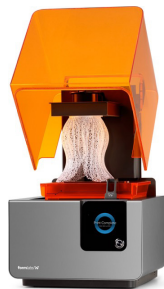


WORKING TOGETHER:

# The Potential of Virtual Communities in the Publishing Ecosystem

## Introduction

### *The Power of the Many*



Formlabs 3D Printer

*In 2011, researchers from the MIT Media Lab decided to take on the challenge of developing an easy-to-use and affordable desktop 3D printer. Up until then, the stereolithographic 3D printer was available only to a select few and far out of the range of the everyday consumer. Using Kickstarter as their crowd funding vehicle, the researchers set a goal of raising \$100K for start-up investment. They ended up raising \$2.95 million, with over 2,000 individual backers. The company, Formlabs, went on to develop that new class of 3D printer. Today, the lower end models are available online for under \$1,000.*

Yes, we have heard these types of success stories before, but it is worth remembering them as examples of how powerful it is to bring together many disparate strangers to achieve the incredible. The internet, and the platforms now available to create various online gatherings, have changed our world and continue to do so. New ways to assemble the combined power of individuals—financially, socially, creatively—are being introduced all the time.

Of course, the crowd funding stories reveal only one narrow aspect of this power. Consider how talented individuals from all over the globe can now collaborate on projects that would ordinarily be beyond the scope of a traditional onsite research and development team.

*The Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), now a part of NASA, needed to develop software that would allow technicians on earth to operate unmanned robotic explorers in space. This was no small task, considering that if anything goes wrong in space, a technician cannot go onsite for a repair. JPL created the project Ensemble, with the express purpose of allowing software developers to collaborate on a single workflow. The Ensemble team chose to use the software development tool JIRA for project management and tracking bugs/issues. JIRA, in combination with Ensemble, a collaboration software, allowed a worldwide team of developers to work together on the same platform. This expanded team eventually gave JPL the software that controlled the Mars Rover.*

Whenever individuals motivated by common interests come together through an online platform, they create a virtual community. Virtual communities are now pervasive and can be found in a startling number of disciplines and professions.

The publishing industry, however, has been slow to adopt them. Publishing is certainly not lacking for appropriate groups to engage; we have authors, contributors, vendors, and of course, our customers. Yet, any publisher investigating the introduction of a virtual community into his business will reasonably want the answers to several important questions,

- How would it work in my business?
- What would we hope to achieve with such a community?

It is time to consider some answers to those questions. We have a powerful tool that may have a natural home in our businesses. Let's take a closer look.

## What Is a Virtual Community?

### *The Tie That Binds*

Before exploring the possible uses of the virtual community in publishing, we need to clearly understand its essential aspects. Misunderstanding can cause us to interpret communities too broadly (e.g., the internet, by itself, is not a community) or too narrowly (e.g., social engagement can be an important aspect of a community, but not all virtual communities are defined by that).

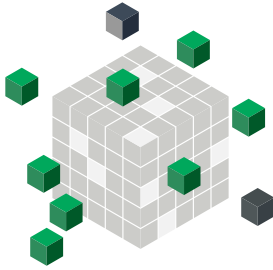
As a starting point, let's look at a definition offered by Constance Elise Parker in A Typology of Virtual Communities:

**A virtual community is defined as an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or rules.**

Note the members of the community are named as "individuals or business partners." The fact is that the virtual community can encompass personal or business endeavors. Particularly successful communities can combine both.

The notion of "a shared interest" is key. Having a common goal, or even a common passion, is what helps form a community, keep members motivated and provide the glue or "stickiness" that holds that community together in the long run. Without that common motivator, there is no community, merely an aggregation of individuals.

Community interactions are "supported or mediated by technology." This is where the role of a shared platform comes in. Each community will require a platform architecture that specifically supports its purpose. So, the



Kickstarter platform enables interested investors and entrepreneurs to find each other and pool investment funding. Meanwhile, the JIRA and Ensemble platforms give software engineers a common workflow in which to collaborate on specific projects.

The “protocols or rules” will also vary according to the purpose of each particular community, but there will always be some guidelines for the interactions between members. For example, in a collaborative community, members might be given role definitions that allow or restrict accessibility to certain processes or documents.

