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# Open virtuality or virtually open? Openness on the web as viewed by the IASSIST membership

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate an interest in the concept of virtual communities and to consider whether IASSIST could be characterized as a virtual community. Previously, the authors carried out an investigative description of the utilization of the IASSIST mailing list, answering questions like: What are the characteristics of the top users of the mailing list? Are there patterns of responses to initial submissions or to the subsequent requests mailed to the list? The work was carried out using the e-mails published on the IASSIST listserv over a period of time, and a descriptive report was most recently presented in IASSIST Quarterly vol. 29-3 (Rasmussen & de Vries, 2006). The IASSIST web site is an equal part of the virtuality of IASSIST and was targeted for the next project. The foremost interest concerning the web site regarded how the web site could support the users' needs in the future, with a focus on openness and the protection of privacy. This was carried out with a questionnaire from which the results are presented in this article.

## Focus for the investigation of the web site

A virtual community is a community that is to a large extent brought together and kept together by the use of electronic computerized media. Quoting from an earlier article (Rasmussen & de Vries, 2006):

“Virtual organizations have been identified as real (Davidow & Malone, 1993) or real organizations sometimes viewed as imagined (Hedberg et al., 1997). The concept of the virtual community has now existed for a good 10 years (Rheingold, 1993). The virtuality emerges due to intense use of information technology corresponding to organizational arrangements that potentially and practically break the boundaries of time and space. In our time of virtuality, people no longer have to share the same space or be in the same time, as direct electronic communication can span the space, and relayed (asynchronous) electronic communication can span the time. A voluntary association – such as the IASSIST – is considered as both an organization and a community, and by applying electronic communications, such associations have the potential of growing into a virtual community.”

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The virtual community has an invested interest on the use of applications on the Internet. The reason behind the investigation into the mailing list was to deliver an objective account of this aspect of the virtuality of the IASSIST organization. An equally objective attempt to describe the use of the IASSIST web site could have been accomplished by obtaining a web log for the site. These raw log data could then have been

processed into more intelligible patterns of page views and their accumulation into user sessions with the intention of isolating characteristics of web behavior (Kimball & Merz, 2000). However, the objective analysis of the user's actual behavior on the web site is postponed to a later time. While the actual web behavior would have sufficiently been explained by the log analysis, the investigation into the attitudes, expectations and wishes for the future implied that the request for information was to be directed towards users.

The focus of the investigation was on what kind of openness and/or protection of privacy IASSIST should aim for. Openness is a positive word and is considered to be a good characteristic, but even a good thing has its limits. The intention was to find where the audience placed these limits - where the audience had gotten too much of a good thing.

## The questionnaire

As explained, the soft issues of intention, values, attitudes, and future lead to the decision of using the questionnaire technique, and in order not to disturb the audience unnecessarily, a small, closed and heavily structured questionnaire – thus supposedly easy to fill in - was posted on the web.

The primary objective of the questionnaire was to obtain empirical information concerning the perception of IASSIST services, including the mailing list that is mentioned above. But several intentions lay behind the core of choice and design of the questionnaire. The attitudes of the membership towards existing as well as future services were to form a background for how the IASSIST web site should be developed. Furthermore, the questionnaire explicitly addresses the ethical dimension by obtaining information concerning the disclosure of different types of

individual background information as well as the utilization of a questionnaire securing the “informed consent” of the participants, which often is disregarded in aggregate and more anonymous analysis; e.g. the e-mail analysis mentioned.

The questionnaire was mainly addressed towards the members of the IASSIST organization but non-members were not excluded from answering the questionnaire. The rationale was that if the information about the IASSIST questionnaire actually did reach non-members and they reacted on that, then these people were probably in the periphery of IASSIST and therefore potential IASSIST members. Both groups were invited to fill in the web questionnaire by an e-mail that included a link to the questionnaire. This invitation was sent to the IASSIST listserv as well as to some other relevant lists.

