

Forget Online Communities? Revisit Cooperative Work!

Yong Ming Kow

Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697, USA
ykow@uci.edu

Bonnie Nardi

Department of Informatics
University of California, Irvine
Irvine, CA 92697, USA
nardi@ics.uci.edu

ABSTRACT

The term *community* does not have an exact equivalent in Chinese. Therefore, we may ask: To what extent do standard premises of online community research apply in China? In our ethnographic studies of two Chinese websites, we found that small “core teams” organized and managed work, and were sustained by offline and behind the scenes interactions. We urge that research on online communities examine preconceptions that may overlook important realities, and that we be mindful that small close-knit groups may be relevant, in the original spirit of studies of cooperative work.

Author Keywords

Online communities, China, Teams, Cooperative work

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.3.c Computer-supported cooperative work

General Terms

Human Factors, Theory

INTRODUCTION

The term *community* does not have an exact equivalent in the Chinese language [see 12]. It is thus important that we come to the study of “community” in varying cultural contexts with an open attitude. In this paper, we examine how two Chinese websites were developed, and question whether the usual framing of “online community” is applicable to what we observed in China.

Since the late 90s, CSCW has gradually shifted its research interest from small computer-mediated project groups [2] to online communities [5][11]. The literature contains multiple definitions of “online community.” Lee et al. [5] examined definitions in papers published from 1993 to 2000 from which they devised an aggregate definition:

[An online community is] a cyberspace supported by computer-based information technology, centered upon communication and interaction of participants to generate member-driven contents.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

CSCW 2011, March 19–23, 2011, Hangzhou, China.

Copyright 2011 ACM 978-1-4503-0556-3/11/03...\$10.00.

This definition establishes *community participants* and their *online interactions* as the fundamental units of analysis. The metrics used to measure online community successes concern participants and online interactions including number of community members, visits, logins, messages, and sharing of online profiles between members [e.g., 1,3,8,11]. Community activity is conceived as *online*, comprised of interactions in technologies such as discussion boards, electronic meeting rooms, blogs, wikis, and social network sites [see 3]. For example, interactions between Wikipedia members take place primarily through the online discussion pages; these interactions teach new Wikipedia members community rules and standards and initiate them to central roles [1].

What if the assumptions in the definition—participants and online interactions as basic units of analysis—are false or misleadingly narrow? We will argue that *core teams* are critically important to Chinese sites. We define core team as a small, close-knit group of site members recruited by a leader to perform activities essential to the site. We examine core teams in China, and answer the following questions: (1) Why are core teams so important? (2) Given their prominent role, what are the implications for studies of online communities? We believe that CSCW’s original emphasis on the small workgroup [2] still holds considerable relevance.

Our discussion is grounded in our empirical study of two Chinese sites: Wownei (wownei.com) and the Chinese WoW Development Group (CWDG) (cwowaddon.com) [4]. Both support Chinese online gamers of *World of Warcraft* (WoW). *WoW*, a product of Blizzard Entertainment in Irvine, California, is one of the most popular online multiplayer video games with 5.5 million players in China and 5 million elsewhere [9].

Wownei, founded in August 2008, hosts a social network site for Chinese *WoW* gamers. These gamers spend considerable time playing with the same group of people. By registering in Wownei, they can continue to network with friends, even as some of them drop out of the game. CWDG, founded in October 2006, is an online interest group developing *WoW* addons. Addons are player-created software extensions to games to change the user interface, add new functionality, and otherwise customize games [4].

PREVIOUS WORK

Previous research on Chinese sites has generally focused on interactions between users rather than how sites are developed [6, 7, 10]. For example, a study of gamers found that they commonly augment in-game interactions with telephone calls, instant messaging, and meeting in-person [7]. A study of Chinese online auction sites examined buyer interactions and found buyers contact sellers through instant messaging before a purchase [10].

