

## POWER RELATIONS IN CYBER COMMUNITIES

Nguyen, Lemai, lemai@deakin.edu.au, School of Information Systems, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia

Torlina, Luba, lubat@deakin.edu.au, School of Information Systems, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia

Peszynski, Konrad, konradp@deakin.edu.au, School of Information Systems, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia

Corbitt, Brian, bcorbitt@deakin.edu.au, School of Information Systems, Deakin University, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood, Victoria 3125, Australia

### Abstract

*Peoples' need to socialise with others and greed for power can be best captured with Aristotle's famous description of human beings as "political animals"/"social animals". It is interesting to watch how cyber communities, such as Web-based forums and mailing lists, manifest themselves through social interactions and shared values, membership and friendship, and commitments and loyalty. It is important to examine how power relations in these communities are formed, exercised and evolve dynamically. This paper explores power relations as they emerge in two online communities and suggests a new understanding of the formation and evolution of power in virtual societies.*

*Keywords: Power relations, virtual community, knowledge management, national culture*

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Cyber communities, such as Web-based forums and mailing lists, manifest themselves through social interactions and shared values, membership and friendship, and commitments and loyalty. To understand one aspect of social interactions, there is a need to examine how power relations in these communities are formed, exercised and evolve dynamically in cyber space where the actors are often anonymous and yet gather to socialise and exercise power. This paper will examine power relations as they emerge and evolve in virtual communities, particularly in two Vietnamese virtual communities.

Power manifests itself in a number of ways including decision making, agenda setting and in the shaping of felt needs. Traditionally, power has been seen as dependent and existential (Markus, 1983). Power creates and is created by organisational attributes, social or cultural attributes and individual attributes. Recently, Corbitt and Thanasankit (2002) suggest the notation of hegemony to understand power in terms of leadership and acceptance, particularly in the context of national culture. Peszynski and Corbitt (2003) argue that power and hegemony change and are changed. They form and reform as the context in which it is created or displayed and is recontextualised by the actors operating within it.

The context, in which the creation and exercising of power is explored in this paper, can be characterised by two socio-technological attributes: virtual dimension and national cultures.

- With the Internet and computer networks becoming an accepted channel for communication, cooperation and collaboration, emerging virtual structures, such as virtual communities and teams, play increasingly significant role in business and social activities (Hiltz and Turoff, 1993). Virtual communities of all kinds have led to conspicuous changes, such as the creation of specific subcultures, and the emergence of new practices which extend or replace existing organisational and societal physical mechanisms and structures. (Torlina & Kazakevitch, 2003). These changes affect power relationships and structures, and therefore, virtual dimension should be examined among the other power attributes.
- In addition to the virtual dimension, national cultures held by members of any community form the context are subject to be recontextualised by the power exercises performed by the community members. Whilst observing Russian literature Web sites, Torlina & Kazakevitch (2003) saw virtual communities as a new form of national culture. Hence, national culture is an attribute to be examined when it comes to understanding power in virtual communities.

Although Internet technology has been dominated by English speaking and Western cultures, Internet based virtual community applications are quickly taken up by other nations and communities. The emergence of hundreds of Vietnamese communities is an example of existence and evolution of Eastern cultures in cyber space. Vietnamese culture, together with the inherent social order and relationships, its traditions and values, is strongly influenced by Confucian philosophy. Vietnamese virtual communities, therefore, would serve as interesting cases to observe how the emergence, practice and evolution of power relations occurs and is influenced by the socio-technological attributes of virtual dimension and national cultures.

In order to examine the ways people exercise power in a virtual community we have posed a number of questions, which help us to uncover different aspects of power in virtual organisations. These questions are:

- How do power relations emerge and evolve in an online community?
- Is virtual space inherently democratic, or political?
- Do community resources distribute power to everyone equally?

## **2 POWER RELATIONS AND SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Power may be exercised in a number of ways including decision making, agenda setting and in the shaping of felt needs. Power can be exercised through political communication - information

presentation and misrepresentation, interpretation and misinterpretation, manipulation and withholding of information. This section reviews previous work which lay significant theoretical foundations to our research.

Rather than understanding power as an absolute term and concept, Foucault's notion of power is in the form of power relations. Foucault (1978, p. 94) sees power relations as more complicated and sophisticated than the ruler-ruled relation and claims that "power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix." In one of his later works, Foucault (1982, p. 220) delves further into the concept of power relations offering that "what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act immediately and directly on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or future."

