

WiserEarth: an Ethnographic study of the community

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the ethnographic study performed to an online community called WiserEarth. A combination of interviews and observations were used to analyze the community's activities and its member's perceptions about it. The analysis of the results was performed by crossing social web concepts, the observation data and general parameters found in the interviews. The results suggest that participation can be enhanced by evaluating the different member's needs and if they are met by the tools offered at the moment. A presentation and discussion of the parameters found in the study with the different stakeholders would be a first step to address this issue.

Author Keywords

Communities of action, sustainable development, newbie's, participation, open sustainability network, social networking.

ACM Classification Keywords

H5.3. Group and Organization Interfaces.

INTRODUCTION

The increase of the computer mediated communication has led to the emergence of a new kind of community, also known as the online based communities. It's the ability of controlling and making connections which characterizes this new kind of community, this new social web. It's the online space which contributes to the establishment of different relationships between the people and organizations who use it. The object of study for this paper is the online communities and its impact in its members. As the web is filled with a diverse group of online communities which have different purposes the type of online community was also considered. The online community selected was WiserEarth.

WiserEarth

This online community connects different communities of action and has over than 30,000 members. It is free-to-use, non-commercial, online community space which has been created for the people, nonprofit organizations and private organizations who are working to create a more just and sustainable world. Its website provides tools and resources to help the communities of action work together to define,

address and solve social and environmental problems around the world. The community holds a directory of non-governmental organizations and socially responsible organizations, over 110,000 in 243 countries, territories and sovereign islands.

This community was created to help the people and organizations involved in the social justice and environmental movement increase their collective awareness, reduce the duplication of efforts, and facilitate better connectivity with the aim of increasing overall effectiveness to prevent harm and institute positive change. It was launched in April 2007 in California and its functionality and tools have evolved with and for the user's needs. Through WiserEarth users can:

- 1) Find and connect with people and organizations working on the issues they are passionate about, both in their region and beyond.
- 2) Gain greater visibility and credibility for their organization, initiatives and expertise.
- 3) Discover potential funding opportunities or potential organizations to fund.
- 4) Join communities of action where they can generate visibility and support for the work they do.
- 5) Grow their network and coordinate community efforts with WiserEarth's group management tools.
- 6) Draw upon and contribute to a global knowledge base of solutions and resources within the fields of social justice and sustainability.
- 7) Post information on any events, jobs or volunteer opportunities free of cost.

Community Principles

As any community WiserEarth holds fundamental principles which are applied across the different community sections. The principles are transparency, respect, community, networking, collaboration and visibility. Transparency refers to the fact that it is open to full public scrutiny, where people who want to edit and add content are asked to identify and make themselves known to the community. Respect is about honoring the uniqueness of

each individual and organization. WiserEarth is community-driven where as a member the individual is expected to share his knowledge, add or edit information, join discussions, rate or recommend content, engage with other people or groups and share resources. The networking principle reflects itself in the fact this community enables connectivity and networking, the exchange of services or information between different individuals, groups, companies, or institutions. Collaboration is about how WiserEarth brings people together to share information across the global non-profit community, and help create alliances. Visibility is related to the fact that WiserEarth enables small organizations to become more visible, as well as the entire network itself.

Community Guidelines and Roles

The principles are complemented by community guidelines which function as the interaction code for all the WiserEarth users. These guidelines are:

- 1) Collaborate and Share your Knowledge;
- 2) Be Polite and Civil;
- 3) Make Comments;
- 4) Embrace Diversity and Transparency;
- 5) Do Not Infringe Copyright;
- 6) Build Community and Visibility;
- 7) Write From a Neutral Point of View;
- 8) Do Not Send Spam;
- 9) Community Guideline Infringement.

The members of the community assume different roles which define their participation in WiserEarth. There are 4 different types of roles available: Guest, Member, Editor, and Administrator. A guest is anyone visiting the WiserEarth site has Guest status until they log on and create a personal profile. A Guest cannot edit but can browse and search through all public content. Members are registered on WiserEarth and are able to search and browse through all public content on WiserEarth. A Member can also: create a personal profile; add a resource, solution, or organization; join or create a group; post a job; post an event; add a new article by creating a WikiPage and edit any page with 'active' status. Editors are WiserEarth community members who have a good understanding of the what, why and how of WiserEarth and are entrusted to serve as stewards of the platform, content and community. They can: change the status of WiserEarth pages in line with WiserEarth Directory Content Standards; edit protected pages such as the Area of Focus portals; suppress comments that are in violation of WiserEarth Terms of Use, Community Guidelines, or Editorial Policy; nominate and/or endorse a Member to be a WiserEarth Editor. Administrators manage the user experience. They are registered on WiserEarth and can perform restricted

functions within WiserEarth, in addition to those functions of an Editor. An Administrator can: change Members to Editors; change Editors to Administrators; deactivate any Member and block and unblock IP addresses.

