

Research Topic: Regional studies of Free Culture

The Study of Sharing Behavior in BBS platform in Taiwan – a Case Study of Virtual Communities in PTT

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With the development of advanced technologies, netizens tend to more likely to share and interact in web 2.0 related sites, for example, blog, Wikipedia, Youtube, flicker etc.. While the web 2.0 applications gradually gain their popularity worldwide, the BBS, which is a text-based discussion platform, is still play an active and important role in community building among internet users in Taiwan. For example, the PTT, which is the largest BBS in Taiwan, usually has more than ten thousands of people on line simultaneously everyday. Information flows are intensive in the PTT, it also facilitates large amount of exchanges of creative ideas among members. Not only it shapes community cultures in the net, it also serves as a seedbed of collective actions. For example, when a worldwide competition, “clicking mouse for your nations” designed by the www.clickclickclick.com site was launched, the PTT in Taiwan was the main virtual space to gather and discuss related issues among Taiwanese netizens. Although the web 2.0 sites receive high recognition in a snapshot speed, the PTT remains its growth in memberships and in information exchanges everyday in Taiwan. In compare to web 2.0 applications that characterizes peer-to-peer and open systems, the PTT represents a traditional and oligarchic discussion platform where board managers has the power to decide what articles can be recommended, and what can’t on the board. Then, the question is why do Taiwanese netizens still attach to the PTT while they have choices to join the web 2.0 sites? The goal of this study is to explore the community dynamics of PTT in Taiwan, and further argue whether it shows different pattern in compared with those social sites of web 2.0?

In McMillan’s “Sense of Community” (1996), the group members with community identity would exchange and share their information and supports. These behaviors make an economics system, becoming the important building blocks of community. But in most Web 2.0 sites, reputation systems play an important role (Rheingold, 2004). Also, in the study of Chinese Wikipedia of Shih (2007), she argued that, when we study virtual community nowadays, the new form of interaction way “Network Individualism”, should be consider as an important role. So we can

say, network individualism enhances the influence of reputation system in the Web 2.0 kind sites. But if we want to find out the reason of sharing behaviors in the PTT, which is a traditional BBS platform, we should reconsider the related elements. Here McMillan's study and other virtual community study provide some insights about these elements, including the identity of community and personal involvement. Based on the study question, this study investigates communities based on interest about popular culture. Because in these communities there are many types of sharing behavior, including information exchange, social support, and even personal creation or re-creation. For the reason, this study use quantitative approach, sampling three kinds of popular culture communities, which are discussion boards of animation and comic, music, and TV programs related. An online survey was conducted in this study, and a total of 311 members from 3 type PTT communities responded to this online questionnaire.

In general, the research results suggest the quantity of posted articles is related to degree of involvement, and the extent of community identity among community members. The definition of virtual community involvement in the study includes the amount of money spent on thematic related goods in communities, the time spent on browsing newspaper, magazines, and other mass media source, the time spent on reading information on internet, and the time spent on on-line interaction with other community members. This result suggests community members invest their money and times to acquire related items and information to increase their knowledge, this knowledge in return would enhance their creditability to post more valuable articles. Among these variables, the time spent on on-line interaction with other community members shows the highest correlation with the quantity of group member's articles posted. This result implies those who have more interpersonal ties in community will also more likely to post articles than other members. The result also suggests the quantity of member's articles posted is highly correlated with the frequency of articles that were praised and recognized informally by other members. That is, members who have received social recognition in the community tend to be more active in posting articles in return. This mechanism is paralleled to the reputation system that generally characterizes in web 2.0 sites. High sharing behavior and interactions are usually found in those better social embedded communities whether in web1.0 or web 2.0 sites.

More recent studies on virtual communities have stressed on the development of networked individualism and reputation system, and mostly they examine these issues from the sites of web 2.0 applications. In this study, we argue that the PTT, a traditional discussion platform, has its unique mechanism to facilitate community interaction and sharing, just as those reputation systems in web 2.0 sites. The PTT in

Taiwan reveals a unique and cultural specific development in internet communities. Since the beginning of 90s, Taiwan developed its own BBS culture among college students (Zhao, 1995). It has been the most frequent use platform among college students in Taiwan. Recently, more and more users adopt PTT for various kinds of discussion, by doing so, their personal networks are developed as followed within the communities. When they interact with others in such a network, their sharing behaviors will increase in any ways, even without the transparent reputation system or peer-to-peer structure. The study result suggests the informal interpersonal interaction will also enhance sharing behavior in community. Interestingly, a more close examination suggests members who post articles on the PTT will also post their articles on their blogs. Whether web 2.0 application is supplement or supplant traditional discussion forum needs further investigation to clarify the intertwined usage behaviors in virtual community.

Keyword: BBS, Reputation System, Virtual Community

Author's Biographical Note

I come from Taiwan, now studying in the Graduate School of Social Informatics in Yuan Ze University. Some years ago, when I was an undergraduate student, I studied Information Management. But the study interest is on sociology now. Cyber culture always interests me, especially some collective actions on the net. Also, as this study, I am a user of the PTT, spending most of the time on it.

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