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**Setting up a Community of Online Communities: A case study**

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**Abstract**

This paper illustrates practical experience gained from development of an online community and connection of several communities into one. Since 1996 a group of authors from Slavonski Brod has been developing the resource network called "SBOnLine". The results of our work are visible through web portals of Brodsko-posavska county and a network of complementary online resources, from the radio station, newspapers, schools, to city and county official web sites. Second objective was communication of people originating from this area through Internet (located in Croatia or around the world).

At the beginning, the communication with people originating from Brod consisted of directory services, web publication and news/information broadcasting. Later, other services emerged: mailing lists, boards, chat and similar. Through the development of multi-user online tools for content publishing, the community became interactive. Today, there is an increasing number of authors and associates from all around the world participating in the content production.

Through connection with similar projects from Slavonia - "Pozega online" and "Osijek online" during 2001, a community of online communities called "Putokazi ravnice" was born. Modules of the online community are using integrated online resources, thus enabling the remote cooperation of the individuals and teams from all communities.

## Introduction

"People on the net should be thought of not only as solitary information processors, but also as social beings. People are not only looking for information, they are also looking for affiliation, support and affirmation... If we view people as social actors, then we should view the net as a social technology. A social technology is one that makes it possible to find people with common interests, to talk with them and listen to them, and to sustain connections with them over time." wrote Judith Stefania Donath in her book, *"Inhabiting the virtual city: The design of social environments for electronic communities"* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1996) (1).

"Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." wrote Howard Rheingold in his book, *"The Virtual Community"*.

These quotes from an excellent set of Nancy White's papers about Online Communities at Full Circle site (2) states online communities are not today's fashion thing. It is only normal that people use powerful communication media as Internet to join into groups and communities of different kinds. More detailed theoretical discussion about reasons, criteria, types of other online communities and finally about technology details are out of focus in this paper.

We will describe some steps of development of online community. This is a story based on experience gained through development of "my hometown and my people worldwide" sort of online community SB OnLine. Main tasks of the community are: joining people originating from this area (Slavonski Brod, Croatia) worldwide, popularization of Internet in local area and building of local area online resources network. Finally, we present the development efforts to join several similar type online communities into community of online communities.

## **1. Snowball effect: How did we begin construction of Virtual Community SB OnLine?**

Internet became publicly (that is, commercially) available in Croatia 1996. Before that, the majority of Internet users were from academic circles (through CARNet infrastructure). We have studied the new phenomenon, learning about the Internet through information sources available on the Internet itself. Our first online publication was on free hosting server - Geocities, and it consisted of several web documents about our town - Slavonski Brod. The effect was surprising - not a month has passed before people originating from this region had sent us a lot of (positive) feedback. They said that it meant a great deal to them to see information about their homeland, and they have asked us to publish even more information on the subject (and we did, ever since). To some people originating from Slavonski Brod, our experiment even became emotional need: Josip Lalich, in Melbourne, Australia since 1966, wrote: "This morning, I have browsed Slavonski Brod pages one more time. Since I have found them, they became my favorite. I visit them every day to see the pictures of my beloved hometown." .

People from Brod and Croats worldwide have contacted us more and more often, asking about the current situation in the country, giving suggestions as to what information should we offer and how to do it, and in numerous cases, offering help. Ivica Fonti, Melbourne, Australia: "I am a Croat born in Australia, and I have never been to Croatia. I work for the Croatian Radio in Melbourne, and if you need anything, we would be willing to help you. Also, if you have some news from Croatia, we would gladly transmit them on our radio."

That is how we got the idea of creating SB OnLine. But, to be able to realize such a project we had to overcome certain problems that surrounded us. We had an idea, the feedback was positive, the only question was - with whom and with what means are we going to do it? Warthorn, troubled and depressed local community was focused on dealing with the post-war crisis. To the local media, institutions and administration, together with the majority of individuals, the notion of a global network was something very distant and incomprehensible. Our idea of publishing documents on the Internet was as strange to our community as "writing on the dark side of the Moon". There about twenty internet accounts (according to the only commercial ISP at that time - HiNet) and not too many personal computers in Slavonski Brod area at that time (1996). The people who still wanted to give us a hand, offered their experience and co-operation in form of information and authorized material (of their own).

First of all, we have searched local community for the people willing to invest time, enthusiasm, knowledge and personal means together with us. We have held Internet courses for general public, we went to schools. The goal of our initiative - Brod on Internet and Internet in Brod

became closer to reality with the help of people from Brod and Croats worldwide. In the following two or three months we have purchased the minimum necessary equipment, rented the commercial web-space for Slavonski Brod Online (SB OnLine), and then our personal initiative (Z.Klindzic, J.Klindzic i V.Prskalo) was transformed into a long-term web project.