METHODS

Since April 2008, we have participated in four chatrooms, one for Wownei and three for CWDG. We also use instant messaging to keep in touch with study participants and ask questions as they arise. In early 2009, the first author visited the Chinese cities of Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Chongqing, and the small towns of Shihezi and Xiuyan, conducting participant-observation research including informal conversations, going to dinner, and visiting homes. Face-to-face interviews with 19 participants of Wownei and CWDG were conducted in Chinese by the first author, voice recorded, and translated into English. Unless otherwise noted, names in the paper are chatroom aliases. Names, aliases, and pictures are used with permission.

RESULTS

We examine the dynamics of core teams in the Chinese sites we studied. The term core team, 核心团队, is used pervasively in China to represent a group of key members within a website or in a company. Though a Baidu.com search yields myriad articles giving practical advice on core team development, we cannot find any dictionary or academic paper defining the term. We have heard the term on Chinese television and seen it in advertisements, as well hearing it in our interviews.

Wownei and CWDG each had 10,000+ registered members, with considerable variation in participants' activities. Some took part in the chatrooms and forums, posting ideas or digital artifacts such as addons, pictures, or videos. These participants did not engage with the site leaders. Other participants logged on daily to casually chat; they were participating socially, but not making technical contributions. The vast majority of members merely consumed site contents.

In Wownei, core team members were in charge of developing the website and the social networking applications. They posted articles related to *WoW* in a news section. In CWDG, core team members moderated and answered questions in the chatrooms and forum, populated the wiki, and developed addons.

At both sites, core team members discussed site-related issues behind the scenes, in a manner invisible to ordinary members. Core team members living in the same city met face to face for dinner. Others talked on the phone, and over VoIP, as well as sending instant messages and email. Wownei's leader and two core team members lived in

Beijing and shared a rented apartment. A subset of CWDG's core team resided in Shanghai; they met regularly for dinner every two weeks. Discussion revolved mostly around informal social issues of a general nature, but topics of site-related finances and collaborations, software and hardware infrastructure, site management, and competitive analysis were woven into the interactions. CWDG team members communicated via a dedicated chatroom not available to ordinary members.

Leadership, Friendship and Respect: The Building Blocks of Core Teams

Existing friends are important building blocks of core teams. They reduce interpersonal frictions and improve understanding between team members. Shining Gan, the leader of Wownei, recruited seven friends with whom he established Wownei. Two of them, including Saiy, a founding core team member, lived with Shining in a rented apartment in Beijing. Saiy knew Shining back when Shining was developing a website for Discuz!, the most popular Chinese bulletin board software.

In their apartment, Shining Gan and Saiy pooled their money in a drawer. They joked to us that during one month, they spent 20 thousand yuan and were not able to trace where it went! However, they trusted that whatever uses the other had made of the money were legitimate—a very high level of mutual trust.



Shining Gan in the apartment shared with core team members

Simonw, the founder of CWDG, and a software developer at Microsoft, laid the groundwork for CWDG by bringing together a small group of addon authors he knew. Johnny_16, a founding member of CWDG, worked with Jinzhongzhao, another CWDG member, in a business venture developing call center software for an American company. Jinzhongzhao bought a three-story house where they worked on weekends. When we visited, we saw that out of all the available floor space, Jinzhongzhao and Johnny_16 chose to work sitting side by side at a standard size office table with their computers next to each other. We asked permission to take photos around the house. "Go

ahead. We are not like Americans,” Johnny_16 joked in a friendly manner, implying that Chinese are not anxious about privacy like Americans. His comment, and the desk placement, showed comfort with closely shared experience.

Shining Gan developed his extensive network of friends inspired by an aphorism he used that bears strong Chinese cultural influence:

When business fails, friendship remains.

A business is an exchange of goods and resources; its nature is impersonal. Friendship, on the other hand, is a creation of trust and openness to future collaboration. Shining told us that efforts sustained by monetary payments were professional labor but emotionless; they do not hold people together, nor do they produce excellent work.

Many core team members were initially motivated by technical interests. Zhenkongguan, who set up the server for Wownei, worked as a Linux consultant and trainer. When Shining Gan approached him to help Wownei, Zhenkongguan was already interested in Linux’s potential for social networking sites, and saw Wownei as an attractive opportunity. Xiaoguan, a graphics designer, told us that Wownei gave her the freedom to explore new visual ideas too radical to implement in her regular job.

