Exploring Hybrid-Economic Communities and the Technology-Mediated Identities Performed There

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Abstract

This research note describes an ongoing ethnographic study of a professional, knowledge-sharing community of information technology professionals. The overarching goal of the research is to understand the use and consequences of social information systems designed for recognizing and rewarding contributions to professional communities within and beyond the workplace. The research presented in this note explores the following question: How does technology mediate the performance of professional identity, and what role is played by the social institutions – e.g., the firm as employer, the firm as a market actor, the professional community, etc. – in enabling and constraining the construction of a professional identity?

Keywords: social media, self and identity, professional communities, communities of practice

Introduction

The ongoing research presented in this note research explores the role of technology, social institutions, and individual agency in the construction of professional identity, and aims to understand the use and consequences of social information systems designed for recognizing and rewarding contributions to professional communities within and beyond the workplace. The guiding research question is as follows: How does technology mediate the performance of professional identity, and what role is played by the social institutions – e.g., the firm as employer, the firm as a market actor, the professional community, etc. – in enabling and constraining the construction of a professional identity?

Mediated performance of professional identity

Increasingly, everyday performance of the self (Goffman, 1959) occurs in technology-mediated social contexts where the capacity for a mediated audience to develop impressions of an actor exists to the same degree as in face-to-face interactions (Walther, 1996), and the motivation and opportunity for deception and impression management through selective self-presentation remains (1996). Online self-performances are afforded opportunities for information-based "social grooming" (Donath, 2007; Tufekci, 2008) by the design of the mediating technologies, and leave behind "a multitude of data traces [which] do not merely document our passage in life’s play but mediate our parts" (Hogan, 2010). Existing research on identity in professional contexts has explored its role in establishing employee commitment and identification with the firm (Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006; Vough, 2012), and particular forms of identity work in professions such as Episcopal priests (Kreiner, et al., 2006) and cruise personnel (Tracy, 2000). In the context of professional work, Ibarra (1999) theorizes that junior professionals develop a professional identity by observing role models of potential identities, experimenting with "provisional selves," and evaluating their experiments against internal standards and external feedback. Hara (2007) examines
the role technology plays in supporting work practices and identity formation of communities of attorneys, finding that while technology fostered instrumental, communicative, and discursive aspects of professional practice, it was not found to foster community or sharing of cultural knowledge. Dabbish et al. (2012) describe "social inferences [...] such as inferring someone’s technical goals based on actions on code" made by open-source software developers from activity information mediated through GitHub, a Web-based open-source code repository. These inferences informed strategies for advancing technical skills and managing reputation.

Hara (2007) found that "[while] younger attorneys learn how to be public defenders by observing more experienced attorneys and by talking with them," the use of information technology within those communities did not facilitate the transfer of cultural, tacit forms of knowledge. However, Dabbish et al. found that software developers used features of the GitHub website to learn better ways to code and to gain access to superior knowledge by watching how others code, what they paid attention to, and how they solved problems (Dabbish et al., 2012). In other words, in some contexts (e.g., GitHub developers) the technological mediation of social signals was found to contribute to the transfer of social knowledge and learning of cultural, tacit forms of knowledge; in other contexts (e.g., Hara’s attorneys) the use of information technology may fail to play and effective mediating role. Aspects of the sociotechnical situation will affect outcomes, including the technology’s design, the types of social information it can mediate, and any number of social contexts that shape the technology’s use.

Research described in this note shares with prior studies an interest in professional identity, its immediate and mediated forms, and the institutional forces that enable and constrained it. Presented in this note are preliminary findings from ongoing ethnographic work, with a focus on the social information mediated by certain types of information systems that are designed or used to explicitly give – or implicitly give-off – social information relevant to the self and the construction of a professional identity.

Methodology

The findings discussed in this note are derived from analysis of field notes collected during participant observation conducted at events related to CollabTech WorkSphere – a popular enterprise-level software system for information management and collaboration – and in online, social media settings between July 2011 and February 2012.

