Information Sharing, Connected Learning, and a Professional Wrestling Fan Community

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ABSTRACT

Research on information sharing practices of online fan communities is nascent. This paper seeks to describe information sharing in a professional wrestling fan community, focusing on the practice of youth. It also seeks to explore how information sharing effects this connected learning environment. This study finds that information sharing practices are tied to the social nature of the community fostering social ties. They also function as a means for people to stay current on new information, and help members of the community develop a more nuanced expertise in their interest.

Keywords

Information sharing, youth, online communities, connected learning.

INTRODUCTION

Information sharing in online communities is an understudied part of the information sharing literature, especially in fandom communities, which are often viewed in popular media as an intellectual wasteland. However, many communities previously seen as devoid of intellectual merit have been shown to support domain specific learning like math, literacy skills, and reading (Steinkuehler, 2011; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2009). The topics of fan communities like those around TV shows, video games, and young adult fiction may seem like places of casual leisure (Stebbins, 1996) but this would be a misconception. These communities are participatory cultures (Jenkins, 2009), the community members develop expertise and create new artifacts to share with the community and are communities of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1996, 1997, 2007) where fandom is active not passive. Serious leisure refers to amateur or volunteer activities where the interest forms a central part of life and an ample amount of time is spent

(Stebbins, 1996, 1997, 2007). Participants in these interest areas actively acquire and share special skills, knowledge, and experience. This paper will explore the connection between information sharing and connected learning through a professional wrestling fan community.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

As Pirolli and Card (1999) state "humans consume information for survival" (671) and they participate in information related activates, like sharing to a degree unmatched by any other living thing. However, humans also consume information for leisure, which takes nearly equal time as that consumed for survival (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Information sharing focuses on information that is given to others within a social group (Clark, 1973). It is often used to draw people closer together and is approached as an exchange between members of a group.

Information sharing in online communities should be examined as a network, as opposed to a group of individuals, as a way to understand how people respond to social norms that exist in these communities (Haythornthwaite and Wellman, 01998). Constant, Kieseler, and Sproul (1994) say that "sharing anything valued always occurs in the context of a fundamental individual-oriented, rational economic exchange," (p. 404-405), however, in online fandom communities sharing information freely is more the norm (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2005). These communities are serious leisure spaces, where participants create and share a variety of content and resources.

Youth in fan communities create a wide range of media content, developing new relationships, and contributing to shared endeavors in their interest. Through engagement, they develop interest specific knowledge, as well as technical and collaborative skills. When these activities and skills become relevant in their lives outside of the fandom, fans can experience connected learning (Ito et al., 2013) that is deeply tied to their passionate fan interests.

Connected learning is a framework that addresses the gap between youth in-school and out-of-school learning, and the new equity gap that is developing from the privatization of learning (Duncan & Murnane, 2011). This connection of in-

school and out-of-school learning is based on Barron's (2006) model of learning ecologies.

METHOD

Approach

This is an ethnographic study (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) which followed an online professional wrestling community, called the *Wrestling Boards,* for eight months, from October 2012 to May 2013. 25 interviews were conducted with community members 16 to 24 years old, with one interviewee over 30. Youth were specifically targeted in this study. Interviewees varied by race-ethnicity (15 white, 3 Asian, 2 Native American, 2 African American, 1 Latino, 1 unknown); gender (23 males, 1 female); and geography (North America, South America, Europe, Asia, and South Pacific), as demonstrated by the responses from the background survey given before each interview.

During the eight months of the ethnography, visits to the website were made several times a week and observations and forum data were recorded community member interactions. Data was collected from 65 threads and 3646 posts. Community members frequently included links to outside resources, videos, and audio files. The fieldnotes include quotes or excerpts from dialogue on the website that occurred on the day of observation. Interviews were transcribed and all other data was recorded digitally. While excerpts from these notes are included in this paper, they have been modified to protect community members' anonymity while maintaining the essence of the excerpt. The name of the community and all participant names are pseudonyms. The chat logs, forum posts, fieldnotes, and interviews were analyzed using both emergent and *a priori* qualitative coding (Saldana, 2009). Intercoder reliability was reached using the in software tool in Dedoose, which creates a Pooled Cohen's Kappa. Intercoder reliability for this data was .91.