Core team leaders must transform such technical interests into respect for the site leader and dedication to serving the site members. Zhenkongguan, for example, was committed because of the respect he developed for Shining Gan, who at age 20, looked too young to be a leader:

So you have met the frog [an online nickname for Shining Gan]?... When I first saw him, I was like, “Oh my, he’s just a baby!”... He is [in fact] very mature.

Saiy, a 23-year-old computer science graduate, was both older and better educated than Shining Gan. But he told us that he worked for Wownei because, in spite of differences in credentials and age, Shining had a much better character.

Core Team: The Keystone of Chinese Sites

Throughout our interviews and observations, we heard accounts of how strong leaders and core teams are indispensable to Chinese sites. A core team’s departure from the site presages the decline of the site. For example, the core team proved the deciding factor in the competition between two commercial *WoW* sites, NGA and Duowan. NGA was one of the earliest and most popular Chinese *WoW* sites. An NGA member told us that Duowan’s core team had moved over to work for NGA, leaving Duowan an empty shell. He said:

The key to competition between sites is their inner strength 内力. And NGA has a lot of it.

Inner strength is a kungfu term referring to latent strength that martial artists cultivate within their bodies which can be utilized in fights to extraordinary effect. In the online gaming industry, it refers to the collective ability of the most central and cohesive members within the core team.

Core team leaders are responsible for building bridges to key players outside the team so that help is available when needed. After Wownei was established, Shining connected with leaders of other online groups including CWDG, Moya Entertainment, Duowan, and NGA. These connections comprised “high level understandings,” with no short term benefits, but Shining Gan believed they would become useful in the future.

Having worked at Microsoft for four years, Simonw was very interested in Web 2.0 technologies. He was motivated by this interest when he founded CWDG and wanted to run CWDG as a Web 2.0 site by supplying it with a wiki, bulletin board, and chatrooms:

I have been considering how I can integrate these different forms of [information] presentation to optimize the function of the site...This would bring out the true value [of the site], not bury [information] within.

However, technology alone proved insufficient to enable the site to develop. As soon as Simonw stopped personally intervening in the site’s management, CWDG grew stagnant, with no new talent emerging from its membership. Shining Gan, aware of CWDG’s problems, suggested that sites must be managed on personal terms. He described CWDG members:

...each working on their own things without a common goal.

A core team leader must constantly motivate and inspire the core team, keeping a constant lookout for new members. As we were ending the fieldwork in Beijing, Simonw was beginning to realize that for CWDG to grow, he needed to again personally identify and groom new members, as Shining had counseled.

Rank-and-File Members: Issues of Non-Engagement

While core team members were motivated by technical interests and the benefits of close interpersonal connections, the bulk of the site members lay outside the core team’s powerful motivational field. Ordinary members of Wownei and CWDG participated in the forums and chatrooms, but not in technical activity, as the core team hoped. The members were socializing with one another and having fun, which did not advance the goals of the site. Kurax, on CWDG’s core team, noted that CWDG was lacking members who were both technically adept and willing to contribute to the development of addons, the purpose of CWDG. In a conversation with us, Kurax deadpanned:

There are no addon authors in China. If you have questions about addon development you can ask me.

Members uninterested in technical activity engaged in what is popularly known on the Chinese Internet as *pouring water* 灌水—unproductive, idle chat in an online forum or chatroom.

Some members who did come forth and contribute were disappointed with the results. Johnny_16 stopped sharing addons. He continued to teach authors willing to learn, but wanted nothing to do with end users. When he shared *Wowlauncher*, a very popular addon he had developed, he

received no grateful remarks or comments from end users, as in US add-on communities [see 4]. Many users asked simple questions with obvious answers, wasting his time. Yueselanying, Johnny_16's protégé, told us:

They [add-on users] just want to take from you.

Kurax explained:

It is unlike in the US, that when you share, you become famous, and perhaps get employment in good companies.