WorkSphere is a closed, commercially developed, proprietary software product surrounded by a knowledge-based economy of consultants, system integrators, developers, designers, and others. Community members share knowledge through participation in a variety of face-to-face national and regional conferences, local user group events, and in online forums and social media spaces. Many of the community’s more active constituents (both individuals and organizations) actively discuss WorkSphere and other topics on Twitter and, to a lesser degree, on the Yammer platform.

Knowledge-sharing through community participation (online and in face-to-face settings) occurs on a voluntary basis and as a consequence of employment at CollabTech or one of many software, services, and consulting firms operating in the WorkSphere market. Many of the observed knowledge-sharing and learning opportunities doubled as marketing presentations; not for CollabTech itself, but for companies that operate in the WorkSphere market. Additionally, though WorkSphere is itself a closed-source, commercial software product, many software tools are developed by volunteer developers and released under open-source licenses through a free-of-cost, open source project hosting site supported by CollabTech. The interaction of the market and the community remains a focus of the ongoing ethnography, and is a component of the following research vignette.

Ethnographic Data

This section contains a research vignette derived from fieldwork data. Following the vignette is an analysis of the role of the CollabTech VIP award in the performance and mediation of identity, as well as the dynamics that are observed between the market, the commons, and the award itself.

Worksphere VIPs: The Passion of the Community, or the Heartbeat of the Market?

CollabTech describes the goal of its “Very Important Professional” (“VIP”) as the recognition of exceptional community leaders from around the world who voluntarily share their deep, real-world
knowledge about CollabTech technologies with others. The nomination process – which can be initiated by anyone in the WorkSphere community – asks for basic information about the nominee and specific examples of online or offline community activities in which the nominee participates. Beyond CollabTech’s statement that “to receive the VIP Award, you must be passionate about CollabTech technology,” comments made by individuals in the community suggest, “it’s not clear what criteria CollabTech uses to choose who gets the award.” [anonymous 27:1]

Recently, a software developer (“Bob”) had his VIP award renewal denied, launching a discussion on Twitter and in multiple blogs about experiences with the VIP program. As the sole developer of a popular open-source add-on to CollabTech’s closed-source programming language, Bob’s values about transparency – and the potential for conflict with the VIP program are evident in his critique:

*One of the problems with the VIP program is that the whole thing is basically a mystery. Here’s where I first knock heads with the program. I value transparency and openness, even if it’s difficult or sometimes painful. The VIP program does not value openness. That’s why it’s basically a mystery how you get nominated for a VIP or what you have to do to get one.* [Bob, P3:18]

Others have suggested that there are certain ways to become a VIP even though there are no official criteria. Across multiple blogs and blog comments regarding the matter, a range of views reflect diverging thoughts and opinions about the program:

*VIP and the Certifications are about promoting CollabTech products. That’s it, nothing else really. The reward I get for doing the Certifications isn’t the cert, it’s the fact that my company will pay me a bonus. Why do they care? Because they want employees with certs to maintain their CollabTech status. Why do they want that? Because of sales. Makes sense, and a nice cooperative relationship. I win, they win, CollabTech wins.* [Sam 3:107]

*Many years ago the VIP award was for answering questions on Compuserve and then NNTP newsgroups. [...] If you had a website/blog or http forum, good for you, but you wouldn’t get an award. It was about answering the direct posts of people who needed and answer. So things change, but we don’t have to like it. Today any douchebag with a blog could get one. Marketing is king.* [anonymous 13:6]

Not all bloggers and commenters view the program negatively or with such skepticism:

*Don’t forget that being VIP is a PRIVILEGE, NOT A RIGHT. Sure, you built a cool framework, but in all fairness it was probably your bitter attitude that you’ve expressed here as well that made your VIP not be extended.* [Fred 3:58]

*Achieving a VIP award means you did *something* to deserve it. You were involved with user groups, code camps, speaking engagements, posting on forums, writing blogs, writing books, etc. The fact that CollabTech is recognizing your accomplishments isn’t something to take for granted, regardless of how secretive and closed the selection process is (a favourite complaint of many).* [Donna 16:1]