We had a clear vision of our main goals, which were to connect people from Brod dispersed in the global space (through online community) and develop quality presentation of the local community (through development of information resources). The expenses that came along were considered as some sort of investment that will eventually generate quality references and experience that will give us new possibilities (and that was later proven to be true).

Through "Mala skola Interneta" ("A Little Internet Course", fall 1996) we have initiated creation of web sites in several high-schools in Slavonski Brod. In exchange, we got additional collaborators from those schools, together with the two of the youngest Croatian webmasters in 1996 (two elementary school pupils). In October 1996, we began the experimental weekly publication of news from Brod on server SB OnLine (those were the first online news created and published in Slavonia). At that time we received a great help from people working in local media (especially from D.Eror).

Through co-operation with the local media in 1997 we got several new important collaborators (D.Svilar and Z.Muzevic), and that gave us the opportunity to introduce the Internet and our online community to the general public. We have used material given to us by the local authors (prof.Toldi, J.Miskiv and others) to improve the quality of the content sections (history, culture, tradition), and also started the section called *SB Links* ("Brodjani na Mrezi" - "People from Brod on the Net"). During that time the volume of SB Online's content began to grow rapidly - information were added on weekly and even daily basis.

In the section of the site called *SB Links* we have tried to connect people from Brod located worldwide through web address-books with following subsections: "Brodjani u Brodu" ("People from Brod living in Brod"), "Brodjani u Hrvatskoj" ("People from Brod living in Croatia"), "Brodjani u svijetu" ("People from Brod living worldwide"), and because of our co-operation with local schools, we have also added a section called "Skole u Brodu" ("Schools in Brod"). To fully extend *SB Links* section, we have also added the first business address-book of Slavonia - SB Yellow Pages. Kresimir Hajnal, Essen, Germany wrote: "Finally people from Brod scattered worldwide have their own home on the Internet. Thank you for that.", Bruno Maglic, Zagreb: "This is a very good way of connecting people from Brod that are temporary (or permanently) away from Brod." During the past 5 years of work, by accumulation of experience and references, the members of the initial team and number of other members of the online community have created web portal SB OnLine as it is now.

## 2. Realization of the Main stage: Web portal SB OnLine

Primary resource and main stage of our online community is web portal SB OnLine ([www.sbonline.net](http://www.sbonline.net)). The web site has developed from several web documents published in 1996 on Geocities free server to a web portal located on commercial server with virtual collaboration platform used for web content production and administration of online services.

Publicly visible part of the portal consists of two major content sections: a space reserved for online community called "Brodjani online" ("People from Brod online") and space for presentation of the local community called "Gradski vodici" ("The City Guide").

Section "Brodjani online" has communication, directory services, spaces of personal and community publications (zine Tools and Online Columns), and private virtual space reserved for the group of authors and administrators of online communities. In the virtual collaboration space, realized with our original system *Workspace* (SB NET, 2001), there are online tools for portal and database administration. Online server-side tools enable the active collaborators to do their job from any part of the Globe, using any non-modified WWW browser.

*Workspace* on SB OnLine portal is organized like a "virtual town square". Upon entrance into the *Welcome* part, the news panel and entrances to various rooms of services (which bear metaphoric names) are visible. *Virtual Cafe* has internal communication services where our members involved in *Workspace* creation can stop and have a little chat on our JavaChat or leave a message on WWW board. *Library* (Uciliste) has document archives used for automatic document exchange (with documents for self-learning, guides and manuals). *Web tvornica* ("Web factory") has services for activation of online tools for web production and administration of other services. *Workspace Office* has sections *Shelves* (*Police*) (tools for member registration and space administration) and *Community Council Forum* is used for private communication among editors and administrators.

"Gradski vodici" ("City guide") hosts the presentation of Slavonski Brod and local area through service information, news from Brod and other information (geographical position, climate, economy...). While certain pages are realized as static HTML prepared on a local computer, others are prepared and maintained in co-operation with number of authors through use of online tools, databases and templates. The City Guide has links to other important online resources belonging to "SB online Network" community, and there is also *SB search* service that can be used for information search throughout the community.