**Methodology**

The degree of representativeness of the questionnaire can only partly be determined. The total membership of IASSIST (265 persons) was invited to fill in the questionnaire, but as the questionnaire should provide anonymity it is not possible to determine if a respondent that is stating to be a member of IASSIST is an actual member of IASSIST. One hundred and eight of the 138 respondents stated in the questionnaire to be members. Acceptance of the validity of this statement resulted in an answer rate of 41 percent among the IASSIST membership. The answer rate is not considered exceptionally poor; however it is certainly not a random choice for the receiver of the invitation to fill out the questionnaire form. We will expect a very strong bias towards the group of IASSIST members that are most interested in IASSIST in general, and in the IASSIST web site in particular. The methodology presents a study with self-selection, which always is a peril for the validity of a questionnaire investigation (Dillman, 2007). This construction can lead to overrepresentation as people outside the target group are answering the questionnaire and often these will fill in their e-mail address as “Goofy” and “Bart Simpson”. Many respondents (110) gave their actual e-mail address, which implies a high degree of seriousness. We have no indication that some were masquerading behind other real persons’ e-mail identities. Luckily, the invitation went to communities that were not inclined to waste their time on spoiling questionnaires. However, this construction meant that we cannot calculate the overall significance of the shown figures; although the number of respondents is known, the magnitude of the population--including potential IASSIST members--is unknown. This methodological mishap was accepted in order to gain more insight into the preferences of the total audience.

The data were collected from 13 March 2001 to 30 April 2001. Announcements and reminders were sent to the IASSIST listserv, as well as to other lists for professionals

where the IASSIST web questionnaire had been announced

**Results from the questionnaire.**

The results presented here concentrate on background information in the form of country of origin; otherwise the tabulations relate to the experience of the web site, the need or ranking of the availability of further information, and the attitudes towards openness and privacy on the IASSIST web site

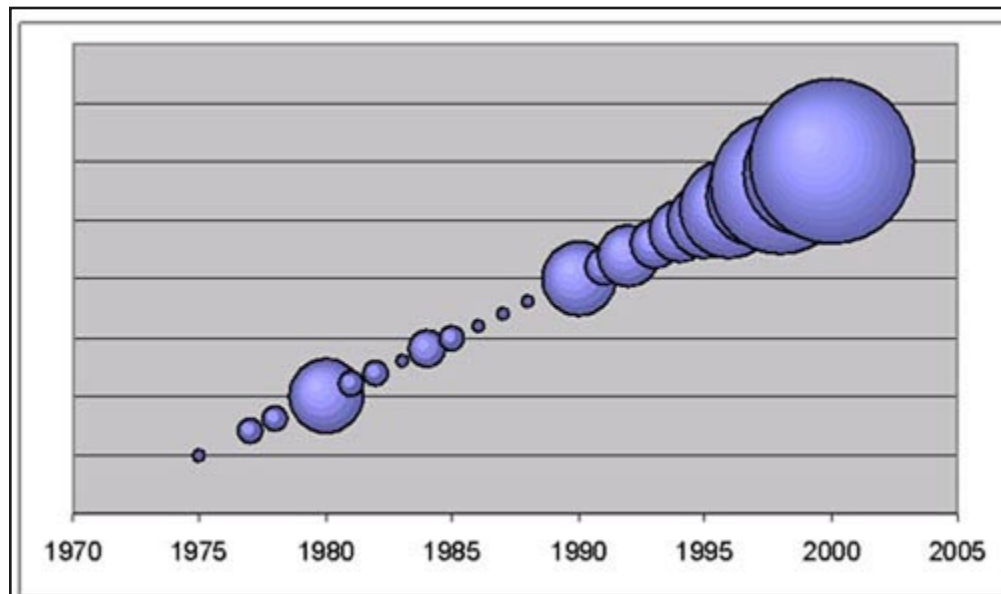
**Country information**

In an anonymous global questionnaire, it would be unethical to reveal information about the country of a respondent, but this information can be obtained fairly accurately from logs, especially the IP address. However, as 110 respondents provided their e-mail addresses, the country information was available by a procedure similar to that carried out for the mailing list study (see the IASSIST 29-3 issue). It can be seen from table 1 that a large contingency of the respondents are from North America, as shown by the mapping of common and general URL endings into this geographical area