According to alexa.com 50% of the users who visit it come from United States. The users are between 35 and 65 years old, more females than males, most of them with graduate education and browse the website from work more than from their own homes.

The research was about analyzing this online community under social web parameters such as the definition of a social community, its regulation policies, contribution and encouragement resources as well as its impact. WiserEarth is a vast community which holds a directory of smaller communities of action. The study was designed to address two of those communities due to time and resources constraints. Although the larger platform offers the same tools and resources for all the communities some variables might interfere in the analysis and benefit one group's visions instead of the other. The study was dependent on the WiserEarth member willingness to respond and collaborate which influenced how the study was later conducted and how its results were analyzed and discussed.



Figure 1. –WiserEarth's main page.

RELATED WORK

WiserEarth aims to connect the different communities of action towards the work around social issues and the construction of a sustainable world. Recent work on this has focused on gathering the different organizations forces to deal with the issues integrated in this area. The problems related to sustainability cross borders and have impact in the different nationalities and regions. In order to find solutions for it a global approach is required. To make the organizations work closer to each other an Open Sustainability Network was created. This network links individuals, programs, courses, projects and organizations which are focused in a sustainable development [3]. The network works around three elements, namely the open source information collaboration, social entrepreneurship and service learning. In general words, the networks goal is to provide a unified collection of online tools, practices and resources to help the different stakeholders achieve a sustainable development. From the different tools available some can be listed as being blogs, wikis, forums, journals,

databases, social networking, social news, social design, projects and finally organizations.

WiserEarth is defined as one of these tools, categorized as a social networking tool, which is a site that links users together based on similar interests by providing social tools, such as profiles, chats and network visualizations [3]. WiserEarth represents a website to link and empower non-governmental organizations and people for a sustainable world. Social entrepreneurship addresses social problems solutions through the use of entrepreneurial principles. Service learning to address a sustainable development combines community service with academic instruction as it focuses on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility.

Participation in the Online spaces

WiserEarth aims to connect the different communities by offering a diversity of collaboration tools hence participation of the members is crucial to its growth and development as an online community. As a community integrated in the Open Sustainability Network this goal is reinforced through the creation of tools and resources for the members to make it a collaborative space. How to make newbie's participate? According to some studies, time and increase of responsibilities make the novices more involved in the community, not only the growth of it but the quality of the provided information [2]. The responsibilities go from activities and the execution of tasks, to the comprehension of vocabulary and organizing principles of the community [2]. When newcomers are not integrated in the community there are negative consequences associated to the learning of participation rules, guidelines and structure. Different factors are associated to the participation of the user in the online community, namely the expectation of reciprocity from the community in the future, a sense of efficacy, to sustain ones reputation or even to sustain ones identity more than altruism alone. [2]. Online communities have to balance not only their objectives and purposes but also the users' needs when offering a space to participate and collaborate. It's the balance between the organizations goals and the user's needs that makes these spaces more attractive for the users to comeback [1]. Usually people come to online communities to seek information, encouragement and conversation [1]. Therefore the content, context and source of a message determine if the messages will get a reply and as a consequence newcomers will comeback to post/participate more. As a group of individuals working in a group, newcomers face phases of socialization, where the different roles and expectations are defined. These elements affect the adaption, integration and communication inside the group [4]. Participation in an online community assumes different shapes according a large number of variables among the ones referred, you can also find, the previous experience, observation and feedback; the transfer

of learning from other digital communities; the situated learning through observation of successful participants and finally the feedback from experienced users [5].

METHOD

This was a study conducted approximately for 10 weeks. The objective was to analyze an online community and analyze its parameters as a mechanism of the social web. The first 4 weeks were about selecting a community to study, joining the community, understanding and observing the community, participating and adapting to the community's rhythm. Four communities were chosen to conduct the research and finally one of all was selected. When conducting the study it was important to understand how could I contribute and participate in this online space. For this purpose an ethnographic research method was selected to analyze the community. A combination of observations and online interviews was used to collect data. The observations were performed three times a week, for a period of half an hour. These consisted in the visualization of the online community activity. This information was provided by the community under study as one of the group tools (figures 2, 3 and 4). The nature of the activity was analyzed and registered. These were performed throughout the project.