Similarly to Foucault, Forester (1989, p. 45) sees power as political communication and concludes that "power works through the management of competence, or obfuscation; of trust, or false assurance; of consent, or manipulated agreement; and of knowledge or misrepresentation. Each of the three modes of power works in this way, either to thwart articulate democratic participation and encourage positivity, or to encourage articulate political action and the rationalisation of a democratic planning (policy) process." Forester (1989), following the argument of Foucault (1971; 1979; 1978), argues that these three modes of power derive their effectiveness from differential levels of knowledge existing in society.

One important concept of power that we need to understand is that people do not 'have' power implicitly. Rather, power is a technique or action that individuals can engage in. Power is not possessed, it is exercised. Essentially, 'Power is'. Power is existential. Power creates and is created by organisational attributes, social or cultural attributes and individual attributes. A power relation occurs where there is the potentiality for resistance, that is to say it only arises between two individuals each of whom has the potential to influence the actions of the other and to present resistance to this influence. As Foucault (1978, p. 95) suggests, "where there is power, there is resistance." The power relationship can be challenged and/or modified. Social relationships, he argues, not only exist as attraction but also generate resistance.

This is saying that we are not born with power, but we *may* (or may not for that matter) come into power at some stage in our lives. Foucault (1978, p. 94) confirms this by stating, "power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared, something that one holds onto or allows to slip away." These power relations are not static, but dynamic, transforming and constantly changing (McNay, 1994). Foucault claims that power is transformable, that we may have power at one point in our life and then at another point in our life have no power. Foucault (1978, p. 93) states that power "is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another. Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere."

As argued earlier, power is affected by the differential levels of knowledge existing in society. This link between power and knowledge has been discussed in Foucault's work (1977). Foucault (1977, p. 66) argues that power is inseparable from knowledge and that since knowledge requires records and a system of communication, it in itself is a form of power: "Power and knowledge directly imply one another. There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations. These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analysed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations." Knowledge, as a form of social capital, is the key to power and control in the community. However, power of social capital is constituted not by knowledge resources as such, but rather by an ability of key community members to mobilize those resources on demand (Vivian & Sudweeks, 2003).

Power, as well as other forms of social practices, is jointly constructed through a complex of interactions and a variety of discourses. In modern society people live in “heteroglossia” (Bakhtin, 1981), participating in multiple discursive practices, where they can be positioned differently in relation to knowledge and power, and indeed can be active in shifting the discourse from one in which they are less powerful into another, in which they are positioned more powerfully (Bourne, 2002, cited in Henriques et al., 1984). Foucault (1978, p. 100) suggests that it is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. According to Ball (1990, p. 17), discourses are, “about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority.” Foucault (1977, p. 49) further elaborates, stating that discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak...Discourses are not about objects; they do not identify objects, they constitute them in the practice of doing so conceal their own invention.” Discourses represent meaning and social relationships; they form both subjectivity and power relations.

The role of the organisation, or virtual community in this case, is accepted both as an influential parameter and as an influence affected by the recontextualisation of the situation (Corbitt, 1997). It is an apparent simplification of what Foucault says to suggest that the organisation has no power. Rather, Foucault (1978) suggests that power is constituted by social relations and that when such a social relationship is created, the relationship can be challenged and/or modified. Social relationships he argues, not only exist as attraction but also generate resistance. Extrapolated into the realm of virtual space we would propose that within a virtual organisation actors are both empowered and disempowered and that it is by studying the immediate, the personal and the ordinary that allow the various levels of resistance, empowerment and disempowerment to be recognised and examined in the contexts of implemented system, technology, knowledge domain, and national culture. These will be further discussed in the following section.

### **3 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND POWER**

We adopt a commonly agreed definition of virtual community suggested by Rheingold (1998) that “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.” This definition fits well with our view and purpose of investigating the socialising and exercising of power relations in cyber space.

Virtual communities are developing around affinities, shared interests, professional disciplines, common practices and values. The process of community building itself is important and crucial. It is emergent, requires self-organisation and takes time to maintain and sustain a valuable community life. The community building process is often informed by specific factors, typical to informal social structures on-line, such as anonymous participation or virtual identify, freedom to join and leave the community at any time, no formal reporting system, deliverables, or deadlines, asynchronous communication, and lack of communication cues helpful in face-to-face interaction, such as body language and face expression (Donath, 2001).

