The Creative Ecology of Etsy.com: The Technical and Social Structures of A Productive Web Community

On Etsy.com you can find a plethora of handcrafted items up for sale. Since 2005 this site has provided knitters and crafters a place to create a web store to sell their creations. In that time it has grown into big business. With more than 400,000 sellers and more than 8 million items on it's virtual shelves Etsy sold more than 400 million dollars in goods.

The site has fostered a community of users, primarily women, who use it as a platform to sell their crafts. An article from the New York Times quoted one Lori Hammond, a 49-year-old retired bakery manager from Portland, Me. "The vibe is like sitting in a room with crafters, drinking tea and laughing." The site represents a vibrant hub of activity. It is a hub of creative production. The site has created this "vibe" through a technical system (web forums, blogs, tutorials, documentation, etc.), an aesthetic style, and a social system where by users interact within that technical system to create and sustain community.

Individual's Experiences and New Literacies in Online Communities

In response to demands for digital competencies, scholars have begun to frame media engagement and production skills as new literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Online affinity communities, that is, websites and web forums where individuals discuss and create media associated with common interests, are increasingly being explored as places where people are acquiring these new literacies (Gee, 2004). Through extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Ito and others found significant numbers of young people engaged in these communities are "learning to navigate esoteric domains of knowledge

> **Comment [1]:** Think about whether you want to lead with the site or the ideas...I would opt to lead with the idea that technical and social structures shape the nature of participation --in both direct and indirect ways--and that you are using etsy as an example to explore that idea. If this is the route you want to go I would add an intro paragraph right above your first that deals with this and then move into the specifics of etsy. Regardless, early on I want a sense of what your research problem is. —sheridan.kim

> **Comment [2]:** This sentence doesn't make sense to me--why would framing as literacies be a response to a demand for competencies? clarify or reword. —sheridan.kim

and practice and participating in communities that traffic in these forms of expertise"

(2010, p. 28). Studies of fan fiction forums (Black, 2005), and videogame fan-forums

(Squire & Giovanetto, 2008; Duncan, 2010) suggest that young people are acquiring

valuable new literacy skills in these communities.

> **Comment [3]:** This section could be improved with greater specificity on what you mean by new literacy skills--so far it's just "media engagement and production skills." Sharpen. —sheridan.kim

Of particular interest in this body of work is Ito's model for how individuals

become active participants in these communities. She suggests that individuals begin

engagement in these web communities through what she calls "messing around". In this

early period of their engagement with a new web community, individuals are just

dabbling with web communities that pique their interest. Ito's research suggests that

through interactions with community members, many individuals move into a more

involved stage that she refers to as "geeking" out. In this phase, individuals delve much

more extensively into the kinds of work occurring in these communities. This model

> **Comment [4]:** Make a more specific statement about how this model is of particular interest to your research problem at the opening of this paragraph—sheridan.kim

resonates with my own studies of these communities, however, her ~~generic~~ model does

> **Comment [5]:** Cite —sheridan.kim

not take into account the different kinds of designed structures which ~~different kinds of~~

web communities employ. I feel her work opens the door to explore how different kinds

> **Comment [6]:** avoid colloquialism--also awkward phrasing--this is a key move in justifying your study so it matters that you can —sheridan.kim

of community platforms and community structures affect the model of participation she

proposed. By deeply exploring the way the technical infrastructure of Etsy functions I

hope to better understand how these components connect with or complicate Ito's model

of individual participation.

> **Comment [7]:** Is this all you're exploring? I thought it was more individuals/group in interaction with technical structure --if so, clarify this point--even though you could argue it's an inherent part of "functions" it's better to be explicit —sheridan.kim

> **Comment [8]:** Split infinitive. Some people don't mind them, some do. —sheridan.kim

System Level Approaches to Online Communities

In the private sector, the principle behind these communities is increasingly

referred to as crowdsourcing (Howe, 2009). As a play on the term outsourcing, the notion

of crowdsourcing focus on externalizing a company's production costs to a crowd of

> **Comment [9]:** Abrupt transition--needs more preparation. What do you mean by "principle" or "these communities"--surely you don't mean that all web communities are based on one principle which is crowdsourcing? Perhaps introduce a more specific aspect-- "Etsy is an example of a commercial web community where individuals …" and then lead to ""A key" (rahter than "the") principle governing these is... —sheridan.kim

skilled participants. However, there is a growing literature in the business community discussing how this phenomena works. There is a need to better understand the nature of this form outside of profit motives. Non-profit organizations, government agencies, philanthropic organizations, arts-based outreach organizations and advocacy groups have also become interested in this phenomenon, and are eager to know more about how they could make use of this phenomena for the public good.