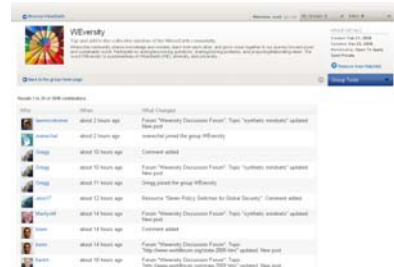


Figure 2. –The groups activity tool.

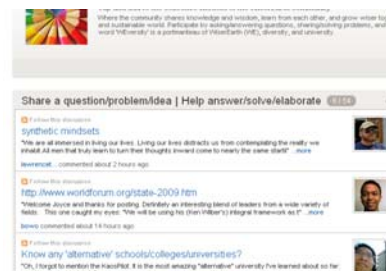


Figure 3. –The solutions space.

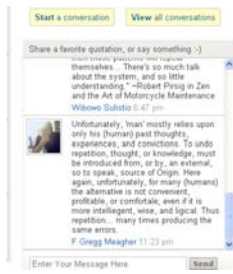


Figure 4. –The Chatterbox.

The following three weeks (weeks 5, 6 and 7) were about narrowing the focus of the study, preparing interviews and sending out the interviews to the selected members from the member section of the community. The last three weeks (weeks 8, 9 and 10) were allocated to the analysis of the data, both from the interviews and the observations.

The interviews were conducted with directors and members who belonged to the community for longer periods of time and with members who had joined the community one month before or less than that. The members were selected among a list of members who had relevant roles in the management of the online communities. After several weeks, a response from an editor came suggesting a list of relevant members across WiserEarth and several parts of the world. 4 out of 6 agreed to participate and were interviewed. The younger members also known as newbie's did not reply to the interviews sent out to them, 1 out of 22 members accepted to be interviewed. This shaped the analysis of the results, as the initial goal was to compare the perspective of more established members towards newcomers about the integration in the online community. The interviews gathered several questions to collect data related to the origins of the community, roles and its definition, regulation policies, strategies to deal with problems or challenges and finally the projection of communities' future (see Appendix A). The interviews were analyzed using the content analysis method. Basically, the most common parameters were registered and compared to the previous work related to online communities. Participation and the parameters found guided the analysis of the remaining data. The observations data was crossed and acted as a complement to this analysis.

RESULTS

The observations performed allowed to gather some general results. The most used spaces offered by WiserEarth were the discussion boards, the solutions space and the chatterbox. The members who used these spaces were mostly editors and established members. In other words, these were members who joined the community for more than 6months to 1 year. The posts made in these spaces were not just related to general subjects of the organization but also to events which editors would create to promote the interactions between the members, especially the newcomers. Overall, only 15% of the members participated in these spaces.

Four online interviews were submitted to content analysis. Each interview contained 8 questions. The results were analyzed according to seven parameters found in the content analysis. These parameters were: Origins, Role definition, Challenges, Encourage other members, Retaining members, Regulation Policies and Future of the community.

About the origins of WiserEarth the interviewed members seemed to have a shared understanding of what the organizations stands for.

The roles are defined in different ways and it varies according to the groups, sometimes being the editor others being time and efforts the responsible for it.

According to the members, newbie's are encouraged through the tools provided by the website or direct invitation. These tools could be the discussions threads or the chatterbox. As stated by one of the interviewees: "I find that when a user finds that the info here is useful they come back. If they want to get involved in discussions then they have to join, and if the discussion is something that they are really interested in then they will join".

In terms of challenges faced by the online community the trend indicates, making the new members more active and working for constant engagement. This is clearly expressed by one of the interviewees: "People join groups and don't participate - thinking that the act of joining is all that is required. For WE to work we need more active members - users who will update and contribute information on specific topics. So we need more networkers and joiners - people who create the linkages!".

The strategies used to retain members go from using other social networking tools, to engagement and other partnerships. The social tools described could go from Twitter, to facebook or even through the community's newsletter. As one of our interviewees enhanced: " [About facebook] (...) at the moment it is still the number 1 referral site for new members".

Engagement was used to obtain more qualitative results than quantitative "(...) particularly since many NGOs in our field are number-driven but then fail to provide meaningful services", as stated by one of the interviewees. The partnerships referred mostly to the collaborative work with other Non-governmental organizations. All these elements clearly expressed by the following interviewee's statement: "The use of social networks and working towards the ability to inform newcomers and older users WHERE the action is occurring within the community is a huge focus right now. Retaining members is really reliant on the ability to engage them. We are all working on that".

In what concerns the Regulation Policies these are well defined and WiserEarth has clear strategies to deal with it as one of the interviewees shared: "We have clear terms regarding what is not acceptable for inclusion on WiserEarth".