At a point in the VIP nomination process, each nominee completes a spreadsheet or submits information by way of an online form that has been the target of criticism:

*When I came up for renewal, I had to *defend* why I should have my award renewed using a bad Excel spreadsheet and a really bad online form which don’t even allow me to capture my real contributions.* [Bob 3:9]

*Don’t get me started about that “silly” Excel form... I complained about that one, refused to fill it out and sent a bulleted email instead.* [Marco 3:30]

Though not all comments observed during the study were negative towards the spreadsheet or its role in recognizing community contributors:
IMHO, it’s reasonable for [CollabTech] to ask what you did to be a VIP once a year - it’s hardly a monumental task (although the site/spreadsheet is ridiculously painful to work with). [Reggie 3:94]

I discussed the nomination process with Blake, a recently-awarded WorkSphere VIP. In addition to sharing information about the selection process, he included the document he sent to the VIP Program representatives instead of the spreadsheet. His 10-page document outlined his many activities in the WorkSphere community throughout the year. The document bears comparison to the following criticism from Bob E.'s blog post mentioned above:

The spreadsheet you have to fill in already shows what kind of people CollabTech really wants to be a VIP: people who volunteer to do their PR, their evangelisation, the marketing of their products, in short: sales people who don't cost a dime! (well, perhaps the MSDN licenses, but they actually don't cost CT any money) So for CT, a person who did a lot to spread the CollabTech gospel among fellow community members, that kind of person becomes a VIP. Not a person who actually did something for the community, like contribute a lot. [Bob 3:22]

Bob brings into contrast “a person who actually did something for the community, like contribute a lot” with “a person who did a lot to spread the CollabTech gospel among fellow community members.” (To wit, Blake’s professional title is Evangelist, not an uncommon term and job title in the WorkSphere community.) Bob’s scheme of perceived value is emblematic of his role as an open source software developer; i.e., he values code contributions above all other forms of contribution to the community.

The content of Blake’s self-designated nomination form reflects drastically different values: He also produced a series of short videos highlighting community experts sharing their answers to the question, “what is the one thing everyone needs to know about WorkSphere 2012?” and community-spoofing videos such as “Behind the Music: The biggest fake WorkSphere band, ever.” Blake has been the most prolific speaker at user groups and worldwide community events in the last year and he is often seen at events handing out t-shirts capturing a range of community memes and inside jokes. Finally, he authored a “free” e-book (it “costs” the reader an email address, paid to Blake’s employer) the title of which – Inside the WorkSphere Community: 4 Strategies for Building Your Personal Brand – reflects his perspective on the value of doing pro-active forms identity work he (among others) refers to as personal branding.

Ultimately, both Bob and Blake received a 2012 VIP Award; the former reluctantly, the latter with conspicuous fanfare from his employer, Excelsior, a software and services firm that released a press release with the following headline:

Excelsior Inc. Evangelist Blake Doe Receives CollabTech's VIP Award: Doe Recognized as Top-Tier Technology Influencer and Community Leader in the WorkSphere Category [Excelsior, 2:1].

The firm’s press release continues, claiming that the award is “also an acknowledgement from CollabTech of Excelsior's broad contributions to the WorkSphere community” [Excelsior, 2:2]. Having attended multiple of Blake’s sessions and speaking with him about the award, there can be as little doubt about his personal loyalty to the community as there is about his company's desire to capitalize on it.

Discussion and Conclusion

Amitai Etzioni writes that “in any relationship or community [there is] some vague sense of appropriate reciprocity, of the need to contribute to a climate of mutuality. But basically people help one another and sustain the spirit of community because they sense it is the right thing to do” (Etzioni, 1994). Findings suggest there is indeed a “climate of mutuality” in the WorkSphere community, but it may not be the dominant climate. Non-market forces like volunteerism, knowledge-sharing, and social reciprocity are evident throughout the WorkSphere community, and shape the structure of the community. However, the logic of the marketplace is also observed throughout the community at events and in online forms of participation. The VIP award is a product of the resulting “hybrid economy” (Lessig, 2008). Despite CollabTech’s portrait of a VIP as an altruistic contributor independently sharing his or her expertise within the community with no motivation but the passion for WorkSphere, the award is equally effective in its capacity to mediate the ostensive market capabilities of the firm.
Beyond Community and Social Capital

