

12 Variables for Understanding Online Communities

by Andrea Baker and Bob Watson

This article is an attempt to discuss some of the qualities that define virtual communities. It is a work in process, an exploration. The twelve variables we've selected are most likely not all that exist, just the ones we find most important in our thinking right now. These variables struck us as important ways in which communities are differentiated despite the type of software chosen to carry a given community. Each author has several years of experience participating in online communities and also facilitating and managing them.

Researchers may take a community or a number of communities and apply these variables in order to analyze them. Each qualitative variable represents a continuum and can be seen to have a "high" and a "low" end. We acknowledge that others could develop a numerical scale for each variable, noting the community's place along the continuum of each of the twelve dimensions. Such a quantitative measurement could possibly be used to reduce subjectivity in comparing communities.

Software Choices

Since online communities only exist through the software that is chosen, it is useful to begin with a few brief comments on what is generally available. Various types of software have their partisans, but a choice has to be made that will influence how well a community functions for its particular use. The variables apply to all, we think, but the software chosen to launch a community has a strong influence on what will ultimately develop. The following thoughts seem generally true in our experience.

Threaded boards.

Threaded boards work well for smallish communities or for those with specifiable, generally technical, interests. The reason is that natural drift spreads a general topic, rather like an organization chart with 20 people reporting upwards, with 20 additional reporting to each of the twenty ... the depth is only three posts, but the resulting width is 400. This can make it difficult for users to find and follow specific conversations. They take considerable management to stay on topic. On the other hand, such boards are great for finding specific information when each thread is well named.

Linear Boards.

Linear boards, where posts follow one another in chronological order and where individual posts allow only one following response in any given topic, work well for large communities and those without specific technical interests. There is better conversational flow and topics self-organize under the named thread branches. Finding older information, however, can be difficult without a strong search function.

E-mail.

E-mail is generally cumbersome except for smallish groups or ones where only a small number of folks are active posters. It is hard to segment interests, thus making life hard for all but the most dedicated list-owner -- unless he/she really *likes* editing and sorting. It is good for some work groups and is, of course, ubiquitous.

E-mail is sometimes used in combination with boards, usually to help folks who are interested in only a couple of topics keep current with new postings. If the interest is in many topics, e-mail makes no sense due to the sheer number of e-mails being received. On the other hand, some people like it because they are very used to it.

12 Variables of Online Community

1. Personal Need for Community.

Does the person *really* desire to be in a particular community?

For a High personal need, consider the case of the parent of a very sick child. He or she is likely to grasp whatever hope or counsel a group might have to offer, especially if it is the only support group available (perhaps to a person in a small town or if the disease is rare). Another high personal need, and a common one, is shown in the person looking for narrowly focused technical information that is only available at one location. Necessity is a great motivator.

There is also that curious individual who gets psychological satisfaction out of trashing conversations: the drive-by flamer or the obnoxious troll. Unfortunately, a wide range of online communities do fit their needs. One might note that some communities try to isolate (or eject) such individuals through strong hosting or by holding "flame attracting" conversations in specific topic areas.

Low personal need is shown when a person stumbles into a community that is completely alien to his/her interests, wonders why he/she is arrived there, and wanders away. The person wanting to discuss Star Wars who wanders into a Jane Austen discussion by mistake is unlikely to remain.

2. Availability of Information.

Can a person learn something?

Information is everywhere in an online community. Sometimes it is obvious and in the posts ... one could come by and harvest it, were there time and software enough. Other times, it resides in the people who comprise the community. But it is a variable. Some communities are more "information dense" than others. Also, some go out of their way to help novices while others do not.

High information communities, such as technical boards or science oriented discussions, do not appeal to everyone. They can be intimidating and not everyone is willing to either admit to ignorance or learn what is necessary in order to participate. It should be noted that discussions on such things as pets and soap operas can also be quite high in information and very interesting to the participants.

Low knowledge communities, perhaps just places to hang out, likewise do not appeal to everyone. Of course, with absolutely no participation and no information exchanged there is no community. Nevertheless, simply having a place to go and "say hi" to familiar residents is attractive to some.

3. Community as Social Destination.

Is the community a fun place to hang out?

People are social beings. If the community is an interesting place (in the mind of the user anyway), then a person is more likely to return. If not, he or she will not. A High social destination community is also one likely to encourage face-to-face meetings, back-channel personal e-mail, instant messaging, and the like.

How one makes it interesting presents problems and opportunities. Content is important, but even more important perhaps are the relationships that can only develop over time.

A Low social destination community may be one where information is exchanged for its own sake, an example being a discussion board owned by a software company to facilitate trouble shooting.

Some communities allow for "socializing" in specially dedicated locations, sometimes entire conferences. If this works well, a "purely informational" community can have a highly social dimension.

4. Rigor of Discussion.

Can a person participate through mere opinion or does everything require a citation?

