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# Online community and the personal diary: Writing to connect at Open Diary



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## ABSTRACT

Open Diary was the first online diary service to be created, in existence from 1998 to 2014. An ethnographic case study was performed in 2006–2008 to explore community-creation on the site, using the theory of sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004) to analyse site practices and the member experience. The study describes a cohesive community based on a culture of support, empathy and open sharing of personal lives enabled by anonymity and privacy protections. The article discusses these results in terms of community-creation online and compares Open Diary to current forms of life writing online, blogging in particular, arguing that it was the members' and designers' understanding and experience of the traditional pen-and-paper diary that enabled the building of a unique community on the site, creating an experience that is perhaps no longer possible to replicate due to the social and cultural changes that have occurred on the web since 1998.

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## 1. Introduction

Open Diary was the first online diary-writing service, described by some as the site that began the era of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The site was opened in 1998, coinciding with the beginnings of the blogging phenomenon. However, the site maintained a distinct identity as a diary site throughout its life, building its purpose – and its community – on the practices related to keeping a personal diary. This long-term ethnographic case study explores interaction on Open Diary, to show how the practices that developed on the site contributed to the development of a strong community.

The study employs the theory of *sense of virtual community* (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004) to analyse the site members' experiences, with ethnographic data collected during some of the busiest years of the site in 2006–2008. The data collection was based on long-term participant observation combined with interaction with site members via the communication tools provided by the site itself. Through this approach, the study offers a view into a unique period of online interaction, when the social scene that developed on the site was still extensively affected by the designers' and participants' experience of non-electronic communication; in this case, of the pen-and-paper diary.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Online community

The early discussion on online community often centred on whether communities can be said to exist at all online (Parks, 2011; Wellman & Gulia, 1999), linked to the pervading notion that online interaction is somehow less “real” than face-to-face interaction (Baym, 2010; Hine, 2015). At the same time, the discussion has been beset with problems of definition, and much work has been done to develop analytically robust definitions for online community and the experience of community online (Parks, 2011; Rotman & Wu, 2014; see Malinen, 2015 for a review of online community studies). This study focuses on the particular affordances that online interaction provides and associates those affordances with a clearly defined theory of community. In doing so, the study shows that it is the technological mediation of the interaction which in this case enables the experience of community.

The work of defining community that has gone on in the social sciences has often grappled with the overuse of the term by academics, marketers, journalists and members of online groups alike (Baym, 2010: 75). Where “online community” is often used synonymously with “online group”, social scientists look for ways to explain the continued popularity of the term; the element that makes “community” more meaningful than “group”. Typically, these definitions include an emphasis on long-term interaction and

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relationship-building (Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and a particular feeling that is elemental to the community experience, variously described as, for example, a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000) or shared identity (Baym, 2010; Cavanagh, 2007:119; Chayko, 2008).

A major strand of online community research has focused particularly on defining and exploring this elemental feeling. The concept of “sense of community” (SOC) was first introduced by Sarason (1974) and later elaborated into its most popular definition by McMillan and Chavis (1986). This definition has also become widely applied in studies aiming to identify and describe community experiences in various online environments, including a popular cooking blog (Blanchard, 2004), online groups for dealing with infertility (Welbourne, Blanchard, & Wadsworth, 2013), a Finnish newspaper forum (Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011), YouTube (Rotman, Golbeck, & Preece, 2009), and Twitter (Gruzd, Wellman, & Takhteyev, 2011). The current case study employs a particular elaboration of the original theory of SOC: the theory of sense of virtual community (SOVC) takes into consideration the particular features of the online environment which the original theory could not envisage (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004).

The theory of sense of virtual community begins with the four key elements of community experiences identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986):

- *membership*: a feeling of belonging and relating to other members of the community;
- *influence*: a feeling of influencing and being influenced by the community;
- *integration and fulfilment of needs*: a feeling that one’s needs will be met through membership in the community; and
- *shared emotional connection*: feelings of shared experiences, history and time together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

In consideration of the diverse social arrangements and technical solutions that exist online, the theory of SOVC then incorporates the notion of virtual settlement (Jones, 1997), allowing for a close analysis of the interactional structure of a site as well as the feelings associated with membership. The concept of virtual settlement describes the underlying structure of an online community, requiring interactivity, a variety of communicators, sustained membership and a common-public-place for interaction among members (Jones, 1997). The four elements of SOC are then applied to analyse the experience of participating in the virtual settlement.