To further the understanding of the factors that shape self-performance and identity-building behavior in a hybrid-economic community the conceptual framework for analysis will be expanded in two ways. First, the concept of social capital – a popular one in the study of social media use by young adults (Ellison, et al., 2007; Steinfield, et al., 2008) and in technology-enabled knowledge exchange (Inkpen & Tsang, 2005; Wasko & Faraj, 2005) – may be inadequate for a social context in which multiple forms of capital co-operate and interact. Therefore, continued analysis will adopt a conceptual framework derived from Bourdieu’s work on the conversion of economic, cultural, and social forms of capital (Bourdieu, 2008). An example of a conversion of capital is found in the appropriation of Blake’s social and cultural capital by his employer, Excelsior, Inc. By using forms of economic capital (namely, the money used to employ Blake and otherwise financially support his participation in community events) Excelsior benefits from the social and cultural capital built up over time that is, ostensibly, the product of Blake’s community participation. Excelsior cannot realize the benefits of a VIP award through a single form of capital (the company cannot buy the award; not directly, at least) and as we have seen, the award is coveted by many in the community (and dismissed by others) not because of its capacity to recognize social capital but for its capacity to be converted into economic capital; i.e., there are few underpaid VIPs if there are any at all.

Secondly, a sociological lens will be adopted, constituted by three related concepts: Gemeinschaft (associated with common ways of life and beliefs, strong ties with fewer individuals, emotional bonds, and continuity [Brint, 2001]), Gesellschaft (associated with dissimilar ways of life and beliefs, weak ties with many individuals, and temporary and regulated arrangements [Tönnies, 1955]); and Pseudo-gemeinschaft, “the feigning of personal concern with the other fellow in order to manipulate him the better; [i.e.,] the mere pretense of common values in order to further private interests” (Merton, 1975). Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft are not dichotomous concepts belonging strictly to their respective forms of social organization; rather, they are dynamic attributes of the human experience that “are found interwoven in all kinds of associations” (Tönnies, 1955). I expect that Pseudo-gemeinschaft is also woven into many transactions that occur within the WorkSphere community. Furthermore, I expect that these concepts will aid the development of a framework for exposing the dynamics of community participation, knowledge-sharing, and the conversion of capital in the WorkSphere community without forcing all participatory behaviors into either a market-driven economic exchange or a community-based sharing exchange.

Finally, social media technologies continue to infiltrate the workplace as the latest wave of enterprise-level communication, collaboration, and knowledge management support systems. Among the most recent are social information systems (Allen, 2010) designed to measure – and often incent and reward – such social constructs as “influence” and “reputation” based on social media and online community participation. Such systems emerged recently on the public Web, e.g., Klout, PeerIndex, and the many “badge systems” (Antin & Churchill, 2011; Halavais, 2012) designed into Web-based community platforms like StackOverflow. These systems have also entered education and training areas where badge systems and platforms promise new but untested modes of engagement (Muntean, 2011) and assessment (Lee & Hammer, 2011; Simões et al., 2012). These systems are making there way into workplace-based social computing (e.g., Maybury, 2002) ushered in under the idiom of Gamification, “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (Deterding et al., 2011). How these systems are designed and the information they are designed to mediate will shape (and be shaped by) the ways in which users appropriate the technology to perform their identities.

Preliminary analysis of the CollabTech’s VIP award – itself a system ostensibly designed to incent and reward knowledge-sharing and community participation – suggests that the diversity of motivations in the WorkSphere community is reflected in the varied attitudes towards the VIP program. By expanding the concept of capital exchange to include conversion of various forms of capital and by re-framing the analysis of community participation to view the WorkSphere community as a hybrid-economic structure, a more nuanced view of the forces that enable and constrain identity performance is possible.
References