Ultimately, the virtual community gives us many of the virtues we would expect from an actual community. Note this portion of Wikipedia’s definition:

**Virtual communities resemble real life communities in the sense that they both provide support, information, friendship and acceptance between strangers.**

## Virtual Communities Within the Publishing Ecosystem

### *1. A Different Perspective*

Initially, appreciating the power of the virtual community in publishing may require some modest changes to the way we now view our customers, authors and even vendors. In the pressures of day-to-day business, it is easy to look at customers as sales targets, with authors and vendors as contractors. In a community, however, all members are working together with a common cause. In that context, we are partners.

Most publishers have used the power of the internet to create email marketing blasts to all their customers. For many, those blasts have had diminishing returns. Besides the various spam blockers at work, messages are often lost in the increasing “noise” of everyday email activity. There is also the danger that our incessant pitches are doing more to annoy the very people we want to win over.

Creating a community platform for customers around a common interest can positively change the way they regard the publisher. That platform may not always be an immediate path to increased sales, but it can certainly be an immediate boon to customer relations. If built with their interest in mind, a community platform can do more for promoting customer loyalty than any marketing campaign could achieve. In the long run, customer loyalty is what keeps us in business.

For the more successful authors, publishers may have built websites to help promote their titles, but those websites have limited success. Authors are an essential part of our team, so beyond selling their titles, we need to enable them as much as possible. There are virtual communities that can make our ongoing business interactions with authors more effective and help them feel more of a participant in the business and not just hired labor. Engagement communities can provide authors more direct contact with their readers and even other authors, again strengthening the team.

With vendors, we usually limit our interactions to working job-by-job and do not look for a more ongoing cooperative relationship. Interestingly, book and journal production itself is a highly collaborative process and is likely to be most effective when all parties function as a community. Working with our vendors in community fashion promotes more of a partnership relationship and ultimately a stronger business.

## 2. Engagement Communities in Publishing

Engagement communities provide their members with a platform for, among other features, ongoing interaction dedicated specifically to their common interest. Of course, the very name “engage” evokes more than casual conversation. In the dictionary definition, engage means to involve intensely, to engross. It follows that the stronger the interest, the more successful the engagement community.

As publishers, we are looking to bring together our customers and perhaps our authors into an engagement community based on an interest they share. We may look no further than our own content. Take this example from Wikipedia:

**Specialized information communities centralize a specific group of users who are all interested in the same topic. For example, TasteofHome.com, a website of the magazine Taste of Home, is a specialized information community that focuses on baking and cooking. The users contribute consumer information relating to their hobby and additionally participate in specialized groups and forums.**

Consider here the opportunity for the publisher to encourage customer/subscriber exchanges, lending support to the community that in turn enthusiastically promotes the publisher’s own content.

There have been a number of special interest platforms that have sprung up independently of the publisher, sometimes bringing authors and readers together, offering blogs, games and promotions for upcoming publications. In those instances, there may be a positive buzz created around specific content, but the publisher is missing out. The participant loyalty for such sites falls to the authors and the subject matter, not the publisher.

Of course, as with the cooking magazine example above, it is often certain trade subject matter—particularly for hobbies and crafts—that lends itself naturally to an engagement community. In a publisher-sponsored site, hobbyists can be encouraged to ask questions of their favorite authors or comment freely on what works best for them.

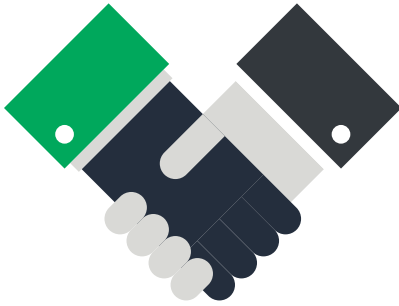
The publisher can release advance articles or chapters to the community and invite reader response. Authors might use reader feedback to guide their writing going forward. The publisher might sponsor onsite open discussions about particular hobbies or crafts, with the authors as moderators. There can even be contests to encourage readers to recommend new subject areas for exploration. The most avid fans will not only have definite ideas of what they want to see published next, they will also be buyers and enthusiastic promoters of the new publications.