A Highly rigorous discussion may not require a citation, but benefits from at least a strong adherence to verifiable facts. The web, of course, makes linking to news sources relatively easy, so High rigor can mean

bringing various proofs directly to the discussion. A community involved in publishable scientific pursuits might use High rigor as a matter of course in many of its discussions - especially as such discussion increasingly becomes a substitute for "first publication."

Low rigor would be offering off any personal opinion as though it were objective truth. Baseball fans often have long and loud discussions, with the deepest passions often coming from those who know the least about what's really happening in the clubhouse.

5. Tolerance for Argument.

Is the community one where argument is allowed, perhaps even valued, or one where argument is discouraged?

High tolerance allows for any type of argument, fair or otherwise. This is often a norm for those who are used to Usenet discussion. Unfortunately, many people - of both sexes -- are distressed by this sort of thing and will not participate.

Low tolerance, at the other extreme, allows for little real argument at all. This style suits some folks quite well -- especially those without their own points-of-view - but also results in an apparent lack of passion or even conviction.

There are, of course, many types of "middle ground." A list of rules, perhaps a prohibition on personal attack, can certainly help create a sense of tolerance.

6. Acceptance.

Is the community open to those with diverse points-of-view?

High acceptance means welcoming everyone. This may be good from a theoretical humanistic point-of-view but can make discussion difficult. The highly divergent point-of-view post *can* be a non sequitur and it *does* make for good theater. It also means accepting the stalker, the ignorant, the vapid, and the loud - which may mean accepting everyone excepting those who know how to communicate their ideas (because they'll soon be gone after such pressure).

Low acceptance means allowing very few participants having real differences. Yet, in such situations, what can there possibly be worth talking about? Communities which do not accept that members may deviate from a particular point-of-view soon find that they have only one member.

7. Duration.

Does the community exist for more than a moment?

A high duration community might well go on for decades. Certain e-mail lists already have and The WELL has existed, now, for many vibrant years. Many, perhaps most, of course intend to last but do not have the various resources (personnel, content or funding, for example) for doing so.

A low duration community might well be a one-day or one-week seminar. This is, of course, good and appropriate for certain purposes.

8. Facilitation.

Is the community facilitated (moderated) in some fashion?

We are avoiding the common term "moderated" here since it can be confusing - the passions of a moderated community certainly need not be moderate!

A high-facilitation community might be one which has every communication vetted by a higher authority - perhaps an owner of some type. A community designed to serve the information needs of an auto company might be seen as being at this extreme, especially if negative comments are never posted.

A low-facilitation community would be one where there is no one about to assert influence or control. There are certainly lots of places like this on the net! Most of them, now, are empty ghost town.

Note that successful communities are generally "midway" in this particular continuum.

8. Entry Barriers.

Is it hard to get into the community?

To be sure, there are many types of barriers. A high entry barrier community makes the member go through a few hoops before being invited to join.

Some barriers are merely technical, others are social or psychological or both. Language is such a barrier. There is little point of joining a French language community if your only language is English. A technical barrier might be bandwidth -- if you're on slow dial-up there is little to be gained from a high-graphics community best seen via cable or DSL.

A purely social barrier might be having to pass a certain test, say one of IQ or creativity or vetted reference, before being invited to join.

A low-barrier community makes no demands. But, like the old Groucho joke, do you want to belong to the type of club that would take you? Having no barriers makes easy access for everyone, including those who would abuse others or try to seize the community for their own purposes. Or, perhaps worse, the terminally boring might take over.

9. Anonymity.

Do people know who you *really* are?

A high-anonymity community doesn't reveal who people are and perhaps prefers that people do not inadvertently reveal who they are. Such a community allows people to post without bad repercussions coming their way. This is good if a person has controversial things to say and needs cover, but bad if a person intends to do nothing more than disrupt the community.

A low-anonymity community requires people to reveal who they really are, perhaps with real names and real e-mail (or even snail mail!) addresses. This has the positive value of keeping folks from flaming, but it may be too intimidating to those worried about such things as identity theft. Moreover, a low-anonymity community necessarily encourages people to stand behind their own words - this may improve overall discourse.

11. Locality.

Does this community serve a physical, geographical, place?

A high-locality community might be one that serves a real town, perhaps even just a neighborhood. The referents and discussion are real to many, if not most, of the participants. You could get an answer to "What do you think of that new burger place on the corner?"

A low-locality community might be spread thinly across the globe. Members are necessarily a bit distant from one another and that burger place had better have a web site if there is to be any discussion about it! On the other hand, low-locality communities are more likely to have conversations on those many topics which, in a "physical community" cannot take place due to a very small number of interested people.

12. Focus.

Does this community focus on a particular topic?

A high-focus community might be one that deals with the minutiae of a particular rock band and its music. Straying too far from the intended topic -- discussing, say, deconstruction of 19th century painters -- would be discouraged.

High focus might be due to the original, continuing, needs of the community (perhaps derived from a single founder).

A low-focus community would allow a person to talk about anything. Of course, the problem there is that it takes at least two to have a discussion! The Internet is awash with still-born communities that did not gel due to a lack of focused intent, and hence a lack of participants attracted by a particular interest.