

Forming Online Innovative Communities in the Book Publishing World:
An Exploration
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1. Introduction

The emergence of the Internet as a robust technology platform and the subsequent development of digital-based innovation have had a major effect on the media industry. Indeed, for the first time, technology is being used by firms in every part of the industry, e.g., books, music, and newspapers, to create value and reach new customers. For the book publishing business in the United States, which is about 150 years old, the development of digital-based innovations changed the landscape of the publishing industry forever. There had been technological innovations before such as CD-ROMs and desktop publishing but they had minimal impact. Suddenly, there was a change in what constituted content as non-traditional content providers such as audio publishers, technology companies, and hybrid content/technology companies began to use the Internet platform to develop digital-based content. Authors such as Stephen King distributed their books directly to readers through the Internet; entrepreneurs began to challenge the notion that books had to be paper-bound and created eBooks for sale; and reading itself was becoming a multidimensional experience with Yahoo providing not only the content but also linking it to music, advertising and commentary about the story.ⁱ

Along with being a platform for content innovation, that is, the development of multi-dimensional (physical, digital or a combination of physical and digital) content, the Internet provided a way for business networks of innovation to evolve. In the mid-1990s, when companies such as Yahoo! and Amazon.com were developing, it became increasingly clear that for such companies to thrive, they would need to acquire a network competence, which would enable them to successfully foster a complex set of relationships between their company and their customers, vendors, suppliers and other experts which resided outside of their immediate corporate environment. For managers striving to create innovative products and services, overseeing and exploiting such relationships between these various ‘nodes’ on the network became crucial.ⁱⁱ

One key aspect of these business networks were the customer - users of these products and services, who provided feedback instantaneously and often set up informal or formal communities. Such users frequently became sources of innovation themselves. The idea of users being potential sources of innovation did not originate with the Internet. It was documented by researchers such as Eric Von Hippel, who described how users created product innovations and had a great advantage over manufacture-centered development because they could create exactly what they wanted and could benefit from the continual exchange of ideas with other users in their communities.ⁱⁱⁱ Understanding the role of users in the innovative process is especially relevant to content-intensive companies. A recent example is the development of user-centric firms such as YouTube and MySpace where the ‘products’ that define these companies such as blogs and videos are entirely generated by users.^{iv}

As the ability of users to contribute became easier through the development of new technological tools, social networks and communities, which had always existed in the physical world, began to emerge. These early networks, which were not tied to a particular place or even time zone, consisted of a variety of individuals who were scattered geographically but who used the Internet as a conduit for discussion of common interests and ideas.^v Howard Rheingold, who pioneered such online communities, defined them as “cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace.”^{vi}

Various types of online communities appeared including special interest groups such as Usenet groups; professional associations and online forums where people could exchange ideas on specific topics of interest to them; portals, which provided a single point of entry for individuals and businesses to interact with one another; chat rooms, where users sought new communities and contacts; and short term groups where users participated in one time events such as online competitions, quizzes and polls.^{vii} Some of these communities had moderators and others were more dependent on users to keep them going. For example The Well, which still exists, is essentially an online set of forums which are available to users who pay a monthly fee to participate in discussions on such wide-ranging topics as entertainment and media, computer tools, and politics.^{viii} More current examples of social networks include MySpace, Facebook and Dodgeball.

This article will focus on the development of online book communities which are a type of social network. Communities have always existed in the book publishing world. Some examples of physically-based book publishing communities include book clubs that are formed by readers with common interests and the tight knit communities of book publishers which exist in large cities such as New York. This paper explores the notion that technological innovations have been the catalysts

for the development of new kinds of communities in the book publishing world. Such communities use the technological platform of the World Wide Web as well as the mobile platform and may exist both in the physical and digital worlds. My research was framed by the following questions:

1. What are the salient characteristics of online book communities?
2. What are the business models if any underlying online book communities?
3. What are the implications of the development of online book communities and other types of user generated content, e.g. blogs, fan fiction for members of the book publishing industry?
4. What are the implications of the development of online book communities and other types of user generated content for the future of the book?

