C&T: two characters in search of a context?

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We borrow the title from the famous paper by Bannon and Schmidt but we add a question mark. With that paper those authors characterized CSCW as a new field that was emerging from previous research fields: they identified some basic issues that, in their view, should be dealt with by a useful research effort within CSCW.

The question mark substantially downsizes the ambition of the present note and points to the question: does C&T need a similar elaboration to better identify its context?

The theme of the research field focused on the interplay between communities and technologies is not new. Since many years this theme is part of the research efforts in its specific venues as well as in combination with other research ambits. What can be observed is that the way in which the theme is faced in all these ambits does not overtly recognized their specificity, both in terms of theoretical foundations, target situations and involved technologies.

In other words, the research questions behind this theme are not clearly stated, they do not raise interesting debates nor they constitute a shared understanding of which are the main issues that can build a tight and productive "research community" around them.

One reason can be that the term community itself is very generic and encompasses disparate situations: sometimes some form of connectivity or the presence of a common interest/goal or the sharing of some sources/repositories of information is considered enough to identify a community; sometimes a set of stronger ties are used to circumscribe it. The huge set of terms used to "call a group of people a community" testifies this confused situations. We are not claiming the need of a precise classification (an exercise that did not bring to any useful result) but at least the definition of some dimensions that allow the research community to grasp the complexity behind the surface, in order to characterize, compare, discuss about the results that have been obtained in different settings. This is a precondition to identify a common research field in which the various contributions are not scattered and can each build on top of the other contributions.

A symmetric argument can be done for the technology. Its development is left in the hand of the big players while the research community is just observing and reporting on its usage in different contexts. The necessity of a "critical mass" to perform meaningful validations is killing the search for innovation, unless in very specific contexts. The same holds for the learning curve that requires the users to spend time to appropriate new, and sometime slightly more complex functionalities.   Last but not least, the understanding of the true interplay between the technology and the community it supports requires longitudinal observations that are difficult in the wild and impossible in more controlled situations.

However, irrespective of the above difficulties (that are common to other research fields), innovation has to be pursued both in the development of new, and empirically grounded, functionalities and in the novel usage of existing ones. User-centred and participatory design approaches have to be combined with techniques to elicit the true needs and with rapid prototyping by involving the target communities from the very beginning.

Also in the ambit that we are most interested in, communities within organizations, things are not going better. There is little attention to discover the "true" communities of practice (with their conventions and shared "repertoire") and to construct ad hoc supports; the popular trend is toward the so called corporate social networks. Indeed, the common attitude is more oriented to the deployment of kinds of WEB 2.0 supports, with standard functionalities enriched by security policies to protect sensible contents, and see what unfolds afterwards through interviews and surveys. On the one hand, there is in general a lack of interest in reasoning, ex-ante, about the process that flanks the introduction of a social computing technology; on the other hand, the post-hoc observations are not generating an evolving set of criteria to evaluate (and again compare) the impact and the effectiveness of the overall process; in this respect, the objectives are in general very generic: sharing experiences, promoting innovation, strengthening ties, and so on. They do not allow for a sound discussion about the extent to what they have been really achieved or not, and about how to evaluate this fact. Finally, a decreasing attention is paid to the care that is needed to keep a community alive and to the related strategies. Should we promote and experiment (if possible) a change of perspective in this ambit?

We are not sure that these considerations can help answering the question raised in the title and identifying fruitful and distinctive research questions. But we are sure that such an effort is needed to keep this research line alive and make the research community around it able to attract/stimulate good cases, creative technologies and their joint evaluation.
This is important to better position the C&T conference too: but we believe this is not the primary problem or goal.