Continent	Country	Count	Sum
Africa	ZA	4	4
Australasia	NZ	1	1
Europe	DK	3	26
	ES	1	
	FI	1	
	FR	1	
	IL	1	
	NL	5	
	UK	14	
North America	CA	17	79
	COM	7	
	EDU	46	
	GOV	3	
	NET	2	
	ORG	4	
no e-mail given		28	28
<b>Total</b>			<b>138</b>
<b>Table 1.</b> Distribution of questionnaire respondents by country			

### IASSIST Conferences

As we mentioned in the earlier article, which reported on the IASSIST mailing list, one of the questions we wanted to shed light on was, "Is there IASSIST life between conferences?" It was confirmed that there is a virtual life. But the question was put in a negative manner, as if we expected there to be little life. We could also have stressed the high degree of IASSIST life found at the conferences and for the arrangers and presenters also in the time span up to the conference. The conference is also a recruiting platform, and one of the questions asked concerned when the respondent first participated in an IASSIST conference. The size of the bubbles indicates the number of first-time participants



**Figure 1.** Attending their first IASSIST conference, members only (N=108)

Figure 1 shows that many members attended their first IASSIST conference several and even many years ago. It is stipulated that members, to a large degree, have continuous uninterrupted membership. However, there are also new members joining in the more recent years. A more accurate description can only be made with the use of the full member registry.

In an investigation of virtuality, it seems to be strange to bother with the physical closeness that members experience at conferences, where attendees are in the same space at the same time. However, virtuality is not absolute. The interrelatedness of reality and virtuality seems to be a synergic fortification of both. Thus, we postulate that it is the virtual activities between conferences that bring people to the conferences, and likewise the participation in conferences gives attendees the incentive to participate on the mailing list, to browse the web site, etc.

### Openness to all

IASSIST has members and non-members. If non-members receive the same information products as the members, what is the incentive to become a member? On one hand, this calls for reserving services to members. On the other hand; allowing non-members to utilize some services from IASSIST will act as an advertisement in addition to spreading the impact and supporting the mission of IASSIST. The problem for the organization is that it must decide on a reasonable differentiation of the products available for members and non-members or, phrased otherwise, to differentiate between the paying customers and the non-paying users. The product of the information age is information. In the digital age the information

product is often reproduced, distributed and spread without any substantial extra cost to the organization. So one could argue for giving it away to potential customers (Keen, 2001: 168). There are plenty of free offers: e-mail accounts, Wikipedia encyclopedia articles, web pages, freeware, home videos, etc. However, since "there is no such thing as a free lunch," the gratis offer is done for a reason. Differentiating between the cost product and the free product often implies that there is an extra cost to the organization. The question is whether the extra cost is outweighed by the extra money raised through membership. There are examples where the

premium product is the only product, and a new product with an inferior functionality is obtained only by some versioning effort from the organization (Shapiro & Varian, 1999: 62).

What functionalities on the IASSIST web site should be available for members and non-members? These questions were asked of the respondents and the answers give an indication of the membership's willingness to pay for features that can be used by all. In table 2, the different services that were investigated in the questionnaire have been ranked by the membership, as only the opinions from IASSIST members are included. The ranked order reflects whether the service should be available to members only or freely accessible for everyone.

The members highly agree that non-members should be granted free access and searching capability of IASSIST

IASSIST web	Free Access for all	For members Only	
1. Search of IASSIST pages	83.7	16.3	
2. Search of articles in the IQ	82.5	17.5	
3. Discussion list archive	36.2	63.8	
4. Information on IASSIST members	23.8	76.2	
5. E-mail discussion list	18.9	81.1	

**Table 2.** Opinions from the membership towards access for non-members, percentages (only members (N=108), missing data excluded, N between 101 and 106

Quarterly (IQ) as well as free access to search the pages of the web site (items 1 and 2). The interpretation of these findings is that the newsletter is considered an important vehicle for the spread of IASSIST influence and that the IASSIST pages should also be available as a promotional vehicle. The second item includes not only the search, and thus identification of relevant articles, but also the general availability of the IQ (in full text PDF) that was readily available before this questionnaire was launched.