Communities are formed and evolve through the participation and interaction of their participants. Within this framework power relations and social relations can be described in relation to the role of each participant, the influential role of the ‘star-groupers’, the influence of the larger social, political and economic contexts, and the history of the social drama acted out over time within specific arenas (Turner, 1974). It is through social dramas that social relations and power relations can be observed. These begin with a “breach of regular, norm-governed social relations between persons or groups within the same system of social relations” (Turner, 1982: 10).

There is a widely accepted point of view that because virtual space is not hierarchical (Berners-Lee and Fischetti, 1999), it is inherently democratic and politically unbiased, and therefore members of virtual organisations can exercise freedom unavailable in real world, stratified and burdened with

traditional power and authority structures (Rheingold, 1998). According to this view, the Internet application becomes political only when politicians and large businesses use it for political games and imposition of power.

In fact, the processes for establishing power relations are imbedded in the community building process itself. Our research has found that this holds true even in the cyber communities established for “fun” with no economic incentives, competition, or explicit political purpose. While there is a considerable degree of negotiation and re-negotiation of one’s status, all attributes of stratification, hierarchy, and power practice can be observed in virtual organisations. There is a hierarchy of members in different roles or positions, with access to resources and decision making (novice and expert, respected authority, ordinary member, moderator, manager, owner of the discussion thread, informal leader, dissident) (Douglas 1998).

A potential dimension of power relations are access to and ownership of resources. Virtual communities, as well as physical organisations and social institutions, have their own resources. There are two main types of resources readily available within a virtual community. The first one includes technology-based applications and services, such as Usenet, mailing list, Web-based forum. The most technologically advanced communities include web-based systems with integrated software and services tailored for specific community needs. The second resource type represents information resources created and collected by this community, and information infrastructure which supports everyday community life and knowledge work. These resources typically include repositories of previous events, messages and accumulated knowledge; tools for private messaging, chatrooms; discussion threads, possibilities to sort, search, follow information, support for different representation formats.

Do community resources distribute power to everyone equally? Different level of access to resources and different command of using tools creates different potential for extracting relevant information from the system for constructing social and personal identity, recruiting supporters, and other decision making and agenda setting activities.

#### **4 RESEARCH APPROACH**

This paper is an ethnographic study of virtual communities. It is a study in which the researchers participated in people’s daily lives over a period of time watching what happens, listening and recording what is said, asking questions and collecting data to try and explain social interaction throughout policy implementation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983). However it was done in people’s virtual lives and in the virtual environment of communities online. Ethnography seeks, at various times, to describe human interaction, group interaction, anthropological change, culture, religion, politics, economy or the environment. Somewhat simplistically, Fetterman (1989, p. 11) states that “ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or culture.” He adds that “ethnography assumes a holistic outlook in research to gain a comprehensive and complete picture of a social group. Ethnographers attempt to describe as much as possible about a culture or social group, history, religion, politics, economy and environment” (Fetterman, 1989, p. 29). In this study the researchers have immersed themselves in the virtual communities with the intent of understanding how people use information and communication to exercise power and influence others.

Our field work has been carried out in virtual communities of people writing poetry and discussing literature in Vietnamese language, where one of the authors have been “living” for 2 years. An important consideration for our choice was that this type of virtual organisation is a suitable test-bed for investigating facets of power in the environment free from workplace biases, pre-established hierarchy and authority. Data collection include observations as well as collection of artefacts, notes and messages exchanged with other members on public forums, and off line communications with few members.

Ethnographic studies accept that the process or problem being studied is complex, messy, dynamic and changing, and rarely able to be moulded or fitted into some recipe form of study. As a result this study of the Vietnamese virtual communities accepted from the beginning that the research would be guided by the events that happened. Similar to Howe (1989) this examination of interaction and communication within the two virtual communities concentrates on those issues and debates which emerged from the study itself. The story that is told is

## **5 THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIPS AND POWER IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES**

The two communities in our study are closed mailing lists - *PoetryForFun* and a Web based community *VietKiem*. Their members are Vietnamese and come from many countries. The majority of the members are undergraduate and postgraduate students in Vietnam and North America, and are aged in their 20s and 30s. The youngest members of the Web community are teenagers and there are a number of members who are over 45.

