Small World Networks and Narratives:
The Curious Case of The Radia Community

Introduction

In this article, the Radia community, an international informal small world network of radio stations is contrasted with IT Pros, an online research community created on behalf of and for Microsoft, to analyse the impact of the type of online community model followed (citizenship vs. consumer) in relation to the democratic effects of associational life and how these surface in their organisational narratives.

When Tim Berners-Lee made the Web available as a public service on the Internet in 1991, it held several promises. According to some authors, it seemed to fulfill Arthur C. Clarke's prediction of bringing universal accessibility to the world's vaults of knowledge. Berners-Lee himself saw the creation of links and online documents as a gateway to global authorship and participation. Others, such as Richard Barbrook, viewed it as a new media arena where this generative inclusiveness was considered to be the touchstone of an emergent gift-economy guided by a cyber-communist ideology, rather than capitalism.

Two decades and one dot.com bubble burst later, the debate between those who consider the web as a privileged ground for citizens to assert their rights and liberties, and those who view it as the prodigal temple of consumption of information, services and goods is at its fiercest. In some countries, such as the as the US and the UK, this ideological arm-wrestling is exemplified by the increasing attempts to undermine the principle of neutrality that sustained much of the growth of the Internet, causing the very founder of the Web to join forces with, ironically, consumer groups and content providers against ISPs trying to enforce a hierarchy of speed in cyberspace.

The influence of this contention of ideologies has extended to concepts that are important to contemporary approaches in social sciences and humanities and their explanatory and predictive power in relation to the changes brought by the transition into the digital age. Chief amongst them is the notion of community.

<u>Citizenship Model of Online Community</u>

Although authors such as Dewey (1939) equated democracy with the idea of community, the concept of association as being inherently democratic has been subjected to an increasing scrutiny by several academics (Warren 2001; Song 2009) who have tried to identify the structural features that may indeed optimise this relation. Warren argues that although associational life does have a potential to elicit democratic effects this should not be generalised to all forms of associations because 'democracies today depend upon a multitude of distinct and often apparently contradictory effects of associational attachments' (Warren 2001: 94).

Felicia Song (2009), following the theory of associations proposed by Warren, argues that to understand online communities as associative forms of democracy one has to identify the specific democratic aspects being pursued and the associative aspects that influence democratic participation. According to Mark E.Warren, the set of values or *dimensions of democratic practice* includes dispositional, deliberative and representational goods, which can be created by *particular dimensions of association,* specifically, the degree of porousness, the institutional mode and the purpose of the group (Warren 2001; Song 2009: 60). Dispositional goods promote processes of socialisation that lead to mutual trust, reciprocity and recognition. Deliberative goods 'help create public spaces and egalitarian opportunities for forming collective agendas and expressing and arguing opinions' (Song 2009: 59). Representational goods are those that assist in providing and regulating 'instrumental means of political action and decision-making (Song 2009: 59).

In terms of the associational dimensions that influence the production of democratic values, Warren shows that the degree of agency in belonging to an association, i.e. whether it is voluntary or non-voluntary, is closely associated with in-group pressure for freedom of speech. The lack of membership agency determines the ease of exit 'which is in turn determined by the extent to which an institution controls the resources individuals need for security, livelihood, or identity' (Warren 2001: 96). Hirschman further establishes a direct connection between porousness and influential participation, arguing that 'the greater the chances for exit from an association, the lesser the chances that voice will have an impact within the association. The more non-voluntary the association, the more important democracy becomes – which is why democracy is very important with respect to the state' (Hirschman 1970).

According to the author of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States*, voluntary associations are inherently market-like, in other words, the possibility of member to exit becomes a democratic leverage for associative influence (Hirschman 1970).

Song (2009) defines porousness in terms of the flexibility of a group's membership (regarding admission criteria, influence of locality, expected commitment and rules of participation). In relation to the institutional mode (social, economic or political) Song argues that it 'influences how associations operate, make decisions, negotiate conflicts and pursue their goals' (Song 2009: 61). According to the theory of associations, there are six types of group-defining purposes: 'status goods, interpersonal identity goods, individual material goods, exclusive group identity goods, inclusive social goods and public material goods' (Warren 2001: 133). An analysis of this typology reveals that the higher the degree of inclusion, sociability and openness to the public, the stronger the contribution to democratic participation. Those groups that promote exclusivity, individuality and privacy tend to contribute less significantly to democracy. There are several examples of this such as 'associations seeking public material goods, such as civic groups that work toward water conservation or air pollution control, are expected to yield many democratic effects requiring cooperation and consensus building, while associations geared toward status goods, such as gated communities or high-end sports cars aficionados, support the least, being unlikely to contribute to public life and tending to generate trust that is only limited to those of a similar status' (Song 2009: 62).