Outside of the trade sector, publishers may not as easily find readers who bring such enthusiasm to particular subject areas, and those readers might not necessarily be the best source for new content development. As one STEM executive has noted, “New scientific discovery is hardly appropriate for crowd sourcing.” There are, however, still appropriate engagement communities to target for more academic or scholarly areas.

In the STEM world, for example, there are a number of author experts who might be brought together under specific topics. Publishers might partner with existing scientific associations already dedicated to specific areas of inquiry, such as cancer research for medical content or nanotechnology for engineering content.

Once again, it would be the publisher’s role to encourage interactions and feedback. There might be sponsored discussions/forums targeting subjects where new research is changing ideas. The interchange from such forums could be the seeds of new content. Authors could be encouraged to produce papers on new sample chapters to circulate back into the community and generate more feedback.

The “shared interest” here can extend beyond the intellectual enthusiasm for an academic topic. In scholarly research communities, funding for grants is often tied not only to publication of new material but also metrics indicating how often a particular paper has been cited. The engagement community can provide researchers as the platform for researchers to pick up new papers and cite one another.



### *3. Collaborative Communities in Publishing*

The distinction with collaborative communities is that they are often project oriented. A group collaborates together toward the completion of a particular goal or goals. For example, the JPL software developers noted earlier formed a virtual collaborative workspace in order to specifically create software for robotic space explorers. The “common interest” in this case is the project itself.

In publishing, we are well suited for collaborative communities structured around our own production processes. The creation of books and journals is a team effort involving authors/contributors, members of both the editorial and production departments, and of course vendors. Traditionally, the effort is held together by a project manager at the publisher or the vendor (for Full Service) or a shared responsibility of both.

As publishers have moved more work into the Full Service model, there has been a subsequent loss of centralized control. Authors and contributors often complain about being shuffled about from one person to the next, without being quite certain exactly what is happening with their creation at any particular time in the process. Scheduling seems to be getting reduced down to manuscript delivery date and final file delivery date, with little publisher/author knowledge of what is happening in between.

Consider a platform designed specifically for the various interactions that occur in production. Such platforms already exist commercially and might even be provided by the vendor doing full service work. The first benefit is that the collaborative platform provides a communication system dedicated specifically to the project. All members of the production team know where to look for updates and special instructions; no one is having to sort through a myriad of emails to find project-specific communications. Team members can be assigned roles within the platform that provide them accessibility to documents and processes they need or restrict that accessibility as appropriate. The platform itself tracks all functions and controls and tracks all versions of pages. Every member of the team can see where the project stands, and there should be no complaints about publications going into “black holes.”

There are uses for this platform even beyond the production of specific projects. There is the possibility for publishers to form an ongoing community with all their authors, providing a centralized platform through which to transact day-to-day business on a more orderly basis. Communications, such as contracts and instructions from editorial, information from marketing and even royalty statements from finance could all be routed, sorted and made secure. It would be a community held together by mutual business interests and most probably win more author loyalty in the long run.

Then there is the consideration of contributors for both journals and books. Contributor groups are a potential community that has yet to form. While they may work on the same book or journal project, they have no interaction. When the project is completed they go their separate ways. Let’s look at possibilities of contributors working on a book project through a collaborative platform.

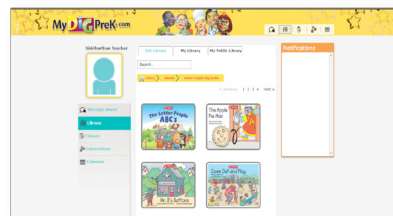
Once again there is the immediate advantage of the dedicated communication system. The publisher can distribute and track each project contract. Contributors can be invited to nominate their own peer reviewer, and peer reviewers can be added to the platform. The publishers can distribute style sheets, invite questions and share answers with the entire community.

Typically, with a large group of contributors, chapters will flow in over a span of months. Initial submissions can be run through the publisher's style template and be output as samples for other contributors to consider while working on their own submissions. Chapters for review can be distributed from the platform to selected peer reviewers. Reviews can be evaluated by contributors and editors, with questions and comments exchanged as needed. The platform will track and maintain version control of all chapters. There is the possibility of creating a buzz before the contributed book is even published. Initial chapters that are promising can be marketed and offered online by the publisher while other chapters are still in process. Any of the early chapters generating online interest might stimulate a conversation between publisher and contributor about future book projects.

