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Translators as Networkers: The Role of Virtual Communities

Abstract

Recent years have seen a rise in the importance of virtual and real-life knowledge sharing communities and communities of practice across many fields of private and commercial interest, including professional translation. This article examines the characteristics of knowledge sharing communities in general, identifies their key elements, looks at the motivation for membership and presents an empirical study of life in a thriving virtual translation community. In doing so, it draws on the results of a literature review combined with a participant observation based study and member survey of a major virtual translation community. The results indicate that virtual translation communities can be lively platforms and offer translators a forum not only for sharing expert knowledge and collaborating, but also for keeping in touch with like-minded individuals.

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, virtual communities and communities of practice have emerged across many fields of interest and are now assuming an increasingly important role in the working or social lives of their members. Our interest in this topic began with an invitation to join the virtual translation community ProZ.com in 2001. Intrigued by the way members clearly identified with the site, we sought to understand their motivation for joining and for sharing knowledge so freely.

Our investigations showed that much of the literature on virtual communities focuses either on social communities, communities of practice or formal and informal networks within organisations. The relevance of those virtual communities that have emerged without a common corpo-

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rate goal and thrive without the motivation of fulfilling corporate targets or financial rewards for the members is often overlooked (Schobert/Schrott 2001: 519). Little material was available on professional (extra-organisational) virtual communities and few references could be found to translation communities.

In a series of articles written in 1995 and 1996 (and published in book form in 2006), Chriss appeals to translators to abandon their individualistic tendencies and realise they have colleagues around the world with whom to share information and experience. He suggests they communicate about terminology, technology, clients and other issues affecting the profession and start to regard each other as colleagues, friends and co-workers, not competitors. His recognition of the importance of collaboration for the future of the profession emphasised a need for interaction, mutual acceptance, knowledge sharing and cooperation. By doing so, translators would use synergies in their working environments, recognise and promote the professionalism of their field and work together to set common goals and standards for the profession.

This appeal did not go unheeded, and recent years have seen the emergence of several virtual translation communities (such as ProZ.com, TranslatorsCafe, LANTRA, GlossPost and Aquarius, to name but a few), with the communication possibilities offered by the internet enabling them to grow to a level of importance that merits recognition. Interest appears strong, and translators around the world are joining and devoting time and energy to participating in these communities (usually without direct financial gain).

This paper provides a theoretical look at virtual communities in general and seeks to identify their core elements. It places emphasis on the motivation for membership and the role of virtual communities in knowledge exchange. Drawing on the results of a participant observation based study and member survey in a major virtual translation community, it looks at the relevance of such communities for the translation profession.

2. The Notion of Community

According to Lesser et al. (2000: vii), "[...] communities consist of three components: people, places and things. They are composed of people who interact on a regular basis around a common set of issues,

interests or needs". However, there is much debate on whether a community can be virtual and/or exist solely on the internet (Wellmann/Gulia 1999: 167). This arises from the traditional notion that community is based on mutual trust and that it is not possible to build trusting relationships without face-to-face communication. Although communities were traditionally centred around geographical locations, in recent years social network analysts have noted that the role of place is becoming less important and that such relationships can be maintained over long distances (Rheingold 1998; Wellmann/Gulia 1999: 169; Figallo 1998a).

2.1. CoPs, Workgroups, Teams and Informal Networks in Organisations

Communities and networks have long played a role in organisations, but it is only in recent years that they have been paid serious attention. Wenger differentiates between communities of practice, formal workgroups, project teams and informal networks and sees organisational communities as "the new frontier for organizations" and "the promise of great opportunities for pioneers of the knowledge age" (Wenger: 1999: 5).

Communities of practice (CoPs) are informal, self-selecting groups generally formed by volunteer experts who share a common interest in a specific area of competence (Wenger 1999: 3-5). Although they can have stated goals, their main purpose lies not in producing deliverables, but in learning together and sharing knowledge. Whilst CoPs are generally self-forming, organisational support and recognition help them reach their full potential both for their members and the organisation in which they are embedded. They are often non-permanent arrangements and only last as long as members share a common purpose and feel they can still learn from each other (Stewart 1997: 94-96; Seely Brown/Gray 1995).