Consumption Model of Online Community

This approach is usually reflected in the creation of online portals, using increasingly complex community features, which are developed to promote the sales of a particular range of products. The inclusion of bulletin boards, chat rooms and forums in a given website affects the number and quality of visitors it attracts, i.e., not only they entice a larger sample of individuals to participate, but also encourage them to view more pages and return more often (Powazek 2002, Stirland 2003). In addition

to this, there is a substantially higher probability of purchase by those who explore a commercial website further, both horizontally and vertically (Brown et al. 2002).

However, virtual communities are becoming themselves carefully manufactured commodities for maximisation of profit. Corporations such as General Motors, O2 and Microsoft have, not surprisingly, resorted to an instrumentalisation of community features hijacking the participative idealism behind the cyber gift-economy (Gosh 1998, Barbrook 2000) according to capitalist rationale supported by social psychology approaches such as the Social Identity Theory (Hamilton et al 2008). The very same *digerati* (Kroker and Weinstein 1994) that once held the promise of liberating the majority from 'the restrictions of Fordism' by 'pioneering the hi-tech services which [would] eventually be enjoyed by the whole population' (Barbrook 2000: 8) are being courted by the capitalist forces they tried to initially supersede. It seems that, to paraphrase Marx, 'capital thus works towards its own [dissimulation] as the form dominating production' (Marx 1973: 700) rather than dissolution.

IT PROS Community

The IT Pros community was created by two marketing consultancies, Intrepid and Nqual 'for Microsoft's various IT Professional and Developer research initiatives' in the US and UK. According to Hamilton et al., authors of *Why Do Some Online Communities Work? Revealing The Secrets With Social and Cognitive Psychology* (2008), an article where IT Pros was used as a case study, the development of a thriving community starts with the establishment of a high standard for member admission and clear structured plans prior to its creation – paying attention to the idiosyncrasies of the target group of potential members such jargon and rituals (Hamilton et al 2008). This approach has to be balanced with the provision of a sense of autonomy and reciprocal belonging, i.e., the community belongs to its members and vice-versa. Independent co-creation with carefully chosen key future members is fundamental to achieve this goal, in addition to a design that mirrors the values of its members.

Hamilton et al (2008) have shown that members who perceive themselves as 'wise', 'creative' and 'innovative' prefer a less corporate design. In other words, the

community brand should be different than that of the host institution. The authors also discovered that members agree that there should be free access to technical support and advice. This system of values had structural implications in the development of the website of the community leading the inclusion of a forum where users could share their knowledge, along with a noticeboard. However, this setting was also a platform for a meritocracy of expertise, as points were awarded in relation to contributions.

IT Pros, set out clear expectations and a structured timeline for participation with events, surveys and questions (Hamilton et al 2008). This strategy promotes forms of participation that tend to be synchronised, which gives a sense of real buzz to the community.

One of the most ironic findings of the study by Hamilton et al, was that a virtual community has more chances to succeed if it is supported by offline events and that geographic proximity can still play an important part in consolidating collaboration between members. The authors discovered that offline meetings tend to provide a 'tangible proof' (Hamilton et al 2008: 22) of belonging to the online community. Therefore, members who were geographically close were encouraged to meet informally in addition to the key global meetings, as these can be costly.

Another important aspect revealed by the research on the IT Pros virtual community was the part played by hierarchies of status. These offer an important basis for a comparative assessment of the performance of each member of the community, whilst creating a desire to participate in order to move up the hierarchy through a system of points earned according to advice given and group tasks accomplished, which are recorded in the personal history of each member (Hamilton et al 2008). This is a peer-validated process, which gives authenticity to the hierarchy.

The fundamental link between social identity theory and the building of online communities lies on the concept self-esteem. According to the notion proposed by Tajfel (1981), it is ultimately belonging to a group that validates personality traits or interests that are neglected by one's ordinary social circle that contributes to one's self-esteem. This sense of worthiness gained through group validation can be heightened by various strategies such as an exacerbation of intergroup rivalries, conveying an image of exclusivity or an alignment with a higher cause. In the case of IT Pros it becomes clear this was achieved by a sense of having been selectively

chosen, recognised and valued by a major institutional player in a field of interest of the future members, along with strategies for in-group validity and recognition.

