

Alejandro Mercado-Celis\*

# Weaving Information Networks in the Digital World: Virtual Communities as Information Grounds

The study of virtual communities has emerged as a fundamental research field in the age of socio-digital networks, when the creation of interest groups is one of the most widespread phenomena.

Information studies have enriched the study of virtual communities, a discipline in which those classified as “informational” develop in two key dimensions: the practical search for information and the monitoring of it.<sup>1</sup> Both play an essential role in the construction and functioning of online communities and are also fundamental for understanding their dynamic and impact in contemporary society. For that reason, this article’s starting point is the following hypothesis: virtual communities can become strategic mechanisms for informational coordination when they are formed in professional fields that are highly flexible labor-wise, such as where free-lance work dominates; where organization is based on projects; where work teams last for a specific time and once that commitment is finished, each employee must look for another project with a new team; and in local contexts with obstacles for in-person social interaction.<sup>2</sup> The information that these job contexts require include possible contracts for a new project, personal promotion, sharing experiences and



knowledge, staying up to date, and building a professional reputation.

To function appropriately, an organization by project requires spaces for real and virtual information to meet up. By “real,” I mean what is known as information grounds, which are temporary social spheres that allow people to meet to socialize. In them, the flow of information fosters spontaneous, random exchange, known as serendipitous information retrieval.<sup>3</sup> To this definition, we should add that information grounds occur in physically delimited spaces, such as a restaurant, a company cafeteria, the reception room of an office, the teachers’ room at a university, etc.

The digital world also generates information grounds, manifested in virtual communities. Interest groups in cyberspace reproduce the serendipitous effect when they meet to socialize. When these groups show an interest in a given professional practice, they become practice virtual communities.

Traditionally, members of workplace communities that I have referred to have face-to-face meeting places to keep abreast of each other and listen to the information that they bring. To these meetings are added virtual meetings, given the facility for interaction and the dissemination of the conversations.

With the existence of socio-digital network platforms and the possibility of creating virtual communities in them,

\* Alejandro is a researcher at CISAN, UNAM; you can contact him at [alejandromer@gmail.com](mailto:alejandromer@gmail.com).

Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other similar platforms become key resources for work-by-project. Online information grounds make it possible for professionals from all over the world to connect, but, in particular, they allow communities participating in localized project spheres (a city, a region) to share information and knowledge and collaborate efficiently on projects in different social forums, overcoming geographic and temporal barriers.<sup>4</sup>

The initial working hypothesis suggests that virtual communities can not only facilitate, but even play a strategic role in informational coordination. Karen Fisher emphasizes that information communities are groups of organizations and individuals with like interests that seek to share matters relevant in information grounds or informal social spheres where people go for information while they socialize in other activities.<sup>5</sup> Gary Burnett, for his part, emphasizes that virtual communities have substantial potential for supporting a diversity of endeavors linked to information retrieval, provision, and exchange, which not only extends to the sphere of socialization and other kinds of interactions, but also to a broad gamut of processes related to information searches and creation.<sup>6</sup>

As already mentioned, virtual informational communities move in two dimensions: practical searches for information and monitoring it. In the former, concrete answers are sought for specific information needs, frequently expressed in very specific questions.<sup>7</sup> Fisher argues that the creation of digital communities has increased access to information focused on common informational interests, and in her study, she points to five characteristics of effective communication of information in these communities. The first is an emphasis on people's collaboration for retrieving and using the information; then, to exploit the exchanges about emerging technologies; to transcend barriers to information; and to foster social connection.<sup>8</sup>

Other studies about virtual communities with specific information interests, such as migrants and the health sector in Canada and the United States, have shown that people often request orientation and clarification about the health system; they share experiences and opinions; and they negotiate the forum's norms and etiquette. The content of the publications centers mainly on issues related to the immigration process, certification, and employability. Other issues identified can be grouped into three categories: preparation for the information, information as support, and informational practices.<sup>9</sup>

Regarding information monitoring, I should underline that it is the supervision of an "informational environment" to receive any data that might be linked to the community's current interests, thus proactively orienting the search. Reijo Savolainen defines the construction of information grounds, emphasizing the co-presence of a group of people as an opportunity to search for and find information accidentally or unexpectedly (serendipity).<sup>10</sup>

The research that has touched on the issue of information grounds emphasizes the role of spatial co-presence for monitoring and accidentally or unexpectedly retrieving useful information. We must give similar weight to virtual spaces that, just like the in-person ones, allow for the emergence of environments that foster sharing and seeking information spontaneously and unexpectedly.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, the digital sphere creates a sensation of place and purpose, allowing the user to interact with a variety of information objects; these may be information search systems, collaborative work, social networks, digital libraries, or any application for work tasks. Practically any interactive digital space offers opportunities for potentially chance exchanges.<sup>12</sup>

Another interesting aspect of virtual communities and physical spaces such as information grounds is that, for the participating individual, they become a form of "informational capital," understood as the capacity of an individual to access information based on the extent of his/her informational environments and levels of social capitalization and informational literacy.<sup>13</sup> For example, research on socio-digital platforms has shown that the information grounds approach reveals Facebook's following roles: it is a connector that allows people with similar needs and interests to come together and it molds their interactions; it is a prerequisite for constructing an online "third place" for social interactions; and it is an apparatus for serendipity, by sharing and storing information in multiple formats and controlling its flow.<sup>14</sup> It has also been found that communities of professionals on X understand

Information communities are groups of organizations and individuals with like interests that seek to share matters relevant in information grounds or informal social spheres where people go for information while they socialize in other activities.