In contrast, workgroups or teams are usually formed by management and consist of a group of people chosen to work on a joint project or task. Members are selected because they have the range of skills needed to achieve the project goals. Teams and workgroups typically remain in place until a project is finished or the goals are realised (Wenger 1999; Skyrme 1999; Gill 2001).

Informal networks are another important form of knowledge sharing in organisations. In contrast to CoPs, they operate more at a social level and do not usually meet to discuss or work on a shared topic of interest (Wenger 1999). They are frequently built up over a long period of time and work without formal sanctions. Informal networks need not be restricted to company employees and can also include external contacts, customers, partners, or suppliers. Since informal networks "[...] function through personal contact and word of mouth, they engender the trust that is an essential engine of successful knowledge exchange" (Davenport/Prusak 2000: 37).

2.2. Extra-Organisational Virtual Communities

Whilst the social aspect of learning and knowledge sharing plays a key role in CoPs and formal or informal networks, the need to network and share knowledge across chains of interdependent individuals and organisations can mean that the members of these networks are often not located at the same site or even in the same country. This has led to the emergence of virtual communities to enable them to keep in touch even without face-to-face meetings.

The term 'virtual community' was coined in 1968 by the internet pioneers Licklider and Taylor, who predicted that online interactive communities of the future would have a great impact on individuals and society, would consist of geographically separated members and be communities of common interest, not location (Licklider/Taylor 1968). At first glance, the notion of virtual community appears a contradiction in terms. Community is traditionally associated with a body of people living near one another who have something in common, where communication is usually verbal and face-to-face. Virtuality, on the other hand, is abstract and often associated with computers and cyberspace. People in virtual communities can live on the other side of the world, yet still form a community around a common interest. However, both local and virtual communities are in essence about people and interaction and all communities share certain characteristics. As Rheingold (1998) notes:

> People in virtual communities use words on screens to ... engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge ... People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real

life, but we leave our bodies behind … a lot can happen within those boundaries.

2.3. Virtual Knowledge Communities

Virtual knowledge communities are organised groups of experts and other interested parties who exchange knowledge on their field of expertise in cyberspace within and across geographical or corporate borders. They focus on this knowledge domain, interact around relevant issues, expand their expertise through collaboration and build a common knowledge base (Skyrme 1999: 170).

Botkin (1999: 15) suggests communities are the answer to unlocking knowledge, since whilst membership doesn't necessarily solve a problem, it is more beneficial to be linked to a community of experts and colleagues than to be isolated. Referring to communities of knowledge, Allee (1997) notes they "are so powerful that they now involve people in conversation with each other all over the globe".

Freelance workers increasingly look to such communities to fill a need in their working lives for collaboration, mutual learning or knowledge exchange. Membership is often voluntary, and people join because of their interest in the subject matter, making virtual communities ideal 'places' for constructive exchange. Knowledge sharing in such communities takes many forms, from discussions in parenting forums (Rheingold 1998) and yellow pages to targeted mailing lists or the KudoZ term help system at the translation community ProZ.com (Dickinson 2002).

3.   Core Elements of Virtual Communities

The theoretical literature shows several common elements across virtual communities. If members do not identify with a community or share a common purpose, they are less likely to return regularly and interact frequently (Typaldos 2000). They also need a place to meet (although this no longer has to be a physical location) and continued, social interaction, preferably on a reciprocal basis, to build up trusting relationships (Rheingold 1998). The following section looks in more detail at the core elements of communities.

A community has to be centred around a **shared purpose** or common interest, which serves as the connecting link between members

(Covey 1998: 55). The shared purpose must be strong enough to encourage members to come together to achieve something collectively they could not do alone. The importance of a shared purpose should not be underestimated: it goes beyond just having something in common, which is unlikely to be enough to sustain a successful community (Rheingold 1998).