Initially, we would put there our own material, and after some local information resource would become visible on the Internet (focused around some specific subject, like local sport or business), we would take down our material, and point our links to the new resource. For instance, when CTR d.o.o. (local development agency) web site with information for local entrepreneurs was started, we moved our online ads section to their site. There were also cases when such narrow-focused resources, whether thanks to financial problems or loss of interest of their owners, stopped publishing (either temporary or permanently). In such case, we would again upload and maintain at least minimum of the content of that resource (with the permission of the previous resource publisher, of course). In example: first, news from Slavonski Brod were located on SB Online server, but with development of Radio-Brod online and Novi Brodski List online sites, we have put links to their information resources on our pages, and our news content production was stopped (for certain period of time). Whenever these resources stopped their online publishing, we would start RealAudio and text news content production on our server once again.

### **3. Web factory: Development of local community online resource network**

Individual non-linked narrow-focused online resources belonging to individual subjects from the local community can not render a good and complete picture of a local community (city, county or region). That kind of organization reveals very fragmented picture of the local community, each of the resources facing poor web visibility (which is usually accompanied by the lack of interest to promote other sites from the local community). The development of local web portals (city, county or region) enhances the local community resource visibility and enhances the efficiency of the community information space.

Our model of the possible organization and development of the information space, proven later by the experience we got through similar projects, is based on creation of web portal and network of interconnected local online resources by composite online community. A term "composite" as used here, means that online community members are on one hand individuals (directly involved) and on the other hand - local media, institutions, organizations, business subjects and similar (indirectly involved).

Our experience gained from SB OnLine portal development was put to good use in creation of other information resources focused on specific subjects from the local community. In 1997 the project Radio Brod online was started, which was, according to Croatia.Net, USA ([www.croatia.net](http://www.croatia.net)) the best Web project from Croatia in category "Mass media" in 1997. Also in 1997, we began experimental online publishing of the local newspapers, and with Tourist Board of Slavonski Brod we have created a web presentation of the town that had won "Stranice mjeseca" ("Web Page of the month") award in August 1997 ([www.croatia.net](http://www.croatia.net)). Then followed the official web site of Brodsko-posavska county (unfortunately, because of the lack of interest on behalf of the county officials, the last serious content refreshment on that site was done more than 4 years ago), official web site of Slavonski Brod, County chamber of trades and crafts, local development agency CTR, City hospital and others. When producing these resources, we had paid close attention to their interconnectivity with other presentations of our town (by linking them together). SB OnLine points to all these resources on its starting page, calling them "SB online network".

"Our town's web pages are the best there are, there are none alike" wrote Goran Jurisic. Some visitors started the exploration of their genealogy through information obtained from our pages: Martin, Wien, Austria: "I'm living in vienna - but my roots (so my grandma told me) are in Slavonski Brod. Now it s time for me to find them.... ". The others were capable of visualizing the stories about a distant town their friends or relatives have been talking all of their lives.

Jeannete A. York wrote from Houston, Texas, USA: "My best friend over 20 years lives next door to us, and our daughters grew up together. She is originally from Slavonski Brod and she was always telling me about how beautiful town it is. I have searched the Internet, found your web pages and I have finally seen things she was telling me about..."

A businessman from Brod, working in Hong Kong, wrote to us that he was very satisfied that he was able to show his partners from Japan an online tour of his home town.

Ante Petar Milardovic, CroLinks, Canada: "After I have browsed your pages, I came to a conclusion that I would rather come to Slavonski Brod than Zagreb. I haven't seen any other Croatian community trying so much to connect their emigrants together like your Web team does!"



#### **4. Illuminate the stage, people must be able to find it in the darkness: How to increase visibility in local & global space**

Web projects with a goal of connecting the local community and global space, must pay special attention to local and global visibility of their content, thus creating better chance for their site to be found. That is why we have organized and held presentations (and Internet usage courses) and various local educational actions in the local community. All that assured media coverage which was additionally enhanced by our co-operation with local radio and newspapers on creation of web content of their sites. The quality of our solutions has also given us the positive critiques and awards, which helped the popularity of our main server and online community.

Special measures needed for web site visibility on the Internet are necessary because Internet is a space that consists of several billion non-indexed documents. Standard methods for web-visibility are: submission to as many as possible Internet catalogs, submissions to numerous search engines, usage of meta information inside web documents, adding URL information to e-mail and news post signatures, appeal to community members to put link pointing to the community server or personally write an email to as many friends as they can (which slightly borders with SPAMMING procedures).

Through multiple copies of content located on various locations within the global space (procedure known as content mirroring) the probability of accidental "stumbling" upon that content is largely enhanced (also enabling accessibility in case of the malfunction of the main content server). The other "trick" is the use of "web satellites", creation of hyperlink set dispersed in the global space all pointing to the same server. Web satellites are that kind of web pages, published usually on number of free servers, that have a goal of establishing a pathway (through hyperlinks) to the central server. The well known example is the one by certain Turkish author whose web site with a message "We kiss you" has achieved global popularity by multiplication of numerous free web servers (using both mirror and satellite effect).

