

Social Performances: Understanding the Motivations for Online Participatory Behavior

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ABSTRACT

“Open contribution systems” (OCS) are online applications that encourage users to contribute and share content in a “public” and open manner. While these systems lower the barriers to participating, what is less clear is why users are motivated to contribute time and effort in these online environments with relative strangers. My dissertation proposes that one way to explain high levels of participation on OCS is to use the lens of social performances. This lens suggests that individual participation on social software websites involves elements of both individual and collective performative behavior. The social performance framework suggests that the participatory behavior is part of a larger sensemaking exercise that rationalizes and aligns individual contributions to the collective effort. The view here is that OCS and its users are part of a socio-technical ecology and are mutually dependent on each other. Understanding participation as a form of social performance can enable us to better design systems that encourage participation, collaboration and sharing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about the birth of a new “participative web” on the Internet and how Web 2.0 technology and user-generated content will allow amateurs and even professionals to collaborate with each other across organizational or geographic boundaries [2, 7]. This phenomenon of participation is in part enabled by web applications that, through their systems’ architecture and design, encourage participation from the users. Broadly, I characterize these diverse online applications as “Open contribution systems” (OCS) - systems that rely on and aggregate the contribution/participation of the individual end-user. OCS applications afford a variety of participation forms ranging from voting news items to more involved participatory activity that combines both online and offline worlds. In general OCS are characterized by the following attributes:

1) Their ability to aggregate content produced by the end-users towards larger collective efforts or products. Often described as “harnessing the wisdom of the crowds” [3], these systems are designed to draw on a variety of data and content provided explicitly (e.g. user generated content) or gathered implicitly (e.g. usage and contribution statistics) from the users. The aggregation of this content is best seen on websites like Wikipedia (harnesses the contributions of knowledge and expertise of users), movielens (collaborative filtering of movie recommendations) and eBay (generating reputation and trust through contributions from other users). One explanation for the popularity of this aggregation of user content is the low barrier to participation made possible by the contributions of content in a modular and atomic fashion.

2) Another characteristic is the open and public nature of OCS. Michael Bauwens describes this characteristic as a form of “holoptism” [2]. Unlike panoptism where participants in hierarchical systems are subject to the control of a select few, holoptic systems allow their users free access to all the information about the other participants. For instance, clicking on the history page of a Wikipedia entry will provide one with a plethora of information; who made what changes, when they made them etc. Much of this openness and public-ness is attributable to the system design and architecture. Architecting holoptic applications allows users a view of the activity of other individuals and of the website as a whole. Such transparency arguably encourages individuals to more openly share and collaborate with each other towards a larger collective effort or product.

While these characteristics of OCS help explain how the technical affordances of such applications encourages participation from the users, what is less understood is why people participate in these online activities in the first place. What drives individuals to spend personal effort and time on OCS such as Wikipedia? What makes the users of OCS collaborate with each other towards collective goals?

2. THE SOCIAL PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

I propose that one way to explain user participation in OCS is to use the lens of performance and dramaturgy. Defining social behavior and interaction as forms of performances where individuals “express themselves in interaction with similarly expressive others” [4], I make the argument that the performative lens can also be used to understand user participation on OCS. Drawing on Kenneth Burke’s [5] notion of “dramatism”, I argue that participation on OCS

can be explained through the framework of social performances. This framework suggests that individual participation (*act*) on OCS (*scene*) involves elements of both individual (*actor*) and group performances (*co-actors*) - such as the expression of identity, adherence to scripts and the use of tools/objects (*agency*) to achieve the goals of collaborative activity. A systematic investigation of participation as a social performance on OCS will revolve around the following assumptions:

- Individual contribution to a collaborative effort on OCS is an expression of self-identity;
- It is also influenced by the roles the participants adopt;
- Additionally, it is determined by the alignment of individual effort to group scripts/narratives;
- Lastly, it is determined by the functionality and affordances of the social software application.

By characterizing user participation as a form of social performance, the individual participation is seen as part of a larger sensemaking exercise that rationalizes and aligns individual contributions to the collective effort. The view here is that OCS and its users are part of a “socio-technical” ecology [1] and are mutually dependent on each other. As such, understanding participation as a form of social performance is particularly salient to the design and development of OCS to support ongoing and high-quality contributions from its participants.

3. METHODOLOGY AND STUDY SITE

I apply the social performance framework to address user participation through the study of ccMixter - an online community and OCS that revolves around the open sharing and “remixing” of music. Participation on ccMixter involves not only contributing music samples, but also reusing these samples to create derivative works - more commonly referred to as ‘remixes’. Like other OCS found on the Internet, ccMixter relies on and aggregates these contributions from its users. Additionally, all content is legally uploaded, copyrighted and licensed under Creative Commons. This means that all contributions to ccMixter are openly and publicly shared - anyone is welcome to reuse this content as long as the specific CC license conditions are met. The ccMixter website organizes, makes searchable and explicitly tracks the contributions and remixing activity of each user. Through the website, ccMixter meets the other characteristic of OCS - allowing participants a “holoptic” [2] view of all sharing and reuse of content between the members of the community.

This ongoing analysis of participation in ccMixter involves a mixed methodological approach. This project will be carried out across the following stages:

i) Characterizing participation in ccMixter: This completed initial stage of the project [6] was concerned with characterizing the participatory activity that takes place in ccMixter. Social network analysis (SNA) and datamining of server log data enabled us to identify two main findings. Firstly, ccMixter organized contests that generated a high degree of participation, especially from new members to the community. However, many of these users do not contribute beyond the duration of the contest and they remain at the periphery of the community’s social structure. Secondly, our analysis identified the existence of a small core of users who have strong reciprocal ties with each other and who are

the most participative in ccMixter. The core users participate by sharing their work and make it a point to establish remixing relationships with others in the community. Unlike contest participants, the core users represent long-term engagement with the ccMixter community - essential for the sustainability of collaborative activity on OCS. In the following stages of this project, we propose a more detailed understanding of the motivations and participatory behavior of the core users.

ii) Analysis of the Core users: One characteristic of ccMixter is that the vast majority of reciprocal remix relationships takes place amongst the core users. This is highly significant to understanding participation in ccMixter and in OCS in general. Are reciprocal relationships, and the connections formed through them, essential drivers of stable long-term participatory behaviors? Additionally, core users account for and drive much higher levels of participation than the rest of the nodes in the network. Some insight needs to be gained as to why this is so.

SNA has helped us identify the core users in ccMixter and focus the next stage of the study on them. In this stage of the project, I will be further characterizing the core users through more detailed and statistically significant quantitative analysis methods. Additionally, I will be carrying out semi-structured interviews with as many of the core users as possible. I will begin with the top 10 contributors in the core network of ccMixter - and I will adopt a snowball approach by interviewing the other authors that these 10 contributors have reciprocal relationships with. I will stop when there are at least 30 interviews of the core authors in ccMixter. The interviews will be focused on each author’s intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, motivations for participating in ccMixter. Questions will be asked about whether the features of OCS systems, e.g. holoptism, encouraged more participation. Additionally, I will use the results from the network analysis - visualizations and data - to stimulate recall and frame the discussion during the interview process.

The implications of the findings mentioned here and the proposed future work on the social performance framework will be further elaborated during the doctoral colloquium.

4. REFERENCES

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