Communities need members and must attract the right kind of people (e.g. with expertise in the relevant field). Since membership is often voluntary, people join because they share the community's purpose and feel they will benefit from communicating with other members (see above). However, since they do not actually 'know' each other, a member needs a persistent **identity** in the community to make the person behind it recognizable to others (Donath 1999: 30). An identity is not necessarily a person's real name; aliases are also persistent identities, as they serve to uniquely identify a person to the community. However, an identity only imparts to a community what a person chooses to reveal and says little about their **reputation**. Reputation is earned based on actions, behaviour and the impression left on others (history of interaction). It provides a context for members to judge each other or the value of contributions and is the basis for a person's standing and status (Typaldos 2000; Donath 1999).

A community also needs to define its **boundaries**, i.e. only admit qualified members, or at least explicitly state its purpose and thus define who should or should not join. This is particularly relevant for free communities, as subscriptions or annual fees help deter *lurkers* (people who hang around a community yet make no contribution) and non-interested parties. Without boundaries, it is difficult to ensure that those who do join are actually in a position to actively participate (Typaldos 2000; Gill 2001).

Trust forms the basis for reliable, mutually beneficial interaction between members (Fukuyama 1995: 26). A virtual community is a place where people meet to exchange ideas and relationships, loyalty and trust gradually evolve. Before interaction can take place, members must be confident that others will behave in an expected way. They have to be able to judge the motives of others without fear of being (ab)used (Figallo 1998a) or laughed at (Gill 2001). People do not automatically gain trust simply because they belong to the same community: trust has

to be established and is a prerequisite for sharing work (Lesser/Prusak 1999: 127).

Members must find enough material of interest to **motivate** them to stay, return and maintain their membership. They need to be encouraged to contribute, thereby generating new content that is of interest to other members. If visiting a community is motivating and satisfying, members are more likely to remain loyal and not look for something else to better satisfy their needs (Figallo 1998b). Community organisers need to achieve a suitable balance between content and interest (e.g. a focus on the shared purpose in knowledge sharing communities). New members in particular quickly turn away if content and discussion drift off topic. **Loyalty** to a community encourages repeated interaction, generates a sense of belonging and, in turn, creates the critical mass of loyal members needed to ensure long-term survival (Armstrong/Hagel 1996: 95).

As communities grow, and members interact over an extended period of time, a need develops for common **standards and values** which set the rules of etiquette within the community (Gill 2001). According to Gill (2001), these guidelines differ from community to community, but must be clearly transmitted to new members. Rules and charters lay down the boundaries of personal and group interaction and are essential for building trust among members.

Whilst a high degree of self-rule and democracy is common, virtual communities do not manage themselves. Somebody has to found them and take on the role of **leader**. If no one takes charge, they run the risk of dissolving into an unstructured mess or fading away due to lack of interest. Community leaders are often known as "hosts" (Rheingold 1998). According to Figallo (1998b), hosts are "usually looked to for help and support rather than for their ability to lead or dominate a conversation". In our study, we also looked for indications of whether hosts play a key role in the **structure** and continuity of communities, define rules, make important decisions (e.g. to delete inappropriate postings, moderate discussions or even ban members) and resolve conflicts, or whether other forms of leadership and structure can be observed.

As communities become established, **history** and **dynamics** start to play an increasingly important role (Typaldos 2000). A shared history reinforces the sense of community and makes repeated interaction

with other members easier. Figallo (1998b) notes that as communities grow, some individuals may attempt to dominate them and attract attention by proliferating their own views and ideas. Since they unbalance a community and threaten its established standards and values, he recommends discouraging such actions and restoring a balance (e.g. by ignoring the protagonists).

Content attracts people to a community and is one of the reasons why they return. As Armstrong/Hagel (1996: 89) note, a "community full of half empty rooms offers visitors a very unsatisfactory experience". Communities distinguish themselves by and benefit from useful, member-generated content. Another key strength is their access to a target group and what is referred to in marketing terms as the '**network effect'**[1], i.e. the increase in value that accrues to a network when more people join it. The network effect is often seen as the basis of the business model of communities (Cohen 2001). If a community does not have enough members, it is unlikely to have enough content to attract new members (Morris/Ogan 1996).