One of the most important showcases of the achievements of each member was their personal page, where all their contributions were recorded and which all the other members could access, thus offering a narrative of their participation in the community. According to Hamilton et al., in terms of SIT, the existence of this record is important for the development of a sense of worthiness, because the 'possibility for the members to assess the weight of their participation offers a flattering memento of the extension of their contributions whilst a *quality member*' (Hamilton et al 2008: 25). In addition to this, there is also some narcissistic gratification in reading one's own contributions (Hamilton et al 2008).

The Radia Network

In contrast with the IT Pros community, the Radia main goals are i) 'to provide an audio space where something different can happen, ii) cross boundaries and address people of different languages and cultures, iii) point to an emergent collective notion of self-determined art for radio' (http://www.radia.fm/ - accessed in July 2009). Each station contributes to the achievement of these objectives through the production of a weekly radio artwork, submitted by one of the network's artists, which is broadcast and/or webcast throughout Radia.

Considering the enunciated objectives of the Radia network, according to SIT the explicit strategy would appear to consist in conveying a sense of belonging through an alignment with a higher cause, which is, ultimately, freedom of speech. However, much like the IT Pros community it is, in practice, based in an image of being exclusive.

Radia supports this sense of exclusivity both at an organisational and at an individual member level. In the former, the selection process starts by a monitoring of the output of potential member-stations, which, if it meets the standards of the network, leads to an invitation to join the network. In the latter, the sense of exclusivity is conveyed by the fact that the program directors, or other figures high in the radio station hierarchy, choose the artists whose radio artworks are to be broadcast or webcast throughout the network every week rather than announcing an open call

for submissions. The type of community model followed by each member-station also mirrors different levels of exclusivity.

The Radia network is formed by two types of community member-stations, which tend to follow either the service or the participatory model, i.e., there is either a focus on the provision of alternative content by a target radio-art-conscious community, which is otherwise seldom available, or on the possibilities and modes of participation it offers to its potential listeners, i.e., there is merit in the mere fact of being able to contribute. In the former, participation is top-bottom, whilst in the latter is bottom-top. However, these community models are not mutually exclusive and often overlap.

The type of community model implemented seems to be related to the level of skill expected from the participants (seasoned artists versus mostly inexperienced students), the degree of openness to participation, a vertical rather than horizontal organisational structure, along with differences in the human and technological resources made available to produce shows to an acceptable standard. One implication of the difference of models in terms of artistic validation, is that the hierarchy of status tends to be peer-validated in the service model and less so in the participatory model. Still, overall, much like the IT Pros, the Radia network promotes a meritocracy of (artistic) expertise.

The distinction between types of models of communities and heterogeneity of modes of participation is also apparent during radio art festivals with some artworks being commissioned (from established names with higher accumulated cultural capital) while others are procured through open calls to the general public. The exclusivity associated with the commissioning of radio artworks, curating of festivals and community model chosen seems to be in accordance with the fact that, according to Pierre Bourdieu, author of *The Rules of Art* 'outsiders to established statuses frequently adopt a strategy of acquiring the kind of cultural capital that may make them acceptable to those whose status they aspire' (Bourdieu).

Like the IT Pros community, the Radia network facilitates occasional offline meetings that provide 'tangible proof of belonging', but although there is a structured timeline of participation, through the weekly submission of radio artworks, these seldom involve interaction or synchronised co-creation, which translates in a lack of real online buzz, which is noticeable in the sparsity of feedback and general input on the dedicated forums. However, artists, or a member-station representative, also post a

description of their submissions, which constitutes a crucial narrative that contributes to the achievement of one the most important goals of the Radia network: 'point to an emergent collective notion of self-determined art for radio' (http://www.radia.fm/ - accessed in July 2009).

Community Narratives

In IT Pros and Radia, the narrative of participation plays a crucial part in their viability and the achievement of their goals. In both online communities of practice narrative can be seen as an outlet of deliberative goods, i.e. those that help creating 'public spaces and egalitarian opportunities for forming collective agendas and expressing and arguing opinions' (Song 2009: 59). The narratives of IT Pros and Radia thus constitute a privileged context to assess their associative democratic value according to Warren's theory, which in order to examined requires an understanding of the particular idiosyncrasies of networked narratives.

Some authors, such as Deseriis (http://deseriis.networkedbook.org/ - accessed April 2011) argued that networked art could be seen as participatory storytelling, an approach that has obvious explanatory value in the case of the Radia network. However, the SIT that guided the creation of IT Pros shows that even in a community dedicated to information technology and supported by a profit-oriented organisation, telling a story can be a core asset, albeit in a very different way.