The experiences of Wownei and CWDG indicate the difficulty of encouraging wider member participation in Chinese technical sites. Many participants have few technical skills and show up only to “pour water.” Even when members participate, the low level of appreciation shown by end users is disheartening. Companies are not watching the young talent as they are in the US, as Kurax noted [see 4]. The core team, inspired by powerful visions and strong interpersonal bonds, can operate at a very high level of productivity. But expanding productive participation to an ever-widening site membership is difficult. We found that leaders created and cultivated core teams because ordinary site members appeared not to associate *participation* with *contribution*. Attempting to “open up” a site, leaving success to members’ willingness to participate, is likely to end in failure.

IMPLICATIONS

Our research suggests that core teams are critical to the development of Chinese sites. Core team members interact in person, on the phone, and through online media. Much interaction is behind the scenes, out of view of ordinary members. Studies that conceive online communities as constituted primarily in open forums, chatrooms, wikis, or other public social spaces are unlikely to identify interactions that we discovered to be at the heart of technical sites in China. We cannot assume the same community dynamics are at play as we expand the geographies of our research. For example, Chinese sites may differ in the ways members ascend to central roles. In Wikipedia, members who actively participated and adhered to community norms were promoted [1]. In the Chinese sites we studied, core team members were often the leader’s personal friends. Core team interactions continued to be nourished through face-to-face meetings and/or private media channels. These realities contradict the assumption that online communities are primarily shaped by participants and their online interactions in the public space, and that we may apprehend online communities by analyzing these interactions. How would measures such as number of online messages tell us about a community’s core team? How would we know if messages contain real content and not merely “water”? How do we know if leaders from different communities are discussing a deal to bring communities to a new developmental path? The number of participants and gross measures of interactivity do not always reveal social structure.

We do not suggest that in research of all Chinese sites, “core teams” should subsume “online community.” Instead, we urge that in each cultural context, we examine “community” in the broadest terms possible, with as few preconceptions as possible. In moving toward methods such as data mining to study online activity, these concerns become, we believe, even more relevant and important. Small workgroups, whether virtual or co-located, were the focal interest of the earliest CSCW research [2]. In China, where small core teams are critical to site development, this original focus remains fresh and pertinent. As we expand our research geographically, we may find that temporally, a move “back to the future” will serve us well.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the National Science Foundation and Intel for generous support of the research. Many Chinese users went to great lengths to share their thoughts and we thank them.

REFERENCES

1. Bryant, S., Forte, A., and Bruckman, A. Becoming Wikipedian: Transformation of Participation in a Collaborative Online Encyclopedia. *GROUP’05*.
2. Grudin, J. Computer Supported Cooperative Work: History and Focus. *Proc. IEEE*, May 1994.
3. Iriberry, A. and Leroy, G. A Life-Cycle Perspective to Online Community Success. *ACM Computing Surveys*, 41, 2, Article 11, February 2009.
4. Kow, Y.M., and Nardi, B. Culture and Creativity: World of Warcraft Modding in China and the U.S. In Bainbridge (ed.), *Online Worlds*. Springer, NY, 2009.
5. Lee, F., Vogel, D. and Limayem, M. Virtual Community Informatics: A Review and Research Agenda. *Journal of Inf Technology Theory and Application*, 5, 2003.
6. Liao, Q., Pan, Y., Zhou, M.X., and Ma, F. Chinese Online Communities: Balancing Management Control and Individual Autonomy. *Proc. CHI 2010*.
7. Lindtner, S., Nardi, B., Wang, Y., Mainwaring, S., Jing, H., Liang, W. A Hybrid Cultural Ecology: World of Warcraft in China. *Proc. CSCW 2008*.
8. Ludford, P., Cosley, D., Frankowsly, D. and Terveen, L. Think different: Increasing online community participation using uniqueness and group dissimilarities. *Proc. CHI 2004*.
9. Nardi, B. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*. University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010.
10. Ou, C., Davidson, R. Why eBay Lost to Taobao in China. *Communications* 52, 2009.
11. Preece, J. Sociability and usability: Twenty years of chatting online. *J. Behav. Inform. Tech.* 20, 2001.
12. Wang, M.M. *Historical Difficulties in Localizing Western Studies*. Guangxi Normal Univ. Press, Guilin, 2005.