3.1. Model for the Core Elements of Community

Figure 1 summarizes the core elements of community in a model. As indicated above, a community needs to have had a founder (or group of founders), some kind of **leadership** or **structure**, centre on a common interest (**shared purpose**) and focus on member-generated **content**. It also needs a critical mass of members who meet membership requirements (**identity/boundaries**), form relationships (**reputation/ trust**) and see the need to communicate over time (**motivation/loyalty**) in an appropriate manner (**standards/values**). Its **history** and **dynamics** are influenced by the formalisation brought about by the standards and network effects.

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1 http://www.marketingterms.com/dictionary/network_effect: "The phenomenon whereby a service becomes more valuable as more people use it, thereby encouraging ever-increasing numbers of adopters." (accessed 7 July 2008).
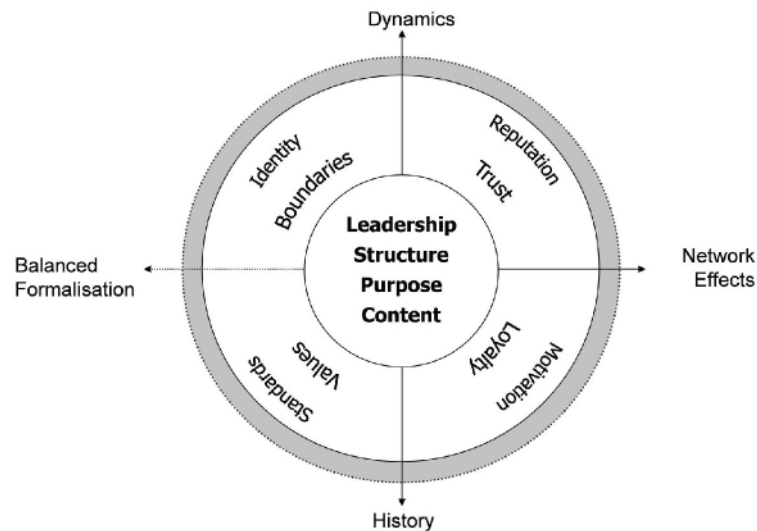
Figure 1. Core Elements of Community

4.   Virtual Translation Communities

Virtual communities offer translators a platform for collaboration, communication and knowledge sharing. Indeed, over the last twenty years, a number of different virtual translation communities have been established. These range from translator directories and job boards to discussion groups on translation tools or business, legal and financial issues. In the following sections, we investigate whether they offer a positive example of the benefits of virtual communities and their knowledge sharing possibilities.

Translation is knowledge work at its best and translators need a great deal of knowledge in their work (see Dam et al.: 2005; Risku et al.: to appear). Similarly, the nature of their profession and their text writing skills make them good written communicators. But it is also, in many cases, a solitary profession and access to a means of collaborating, communicating, sharing knowledge and learning can be of great benefit to translators in their work. Despite the popular misconception that little or no support is needed from clients, authors, subject experts or peers, such communication is an essential part of the translation process. Pri-

or to the internet, communication between translators and clients was more difficult and – with deadlines making accessibility a key issue – contact to other translators was often limited to known colleagues, membership in local/national translation associations or attendance at translation conferences. As Sofer (1999: 68) notes, translation might be a solitary craft, but "it doesn't have to be this way, especially in today's world. There are now organized translator groups everywhere, not to mention the Internet with its e-mail, chat rooms, and newsgroups".

5.   Empirical Methodology

To examine the rise, structure and motivation for membership, the translation community ProZ.com was observed by one and the same person over a six-month period in 2001/2002. In addition, an anonymous member survey was carried out in 2002 and complemented by direct communication with the founder via e-mail in 2001/2002 and at a face-to-face meeting in December 2001. ProZ.com was selected because of its large membership and because it went beyond being an online job centre, offering knowledge sharing features such as term translation support, a multilingual glossary and member forums. At the time of the survey, ProZ.com had over 25,000 registered members and a growth rate of around 1,000 users per month; by 2007 it had more than 170,000 members, with 47,571 new registered users in 2006 and up to 80,000 users viewing up to 1 million pages per day.[2]

