Review: Dynamics of Mass Interaction

The study focuses on Usenet conversations and how different demographics affect interactivity. By using the Common Ground Model, the researchers also hypothesized about the effects of demographics on conversation strategy that could bring about the conclusions on interactivity. The result of the study produced some interesting conclusions that were contradictory to the hypothesis.

First, cross-posting actually increased interactivity. These posts generally had more thread depth than non-cross posted message. Also related, cross-posting is actually very frequent, which goes against the common ground and Netiquette guidelines. The explanation the authors draw from this unexpected result is the idea that people want to exploit the mass distribution properties of the diverse population of Usenet to go beyond a single newsgroup to carry out their conversations. In fact, they’d much prefer diverse perspectives and to do that, they must post outside their newsgroup. However, I hesitate to draw this conclusion because of the very nature of the study. The measurement of “interactivity” is the thread depth, not the actual content of the thread itself. Since cross-posting often gets posted to over 200 other groups, resulting in unspecific targets. It is very likely that mass, irrelevant cross-posts were treated with many unfavorable responses and additional flaming. This would not be the kind of “collaboration” or “interactivity” that this study is trying to capture.

Also, the level of moderation had no effect on interactivity. Moderation is, in theory, supposed to help weed out content overload so that conversation can be focused to the most relevant topics. One reason that the authors suggest may be the cause of low threads in moderated groups is the fact that they often will stop a current thread if it starts goes off topic, forcing threads to stop growing. The authors did not specifically address if the threads that the moderators did not stop actually grew beyond ones that were not moderated. The challenge is to measure the “quality” of the conversation rather than just the length to help identify the key traits of successful newsgroups. Perhaps further study on moderation and the quality of threads can help moderators determine how much “off topic” the posts can be before prematurely ending a thread.

In addition, the effect of having a FAQ also seems inconsequential. The authors suggest that the reason is because a FAQ can have contradictory effects of both promoting conversation but discouraging newcomers. I may interject that there might even be a simpler reason, the theory that few people actually read the FAQ. In this study, it determined that 27% of the messages generated by people who only contribute once to the group. Without any intent to have repeat interaction with the group again, there is little incentive to follow the FAQ. Also, although the FAQ explains the background and maybe some of the etiquette of the newsgroup, few really help address a user’s underlying interest in getting a response from a post. Around 40% of messages were initiating attempts, signaling that the need for improved knowledge on what makes some posts successful and others not.
The transformation of user motivations and perceptions as they become integrated to a new community is this study done by researchers at Georgia Institute of Technology. Although the number of people who participated in the study was small, the qualitative analysis and participant quotes were refreshing changes to the typical quantitative research papers. The findings focus on the different aspects of Activity Theory and how those areas have transformed when going from novice user to a Wikipedian.

Organizations, like companies or student groups, often struggle with the issue of attracting people to their cause and retaining them afterwards. In Wikipedia’s case, the issue of attraction is simply addressed by interest and familiarity. Perhaps unique to Wikipedia, users can find just about anything that they have knowledge on in the database of information. Many of the users simply noticed that there was missing or inadequate information on the page that they knew something about, and decided to contribute in a “why not?” sort of fashion. The key, I think, is that the users saw a real NEED and could fit that NEED in with their own ABILITIES. While the initial need sucks them in, it’s also the ease of use of Wikipedia that helps users find other needs and therefore, retaining them for future edits. Also, the dynamic changes and ease of edits ensure that nothing stays the same. This helps keeping users that have previously edited a page to “watch” the page for changes.

User’s personal motivations for building the greater Wikipedia is probably the most interesting aspect of the paper. Many participants in the study cited that they “got inspired by the idea” and believe that the project is “worthwhile” and has “integrity.” This seems to be the essential component to keeping anyone going in an organization, whether it is at Wikipedia or one’s job. Wikipedians want to contribute because they believe in the product that the community produces. Also, there is a sense of personal ownership to the result and growth of an article even though receiving personal recognition may be nearly impossible due to the radical nature of online collaboration. The responsibility that Wikipedians hold to their own writing is another propelling reason that many continue to contribute to the community.

These have all been insights that are valid in the success of collaboration in all kinds of organizations. However, it is often easier to identify the success than to address why there have been failures in inclusion. This study mainly focuses on people who have been active for several months, knowledgeable enough to access the talk pages, and have made hundreds if not thousands of edits. Although they were all novices at one time, they were the novices that advanced into integrating with the community. Another more difficult study would be to analyze what makes people leave Wikipedia, not contribute, and never end up as Wikipedians. And the question to answer is how does an organization promote and aid integration successfully? Some ideas mentioned here like individual mentorship and the ease of use of the interface has encouraged novice users to contribute more but why? It can have strong implications for other organizations and integrating people into communities as a whole.
Review: Studying Cooperation and Conflict between Authors with history flow Visualizations

History flow has been mentioned and examples seen many times in class already. This paper actually highlights the history and development of the visualization tool for Wikipedia, which helps us understand the thought behind it. The goal of history flow is to pick out broad trends in revision histories. Since the Wikipedia data set is so large and revisions so frequent, revision histories on the site can only be seen one at a time. This visualization really addresses a need to see the overall picture of revision history.

The paper builds upon the motivation for the visualization structure. First, each user needs to be recognized uniquely and like many visualizations, color is used to address this problem. Also to create “flow” the revisions are spaced out by time and then connected. Now, this may potentially convey a sense of change in between the revision marks because the colors need to be connected. This changes the length of the colors in between revisions even though technically, the length should stay the same. This may confuse people on what “changes” are actually occurring. Instead of sections becoming smaller and smaller, often, whole entire sections are cut out at once. Even though it’s called “history flow” there’s not a smooth transition between revisions but visually, you would think otherwise.

Also, the examples shown of different instances of conflict and cooperation are very clear cut. Is this standard of Wikipedia edits? In the Microsoft article, which seems like a mass chaos of information, can negotiation be pointed out if any of these instances could be happening at once, or even in between other conflicts. The zig zag pattern of the Chocolate page is beautiful, but how many articles have such a clear cut pattern? And if there are many things going on, is there any way to isolate the information or situation? It would be interesting to see if software could actually find patterns that are not easily seen to the eye.

Using history flow, we could analyze other outside Wikipedia interfaces to begin to predict conflict or cooperation based on what’s being discussed about the page or depending on the watch list. Or, in reverse, this can help people identify the nature of discussions that can escalate to conflict showing up in article revision. It would also be interesting applying history flow to other collaborative communities besides just wiki-type spaces. Companies, in particular, can definitely use a “history flow” visualization to explore the changes during project history and to access the pace of progress. I really can’t wait until boring Excel sheets and linear revision histories everywhere become visualized and interactive.