2. Characteristics of Social Networks

In a recent research study which focused on Dodgeball, LinkedIn and Tapuz Mobile as representative social networking companies, several defining characteristics of these networks were identified which can serve as a basis for exploring online book clubs and perhaps lead to uncovering the salient characteristics of such clubs.^{ix} Initially, approximately 25 social networks were categorized along two matrices: a technological matrix, that is, Web-based, mobile-based or hybrid (incorporating both the Web and the mobile platform) and a purpose matrix, which ranged from purely social in nature to more commercially oriented. Most of these networks were Web-based and focused on the development of user-generated content, which was available for download to various portable and desktop devices. Users voluntarily contributed their own content to particular networks by posting information, but were relatively isolated from one another and as such did not really form communities.

While the web-based networks existed irrespective of time and place, mobile social networks such as Dodgeball and Tapuz Mobile were location-based and thrived in specific urban centers. These networks benefited from the development of new technologies, in particular, Location Based Services, which capture the location of a particular user and integrate this information into a wide variety of applications. For example, a Location Based Service might enable a person to find the nearest business of a certain type or announce their presence at a particular location, thereby enabling other people in the network to find them. Indeed, these companies encouraged their users to interact on a very localized level. Along with being venues for users who wanted to create innovative content, the members of these social networks directly participated in

developing innovative products and services. Indeed, Tapuz Mobile attributed part of its success to being attentive to the requests of its users, and firms in the mobile product development arena actively participated in some of the online communities in order to better understand users' needs. Finally, social networks provided an opportunity for businesses to tap into the valuable youth market and better understand what products will be successful for this market segment. Among the challenges identified were the lack of viable business models which can sustain such networks and the issues of privacy and security which need to be addressed.

3. The Evolution of Book Clubs

Book clubs have always served an important function as venues for discussions on books and for sharing ideas on book-related topics. Physical book clubs are by their nature localized and take place in homes, at libraries, and other locations. Such clubs or book discussion groups are usually designed to attract readers who are interested in a particular genre, e.g., science fiction and cooking, or are members of a particular segment of the population, e.g. children, teens or senior citizens.^x Book discussion groups meet on a regular basis and often have a moderator or convener. Members of such organizations come together in a physical location and communicate with one another about the book club selection at that location. Often, the thread holding such groups together is an overarching theme that ties the book selections together.^{xi} While some sense of community develops among the participants, once the book discussion meeting is over, little follow-up communication ensues. Indeed, physical book discussion group meetings are an isolated series of events tied to a particular time and place. Moreover, though book publishers may seek to promote their books through such book discussion groups, such promotions are difficult to accomplish unless the groups meet in bookstores where publishers can display their wares.^{xii}

With the advent of the Internet, there is now a platform on which book discussion groups can flourish in a more connected, richer environment. In order to understand the changes that have occurred in book clubs as a result of their evolution into the online environment, two book discussion groups were analyzed: Tabletalk, a literary online discussion group which is part of the web-based magazine, Salon; and eHarlequin, a hybrid book community which has physical, digital and mobile aspects to it (see Figure 1).