There is a remarkable distinction between the different functionalities of free access. The evaluation is reversed from a liberal 20-80 distribution in favor of openness for items 1 and 2 to a restrictive 80-20 distribution for the items 3 to 5. One factor in explaining this dramatic shift may be the intention behind the content. While the web pages and the articles in the IQ are written with the intention of being published for a wider audience, the other items – mails to the discussion list and the related archive - are communication between members taking place in a more secluded fashion within virtual space and thus these contributions were not intended for non-members.

### Openness about personal information

This section concerns the disclosure of information about personal members. Less than 25 percent are in favor of opening information on IASSIST members to non-members. The next question is: Should the information about IASSIST members be available at all, i.e. available for the membership itself? A large majority of the membership found that this type of information should be made available (77 persons or 71.3 percent).

Openness is a broad concept, but how open? One

way to look into this was to investigate the different attributes of the individual that were being disclosed in a membership database. The people who found that membership information should be available were then asked which attributes describing individual members should be made available:

The percentage of respondents who agreed with the inclusion of specific personal information was expected to be very high. This is because only respondents who were positive towards a general description are included here. If a general description is acceptable at least some of the specific descriptive items themselves must be acceptable as well. A member's name is the most obvious identification and the entry point for viewing other information concerning the person. In the list above (Table 3), even Name has not received 100 percent. This reveals some information about the precision of the measures obtained

Descriptive attributes to include in a web description of members	Percentage Yes
Name	98
E-mail address	96
Work address	93
Interest areas	91
Job description	74
Link to personal web page	66
Portrait	21

**Table 3.** Ordered list of attributes to be included in the member description (N=77)

from quick answers. The person's e-mail address being the prime address for contact is also high and above other attributes like work address and interest areas. Lower down on the list is the description of the job and links to a personal web page. The reason behind this could be the instability of information due to changes in employment. Lastly, the inclusion of a portrait ranges very low among these descriptive items. Online communication has been analyzed for its effects on identity deception (Donath, 1998) but in the mailing list, the identity of the person is well established by name and e-mail. Even though identity is carried by physical appearance, and includes an online portrait, this portrait (according to members) is apparently crossing the line of privacy and adding too much "body" to the virtual community. In addition, adding an online portrait may counteract with the traditional perception of a virtual community as being virtual only.

### **And then came the future**

Now six years later we can present what information is actual available on the IASSIST web pages that describes the membership. First of all, it should be stressed that the membership directory is only available to IASSIST members. Secondly, the actual attributes comprise all of those mentioned above – with the exception of the picture. Thirdly, the members provide their own attributes. A member not interested in revealing much information may be reluctant to fill in information. Furthermore, some information can be hidden by a member because they can choose "No" in the "Show Contact Information" field.. The feature of hiding information applies equally to the "Profile" which is a text field for description of what could be both "Job description" and "Interest areas".

### **Use and usefulness of the IASSIST mailing list**

The analysis of the IASSIST mailing list (Rasmussen & de Vries, 2006) is supplemented by the impression or opinion of the mailing list by its members. Accordingly, the questionnaire included some questions as to the use of the mailing list. The perceived values of mailing lists are investigated in some earlier literature (Hardie & Neon, 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1992: 34). These values are often directly related to performance improvement via computer-mediated communication (Rice, 1994).

Performance improvement was the focus for the question concerning the usefulness of the mailing list as related to the job of the respondent. Among the 112 persons that responded as members of the IASSIST mailing list, 103 persons (92 percent) answered "agree" or "agree strongly" to the question concerning usefulness of the mailing list. Even for the small group that did not find the mailing list as having any obvious, or recently experienced, direct job value (8 percent) there might be valuable aspects of the mailing list to the person, e.g. information concerning a future job area, affiliation with the area by pure interest, etc. The proof of the continued interest in the mailing list

lies in the fact that these people have not unsubscribed to the mailing list even though these respondents did not identify any positive connection between the information and discussion on the mailing list and their job.

