

The 5 dimensions of online gifts

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Different social media, such as wikis, MySpace, Flickr and various forums have different ways for people to give and receive gifts, according to Swedish scientists. To fully understand online gifting and the successes and failures of online communities, we need to consider the question "who gives what to whom, how and why?"

Every day, more and more people join online communities, such as MySpace, FaceBook, and Second Life, and use file sharing systems like BitTorrent. In these virtual spaces they can reinvent themselves, make new friends, and share information and resources with others. Understanding how people give and receive digital gifts online is key to understanding the successes and failures of these communities.

Now, computer scientist Jörgen Skågeby of Linköping University in Sweden writing in the International Journal of Web Based Communities, explains how there are five dimensions to the way people give and receive gifts online, whether those gifts are information, mp3 files, photos, or illicit file shares.

"Different social media, such as wikis, MySpace, Flickr, and various forums have different ways for people to give and receive gifts," Skågeby says, "To fully understand online gifting we need to consider the question "who gives what to whom, how and why""

Gift giving and receiving is a collaborative activity that pulls together social groups. However, little research has been done outside niche anthropological studies and the studies of "gifts" given or exchanged by

animals in feeding and mating rituals. Skågeby says that gifts provide one type of social membrane so understanding what makes a strong membrane and what might cause it to rip are crucial to studies of online life.

There are five dimensions to gift giving among users of online communities, Skågeby explains. These are "initiative" in which an individual decides spontaneously to give a gift to another member of the community. This can be active with one person giving a piece of advice or a useful link in an online forum or passive where community members download something from a specific user automatically through a peer to peer network. In this case, the gift giver plays no role other than making the digital goods available online.

The second dimension is "direction" and tracks the path of a gift. For example, a public gift might come from an individual or organisation, a musician say, who loads their mp3 files on to their MySpace page, or a photographer who shares her photos using Flickr.com. Direction can also apply to gifts given to small communities or groups or given among online friends. An entirely private gift would be a single individual giving a gift to another or a very select group of friends.

The peer to peer networks, including the BitTorrent approach exploit another dimension of gift giving, the "incentive". Incentives can be enforced or voluntary. In the case of BitTorrent file sharing, users can only download a given gift, or file, if they simultaneously share that file as it downloads with other users, so the incentive process is often bidirectional.

Incentive gifting is exploited in illicitly distributing copyright materials such as movies and music, but also has a legitimate use in distributing large files within businesses and other communities. Voluntary incentive involves a points system so that users who share most, gain kudos or

better access to additional gifts.

The final two dimensions of gift giving online are "identification", knowing who is giving or receiving a gift, or remaining anonymous. In some systems, such as BitTorrent, gifting is essentially anonymous, while users are known on MySpace when they share digital gifts. Another dimension is "limitation", which controls the level of access to gifts, either giving or receiving can be open to all or restrictive. An open gift system might be the free software available for anyone to download on the free software network sourceforge.net, whereas a private BitTorrent or other network would be considered a restrictive gift network.

Gifting is a central human activity in many communities, both offline and online, explains Skågeby, "As more and more of human social activities will be copied or migrate entirely to online, we need to consider what dimensions are central to these activities, so that we can analyse their long-term impact on individuals and society."

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