For the promotion of new web projects it is necessary to organize some kind of lottery, because people just love to take part in games and lotteries, especially if the concept (or the prizes) are original. When we were promoting Tourist Board of Slavonski Brod web pages in 1997, we organized an online lottery "What do you know about Slavonski Brod". The answers to questions were located on the various pages on the web site. The randomly selected winners were awarded a special charter proclaiming each one of them to be "the first honorary virtual citizen of Slavonski Brod", with number of complementary books about Slavonski Brod. Whenever Muamer Bajric, New York, USA, one of the prize-winning visitors, used to contact us by e-mail, he signed his letters with "the first honorary virtual citizen of Slavonski Brod". With minimal

costs, we have attracted a large number of visitors to that web site, who learned more about Slavonski Brod than before and the local promotion of the web site was also boosted.

It is also worth to mention that promotional activities can enhance the probability of a first visit to certain web site, but the repeated visits are the result of content volume, frequency of content refreshment, and usability of the content. One of the most efficient ways (if not one of the most obvious and widely used) to enlarge web site's audience is to listen to the visitor's feedback and their participation in the creation of content.

The reactions from our visitors are:

Vera Corkovic, Canada: "I am delighted with the fact that we can connect with people from Brod worldwide.",

Boris Opacak, Miami, Florida: "I have found my childhood friends that went abroad decades ago, and it was all done through these pages. Keep on working, it makes me proud to be from Brod.".

## 5. Release full strength of main engine: Identify and use motivation and attraction elements

The attraction elements that can attract people from both local and global space and motivate them for passive or active collaboration in the further development of the online community must be taken into consideration. Through analysis of our journey from experimental web page to online community we have found out and used certain elements of motivation to attract active collaborators:

- **curiosity :**  
experiments and research of capabilities of the new media present a strong challenge
- **a need for socializing and team work :**  
team work, realization of contacts in the local and global space
- **a need for community work :**  
most of the people are keen to participate in the presentation of their local community
- **direct stimulation :**  
there were intensive stimulations from both local and global space
- **a need for self-confirmation :**  
many of our members come from a war thorn area, and the collaboration here helps them to forget their troubles and feel like they are needed
- **the release of creativity :**  
it is rather easy to release their potential because of the easy-to-use tools and team-work with other members
- **gaining the experience :**  
the experience gained through projects like this can be valuable for team work of any kind

Important elements and motivating factors that attract visitors (readers) to join our community (if only as passive members), according to our observations are following:

- **information**  
consummation of information and news about the local community, especially important for those visitors who are in geographically distant places (Australia, North America), because they are out of the reach of the classic media
- **the use of personal communication space**  
chat, forums, gathering, discussion on local subjects
- **bounding the gap between people:**  
seeking old or new friends and relatives in a global space
- **connection with one's personal identity :**  
one can show to others through internet where he/she comes from, the possibility of genealogy, someone once described it on a WWW Board as "a feeling of remote presence in one's home town"

## **6. Intensive Work produces Value: Positive effect**

During the past five years we had participated in the production of several important local community online resources: ranging from official County and City web sites, through local media to commercially oriented sites. We have produced complementary and interconnected resources which rely one on another for further focus on specific subject. For instance, if you visit a site concerned with local sport and want to find out more about the local history, the link called "local history" would point you to a site exclusively dedicated to history. One of our goals was to involve as many as possible local subjects in the production of their own information space, because it would ease the demands on our volunteer teams.

Because of the need for participation of greater number of collaborators and the growing complexity of our content, we began the development and implementation of online databases and server-side software (CGI, PHP...) that will simplify and ease the collaboration and administration. The administration of content and services is being realized through the online platform enabling the efficient collaboration of several administrators, editors and content authors.

Our own program solutions, from simple guestbooks and WWW boards to online content production platform, that were made through co-operation in the online community and applied to SB OnLine portal and SBNet.Hr server, were later applied in the web projects of the local community. Through application of these tools, we have enabled others to achieve valuable results on various projects - like the online collaboration of M.A.Reljkovic high-school from Sl. Brod with two schools from Europe (White Stork Online Archive, multilingual e-zine EkoMAR, Europe at School competition) or online service for local entrepreneurs on web site of the local development agency.

So, after the phase of introduction to the capabilities of new media (at the beginning), the accumulated experience and practical experimental development within the online community resulted in solutions that are currently used by subjects of the local community, from schools and not-for-profit organizations to certain business associations.