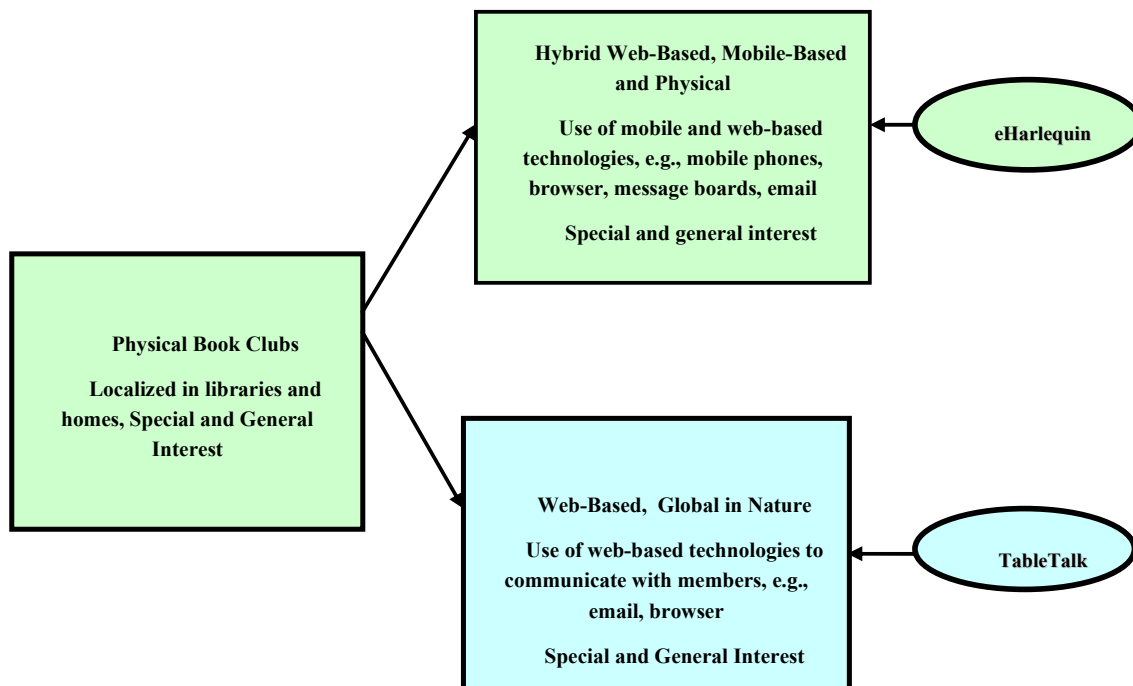


Figure 1 - Evolution of Book Clubs

4. TableTalk’s Book Forum

TableTalk is an online community forum which is hosted by Salon.com. Salon was established as an online magazine in the mid 1990s. The original intent of the magazine was to focus on books and on the literary world. The founders wanted to develop a smart, elegant online website that would attract a sophisticated audience. One of the sections in Salon is specifically devoted to books and includes book reviews of current book, interviews with authors and commentary. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, Salon pioneered the online content arena by offering its customers downloadable audio books and short stories, which could be used on portable and wireless devices; ^{xiii} and partnered with Rocket eBooks to offer eBook readers book reviews and literary articles on their handheld electronic readers. ^{xiv}

An important part of the vision of Salon was the development of a vibrant online community. TableTalk was one of the magazine's community outlets. Another one was The Well (referenced in Section 1), which Salon acquired in mid- 1999 and which for many represented a premier example of an active online community.^{xv} The magazine hired an experienced online host, and TableTalk began to flourish, eventually representing ten percent of the overall traffic on the website.^{xvi} Participants in TableTalk pay a monthly subscription and can contribute to the forum on various threads or start their own.

One of the folders in TableTalk is on books. The threads in the book discussion folder are wide ranging in terms of topics and in-depth discussions. For example, one thread focuses on Ulysses and other works by James Joyce. Readers contributing to the thread do not really discuss the book itself but rather the challenges inherent in reading Joyce and in particular Ulysses. Some of the participants in this thread make recommendations to other participants about how to tackle the book or what books by Joyce should be read before reading Ulysses. One interesting part of this thread is that it was a revival of an archived thread from 1997. Another thread is about book clubs themselves and asks participants to discuss what books their book groups are discussing. There are then discussions about these discussions. There are discussions about particular genres such as historical novels, political books, and cookbooks. There are also discussions about individual books that reflect the traditional idea of a physical book discussion group. Thus, one thread focuses on Michael Chabon's *The Final Solution: A Story of Detection*.

