Private Social Media

Rather than a particular client for this project, I left my tutorial fairly universal and easily translatable to multiple types of communities. However, I focused on a particular local Mental Health Center as a template for a client. I was unable to get a response from them about the project. However, I still designed my tutorial with them in mind as a place with a particular need for private community building tools to solve an invisible need.

Having a firm support structure in place is often cited as one of the best and most effective predictors of good outcomes among those struggling with mental illness (Hedrick, 2014). This can mean friends, family, or a support group they share a real connection with. Often, those suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder, depression, or other psychological difficulties will seek out a group therapy to help handle the added strain of these disorders. However, outside of large cities, support groups for a variety mental illnesses become rare.

Studies also show that whether or not a patient seeks out help is often directly related to his or her ability to recover (Vogel, Wade, Wester, Larson, & Hackler, 2007). New initiatives are constantly being introduced to find a way to reach more people faster, to prevent suicide and violent outbursts. If the forum building tools I demonstrated were utilized to greatest effect, it could create a network of potential private, confidential group therapy sessions, happening across the world every day online, with people swapping information about the best coping strategies or the side effects of a new drug. It could put a lot of mental health patients in charge of their own care in a way never before possible.

Facebook brings people together. It inextricably links the online world to one’s flesh and blood life in ways that are not always positive. Keeping a healthy distance between different aspects of their lives is important to many people, and Facebook breaks all those rules. Posting publicly to Facebook is posting to the bulletin board of the world, never to be fully removed. Humans have adapted, for the most part, but many people still feel the need to keep a separation between their work and family life, which is unobtainable on a platform where everything that compromises you is a single stream of information.

Many newer features of Facebook seek to give people more control of their online presence, using groups and filters to separate one’s friends into distinct piles, but the problem remains that a person’s life cannot be reduced to a single data stream, but we assume that it can. We presume to know and judge a person, based solely on Facebook profile. This is because Facebook requires that its users use their real names.

We assume that a person posting for several years with the same name is the same person, but people grow and change over time. Some change publicly, documenting themselves through the years, and others are reticent, and consider what the future you might say, or the future potential employer. The sheer permanency of name-associated online presence stymies personal growth. For some, the need to grow and explore their own personhood requires more of a sense of anonymity. In short: People need privacy.

The type of forum I demonstrated is considered rather antiquated online. However, I believe it can be extremely useful, specifically because of the differences it has from large corporate social media such as Facebook. Forums do not use algorithms to determine which content you would enjoy seeing. All content curation is done by hand. You may decide at one time that you wish to skip something and at another time to read it. With an algorithm filtering out anything not selected, the content you may have been interested in later will not often be presented again. Neither moods, changes in personality or behavior, nor any personal quirks factor into the simplification of your interests as determined by algorithms. For the right size of community, personal curation is freeing rather than time-consuming.

Additionally, the freedom to change behavior without being held to the standard of previous behavior associated with your identity can allow for greater and faster personal growth and increased opportunity. Of course, it can lead to deception and mischaracterization as well, but that is an unavoidable truth. Holding a person to their previous behavior can sometimes be an act of revealing the truth about a person, but can sometimes also be an act of revealing a former truth which no longer applies. Forums which allow for the anonymity of its users are out-of-date and old-fashioned, but also could be a useful alternative in many situations for many types of communities.

I once helped run a support group, within the larger context of a forum site, for people considered sexual deviants and their allies. The group supported a large number of transgendered people, pedophiles, as well as a few zoophiles and other more rare abnormalities. At the time, the T hadn’t really been added to the LGBT movement, and transgendered individuals were just as stigmatized online as sex offenders.

One of the main goals of my contingent of the group was to give people with these abnormalities a chance to interact with one another. They vented about problems no one else could understand. They shared coping mechanisms and random tips. I once had a pedophile give me expert advice on how to stop my infant from crying. Turns out, people who are attracted to children know a lot about them and give great parenting advice. They’re not monsters that rape babies. They’re people who think a different way. The community helped all of us, not just the perverts. I learned to see that people who are different usually just need to be treated normal and the differences blow away.

The community was chased away, its content eventually considered too inappropriate even for a private members-only community. It reformed and disbanded, losing members along the way, until finally someone had the bright idea to create and host a forum that no one else could ban us from. So the community came together again, and supported one another through our screens. Communities which are stigmatized and harangued still need a space to be at home.

With my final project I wanted to emphasize the fact that communities are built. Every social media outlet depends entirely on the people that use it. It’s like when a new toy comes out. Lots of super fancy toys connect to other toys in order to do more than one trick. Social media only works when people get social. And social media platforms only work when people use them. Forums are considered slightly antiquated in internet culture, but any community can be built from the ground up, without dealing with any corporate conglomerate with an abundance of rules. Communities are groups of people communicating, no matter what the medium, and forums provide an absurdly simple method of creating new communities, which I hope more communities will take advantage of in the future.

One infrastructure that has traditionally been a beacon for community building is the public library. The public library is an ideal place to educate and utilize forum systems to encourage private community building activities. Private community forums allow for meetings and exchanges of ideas on a grand level, without outside interference, which can stimulate community involvement in issues both small and large. Outreach programs that provide literacy education could also easily offer education about private forums and their usefulness. As an aspiring public librarian, I would consider private forums as an option for community input and involvement, as well as an important option for community education.

References:

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