This focus on the individual experience of community enables the exploration of any online environment as a potential space for community, allowing for the existence of different technical solutions and interactional phenomena, and therefore provides ground for the development of an understanding of online community as a particular phenomenon underpinned by unique elements that are not present or equally relevant in communities primarily based on face-to-face interaction. In the qualitative case study presented here, it was particularly important to find a definition that would enable a highly nuanced exploration of the feelings and impressions described by the study participants.

The next section describes the emergence of the online diary as a new tool for interaction, discussing the development and fragmentation of the genre and introducing prior studies related to community experiences on similar sites, ending with a description of the basic functionalities of Open Diary.

## 2.2. The online diary

The personal diary as a genre has a long history. Traditionally

associated with entries arranged by date and a self-reflective focus on the writer’s life (Cucu-Oancea, 2013; McNeill, 2003), the diary retained these essential features when first brought online. At the same time, the interactivity and publicity of the online arena have caused transformations in a genre previously thought of as primarily private, to be hidden from public view (McNeill, 2003; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). It is these transformations that are key to understanding the social scene on Open Diary, and they are also the distinguishing factor between online diaries, as they appeared on Open Diary, and blogs, which are a more recent development in the historical timeline of the social web.

Online diaries first began to appear in 1995 on individual websites (Kawaura, Kawakami, & Yamashita, 1998; McNeill, 2003). In an age of static webpages the early online diarists were radical in two ways: in frequent updates to their sites, and in sharing their personal lives with an unknown public audience (The Online Diary History Project). Yet the urge to share online soon revealed its universal nature: as access to the internet became more widespread, the number of diarists also began to grow exponentially (Firth, 1998). Open Diary was the first dedicated online diary service opened in 1998, attracting approximately 1300 users in the first month of its existence (Seminario, 1998), growing to 166,000 registered diaries two years later. The scene soon proliferated: LiveJournal, Diaryland, DearDiary.net and Blogger were opened in 1999. However, Open Diary is considered as not only the first online diary service, but also the first social media site to exist (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), making it a very interesting and important environment to study, particularly as the site survived throughout the enormous social and cultural changes occurring on the web (McNeill & Zuern, 2015) through the 16 years of its existence, with no major changes to its original design.

All of the sites mentioned above can be said to represent a popular early form of sharing online, providing different interpretations of diary-writing practices, but relying extensively on the familiar genre of the pen-and-paper diary. However, one of these interpretations of the diary genre was destined to become a phenomenon much bigger than that of the online diary: blogging began as a genre building on many “ancestral genres”, only one of which was the diary or journal (Liu, 2014; Miller & Shepherd, 2004), but in common usage as well as in the academic discourse the lines between online diaries and blogs soon began to blur (Herring, Scheidt, Wright, & Bonus, 2005; Van Dijck, 2004). Some saw blogs as simply another form of the online diary, perhaps one less bound by the cultural associations of the traditional genre of diary-writing, but sharing the key features of regular dated entries and a focus on the writer’s experiences and interests, and interaction between the writer and the reader (McNeill, 2003). However, blogs were even then seen to be a genre in flux (Van Dijck, 2004), and recent research shows that the attributes of blogging as a genre are still fluid and developing as well as dependent on their cultural context (Haferkamp, Lam-chi, & Krämer, 2011; Liu, 2014). In contrast, this article argues that the generic form of the online diary as seen on Open Diary was not only stable throughout the life of the site, but dependent on the members having a particular understanding of the genre, rooted in the traditional form of the personal pen-and-paper diary still familiar and relevant when the site first opened in 1998. Indeed, Open Diary maintained the use of the word “diary” throughout its existence in describing itself, despite the prevalence of the concept of blogging in popular parlance, and this distinction becomes relevant in understanding the community that developed on Open Diary.

### 2.2.1. Community on diary sites

As discussed above, there is significant overlap with the terms “blog” and “online diary”, and no studies focusing on community-

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