In addition to the book forums, Salon has also encouraged dialogue between authors and readers by setting up a Classic Book Club, which featured well known writers discussing classics. Unlike physical book clubs in which only readers participate, these online clubs enabled both writers and readers to engage in a discussion about a topic of literary interest. For example, one Classic Book Club discussion was about Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The basis for the discussion was an article on the novel written by Erica Jong in Salon magazine. The moderator of these clubs announced the formation of the discussion online and Ms. Jong along with 173 other readers, participated in a lively discussion about the book. While the book discussions did not feature ads, the Classic Book Clubs were co-sponsored by Doubleday, which was publishing a new set of Collector's editions of several classics (including *Madame Bovary*).^{xvii}

5. eHarlequin

Harlequin Books is a well known book publisher of romance novels based in Toronto, Canada. The publisher's main audience is women and rather than focusing on selling books in traditional venues such as bookstores, Harlequin chose to market its books in places where women shop, e.g., department stores, supermarkets and drugstores. Harlequin's sales of romance novels have increased from three million in 1970 to more than 131 million worldwide in 2006. Over 13,000 authors are currently published by Harlequin and it publishes over 115 titles each month under such imprints as Silhouette, Red Dress Ink and Luna Books.^{xviii}

In 1996, in an effort to reach more readers and exploit the potential opportunities on the Internet, Harlequin launched a website called www.romance.net which featured online book serials, community features and electronic newsletters. As an outgrowth of this website, the company launched eHarlequin.com in 2000. The purpose of this website was to provide "romance lovers with a safe and engaging place to escape the day-to-day pressures of a busy lifestyle, to interact with like-minded romance readers, and to purchase romance novels with ease and comfort."^{xix}

Since 2000, the eHarlequin community has evolved online and now has 50 million women who use its website. Much like Salon.com's TableTalk, the website has successfully created a community of readers, authors, and editors who continually discuss books and share their ideas and insights on Harlequin literature. Many of the discussions center around particular romance novels or a series of novels. Members post their messages which can be read by others and there is an online moderator, a member of the Harlequin publishing staff, who monitors the postings and also answers questions members might have. In addition, there are designated times at which members can participate in real-time chat rooms which are also moderated by Harlequin publishing staff members. Along with discussions, there are blogs by Harlequin authors and other community members about various topics of interest to the eHarlequin community.

The publisher uses this website not only for providing a community venue for discussion of its offerings, but also for distributing its novels through various formats. Thus, readers can buy books in traditional physical format as well as electronically. As a result of partnership agreements with Lightning Source, Motricity, and Overdrive, Harlequin books are available for download on handheld devices such as PDAs and eBook readers as well as desktop computers and cell phones.^{xx}

Harlequin has also pioneered a unique capability on its website, which is to provide guidelines for the development of so-called fan fiction. Thus, community members are invited to submit manuscripts for review using a template for Harlequin novels that is found on the website. These manuscripts are then critiqued by editors at Harlequin, proofread and formatted with proper

fonts and page numbers. Authors are then provided with instructions as to submit their manuscripts to the proper imprint in the Harlequin book publishing family. Harlequin accepts manuscripts from authors who have agents and those who are independent. The website also is source for authors who wish to learn more about the writing process and about developing ideas for their novels.^{xxi}

6. Conclusions

From the analysis of TableTalk's book forum and eHarlequin.com, it is clear that the online book discussion arena is an evolving platform for innovation. Instead of just meeting at a designated time and discussing a book with their fellow book discussion members, users can participate in a wide spectrum of online communities and thus enhance their reading experiences. Indeed, members of these online book discussion groups can get feedback on their ideas concerning a particular book or literary topic from a worldwide audience of readers, editors and authors. This enables the development of a diversity of viewpoints on a topic and members thus are exposed to a richer literary environment than in the physical book discussion groups. Like the social networks described earlier in this article, members of these online book discussion groups contribute their own content voluntarily and form sub-communities around topics of interest to them.

Authors also benefit from these groups as they are able to directly tap into their readership and solicit feedback on their books. Though Stephen King was the first author to sell his work directly to his readers when he put *Riding the Bullet*, a novella, on his website and invited readers to download it for free, the King experiment was very limited in scope. King did not receive feedback per se on his book while the online book discussion sites encourage continual author-reader dialogues and such dialogues seem to be sustained for an extended period of time.^{xxii} An important finding from my research is that unlike mobile social networks, which have brought people together in an urban-centric environment, online book discussion groups such as TableTalk and eHarlequin.com are not local phenomena; instead, they have evolved from their localized origins to becoming more global in nature. The technological platform has enabled discussions to flourish regardless of time and place.