Observation was carried out using the participant observation method described by Suler, whereby the observer joins as a member and tries to correlate an objective analysis of a group with the evaluation of his/her subjective reactions (see Suler 1996). The **survey** took the form of an online questionnaire containing a mixture of 19 open and closed questions (see Appendix 1) posted on the ProZ.com site for three days in February 2002. Access to the questionnaire was open to all registered members (both paying and non-paying). A total of 335 members completed the questionnaire. The results were analysed and assessed by a team of three students and a tutor from the 2002 Postgraduate MSc course in Knowledge Management at the Danube University Krems in Austria. The analysis of answers to the open questions was carried out

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2   See http://www.proz.com/employers/news?press_id=18

in a data-driven manner, by reading all the answers on each question-
naire, identifying groups of similar answers and categorising and label-
ling these according to their content. **Direct communication** with the
ProZ.com founder included the role of his background, personality and
vision in shaping the spirit, direction and development stages of the
group (see Suler 1996). The results were initially reported in a Master
Thesis for the MSc in Knowledge Management at the Danube Univer-
sity Krems (Dickinson 2002).

6.   ProZ.com

ProZ.com[3] was launched in 1999 by Henry Dotterer and has offices
in the United States and Argentina. The community offers a range of
tools and opportunities for translators, translation companies and oth-
ers in the language industry to network, expand their businesses, im-
prove their work and experience added enjoyment in their professional
endeavours. It also provides a platform for translators to work together
to improve the profession. Through collaborative services like the Ku-
doZ term help system (a framework for assisting with the translation or
explanation of terms and short phrases, see below), the Blue Board (a
database of language job outsourcers with feedback from translators)
or group buying (where members group together to buy products such
as CAT tools), as well as networking in forums and national and inter-
national offline meetings and conferences or Powwows (informal get-
togethers of members who live in close proximity), ProZ.com sees its
members as ushering in a new era of collaboration for translators[4].

Since its launch, ProZ.com has continued to grow and is now the
largest virtual translation community worldwide. Our survey showed
that the majority of members are experienced professionals: over 60%
of respondees had been translators for 5 years or more, indicating that
such sites are not just the domain of 'new' translators. Over 80% of sur-
vey participants were freelancers. The majority were based in Europe
(60.24%), followed by North/South America (33.43%), Asia (6.03%)
and Africa (0.3%).

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3 http://www.proz.com (accessed 1 April 2008).

4 For more details see http://www.proz.com/translation-articles/articles/964/

ProZ.com is a business, not just a free web platform. Different membership levels are available, with paying members granted full access to all data, features and clients on the site and certain networking privileges not available to non-paying users. ProZ.com maintains paying members are four times more likely to meet new clients than non-paying users, and as the site grows, new paying member-only features are being continually added.

The survey results indicate that many members become non-paying users first and upgrade to paying membership later. Whilst the level of access offered to non-paying users was seen as positive by some respondees (and an aspect that differentiates the site positively from other communities), others voiced reservations about the fact that this also attracts non-professional members.

As explained, one of the site's aims is to facilitate cooperation and knowledge sharing among language service providers. This is centred around the forums, knowledge base or term translation support provided in KudoZ, a collaborative system of human support in the translation of terms and short phrases. A unique page is assigned to each KudoZ question, where comments and additional information are also collated, allowing a comparison of all answers to a question at a glance. Other members can comment, agree or disagree with the answers (peer grading). KudoZ is browser-based and thus more structured and convenient to use than conventional mailing lists.

As a result of the many specialist or new terms being answered in KudoZ, ProZ.com also features a multilingual terminology database. The KudoZ Open Glossary (KOG) contains post-edited KudoZ questions, direct entries and donated glossaries. With over 2 million questions asked by September 2008, it is growing rapidly and is particularly rich in current, specialist and hard-to-find terms. All users can consult the KOG, with paying members given full access and credit given to all term contributors. Many members consider KudoZ a key element of the community and actively participate in this support system. When asked why they did so, 82% of respondees named knowledge sharing and helping others as their motivation. Other reasons included learning – e.g. through comparing the different answers to a particular question – (46%), putting something back into the community (38%) or improving

their image (15%). This indicates the importance of knowledge sharing and learning and suggests a strong sense of community.

