

# Book Reviews

---

J. Preece

**Online communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability**

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd,  
Chichester, England, 2000,  
pp. xxiv+439, ISBN 0-471-80599-8

In the recent years we have been witnessing striking growth of the Internet, with the number of people using it in diverse everyday activities – to do jobs, to have fun or simply to find something they need as well – increasing at a comparable pace. During that period of time, a number

of places and social interactions have arisen, that are today known as online communities. In her excellent book on this new communication milieu, Jenny Preece guides us through two major issues concerning online communities – how to design them, having in mind the principles of usability, and how to support sociability.

The book consists of twelve chapters grouped in 2 Parts, a References list with 288 items and an Index. Each chapter includes suggestions for further reading.

In the first part of the book the author introduces us to the concept of online communities – what they really are, what their bright and dark sides are, and how principles of usability and sociability influence them, because "...developing successful online communities is not trivial. Successful online communities satisfy their members' needs and contribute to the well-being of society..." She emphasizes the fact that it is essential to understand a community's needs in order to develop a successful online community. In order to illustrate some aspects of online communities, Preece guides us through a number of already existing ones. Health, education (including a distance education instance) and e-commerce communities, to mention only some of them, are analyzed taking into consideration the supporting technologies, the purpose of the community, people gathering in it ("...people are the key to a thriving online community..."), as well as various kinds of policies for communities (joining and leaving policy, by-laws, netiquette, moderation, privacy, security, copyright and the like).

People and their role in communities are also scrutinized – moderators and mediators that help to govern communities, professionals that have some expert knowledge in areas covered by community purposes, lurkers that could be classified as passive participants observing only what is going on and otherwise remaining silent, and finally active participants that "...are the pulse of any community..." – and the way their number impacts community activities.

The technology on which the community can be based (e.g. web site, email, listserver, usenet, bulletin boards, chats, instant messaging, MUDs, MOOs, and virtual environments) is described in aspects of synchronicity, tasks and usability, as well as social impact of software design. An additional chapter is devoted to both interpersonal communication and common-base theory.

The second part of the book is devoted to developing online communities. Since the success of an online community depends on many factors mentioned above, the process of its developing is fundamentally different from writing program code. The approach called community-centered development is described in the first chapter of this part of the book. As people and community purpose are the most important issues, technology selection is considered less important than the fulfillment of community needs. The two main parts of this process, which are software design (of software selection and tailoring) and sociability planning, are fully explained.

If we choose to start a new online community using present software, this book gives us an excellent overview of existing software solutions along with explanations on how different kinds of products work and for what kind of community they can be used best. For example, usage of listservers or UseNet News are some of available options.

When designing an online community, it is also very important to design it considering sociability and usability, hence the book provides for a number of suitable guidelines. These comprehend guidelines for sociability, usability, moderators, guidelines to help participants communicate, as well as a checklist for sociability and usability.

Additional problems arising in the process of online community development are both the assessment of needs and evaluation of communities, issues that are addressed through a number of solutions presented in the book. Finally, to exemplify the subject discussed, the book contains a development case study.

*Online communities – Designing Usability, Supporting Sociability* by Jenny Preece is an excellent book with more than 400 pages for everyone involved in online communities, be they developers or participants. It is also an excellent starting point for further research because every chapter ends with a number of references where more on the subject can be found. My best recommendations.

Marko Čupić  
Faculty of Electrical Engineering  
and Computing  
University of Zagreb  
Zagreb Croatia