

From Usenet to CoWebs - Interacting with social information spaces

(Book Review)

Reviewer:

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This book has the worst title ever. The title is not only too literal but it really does nothing to indicate the book's true value. The book is really about something much more engaging than the title implies, and academics, researchers and teachers (especially teachers already working in online environments – which is in fact, the perspective of this reviewer), will find much of what is written here of value.

So what is the book about? It is about social spaces and social interactions on the Internet. The editors seek to chart the development and the study of these spaces, ranging from their earliest context (Usenet), and ending with a technical phenomenon they recognise as 'CoWebs' or 'Wiki webs' (one might reasonably ask where this ridiculous terminology comes from). Most of us have heard a good deal about Usenet, as the embodiment of much of what the early Internet was all about — asynchronous communications organised around tens of thousands of topically organised forums or newsgroups, all of which are replicated across multiple servers and networks. But few, I believe, are familiar with CoWebs, or 'Collaborative Webs'.

CoWebs are really one representation of constructionists' (rather than constructivists') influences in the Web, and might be better characterised in terms of what Stephen Heppell of Ultralab (<http://www.ultralab.net>) has called the 'participative web'. Back in the mid 90s, the technology necessary to enable distributed users to collaboratively build, maintain and adapt web content (as social and educational spaces) without requiring programming skills in HTML or XML, was still very new. These days, it is commonplace. In fact, during the writing of this review, my 10 year old stepson, Rolando, was working on his own collaborative web site with other children he has never met, and almost certainly never will, face-to-face, to look after and 'sell' his adopted collection of 'Neopets' (<http://www.neopets.com>). But perhaps the biggest collaborative web presence, or educational one at least, is embodied in SchoolNet Global (www.schoolnetglobal.com). The SchoolNet Global project, started in 1998 in the UK, has over actively involved over 500,000 young people, aged 4 to 18 in collaboratively building and maintaining a series of curriculum focused web pages. They have worked in groups to record their thoughts and feelings about life in the 21st Century, on over 54,000 web pages detailing their own lives, homes, interests, wild ideas, hopes and dreams and how they will make the world a better place. In 2000 this project entered the Guinness Book of Records as the biggest educational Web project of all time.

But back to this book. As with all such edited collections, the range of chapters are partially dependent on the interests and work of individual researchers. The editors appear to have done well to organise the full range of contributions into 3 coherent sections: Introduction to Online Studies and Usenet; Studying Spaces; and, Enhancing Spaces. All the chapters find an appropriate home within this categorisation.

So, we find we have the very interesting historical/political analysis of Usenet's origins from Pfaffenberger; a more straightforward yet still intriguing 'social accounting' of Usenet by Marc Smith; and an analysis of Usenet postings in terms of demographics, conversational strategy and interactivity from Whittaker, et al. Conclusions reached by the latter authors are really very stimulating for anyone committed to the use of asynchronous communication tools in education (for example, the greater the diversity of the online population, the more likely it is one will find stilted and unsustainable conversations in postings). Another chapter focuses on the difficulties of understanding 'lurking' more completely (Nonnecke and Preece), in which the authors offer an insightful perspective on the practices associated with non-contributory approaches to mailing lists, Usenet groups and the

like. Of course, few suggest that lurking is a permanent condition of online participation, but most accept the practice is widespread. However, I wonder if lurking is really worthy of such lengthy consideration — lurking is, in the final analysis, surely just another characteristic of online discursive behaviour.

For me, the most interesting yet in some ways the more frustrating chapters, among a preponderance of interesting chapters, are those grouped together in the final section of the book (part 3). These chapters are all focused on enhancing social spaces on the Internet, through the application of technology innovations (for example, enabling the distributed and collaborative management of web content); and through the adoption of processes such as data mining – that is, filtering large amounts of data so as to make predictions of individual behaviours, for example (Amazon.com use data mining processes to make book recommendations to individual and new users of their online services). I say interesting, because these chapters provide insights into current and future embodiments of social spaces on the Internet; and frustrating since they perhaps don't go far enough in these insights. For example, much is made of the attributes of online spaces and what a better understanding of these might hold for studying and creating such spaces; but nothing is spoken of the effects of innovations such as the 'adaptive web' – web sites that automatically improve their organization and presentation by learning from user access patterns – on the appearance of these spaces. In fact, for me the latter part of this book loses direction somewhat and fails to build on earlier chapters concerned with the behaviour of both individuals and groups in web spaces.

Overall, however, this book is a valuable read and I'd recommend it to anyone with a practical or research driven interest in the design, development and implementation of online spaces for social interactions.