The Wrestling Boards

The Wrestling Boards is a forum based professional wrestling fan community, which covers a range of wrestling topics and beyond, for example, there are individual boards for specific WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) shows (e.g., *RAW* and *SmackDown*), boards for general WWE discussions, boards for a variety of non-professional wrestling related discussions, along with a board for the community's fantasy wrestling federation, *Over the Ropes*. Fantasy wrestling is essentially a text-based role-playing game (RPG). It combines the reality of wrestling moves and the creativity of fan fiction based on the genre of professional wrestling, just as professional wrestling combines real-life athleticism with the fantasy of dramatic characters and scripted action. *The Wrestling Boards* currently has over 6000 members.

Like soap operas, professional wrestling offers complex stories that span long periods of time (Baym, 2000; Jenkins, 2005). In order to participate in the fantasy wrestling federation fully, or in the wrestling community in general, players need to understand the intricacies and nuances of professional wrestling in a sophisticated way, which requires knowing more than simply the names of the moves (Mazer 2005). In fantasy wrestling specifically, players have to know the discourse of professional wrestling and be able to create an authentic performance. They accomplish this by sharing information from the constellation of information (Martin, 2014a) of the professional wrestling community with each other.

FINDINGS

Even though watching professional wrestling on TV would be casual leisure (Stebbins, 1996); fans that are active in fan communities transform their interest into serious leisure (Stebbins, 2007). They take the passive experience of a television show and make it active by developing expertise, sharing information, gaining social stature, and learning.

Fostering Social Ties

In *The Wrestling Boards* community, helping out is used as a way to create social ties amongst the members of the community. Jonathan, a 16-year-old from the United Kingdom, described how helping, which usually occurred as information sharing on the forum, strengthened the bonds between members of the community.

> I give and get feedback often about what I do. I often help/mentor new members of the forum to the best of my ability. At the end of the day, we're all alike and we're like a family on *The Wrestling Boards*.

The interest that the participants have in common supports relationship building (Hersberger, Rioux, & Cruitt, 2005), which is even more poignant in a community like this where many interviewees described their interest being alienating and socially stigmatizing in their local communities.

Social Function of Information Sharing in the Interest

The social function of sharing information, beyond creating social bonds is to help community members keep up-to-date on the complex storylines of professional wrestling. Jose, an 18-year-old from the European Union, described it thus:

> It is a great way to discuss and talk about the WWE product. As a member of Wrestling Boards myself I really could recommend wrestling fans to join a forum if they are interested. It gives you news updates, it helps you understand the full ''WWE Product'', getting info about wrestlers their backgrounds, etc.

Crayo the sites founder, a 19-year-old from the United Kingdom, used the boards in a similar way, sharing his thoughts and information about the match while he watched it live.

> I watch them [WWE shows] live on TV. I watch RAW, NXT, Main Event and the Pay-Per-Views, the other shows (SmackDown, Superstars) don't appeal to me at all, they are the definition of stale. I watch them with our community, whilst I have it on the TV I'm

discussing it live in the weekly RAW discussion thread.

The spread of information between the members of the community is a common function of the *Wrestling Boards*. But it is also part of what the community feels is their duty, that is to educate members of the community about professional wrestling.

> I educate the "marks" about the business and how professional wrestling works, as it's near-impossible to participate in the IWC if you don't know about the business, as everyone around you is more in the know.

Marks are people who think that professional wrestling is real, instead of understanding that it is choreographed and scripted. Education of marks into what they term "Smarks", or smart marks, is an important part of keeping the community participation at a high quality level.