### **Positive effects that this type of online community has on the local community**

- total presentation of the local community and its integration in the global space
- local concentration of the experience and own solutions applicable in local community development
- large number of collaborators capable for development of local online resources

**Positive effects for authors, active members of the online community**

- the development of personal experience in the active use of the new technology and learning its methods
- gaining personal references and affirmation in the local (and online) community
- possibility of participation in some future profitable projects based on similar technology

## **7. Do not stop walking: Joining more online communities into community of online communities (the future development)**

We have realized that our model of information space module can be applied to other cities and counties in Slavonia with the same result: creation of virtual picture of the local community in the global space. That virtual picture is in most cases non-existent or fragmented (as it was in Slavonski Brod area few years ago). The creation of online communities similar to ours all over Slavonian counties would result in a still larger virtual online community that would represent the whole region. That is why "Putokazi ravnice" project was started - to be a community of Slavonian online communities.

The initiative was welcomed in Slavonian towns of Pozega and Osijek, which resulted in founding of Pozega-Online (2000) and Osijek-Online.Com (2001). Using the positive experiences from SB OnLine and developing their own solutions (founder of Pozega-Online is an experienced programmer and IT professional) or by animation of the local community (Osijek-Online) these projects have developed rapidly, and their local communities have recognized their enormous potential. The creation of web portal with a goal of integration of the local information space into one community in which individuals can directly (or indirectly) participate can be a powerful motivation factor. The results of the individual collaboration were quick and of high-standard, and they are getting better as the time goes by.

### **Darko Giener, founder of Osijek-Online.Com has an opinion on that:**

"Osijek Online was founded in February 2001. Why did I start it at all? Out of great love for my town, which was combined with scarcity of web pages with organized information and lack of services that would connect people in this town. First there were ordinary web pages, and through time, they have developed into something I can not be without. After we have achieved full co-operation with SB online and Pozega Online and applied the same content schemata and solutions that enabled participation of number of collaborators, the "problems" came. Sweet problems. Day after day, young people contacted me wanting to write some news, offer their opinion, material, co-operation and bundles of ideas. In the past six months of our activity we have gathered a dozen collaborators writing on different subjects and sensing that this project is theirs. Recently I even got inquiries for co-operation from several noted journalists (from such newspapers as "Glas Slavonije", "Osjecki Dom" and "Arena"). We are just finishing a "jumbo" poster and t-shirts for Osijek-Online promotion. I could not stop it anymore, even if I wanted it to. The whole family is looking at me like I fell from Mars when I pay large telephone or server (web-space) bills, but it is really a small amount when compared to the satisfaction given to me by these young people thrilled by the idea, willing to co-operate in the creation of content of our portal..."

On WWW Board at Pozega-online site there are messages like this: "Viva Pozega! In the wake of the eleventh hour, while witches use their beloved flying brooms, I click on Pozega-OnLine and remove all gloomy thoughts.", and infection with fast-pace growing online community virus, seen before at SB Online is also present: Zeljka, Zagreb wrote: "Hello to all the people from Golden Valley all around the world and Croatia. This is a gorgeous idea and I will recommend it to other people that I know. Greetings..."

The exchange of experience and solving of new problems that we have faced during the collaboration with other communities have resulted in improvements of the initial solutions and development of universal standards enabling efficient collaboration between online communities. Tighter connection, helped by the similar model, exchange of web-portal software, exchange of mutual resources and services is also realized through mutual Slavonia.Net portal, and co-operation of all teams in creative work of all three community spaces.

Interconnected online communities of Slavonia were called "Putokazi ravnice" (Pathways of the lowlands), because their mutually linked portals are here to enhance the online visibility of this Croatian region. The mutual efforts have given us this information space, connection among users in three communities over Internet, and the future will bring additional improvements in quality and practical exploitation of the given possibilities.

## **The conclusion:**

In this paper we have tried to illustrate the practical experiences in the development of the online community (of type "my town and people from my town worldwide"), together with the attempt to connect a number of similar communities in a regional space module. Several examples that we have mentioned here emphasize the fact that clearly defined focus, goal identification and development vision are necessary for the successful development of online community. Motivation of the creative individuals is the main power that lies beneath the development of online community, and active participation has positive effect on the individual (accumulation of experience and introduction to methodology of the modern global technology). Classic infrastructural parts through which online communities are realized, Internet and W3, need extension of their possibilities by adding online tools and collaboration systems. Online community is a suitable field for experimental development and testing of own solutions through co-operation of community members. Experiences and solutions gathered in this way can later be applied in the realization of other Internet projects in the local community. Online communities of this type can be one of the possible ways to building useful local resources and information spaces.

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