For publishers, online book discussion groups are an important innovation. Though many publishers have their own websites, e.g., Random House and Harper's, they are not specifically designed for a particular set of readers. Online discussion groups enable publishers to tap into specific types of readers who gravitate to one of these groups because of a specific literary interest

and develop innovative products and services which can benefit these readers as well as entice them to buy books from particular publishers. In addition, advertisers can access specific markets, e.g., women in women's book club, avid travelers in the travel book clubs, and children and their parents in children's book clubs.^{xxiii}

Because of the rise of online book discussion clubs and user-generated content such as fan fiction and blogs, managers in book publishing firms may have to rethink how their firms are structured and how innovation occurs in the book publishing world. It may be that while book publishers still rely on a kind of cottage industry of authors to produce new texts for them to market, another locus of innovation and content generation can be found in more user-centric endeavors which are outside the traditional publishing companies or operate in partnership with them. A recent example is a company called FanLib, which launched a romance-writing contest with Harper Collin's Avon imprint. Avon believes that this activity will enable the publisher to reach out to core readers of romance fiction in a new way and capture a reading audience that might otherwise have gone undiscovered.^{xxiv}

Moreover, it is important for such managers to incorporate new web-based and mobile technologies in their businesses in order to reach a new generation of readers who may spend much of their time online and may find online book discussion groups to be more attractive than attending their physical counterparts or buying books at traditional venues such as bookstores. Indeed, some major publishers and scholars are already recognizing that while digital-based innovation can potentially change the nature of what constitutes a traditional text,^{xxv} it is important to experiment with technology. Thus for example, Random House has instituted a Readers Circle on its website, which is an online book discussion club that enables readers to connect with authors through phone conversations.^{xxvi} Fodor's, which is a travel book imprint under Random House, uses online forums to enhance and update the travel books that are written in physical format. While not book discussion groups in the traditional sense, the online community, Rants and Raves, hosted by Fodor's, serves as a vehicle for not only discussing what is in the book but also updating the print book since there is a great lag time between when a travel book is finished and when it actually appears in print.^{xxvii} In addition to participating in the online forums, Fodorites, as they call themselves, have formed a community of travelers which set up physical meetings around the world.^{xxviii}

Overall, online book discussion groups can have a transformative effect on the book publishing industry as the various constituencies, i.e., readers, authors, and publishers, are linked together in a continuous rich dialogue about books and literature. Such communities can only help

the book industry as it seeks to develop new markets. Yet challenges remain. One issue which is also relevant to physical book clubs is the overall longevity of such groups. Some physical book discussion groups have existed for many years but it is unclear whether their online counterparts will be sustained for long periods of time. Virtual chat rooms and other online meeting places are often transient in nature and this may hold true for online book discussion groups. While TableTalk's book forum has a subscription fee which provides it with a steady revenue stream, most online book discussion groups are free for their members. Such groups use the website of a host member who may in fact be paying for that site out of his or her own funds. Developing business models to sustain these online book groups may be necessary in the future. Finally, there are privacy concerns that need to be addressed as many potential members of online book groups may not want to share their thoughts as readily as they would in a physical setting.

The research on TableTalk and eHarlequin represents a beginning exploration of what is an important new phenomenon in the book publishing world. The virtual book discussion groups and communities that are thriving on the new technological platforms are a unique kind of innovation which bears further examination. There is certainly a need for further research on these communities and on the interactions that are occurring with more frequency between the various constituencies who participate in such communities: the authors, the readers, and members of publishing organizations. For managers in the book publishing arena who wish to stay competitive and foster an innovative atmosphere in their companies, it is essential that they be aware of the development of such communities and the value that they are creating.

End Notes

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