Author and computer programmer Eric Raymond argued that building a community requires a 'plausible promise' (Raymond 1999). Only when this is established can the narrative begin. In the case of IT Pros, the 'plausible promise' was presented via an external institutional player, Microsoft, being the plausibility derived from a sense of exclusivity underlying the process of selection of actors. In the case of Radia, the plausible promise arose from informal meetings between representatives of the founding member stations.

According to the Mike Ball, a narrative to be defined as such requires a reasoned organisation of its constitutive elements, involving actors and transitional events (Ball 1997). The IT Pros community was organised according to the logic of SIT, involving programmers who participated in an array of diverse tasks, which upon successful completion lead to other assignments, thus adding continuously to the

associative and personal narratives. In the Radia network artists participate by contributing with radio artworks transmitted weekly throughout the network and by uploading their respective descriptions on the network's dedicated website.

Marco Deseriis argues that, in addition to these, networked narratives have very particular characteristics: 'i) a networked narrative describes an initially unsolved situation, a conflict, a clue, or a dilemma (denotative function); ii) a networked narrative demands its addressee to undertake action and play a role in it (performing function); iii) a networked narrative allows for the transmission of a set of rules, an ethics, or a system of beliefs that resonate with the nodes of the network to which it is addressed (pragmatic function' - http://deseriis.networkedbook.org/no-end-in-sight-networked-art-as-a-participatory-form-of-storytelling/ accessed April 2011). Although Deseriis uses mostly examples of activist narratives involving strategies of mobilization, i.e., where actors are users rather than authors, he concedes that the former can become the latter when the denotative, performing and pragmatic functions are combined. Both the IT Pros and Radia communities satisfy these conditions. In IT Pros, the denotative function assumes the contours of software issues and tasks, which are directed at and addressed by the programmers of the community (performing function). The transmission of its system of beliefs and ethics occurs at several levels as it is embedded in the design and the software used to build the community, the explicit rules of participation and the standards achieved. In the Radia Network the weekly slot available for contributions constitutes what could be considered an unsolved situation (denotative function), a silent time-space that is filled with sound every week (performing function). The very history of this continuous process of artistic participation towards the declared goal of the community informs future contributions (pragmatic function). As we shall see, these different narrative functions have different democratic value as deliberative goods. In both communities the dilemmas or unsolved situations that constitute the denotative function are posed by the organisations themselves rather than the actors. In the case of IT Pros, it determines to a great extent the scope of the performing function. The pragmatic function possesses, by its very definition, low democratic value. It is thus mainly through the performing function of the narratives of these communities that one can truly assess their value as deliberative goods.

In IT Pros, members are constrained by the type of unsolved situation but are free to contribute to its solution in any way they see fit. In the Radia network, artists

have *carte blanche* and can submit a piece of their choice as long as it addresses the call for self-determination of radio art. The performing function of the narrative of the Radia community would thus seem to be more democratic. This assumption can be assessed with digital methods, by studying the resonance of keywords throughout the network.