7. The Core Elements of Community in ProZ.com

The following section applies the core elements of virtual communities described in section 3 to ProZ.com and provides specific examples taken from the results of the member survey and from our observations.

7.1. Shared Purpose, Identity and Boundaries

The shared purpose behind ProZ.com is based on the aim of creating a virtual meritocracy for translators in which members can earn, learn and share from each other. It describes itself as a 'translation workplace' in which all services, activities and discussions focus on the art and business of translation.[5]

ProZ.com members must set up a unique identity within the community and provide a profile with details of language pairs, fields of expertise, qualifications and experience. Since one of the aims of ProZ.com is to bring translators and outsourcers together, the information included in a profile is like a virtual business card. The relationship between a translator and client is based on mutual trust, and work is less likely to be given to someone who hides behind an anonymous profile. The inclusion of KudoZ information (details of questions answered or asked) in member profiles also provides clients with a way of assessing expertise. Identity is an important issue: our observations indicated that many members use their real names as user-IDs, while the survey results indicate that 'anonymous' users or empty profiles are frowned upon.

Membership of ProZ.com is open to anyone who wants to join and while members are expected to be working in the translation field, no compulsory check of credentials is carried out. This has been an issue of discussion (e.g. in the forums), since some members feel it reduces the professional image and the quality of knowledge shared. 19% of respondees named non-professional members as one of the things they liked least, illustrating the conflict between open membership and the need to protect the image of a community against unqualified members. However, ProZ.com does offer ID verification for members who have

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5   See http://www.proz.com/translation-articles/articles/964/

met a staff member, moderator or other member with the right to verify identities in person. Verified IDs are indicated in member profiles.

7.2. Reputation and Trust

In ProZ.com, there are two sides to the issue of reputation: the individual reputations within the community and the site's own reputation in the outside world. Members gain reputation through their behaviour on the site, the subject matter and tone of their postings, the information in their profiles or the quality of their KudoZ answers. Since KudoZ is open to the public, the answers provided should be of a quality that ensures the community's reputation of being populated by experts. This is achieved, for example, through the grading of answers by other members.

Our observations indicate that members clearly trust ProZ.com and see it as a genuine community. Examples of this trust include upgrading to paying membership and actively contributing to KudoZ activities. There are also examples of members who only got to know each other through the site developing working relationships and forming teams to share work or terminology.

7.3. Motivation, Loyalty, Standards and Values

Interest in ProZ.com is confirmed by its large number of active members. The survey indicated that motivation for membership is varied, with reasons including locating work (56%), sense of community (54%), learning/benchmarking (42%) or networking and collaboration (30%). It is described by respondees as "a good Samaritan", "a warehouse of intelligent, helpful translators" or "a sound investment for tangible (job offers, KudoZ) and intangible (sense of community, exchange, friendship) benefits".

Motivation to exchange knowledge is high, and members appear unaffected by traditional barriers to knowledge sharing. 52% of respondees named KudoZ as one of the things they liked best, while knowledge sharing (39%) and access to industry information (32%) also featured in reasons for membership. 40% of respondees were paying members and had been members for 6 months or longer, reflecting a high retention rate and level of loyalty to the site.

In section 3 we noted that rules and charters are essential for building trust among members. ProZ.com has written guidelines and unspoken standards and values in place, and our observations show that communication generally adheres to high standards of netiquette. Since it is an open community, ProZ.com posts site rules and details of accepted behaviour in the forums, the KudoZ system and the peer grading system (e.g. whilst members can agree with a proposed answer without comment, a reason must be given for a disagree or neutral assessment). Since forums are open to the public, if postings drift off topic moderators or other members intervene to reinstate the desired standard of professionalism. There is a strong dislike of dominant posters and negative postings, and 21% of respondees named this as one of the things they liked least.

7.4. Leadership and Structure

The leadership role at ProZ.com is assumed by the founder, staff members and voluntary moderators. Our observations showed that the leaders play a key role in the structure and continuity of the community, bringing a human touch to an impersonal medium. They define rules and play a key role in conflict management e.g. by deleting inappropriate postings or moderating discussions. As a meritocracy, regulation in ProZ.com is balanced, with the founder preferring it to be as self-regulating as possible. However, he is very much a key figure and plays a strong personal role, gives direction, promotes the community and provides continuity.