The high account of usefulness of the mailing list among the membership can be taken as evidence for the mailing list being the "diamond" in the collection of functionalities available to the IASSIST members. To a high degree the mailing list can be considered to be the strongest incentive to becoming a member of IASSIST.

A mailing list has also been treated as the vehicle for the analysis of virtual communities. A recent article (Blanchard & Markus, 2004: 67) cites and stresses the "sense of community" concept placed in a framework of four dimensions: "feelings of membership, feelings of influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection". The figures above on the usefulness of the IASSIST list are an example of "fulfillment of needs". The well distributed (democratic) activity on the mailing list shown in our earlier article can be interpreted as support for "feeling of influence". To a certain extent the high percentage (64 percent) of respondents who answer positively to a question of "Have you ever responded or reacted to information on the IASSIST mailing list by sending a reply directly to the sender or discussing so your comment did not show up on the IASSIST mailing list?" can also be taken as an emotional connection with the listserv uses – and even specific users.

In the discussion of community, and especially of the virtual community, it should be noted that most membership applications take place in connection to the non-virtual conferences. The conferences are thus a strong aspect of non-virtuality supporting the sense of community in the membership.

### **Openness for others and towards self**

The title phrase of "open virtuality" is directed towards the aspect of opening the virtual community for people outside the membership. We were searching for the limits of openness and found them to be related to the mailing list and the membership directory. These areas were considered to be for members only. The concept of "virtuality" is also a synonym for "sort of" and including "but not quite". "Virtually open" means that the IASSIST offerings look as if they are open, but they are not quite all available. The "not quite" openness also extends to the opinion of the membership towards what attributes should not be included. It is "sort of" paradoxical that photos are not included, while on the other hand photos from the IASSIST conferences are considered to be popular and are often placed on a parallel site for amusement of the IASSIST conference attendees.

### **Conclusion**

The earlier investigation of the IASSIST e-mail list and this reporting of the questionnaire data have mostly been descriptive. The mailing list itself is considered a service that should be restricted to the membership. But other contributions that are directed towards a bigger audience (articles in the IASSIST Quarterly or web pages) are considered suitable. The reason behind this consideration is the general attitude towards openness to information and research. But there might also be an aspect of promotion of the IASSIST organization. The bigger audience not belonging to the IASSIST community should be allowed to benefit from many of these services.

The IASSIST organization and its members are evidence of a process where the boundary of the organization exemplified by the boundaries of the organizational services and of membership (and thus the boundary of the community of members) has become more blurred. The blurred boundaries concerning time and space transform the community into a virtual community. And the availability of at least parts of the offerings to non-members is also contributing to the blurredness. The joke of Groucho Marx that he would not join a club if it would have people like him as a member has become a fact. In the virtual community you don't have to join the club in order to benefit from some of the services.

\* At the IASSIST conference in Amsterdam in May 2001 "Preliminary findings from the IASSIST web questionnaire 2001" were presented by Karsten Boye Rasmussen. This was part of the collective presentation by Karsten Boye Rasmussen and Repke de Vries: "Professional associations in transition to virtual communities for collaboration: the case of IASSIST". The finding have been discussed at some IASSIST administrative meetings, was latest used as PowerPoint slides at the 2007 conference in Montreal in the panel session "Care and Maintenance of a Global Knowledge Community", and are also to some degree reflected in the actual layout of the IASSIST website [www.iassistdata.org](http://www.iassistdata.org) that has expanded significantly in content and functionality. Repke de Vries, Department of Public Services at The Royal Library of the Netherlands. Karsten Boye Rasmussen, Department of Marketing and Management at University of Southern Denmark. Contact about the articles should be directed to: [kbr@sam.sdu.dk](mailto:kbr@sam.sdu.dk).

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