*PoetryForFun* is a closed mailing list created by a small group of Vietnamese professionals and students in October 2001. The mailing list is hosted by a third party Web site. Currently, there are more than 50 subscribers from many countries, including Vietnam, Australia, Korea, Japan, North America, etc. On average, there are 2 messages per day. There are days with more than 20 messages.

*VietKiem* (Vietnamese Sword) was developed and formed in early 2001. Nowadays, VietKiem has become a 'little society' of more than 3000 members. The maximum number of members being on-line is 105 on Dec 17 2002. Currently there are over 9600 topics with approximately 186000 replies, contributing to a total of over 195000 messages.

### 5.1 Living in an online village

*PoetryForFun* is a relatively small community. It is comparable to a 'village' in which personal contacts and relationships play a vital role in community life - the exchange of messages. The socio-technical structure in this community is rather informal and simple. The organisational structure within the list resembles the real life counterpart with the president (i.e. the owner of the list), his deputy, secretary, and treasurer. However, all the positions were created for fun, with the exception of "President", who can add and modify members' accounts, as well as authorise new subscriptions. This is an unmoderated discussion list, based on email technology, with everyone playing the same role in posting and replying to anyone's poems.

Archives can be read only by the list's members. Members write poems and exchange reviews and replies in either prose or poem. A knowledge repository is created in the form of asynchronous threads of topics and their replies. Every member receives the same thread of messages. In this thread of messages social relationships and power are displayed in different ways, such as the way members address each other; the way replies to messages were made; and the multiple discourses of the communication.

In this virtual community, there is no anonymity. That is, the social relationships between members, by and large, reflect off-line relationships. As a result, new members are introduced and subscribed through networks of friends. Members occasionally hold their off-line meetings in Hanoi, Melbourne and New Zealand. Consequently, the membership and communications style are, to a large extent, pre-defined by off-line social relationship, context and knowledge.

In Vietnamese culture, addressing and treating each other according to their positions, age and gender and maintaining personal relationships is critical as is the sophisticated Vietnamese language. People address each other as immediate and extended family relations, e.g. uncle, young uncle, aunt, aunty, big sister, little sister, big brother, little brother, and so on. *PoetryForFun* strongly follows this protocol. Members address each other to show respect to the addressee's gender, age and social

position. On-line critical reviews are made with care. There were few cases when people disagree with each other or head on to criticise someone's expressions or phrases. Silence and/or having a supporting voice in debates are good ways to maintain and strengthen relationships. Often negative comments towards an author would be made by someone considering him/herself more senior than the author. If a negative comment is made towards a senior member either by a junior or another member of the same seniority, the involved authors quickly get into arguments because of the fear of losing face. Avoiding making negative comments to more senior members and the fight for preservation of face reflect the hierarchy of social relationships in Vietnamese culture.

To gain popularity and understand the "language" of communications, one should be included in the discourse behind the scenes. Discourses created are representative of the informality of the non-disclosed sub groups which are often formed by members who live in the same town. This is evident in their messages showing that they share more jokes, observations, and rumours. Even the president, while holding the administrative power, feels reluctant to remove undesirable messages. When asked why he did not remove messages even approved for removal by the author, he replied that he did not do so to avoid rumours. Rumours, interestingly, start via informal communication, that is, behind the scenes.

Supporting Foucault's (1977, 1978) view of discourse, it was found that discourse was created and carried by the list (and/or a sub group), while empowering its members confuses new or other members. Discourses are not static. Rather, they are dynamic and evolve. In a mainstream discourse, the majority of existing members addressed each other by either "uncle" or "aunt" on behalf of their children. This is an informal spoken language often used by real life villagers to show both respect to the addressee's age and a close family relationship towards him/her. For example, there was a new member who was confused by this discourse. Not feeling comfortable using this addressing style, this new member created a new story in a hilarious way and in a style popular to many existing members. Unexpectedly, she created a new discourse, in which members are related and ranked as in martial arts schools in the old days. New relationships were established between the newcomer and members accepting this new discourse. Although all members though do not explicitly get involved in 'her' discourse they still use the new image in her story when referring to her. Overall, she is acknowledged and respected by all members for her knowledge of classic literature and poetry styles.

