Managing Online Forums

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Patrick O'Keefe’s *Managing Online Forums*

Review by Jeffrey Barlow


Managing Online Forums is an excellent book for those interested in participating in or in creating and operating such forums. In this work "forums" is a reference primarily to Bulletin Board systems permitting asynchronous community discussions. These have been around for some time, dating back to the pre-WWW stage of the Internet, when communication was limited primarily to text, and that laboriously produced. The number of potential users of such systems was inherently limited because sending even short text strings was complex and frustrating.

Today's forums are sites, usually within an HTML web-based environment, on which registered members may communicate at the time of their choosing, primarily by posting messages to each other which may well be read and replied to days later. The common forum applications "thread" these messages, organizing them by topic, by author, by time posted, in a variety of ways so as to build a community of discussants around common themes. Here is what one forum taken from a recent class I taught looks like (contributors' names removed):

Joined: 31 Jan 2008
Posts: 30

Post Posted: Mon Feb 04, 2008 2:49 am Post subject: Dispatches
Question Reply with quote. The book only talks about U.S. troops essentially going crazy from the war and always being frightened of what may be around them ready to kill them, but were the Viet Cong affected in the same way? Did a lot of them go home from the war, like
the U.S. troops, and have constant nightmares, flashbacks, and basically not be able to re-enter society?

author:
Back to top
View user's profile Send private message AIM Address

Joined: 30 Aug 2007
Posts: 22

Post Posted: Mon Feb 04, 2008 4:27 am Post subject: Reply with quote I guess I have a similar question to the one posted above, pertaining to the troops, and their reintegration into home life. Not knowing much about this war, or any prior pertaining to the finer details of troop-life, I am curious as to the idiosyncrasies of the Vietnam War that contributed to the severe augmentation of troop psyche, especially upon returning to the U.S. - what about this war made it difficult, if not impossible for a reintegration into civilian life (citing particularly examples in the book of soldiers incapable of resuming a non-combatant lifestyle)? Or, if there is no difference, then what about this war, and information covering it, highlighted these issues, compared to the aftermath of previous conflicts?

author

To see the discussion in its original HTML formatting which makes it much more readable, go to:
http://bcis.pacificu.edu/phpBB2/viewtopic.php?t=373&sid=aa5b71c7226f31a6fb1efea2ace5f4cc

A well-run forum may have many hundreds, often thousands, of participants interacting in smaller or larger groups as they choose. Many users also appreciate the information or enjoy the interaction of others but simply "lurk" and do not post.
Forums are different than the more familiar "chat rooms," which permit only discussions between participants who are on line at the same time ("synchronously"). Asynchronous forums are more useful for many, who prefer the ability to post following careful reading and consideration of previous postings, rather than engaging in simultaneous instantaneous communications, which at the least privilege speed typists.

Because of the problems now presented by the Internet such as spamming, obscene or unwelcome postings, inappropriate discourse, or simply personal conflicts among participants ("flamewars") these forums are usually managed or mediated by an editor or editors.

These editors or "managers" as O'Keefe prefers to call them must establish rules for behavior in the forum, and then enforce them, perhaps to the point of "banning" participants or blocking the location from which they usually post. There are also, in these days of digital rights management and its accompanying violations, an accumulating body of law that must be scrupulously observed. And even the seemingly anarchic World Wide Web has its standards of etiquette and good practices, violations of which may cause a cascade of negative comments to flood the web, seriously damaging the forum that has offended.

Patrick O'Keefe is well qualified to guide the would-be forum creator, manager, or participant through these many issues. He is experienced in running a wide variety of such forums, including managing electronic communities of Karate practitioners, despite the fact that he himself has never studied any martial arts. That he is able to do so effectively is a testament to his understanding of how such communities are created, managed, and are grown.

Managing online forums is, not surprisingly, complex--at one point the author speaks of "cultivating" them which seems a precise description of what is actually required of an owner-manager. While some forums generate substantial income, most, as the author ruefully admits, do not.
These depend largely on volunteer labor and on the strong support of the community members themselves, making management of the forum as much a social interaction as a business. O'Keefe has many useful lessons on how to work with such groups, and seemingly has himself made every possible mistake. The lessons derived from these errors are as useful, of course, as those drawn from the successes.

At first glance Managing Online Forums may strike some readers as both over-written, full of restatements of the same information through repeated examples, and at points even simplistic as well. I myself have been utilizing forums in classes and on-line publications for many years, and thought that I had little to learn.

I was very wrong. The approach taken by O'Keefe, while deliberately popular and sometimes overly obvious, is extremely effective. His real-world examples, taken from a series of communities--of which the reader soon comes to almost feel him-or herself a member--are both humorous and instructive.

The author addresses a number of types of communities with different purposes, and extracts useful lessons common to all. He also discusses software for creating and managing forums, thankfully sticking to the most commonly utilized packages. He thus may avoid the rapid dating of his work, a common result of authorial discussions of programs found in such a quickly evolving environment as the Internet.

The work is fully supported by an on-line web site, and if O’Keefe practices even a portion of what he preaches in this book, it seems safe to assume that it will be continually updated and can itself serve as a means of enabling reader-author discussions.

While the author continually insists that he is himself not able to program nor particularly competent with computers, his use of terminology is both appropriate and deft so that those more advanced than he can yet benefit from the work. Those working at creating a community site will find the work a very useful introduction to the
technology, but by no means a fully adequate resource. Many more technical works are to be found in O'Keefe’s references and his useful appendix will give the reader a sufficient grounding in vocabulary and in the definitions necessary to fully understand the analysis.

There are many points at which some readers may also part company with the author’s single-minded focus on the smooth "management" of the community, even if sometimes at the expense of the freedom of speech of individual members. For him, such discussions are seen as primarily legal ones, rather than ethical issues. His readers are urged to keep discussions of politics and religion, for example, out of any forums not specifically dedicated to such content. Such rules can give a forum an otherworldly aura in which discussions seem more virtual than real.

While O'Keefe is quite careful to keep this work relevant to a very broad group, the holy grail of many forums is to attract a sufficiently large audience that advertising can be sold, or perhaps some larger conglomerate will "acquire" it for its own purposes. Despite the fact that the author repeatedly describes such hopes as unrealistic for most forum creators, one is left with the impression that even for O'Keefe much of the purpose of cultivating a large and smoothly functioning community is to somehow amortize it.

The book will be of lesser interest for those seeking primarily to understand the impact of such forums, or their social, economic, or political functions in an internet-enabled world. The current buzzword with regard to web-enabled communications is "Web 2.0," a reference to the most recent stage of the web, facilitated by the wealth of tools and on-line storage space produced in the last five years or so, and by the eagerness of readers to themselves become writers. This work however, is about practicing within this environment, and primarily from the perspective of the owner-operator rather than from a participant’s perspective.

Nonetheless, such forums can be useful adjuncts to such a wide variety of Internet sites that the work will probably go through many editions.