The community's rapid growth has been accompanied by a need for some structure and regulation, e.g. in the form of language pair sub-communities, each with their own moderators. Moderators play an integral role in community dynamics and have been instrumental in establishing events such as the Annual Conference or national meetings. They also play an active role in their sub-communities, are involved in guiding site development and helping to grow and shape ProZ.com as a cooperative and a business.

7.5. History and Dynamics

Our survey looked for indications of how the community itself and interaction in it had influenced members. On a theoretical level, we

sought here to emphasise the importance of a community's history in its analysis; however, since our study was not longitudinal, our results on history and dynamics are limited. Nonetheless, as the ProZ.com community grows, its importance to members becomes more obvious, with many members spending a considerable amount of time on the site: 24.2% of survey participants stated that they spent 3-5 hours per week at ProZ.com, while 19.4% spent 5-10 hours and 16.1% over 10 hours a week on the site.

To enable new (and existing) members to find information and trace community history, archived KudoZ terms and forum threads remain accessible. Members can also choose to display details of their own KudoZ history in their profile. Furthermore, the comments added to KudoZ answers or conversations in the forums also frequently indicate the shared histories of interaction and friendships that have been built up through the site.

Many survey participants indicated that membership had positively changed the way they worked, helping to improve their skills as translators or learn new skills (28%), providing access to new (global) markets (26%), opening up new networking and collaboration opportunities (23%) and creating an increased enthusiasm for their job and profession (10%). Several members also reported having built up lasting professional and social friendships (both virtual and real-life) through membership.

7.6. Content and Network Effects

ProZ.com offers a range of functions and content specifically for communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing between translators. On a scale of 1 to 5, the survey results indicate that members make most frequent use of the following areas: KudoZ (3.6), the translation jobs system (3.0), glossaries (2.2), forums (2.0) and the Blue Board (1.8). The relevance of appropriate content is indicated in a forum posting pointing out that the site is in a "different league" when it comes to functionality, content and entertainment value. Similarly, some members noted they would be prepared to "put up with advertising" if it would help guarantee the community's continued existence. Since advertising is often considered annoying and distracting, this offers a further indication of the value attached to the community.

The founders of ProZ.com accredit its rapid growth in part to word-of-mouth propaganda (network effects) by existing members and links from other websites. Almost 50% of the survey respondees indicated they had found out about the community through a friend, colleague, existing member or link from another site, and 98% stated they would recommend ProZ.com to colleagues and friends.

8.   Benefits and Drawbacks

Our results indicate that virtual translation communities can serve as strong examples of knowledge sharing in practice. They offer many benefits to translators, providing them with a platform for exchanging information and knowledge with colleagues worldwide and access to rapid, qualified help. They also serve as a forum for giving and receiving advice or support and, since they never close, this help is available round the clock. Membership in such communities also provides commercial benefits, e.g. access to new job markets, marketing opportunities and collaboration projects. This was reflected in the survey results, with 56% of respondees naming locating work as one of their reasons for using ProZ.com.

Whilst active participation in a virtual community can be beneficial, respondents noted that it can also be time-consuming and even (temporarily) addictive. Another drawback is that members may also find themselves confronted with 'virtual office politics' played out in the forums. As a member noted, one attraction of freelancing is the freedom from conventional office politics and it is "galling to encounter something just as corrosive in the online environment", referring to a job forum where responses to a particularly low paid job amounted to little more than condescending remarks on the issue of unprofessional open bidding. The results of the survey show the following areas of contention in translation communities: job bidding issues (low rates), negative postings (and dominant members) or non-professional members (lack of qualification or translating outside language pairs). Although a breach of accepted behaviour, flames in translation communities can also be linguistically particularly vindictive given the translator's text communication dexterity. Some dominant members could also be observed, who seem to have opinions on almost every subject and are crit-

ical to an extent that makes their motivation for membership difficult to understand.