Henry Jenkins' notion of participatory culture (2009) effectively describes aspects of crowdsourcing but entirely focused on end users, individuals in the crowd of crowdsourcing. His idea of participatory culture holds that new social media forms are enabling consumers of media to act as producers. The idea of crowdsourcing requires participatory culture, but the studies of participatory culture have generally focused on what individuals are doing, learning and accomplishing at the expense of understanding the system they are engaged in. While we have learned a considerable amount from these user studies, principally that users are engaged in a range of interesting practices and developing a range of valuable skills, the next step in this space is to begin to understand how particular designs enable and foster unique participatory structures. It is not simply enough to acknowledge the skills and competency individuals are developing in many of these commercial spaces, to do so is to cede the potential of these designs to private interests. Instead, we need to extrapolate principles of design that can be used to develop these spaces as well.

Studies in engineering and design have begun to develop a vocabulary that can be deployed to contextualize the structures and designs that enable the participatory cultures which scholars such Jenkins and Gee have proposed offer such promise for learning with

Comment [10]: I think this is a good and important point(s), but you need to really try to hone in on what you are trying to say, explicate the different aspects and be as clear as possible. Work more here.—sheridan.kim

technology. This vocabulary has been developed in the professional literature of

"Metadesign", which has developed a set of principles for designing systems that in turn

enable end users to engage in their own design practices (Fischer & Giaccardi, 2006).

These principles of metadesign are much more prescriptive than descriptive. They

provide a way of thinking about these issues for design practitioners. However, they also

can provide a basic language for interpreting how each of the communities participatory

structures function.

> **Comment [11]:** Sounds interesting--give more specifics. A "for instance" would help...especially if this is something you may use analytically with your data—sheridan.kim

In the business world, the idea of crowdsourcing is being successfully promoted

and advanced as a model for generating revenue. Studying engagement of individuals

with many of the same sites that advocates in the business community extol as examples

of the profitability of crowdsourcing researchers interested in participatory culture have

suggested that participants are engaged in powerful learning experiences. Engineering

> **Comment [12]:** dense and confusing sentence —sheridan.kim

and design fields have begun developing a vocabulary for defining principles of

metadesign, principles for designing systems that enable participants to design. With

these perspectives in place I am interested in exploring a community like Etsy

ecologically. I use the term ecology to evoke an equal consideration of the environment,

the design of the structure of the sites that enable participation, and the actions and

interactions of individuals within that structure.

The Individual and The System

I believe that it is possible to connect these two approaches through work that has

extended Vygotsky's ideas about how thought is mediated by tools. Hutchin's work on

how cockpit's control their speed and large navel vessels move about the sea (Hutchens,

1995 & 1996) offer specific frameworks for understanding the way in which individuals,

> **Comment [13]:** Cite Vygotsky--Mind in Society. Also, you should read Wertsch 1985 on Vygotsky to get the history of thought—sheridan.kim

> **Comment [14]:** check spelling vs. citation and the example needs more framing. Introduce your idea of how Vygotsky informs your work and then move to these examples and reconnect with your idea —sheridan.kim

other people, and tools distribute cognition throughout an environment. I see Werstch's ideas about *Mind as Action* (1998), and cognitive philosopher Andrew Clark's notion of the extended mind (2008) as essentially the same core idea. From this perspective, we can think about the structure and design of these systems as organizing and structuring the thinking and actions of individuals.

Comment [15]: Reword this--surely they add nuances of new thought! :) —sheridan.kim

Research questions:

- How does Etsy scaffold users from interest in crafting into the skills required to create and manage online stores, market their crafts, and create their products? In this case I am particularly interested in the process and extent to which the site structure and social structure are salient components of that process.

Comment [16]: I think you need an earlier descriptive question that would allow you to map out the technical structures in place and then this becomes RQ2—sheridan.kim

- What skills and competencies do individuals acquire by opening store fronts on Etsy?

Comment [17]: do you want to broaden this or is this is a useful way to limit it? I would think that there's a long chain of learning that follows the "opening" so the word is misleading -- —sheridan.kim

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