In a small community in which members have the freedom to join and leave without any reporting system it is interesting to watch how the president exercises power and leadership. The President is very popular and liked by many members of the list not because he can add new members, but because he pays attention and respects every community member, being active, impartial and quick at responding to almost everyone's poems. The president of the list has good knowledge of its members and is aware of the list dynamics and different discourses and is flexible in using languages and expressions when replying to messages and conversing with different sub-groups. In addition, he maintains personal relationships via email and off-line meetings with members who live in his local areas. In debates, he stays firm and strongly argues to keep face and he is often supported by other members due to his popularity. However, in terms of power, the Presidents supporters could be seen as conformists. This ensures that the supporters themselves do not lose face and get into the Presidents "bad books."

## 5.2 Living in an online city

*VietKiem* (Vietnamese Sword) is a large community and attracts members with special interests in martial art literature "*kiếm hiệp*". This is a special stream in Chinese classic literature including famous series of inspiring novels and stories about swordsmen and swordwomen (Kungfu fighters) in the Ancient Chinese social setting – an interesting unique combination of historical, martial art and love aspects. This stream of literature is strongly linked to Eastern Confucian philosophy which is also the core values and ground beliefs in Vietnamese culture therefore it is widespread and captivating to Vietnamese readers.

With more than 3000 members, approximately 350 messages posted in almost 100 topics every day, and with a diversity of public forums, such as poetry, literature, history, sciences, news, recipes, photo amateur, music, entertainment and services such as banking, shopping, and sport betting, *VietKiem* can be seen as a small society. The cyber life in *VietKiem* is multifaceted, vigorous, competitive and evolving. It bears a resemblance to living in a busy crowded city in which members come from many places and backgrounds with multiple motivations and interests. Social relationships and power relations are a much more sophisticated and complex in comparison to those in *PoetryForFun*.

*VietKiem* is built on a complicated technological infrastructure combining Web based forums, email and a communication portal (Invision Power Board). There is a large library of poetry and literature publications and critiques, books and articles; a rich diversity of special interest based forum; a private message facility (internal email system); a chat room; and a banking and monetary system. There is also an advanced reporting system to allow visitors and members to view statistical data (for example, the number of members, topics and messages), to vote on issues posted by members, and monitors activities carried and messages posted by certain members.

Forums are organised into 23 Houses (inns). Each House is a forum of a special interest and is moderated by one or more House Leaders. Houses with similar interests are grouped together under the category of a Hall. There are five Halls in total: Governing Hall; Martial Art Training Hall; Poetry and Music Hall; Literature and Entertaining Hall; and Miscellaneous Hall. There are four Houses in the Governing Hall: Adviser House - the place for questions and answers; Reception Inn - the place for new members to get to know each other and existing members; Commanding Office - the place where regulations and rules are announced; and Contributors House - a place where members contribute to the knowledge repository (Library). All Halls and Houses are named in the Chinese-Vietnamese (*Han-Viet*) language and are often named after old Chinese legends to promote the martial art style and inspire members.

As described in Douglas (1998), the organisational structure is hierarchical in virtual communities. In *VietKiem*, there are five senior managers, or masters (*Tong Quan*); three middle managers/administrators or high rank officers (*Truong Lao*); and more than 20 forum moderators - House Leaders (*Chuong Quan*). These masters, administrators and officers govern and provide services to this cyber society. Different management levels hold different administrative privileges to maintain Halls and Houses. As a governing body, they issue and publish 'laws' and regulations. As public servants, they are expected to facilitate discussions and assist members in the House(s) under their management. They also play the role of policemen to enforce the 'laws'. They can give warning messages to members for "unacceptable behaviours", move and delete their topics/messages and even lock their accounts as they see needed. Other members are ranked at different levels according to their contributions to the school community in terms of the number of topics created and messages posted by them. Another part of this society are visitors who visit the Web page to read messages with limited services and access to resources.

In this complex socio-technological context of *VietKiem*, social relationships and power relations emerge and evolve dynamically and in different ways, such as addressing languages; multiple and dynamic motivations; public image and personal relationship building via multiple discourses; and channels of communications, leadership, acceptance and resistance.