The keywords chosen refer to the main techniques used in the production, distribution and consumption of radio artworks. They were gathered through a qualitative analysis of the descriptions uploaded by the artists on the dedicated website of the Radia network. Their semantic resonance throughout the network, which was mapped with the Issuecrawler, was measured between 2005 and 2010, using the Googlescraper (aka Lippmannian Device). These are online research tools provided by the Digital Methods Initiative, a project that resulted from a collaboration between the New Media TEMLab, University of Amsterdam and the Govcom.org Foundation, Amsterdam. The results are displayed in the graph below:
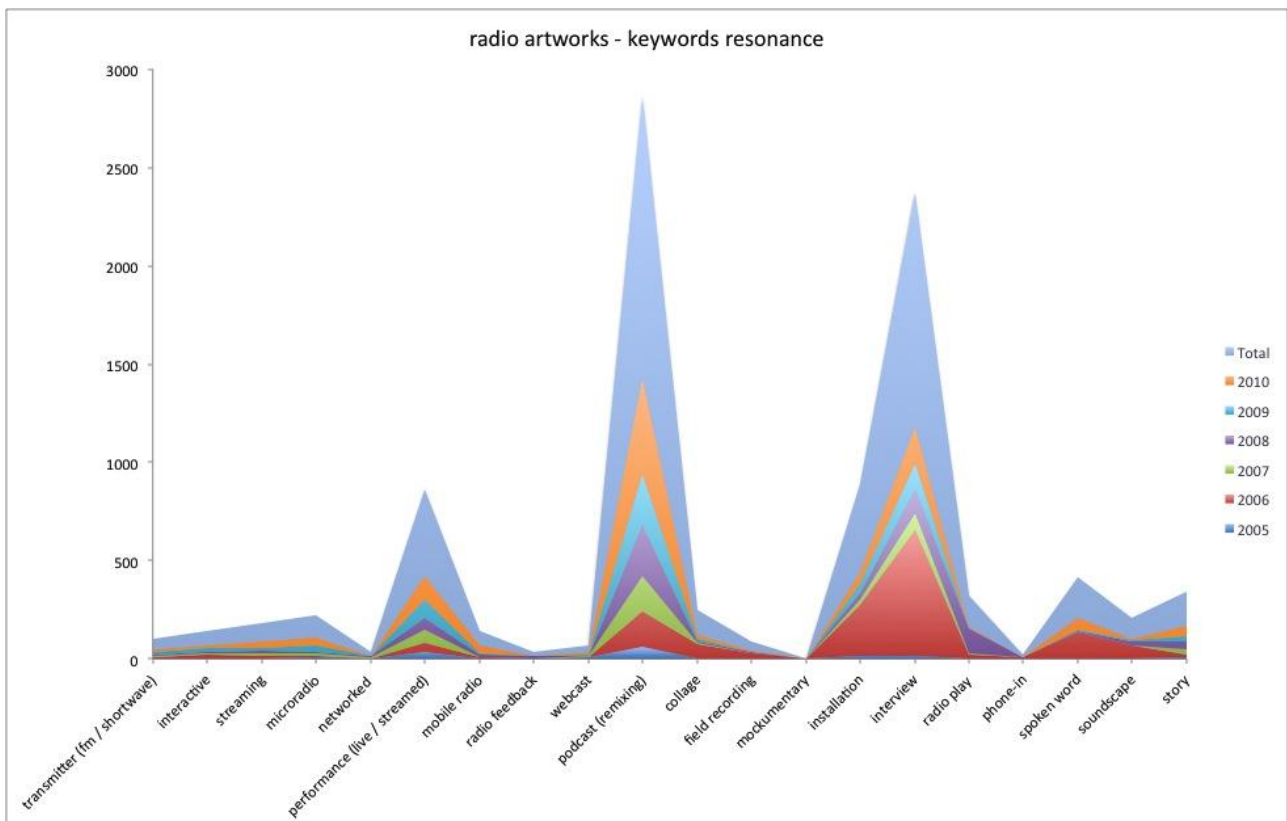
Analysis of Results

Although the results indicate a marked trend in introducing a variety of innovative ways of making, distributing and experiencing radio art within the Radia Network, particularly in comparison with mainstream radio, such as microradio, the use of transmitters as radio instruments (mentioned in association with *FM* or *shortwave* mostly), or mobile radio, the bulk of techniques still relies on classic forms of making alternative radio, such as soundscapes or spoken-word, and even mainstream content production tools such as interviews. Podcast peaks as a distribution strategy rather than one used for creative purposes, although there was at least one instance where *podcast remixing* was mentioned as a technique used in the production of a radio artwork. Performance refers mainly to the broadcasting or webcasting of live performances, although there are a few instances where performativity was associated with streaming and/or networked events.

As a small world network, Radia seems to be helping to define the boundaries of an artistic genre, through the pooling of ideas, resources and the promotion of particular modes of participation. This amounts to being a source of deliberative goods, i.e. a public space where indeed the collective agenda of radio artists is performed and a multiplicity of views on the meaning of radio art is expressed. However, the relative lack of radio artworks exploring the idiosyncrasies of radiophonic transmission indicates a certain degree of homogeneity in the radio art forms used to express those meanings and the influence of a strong media regulation regarding the use of broadcasting frequencies.

Conclusion

The comparison between the IT PROs and the Radia communities provides an important contribution towards the debate between the consumption and citizenship models of online communities in relation to the democratic effects of associational life as it reveals that a capitalist setting does not necessarily undermine the constitution of a thriving virtual community, whilst a networked not-for-profit associative context founded for the production, distribution and consumption of

cultural goods can promote forms of interaction that depend heavily on accumulated cultural capital rather than promoting a rich online social interaction.

In relation to the citizenship model, this analysis also seems to support Warren's theory that not all forms of associational life are inherently democratic. Whilst the transition into the digital age has offered a wider public space for participation, online communities can still facilitate a certain degree of in-group homogeneity of values and beliefs rather than dissent.

In sum, the present article supports the findings for Hamilton et al (2008), i.e. ultimately an online community should be a dynamic social setting that promotes a sense of belonging and co-creation, that empowers through a facilitation of socially significant participation and agency rather than the mere provision of awareness through virtual billboards of knowledge.