Developing a Nuanced Expertise

Information sharing is also used to develop more nuanced expertise. Participants in *The Wrestling Boards* community use the forums as a place to be exposed to new information shared by other members, which they can evaluate and possible incorporate as is or synthesize into a new understanding of this complex interest.

> To discuss anything WWE I use my forum (*Wrestling Boards*), to find out news from 'dirt sheets' for anything else, I use Twitter. I then post the news on my forum and discuss it with the members. It's helped me really as it's a place to discuss it, as none of my friends in real life enjoy wrestling. Also, you can read ideas that you would never have thought of and discuss them, and read about the backstage news and future wrestling news. It's just a great place to discuss professional wrestling in general.

Many of the participants in this community talked about being exposed to new ideas, which shaped their own perception of specific storylines, or professional wrestling in general. The sharing of information allows for synthesis of new ideas amongst community members.

CONNECTED INFORMATION SHARING

For this community the social aspects of information sharing were essential to its functions, while at the same time supporting the community as a connected learning environment (Martin, 2014b). The overlap between connected learning and information sharing may not be obvious at first but it is definitely important to both concepts, especially in serious leisure spaces. To begin with information sharing is essentially a process to exchange information with others to help broaden an individual's knowledge, that is, it is a learning process. Connected learning, at its essence is about bringing together what is envisioned as three separate spheres where learning can occur for youth, those being the interest, peer, and the academic sphere (see figure 1).
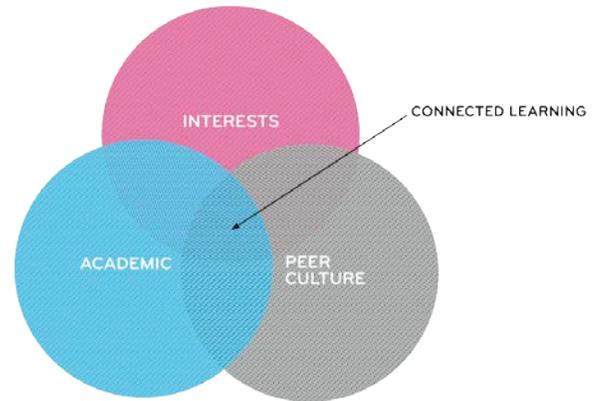

Figure 1: Connected Learning Spheres (Ito, et al., 2013)

The information sharing that occurs in professional wrestling communities easily brings together two of the three spheres. People come to professional wrestling online communities because they have an interest in the subject. Through information sharing experiences they are able to connect with peers who share the same interests. This is an important opportunity for many professional wrestling fans as it is often stigmatized and can have negative social consequences if discussed with those who do not share the interest. Maria, a 17-year-old girl from the Philippines, said that she was made fun of by her friends for being a "tomboy" because she was a professional wrestling fan. This caused her to keep her interest hidden until she found the *Wrestling Boards* where she was able to find peers to share information with about her interest, learning from the knowledge of others and from more critically examining her interest in terms of genre convention and literary techniques.

CONCLUSION

As Constant, Kiesler, and Sproull (1994) suggest, sharing expertise can offer significant benefits to the provider of information, including self-expression and self-consistency. Online, members of a community that are often dispersed and sometimes secretive about their interest are able to express themselves through information sharing in interest-powered communities. Information sharing in *The Wrestling Boards* community served several socially related purposes. It fostered social ties between members of the community through support of each other's interest. It served a social function of keeping members of the community up-to-date with news that surrounded the complex storylines of professional wrestling. And information sharing also helped members of the community develop a nuanced expertise of professional wrestling; being exposed to others' ideas about storylines and genre conventions through information sharing allowed the receiver of information to synthesize new perspectives. Because information sharing is social in this community, and similar communities, it fills an important role in

connecting the interest and peer spheres of connected learning, especially for interests where people feel isolated from peers.

This study is the first to make a connection between information sharing and connected learning. Those interested in the ecological approach to youth learning would be interested in information sharing's role in that ecology. More research is called for to examine the complex relationships among social ties, serious leisure, information sharing, and connected learning.

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