9.   Closing Comments

The need for collaboration and knowledge exchange in translating has long been recognised, and virtual communities offer a forum for the collaborative knowledge sharing activities needed in this profession. The high membership levels and participation at ProZ.com indicate a real need for what these communities have to offer. Members seem to rely increasingly on the site for communication, knowledge exchange, learning, access to new markets and an increased awareness of the profession. Trusting relationships and increased collaboration among members are on the increase and shared histories of interaction are developing. Standards and values are particularly important, and attempts to reinforce them reflect a desire to share high quality information and present a professional image of the community and the translation industry to the outside world.

The results of our survey suggest that translators see virtual translation communities not only as places for knowledge exchange and communication, but also as communities of like-minded individuals. When asked in the survey why there was a need for such communities, the reasons given could be grouped into four categories: knowledge exchange, individual learning, social and professional contact or commercial and professional issues. Participants commented on the solitariness of the profession, on the importance of "no longer feeling alone" or of "having another resource to turn to" when others had been exhausted.

Knowledge exchange in these communities centres on language and linguistic knowledge, expertise and experience. Indeed, translators show great willingness to exchange knowledge and appear less affected by the traditional barriers to knowledge sharing encountered in scientific communities, where initiatives may fail because they face a discouraging culture "for fear of losing ownership of the intellectual property" (Hyams 2001), or in corporate environments where knowledge is often seen as power. On the contrary, there is no indication of any fears or risks to their personal situation through sharing knowledge in virtual communities or contributing to global glossaries, indicating a recognition of the underlying reciprocity of knowledge sharing. This may, of

course, lie in the creative nature of translation. Since no two translators will produce the same translation of one source text, there is little professional risk in helping others and sharing the benefits of experience.

Our observations indicate a strong sense of community in the community studied and an inherent willingness to help each other. Members seem to identify strongly with ProZ.com, emphasising that there is a need for such communities and offering confirmation that professional and trusting relationships can exist and be built up online. Since little scientific research has yet been carried out into professional virtual communities and their knowledge sharing activities, our study results could prove beneficial for other communities of this kind. For example, the possibility of benchmarking through the KudoZ peer-grading system is an important step in guaranteeing the quality of information often missing in internet communities and a learning tool for members. A follow-up survey and analysis would serve to identify trends and changing motivations as communities grow and their history develops.

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Appendix 1: ProZ.com Member Survey

My name is Angela Dickinson. I am a freelance translator based in Vienna and am currently studying for an MSc in Knowledge Management at the Danube-University in Krems, Austria. I am carrying out research for a Master Thesis on translators and online knowledge communities. Online communities appear to be becoming more and more important in our working and social lives and the aim of my thesis is to try to find out why! I wondered if I might take a few minutes of your time to participate in this research by completing the survey below. Thank you for your help!

1. *When did you join ProZ.com ? (MM/YY)*

2. *What level of membership do you have?*
   non-paying / premium / platinum

3. *How did you find out about ProZ.com?*
   From an existing member / from a professional publication or conference / from a friend or colleague / from another website / internet search / other

4. *How much time do you spend on average per week in ProZ.com?*
   <1 hour / 1-3 hours / 3-5 hours / 5-10 hours / >10 hours

5. *How often do you use the following areas (on a scale of 1 to 5)?*
   Answering KudoZ questions / reading answers posted by colleagues/ posting KudoZ questions / peer grading KudoZ answers / bidding for translation jobs / posting translation jobs / participating in forums / consulting glossaries / using Blue Board

6. *Why do you use ProZ.com?*

7. *Why do you answer KudoZ questions?*

8. *What do you consider to be the best aspects of ProZ.com?*

9. *What do you consider to be the worst aspects of ProZ.com?*

10. *Why do you think there is a need for translation communities like ProZ. com?*

11. *Has membership of ProZ.com affected/influenced the way you work as a translator and if so, in what way?*

12. *Would you recommend ProZ.com to other translators?*

13. *Are you male or female?*

14. *Which country do you live in?*

15. *What are your language pairs?*

16. *How long have you been a translator? (in years)*

17. *Which of the following best describes your work situation?*
Freelance translator / In-house translator/agency / Other

18. *Which other translating communities are you a member of?*

19. *Optional: Your name and email address*