The future of WiserEarth is seen as the ability to make it more international, having more partnerships and promoting its growth. One of our interviewees illustrates these concepts through the following words: “[WiserEarth] (...) is now shifting towards initiating real life projects, as well as translation into numerous languages. As the UI changes to become more ‘face bookish’ I believe WiserEarth will become recognized as the ideal place to come for primary source information as well as for collaborations and movements towards social justice, sustainability project and relocalization”.

DISCUSSION

WiserEarth offers different resources its members can use to get involved. In fact WiserEarth functioning is guaranteed through these spaces, through the continuous collaboration of the different members and communities. Nevertheless, as a member for 10 weeks (observation period) I could register some difficulties in understanding how could I participate and give my contribution. As one of the editor’s roles was to organize events to make the members exchange experiences between themselves, I waited a couple of weeks to see if somebody would orient me on this. I changed the strategy and went to ask for help in these spaces but still the directions were too broad and not adequate to what could be considered a newbie. As some of the communities exist physically and have their members working in the field, they are more interested in the experienced-driven solution members may bring to the online space. However, this can not be generalized to all the groups which belong to WiserEarth. More data would be needed to draw this to other groups.

The interviews analyses indicate that participation is one goal WiserEarth seems to hold, although the mechanisms are not prepared to welcome newbie’s. In fact one of the challenges pointed out by the interviewees was precisely related to this one, retaining the current members and keep them constantly engaged. This leads to consider that there can be a problem of structuring the journey of the member in the community and perhaps some additional analyses need to be performed to cross this information. Register the member’s perceptions and journeys since they first joined and design for the potential issues related to it. This could help understand why and what makes people engaged in the community and what could be done to improve the space to accommodate this need. Do the editors need to change their strategies? Do the spaces need to be changed to be more attractive? Should there be different strategies to welcome newbie’s?

Not only retain but also recruit new members is a goal that has been modified through time. At the moment other social networking tools are used to attract new members and to advertise about the community’s causes and work. Facebook is one of them if not the number one. It would be interesting to know if this strategy considers the quality of members and not only the quantity. As a social networking

space, Facebook expanded and has millions of users. As a consequence, recruiting new members will not be a problem in terms of quantity as friends of friends will keep joining WiserEarth. Quality was a concern mentioned in the interviews performed. How to balance the quality with the quantity, as both are in fact important factors to consider? WiserEarth needs members to participate and needs active members to make it an efficient work towards the desired social problems and sustained development.

There seems to be different interconnected challenges which can be approached using combined strategies. Design the member’s journey, from the recruitment moment up until an established member who has responsibilities and more central roles to the community’s functioning, seems to be an alternative to follow. This would give guidelines about the different moments a member goes through in the community and therefore help design these moments and adapt the different tools and spaces if in case of need. This would impact the expansion of the community to other languages and cultural spaces by adapting the community to a large diversity of users and practices. This would establish guidelines of the community as the members expressed during the interviews, towards growth and international spaces.

CONCLUSIONS

WiserEarth is an online community which gathers communities of action around common objectives related to the construction of a more sustainable world. An ethnographic study was performed to register, evaluate and understand how this online community is a mechanism of social web. This is considered a social networking site, where collaboration empowers non-profit organizations and people to a sustainable world. WiserEarth reaches new members through other social networking sites, non-profit organizations and direct invitations. This community promotes the participation by offering discussion spaces, information and direct intervention. It regulates the behavior of its members through well defined policies, either by providing warnings or deactivating the members account. The community gathers knowledge from the different members, but also needs that knowledge to connect and keep its members active. As a larger organization it provides tools for smaller organizations to create their group and space, and lead it from there. The groups are semi-private, and spammers are immediately banned from the system. For the future, WiserEarth aims to extend to the different countries to provide support to a larger number of causes and communities.

The challenges identified both by the observer and the interviewees suggest future work around the welcoming of the members in the online community. A work done with and for the members, even consider the co-analysis of these results with different members and stakeholders of the community to discuss these. Using methods as a survey, focus group or even participatory design seem appropriate

to structure needs, solutions and modifications in the community's space.

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APPENDIX A

Interview questions to the members of the group (joined longer than 6 months up to 1 year):

1. What is WiserEarth about?
2. Could you tell me more about your role in the community?
3. Who defines the roles in the community? Are they defined in the field or is it the community online who does it?
4. How did you encourage users to become members and interact on the online community/space?
5. What efforts are you undertaking to continue WiserEarth traffic growth, and how do you retain members?
6. Can you refer to some Challenges/Problems and opportunities of the community?
7. Do you have procedures if members have any abusive behavior in the community online (regulation policies)?
8. How do you see the community in the future?