Finally, once the project is complete, the publisher might archive community interactions and look for future uses of this community.

## The Abrams Community

### *Learning From the Students*



MyDigPrek.com

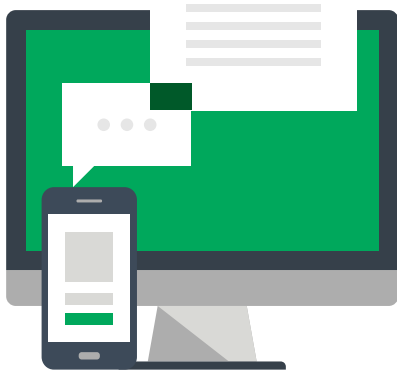
It seems appropriate to end with another virtual community success story, one that comes directly out of the publishing world. This story is not in the headliner status of a multi-million-dollar funding deal or the development of Mars Rover software. However, The Abrams community is an example of how connections made between people with a powerful shared interest can positively affect personal lives and business.

Abrams Learning Trends (ALT), a publisher of supplementary materials for pre-K through 5th grade, launched DIG!, a new pre-K program in schools. The program consisted of print books, teacher guides, flip charts, audios and eBooks. ALT was looking to differentiate their existing program and digital reader solution to make it stand out in the marketplace.

ALT implemented MyDigPrek.com that provided a secure, user friendly social networking environment. This engagement community was designed for interaction among classroom teachers, students and their parents, as well as between teachers within the same school systems. Note that the shared interest holding together this community was the desire to provide an optimum educational experience for these young children. In the case where the children are your students, or your sons and daughters, the interest is not merely casual but often passionate.

Since the users of the online learning system are all Pre-K, the modules are very basic and easy to use. For example, there is an online reader in which simple text is read aloud while each word being read is highlighted on the screen. Most modules are for teaching basic vocabulary or beginning math concepts, with interactive games and exercises.

While the focus of the learning platform is the young students, it is the publisher, parents and teachers who are actively monitoring the system. There is plenty of opportunity for parents and teachers to comment on their impressions of how the system is working and what is needed going forward. It was ALT's intent from the start to encourage this kind of feedback and recommendations in order to continue enhancing their program and to drive more user adoption. This interaction worked even better than expected.



ALT ensured the platform tracked and measured usage of all the modules. The usage stats, meant originally to be for ALT's own analysis, attracted the attention of the parents and teachers. Consequently, ALT began getting extremely valuable marketing intelligence back from its own customers. Feedback provided not only direction for the refinement and development of the site itself, but also recommendations for new content. Parents and teachers began seeing where there was a need for additional titles in vocabulary or math, in addition to the titles already provided as part of the package. As a result, ALT was able to introduce multiple new titles to the community, with guaranteed sales.

Here there is a fine example of a win-win arrangement. ALT succeeds with its business model and receives ongoing feedback for enhancing it. The parents and teachers are given an active role in shaping the educational experience for their children. And the children, we can expect, receive an optimized educational experience. This is what a virtual community does at its best.

## Summary and Conclusions

### *The Virtual Has Real Benefits*

There is certainly no lack of examples to show the power of bringing together a disparate group of individuals to accomplish great things. Though not so common in the publishing industry, virtual communities are now pervasive in our everyday life. To best make use of this powerful tool, we first need to understand the essential aspects that create a community. An aggregation of individuals is not a community if it does not provide a shared interest or common purpose.

Publishing can be an ideal setting for both engagement and collaborative communities. We have natural candidates for community in our authors/contributors, vendors, and customers, but we may need to consider a change in perspective to make it work. As members of a community with a common purpose, we are all partners, no longer just a publisher with contractors and sales targets.

Ultimately, the ALT community of publisher, parents, teachers and children is a small but powerful indication of the potential. There are existing platforms that can meet our functional needs and there are plenty of opportunities for creating communities. Now it is time to start connecting the dots between them.