Gorbis's concept of "information as a gift" in virtual communities underlines the importance that these give to sharing information and knowledge without any economic interest.

their interactions on that platform as an online space for the exchange of information. For these professionals, that social network constitutes a genuine space where they meet and relate to others, but it goes beyond being simply a place to seek and share information.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, we must incorporate the value of information produced outside the commercial field. Virtual interest groups are formed initially when seeking information that comes from peers with the same goal. People look for information that is the product of experience and accumulated expertise, which comes out of the enjoyment of some activity, of a commitment voluntarily acquired. In this sense, they are seeking information as a "gift," not something given for financial gain. The concept of "information as a gift" in virtual communities must be explored based on the division between social and commercial exchange and the tension that both exert over these communities' structure and dynamics.

Marina Gorbis underlines the distinction between the logics of belonging, cordiality, and sharing, as counterposed to the logics of the markets and economic transactions.<sup>16</sup> In her opinion, the digital sphere has opened up an emerging economy based on social relations, allowing individuals to collaborate and create knowledge, services, and even products. This offers an alternative to institutions like companies, which often provide information aimed to—and even manipulated to—favor their economic or political interests. In this context, the divide between the domains of social and commercial exchange becomes crucial. The inclusion of commercial interests can alter the natural flow of social exchange, making the members more cautious about the information they share or the interactions they participate in. On the other hand, the presence of commercial interests can undermine the cohesion and shared identity that defines many virtual communities, leading to their break-up or even disappearance.

In conclusion, Gorbis's concept of "information as a gift" in virtual communities underlines the importance that these give to sharing information and knowledge without

any economic interest. The intersection of these two spheres can give rise to tensions that compromise the authenticity and aim of virtual communities, and understanding this dynamic is crucial for preserving their essence. ■■

## Notes

- 1 Gary Burnett, "Information Exchange in Virtual Communities: A Typology," *Information Research*, vol. 5, no. 4 (2000), pp. 1-23.
- 2 Alejandro Mercado-Celis, "Industrias culturales y comunidades virtuales. El caso del sector audiovisual en las ciudades fronterizas de Tijuana-San Diego," in Alejandro Mercado, ed., *Comunidades virtuales en las industrias culturales de Norteamérica* (Mexico City: CISAN, UNAM, 2024).
- 3 Karen Pettigrew, quoted in Bazilah A. Talip, Narayan Bhuvva, Sylvia L. Edwards, and Jason Watson, "Digital Ethnography as a Way to Explore Information Grounds on Twitter," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries*, vol. 5, no. 1 (November 2016), pp. 89-105.
- 4 Nicole B. Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe, "Spatially Bounded Online Social Networks and Social Capital: The Role of Facebook," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 12, no. 4 (2007), pp. 1143-68, doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00367.x.
- 5 Karen Fisher and Ann Bishop, "Information Communities: Defining the Focus of Information Service," in Sandra Hirsh, ed., *Information Services Today: An Introduction* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
- 6 Gary Burnett and Harry Buerkle, "Information Exchange in Virtual Communities: A Comparative Study," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2004), doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.tb00286.x.
- 7 Burnett, op. cit.
- 8 Fisher and Bishop, op. cit., pp. 22-23.
- 9 Nadia Caidi, Anita Komlodi, Aline Lima Abrao, and Aqueasha Martin-Hammond, "Collectively Figuring It out: Foreign-Trained Health Professionals and Labor Market Integration," *LIBRES, Library and Information Science Research E-Journal*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2014), p. 118, doi: 10.32655/libres.2014.2.5.
- 10 Reijo Savolainen, "Small World and Information Grounds as Contexts of Information Seeking and Sharing," *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 31, no. 1 (2009), p. 38, doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2008.10.007.
- 11 Ibid., p. 41.
- 12 Lori McCay-Peet and Elaine G. Toms, *Researching Serendipity in Digital Information Environments* (Switzerland: Springer Cham, 2018), p. 33, doi: 10.1007/978-3-031-02312-5.
- 13 Scott Counts and Karen E. Fisher, "Mobile Social Networking as Information Ground: A Case Study," *Library & Information Science Research*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2010), p. 98, doi: 10.1016/j.lisr.2009.10.003.
- 14 Devendra Potnis, Macy Halladay, and Sara-Elizabeth Jones, "Consequences of Information Exchanges of Vulnerable Women on Facebook: An 'Information Grounds' Study Informing Value Co-creation and ICT4D Research," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, vol. 74, issue 12 (December 2023), pp. 1365-1383, doi: 10.1002/asi.24708.
- 15 Julia A. Hersberger, Adam L. Murray, and Kevin S. Rioux, "Examining Information Exchange and Virtual Communities: An Emergent Framework," *Online Information Review*, vol. 31, no. 2 (2007), pp. 135-147, doi:10.1108/14684520710747194.
- 16 Marina Gorbis, *The Nature of the Future: Dispatches from the Social-structured World* (New York: Free Press, 2013), doi: 10.5860/choice.51-6461.