and mimetic queues, and in addition the partners' mutual vicinity is a reason in itself to start a contact. Table 1 shows that among the group members with nonprofessional aims there is a blend of four to five scopes in parallel on average.

Table 1 Distribution of interest sectors within the group of extra professional perspectives in 2001

<i>Interest sectors</i>	<i>Percent of occurance</i>
Trade association or professional group	50%
A group for people who share a hobby or interest	50%
A fan group of a particular team	31
A fan group of a TV show or entertainer	29
A local community group or association	29
A group of people who share your lifestyle	28
A support group for a medical condition or personal problem	28
A group of people who share your beliefs	24
A political group	22
A religious organisation	21
A sports team or league in which you participate	29
Ethnic or cultural group	15
Labour union	6

Source: Pew Internet & American Life Project, January–February 2001 Survey, internet users, n = 1697. Margin of error is +/- 3%

In contrast, now in 2007 we see the community approach as a prime entry mechanism for any grouping on the web. There are even large numbers of metacommunities where candidate members may find the best places to 'shelter'. To give you an example of how virtually any criterion can be a reason to raise a community: The site <http://www.lessthanfour.org/> invites for membership those who are missing any limb. Even parents of babies are subscribing as soon as photos can show the amputation. This community site is featured under the ONEsite community by CNN.

In Wikipedia's list of social networking websites are MySpace with more than 200 million, Windows LifeSpaces with 120 million and Orkut with almost 68 million counts at the top. Orkut claims being designed to help users meet new friends and maintain existing relationships. Compared to Friendster and MySpace, Orkut goes a step further by permitting the creation of easy-to-set-up simple forums (called 'communities') of users. Since October 2006, Orkut has permitted users to create accounts without an invitation. In April 2007, Orkut introduced polls in communities.

We may conclude that since the start of this journal the web has often been used as a tool to meet new people, but in recent years the interaction between web users has grown dramatically, spawning a new generation of networking sites. We now see a trend towards web communities that share photos and videos. The notion of Web 2.0 has further penetrated; it is a web where content and understanding are created rather than exposed and consumed. This central idea has created the most popular sites of the internet nowadays; everybody wants to be a member of the social networking culture. Besides MySpace, Bebo and Friendster also have stimulated the social networking trend. Posting profiles, music, episodes in life, points of interest – they are all part of one's new web identity. We may summarise by concluding that rather than correspondence, it is now the full bandwidth of communication that counts.

By looking back we may see the three phases in WBCs even more clearly:

- 1 The first step, as already expressed in the 2001 study by Pew Internet & the American Life Project, was that group structuring had started on the web.
- 2 The second step was that web-based communities tended to manifest in a more complete and social sense; the web meetings were made more similar to the face-to-face meetings in real life.
- 3 We have now arrived at the third stage, where real life tends to absorb the hidden benefits and even the arbitrary side effects of web-based communities.

Social networks are the more common lines along which persons think and take strategic decisions. One important notion is that actors have quite distinct positions in the social network. Social actors tend to adapt earlier trends more easily.

A fascinating example of this trend is described by Iding *et al.* in their article, 'The computer and the canoe: web-based communities across the Pacific Islands'. They describe the exploration and validation of classroom practices that are culturally congruent with traditional island ways of 'knowing' and communicating, therefore promoting a synergy between 'village wisdom' and 'western literacy'.

In 'Newbs vs. geeks: encouraging creativity in an online learning community', Nichol and Blashki describe the enhancement and support of creativity through the development and implementation of purpose-specific learning environments. They use the specific example of an implementation in a community at Deakin University, Australia.

Park *et al.* share with us an interesting discussion of an online social context that has potential for learning. In the article 'Cyworld is my world: Korean adult experiences in an online community for learning' the authors introduce the popular online social networking service Cyworld and explore how informal learning occurs.

In their article 'Requirements for building accessible web-based communities for people with special needs', Santos and Boticario cover crucial issues such as the accessibility and the social impact of WBC, as well as the technical information for creating a WBC easily accessible to people with special needs. In the article they introduce the EU4ALL architecture, an open and flexible architecture that can support technical requirements.

Website designers should be educated on how to accommodate disabled users, while still providing a credible website for able-bodied users. Reilly and Flood discuss in their article, 'Combining accessibility and credibility in website design', how a website can

implement accessibility features and at the same time maintain credibility. They describe the results of the testing of the guidelines among students of the Dundalk Institute of Technology.

In 'Designing and evaluating online communities for promoting self-management of chronic low back pain', Rubinelli *et al.* describe a pilot study to answer the question of whether and how patients with chronic low back pain can benefit from the usage of a WBC. The pilot study was financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation.

And last but not least, Wilde *et al.* introduce the ShaRef system and why ShaRef is an interesting candidate for cooperation in communities of collaborating researchers.

The first three articles describe situations in different parts of the world: Hawaii, Australia and South Korea. The other four articles focus on specific user groups.

We trust that this first issue of the fourth volume will also be for you a trustworthy landmark in the evolution from community-based web to web-supported real communities. Please feel invited to bring forward your reflections or your research at this point for a next issue of this journal.

Note

- 1 <http://www.iadis.org/>. Its next event can be found under the same IADIS site. Here is its pre-announcement: <http://www.webcommunities-conf.org/>.