

Online-Communities: Agents of Democratisation and a Marketing-Paradigm

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Since the mid-90s there has been hope even in Europe that online communities may foster both economic and democratic developments. The article will show results based from a seven-year-experience of practical community-networking, as well as results of empirical studies and theoretical considerations.

Community networks and free-nets played an important role in spreading the use of the net in its early days of growing popularity from the late 80s to the early 90s. Many thought of it as a new tool for the development and enhancement of the civil society. Others (Hamman, Rheingold ea.) called it a new "Third Place" for social exchange and the construction of communities. Individuals, grass root organisations and NGOs (non-governmental organisations) find computer mediated communication (CMC) a useful mean to organise their activities, to keep in touch with activists and supporters and even to find more people interested in issues their work is dedicated to. In the mid-90s community networks ("digital cities") were promoted by the European Union as a universal tool for spreading the use of the net, enhancing commercial applications, and even modernising city administrations: Its bidirectional communication capabilities make online media suitable for establishing a third level of democratic discourse (besides traditional political institutions and mass media) avoiding "gatekeeper" and reality-construction effects found e.g. in press or TV.

When the commercializing process of the net advanced, very similar virtual entities, so-called "online communities" seemed a solution for establishing ties between a website and the roaming and quickly volatiling internet user. E-commerce concepts make use of additional information available from community members and establish new targeting concepts for marketing like "communities of interest".

In contrast to the manifold applications which exist for online-communities, we only possess a very basic understanding of their processes and effects. Most of our knowledge is derived from a patchwork of theories and findings on related subjects (like studies of behaviour in virtual realities and chatlines) and theoretical discourses. This article will analyse experiences and empirical studies about one of Europe's oldest and largest Online-Communities, the Vienna-based Black*Box, founded in 1992. First online research dates back to 1995 and recent works (already in progress),

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including an online survey and group interviews will aid the further development of both the technological platform and media design. Experiences and research results are discussed in a theoretical and practical context.

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