As mentioned previously, Vietnamese addressing language is sophisticated and hierarchical describing one's relation to the addressee in terms of gender, age, and social relationship. These factors define socially acceptable behaviours. These include whether actors can equally discuss, share opinions, give arguments, and issue orders. Though gender, age and social status are more visible and are easier to identify in face-to-face contact, these are not visible in an anonymous on-line situation. *VietKiem* replicates these face-to-face situations in an interesting way.

Anonymity is provided to members via nicknames. To stimulate the martial art spirit and promote the traditional values, the majority of nicknames borrowed are from favourite characters in martial art stories. The addressing language in *VietKiem* adopts a formal language in Chinese-Vietnamese (*Han-*

*Viet*). Members address each other according to their ranks in martial art schools. As everyone is aware of the simulated situation, members (especially new members) feel safe when addressing others in a fictitious way without showing a lack of respect to the addressee(s). Therefore, members feel comfortable when practicing “Kungfu in words.” This is because members make both positive and negative comments to each other and create provoking topics to discuss controversial issues. Another surprising observation is that despite members being anonymous via nicknames, the concept of “keeping face” still applies. In fact, some “Kungfu practices in words” become very aggressive and occasionally ‘the loser’ left the forum or was banned. A combination of anonymity and the addressing language in martial art style contribute to a more democratic and relaxing atmosphere in *VietKiem*. As a sub group of members gets to know each other personally they may change their addressing language and use normal off-line ‘modes’ reflecting their power relations over one another.

Members join *VietKiem* with different motivations. Common intellectual motivations include: accessing the library of literature and poems; learning to write; publishing own writing; reading and collecting poems and stories written by amateur writers; writing and learning to write reviews, critiques; and discussing different subjects of interests, such as social and natural science. Common social motivations include: meeting other people; looking for friends or soul mates; getting to be known; and sharing of music, songs and recipes. Often members have multiple motivations as they discover available knowledge and resources and engage themselves more closely in the social life in *VietKiem*.

For example, a member was initially motivated to publish his poems in *VietKiem*. As he engaged himself in contributing to other members’ topics by posting his poems, he quickly gained popularity. Motivated by his popularity, he participated in many other Houses. He created and led discussions in rather provoking topics, for example, *What is behind a nickname?*; *80 days in VietKiem – notes by a newbie*; *A diary to my lover*, *VietKiem Guinness*. His topics were well attended – *What is behind nicknames?* attracted approximately 2500 readers and received close to 160 replies over two weeks. He has become an influential member of the community, indicating a link between motivations, actions and power.

As members choose topics to participate in and engage themselves in discussions, they continuously shape and reshape their public image and build up social relationships with other members. Power is exercised as some members attract more attention, dominate discussions and influence other members’ behaviours and thoughts.

As there are many Houses with more than 9600 topics created and attended by more than 3000 members, it is impossible to follow all topics. Choosing which topics to visit and contribute to is a deliberate action. Many members acknowledge that they choose topics to read by the attractiveness of the title and most often by the author. The successful building of public image and social relationships is important in attracting readers and contributors. Public image and social relationships are built and improved via multiple channels of communications and discourses. A number of interesting factors are observed.

*First impression:* Often new members create a new topic in the Reception Inn to introduce themselves. Many existing members, usually those with social motivations, also go there to get to know new members so that new members know them. It becomes a place where new members’ cyber personalities emerge and are noted by other members. If a member portrays themselves to be interesting to someone in the first contact, it is likely that his/her topics will be read by that person.

*Cyber personality:* As members exchange messages, “cyber personalities” are developed. For example, some members are careful in commenting other’s work while others are more direct. A few are rather provoking to attract attention. Members sense each other’s personality and treat each other accordingly, for example to avoid trouble makers, to offer friendship; or to make up jokes/stories about members with good humour. Members gain sympathy and popularity through their interesting and distinctive personality.

*Knowledge*: In cyber space, when age, gender and social status (wealth) – the common attributes of respect in Eastern culture – are not visible, community members gain respect primarily through knowledge. Members recognise and show respect to members with deep knowledge in specific areas. Examples in *VietKiem* include House Leaders in literature and poetry Halls.

Members make friends and form personal relationships with each other using the internal email system. Friends support each other by contributing to each other's topics and offer 'protection' in debates. Informality emerges, that is gossip and rumours are created and passed through private messages and chat.

It has been observed that sub groups are often formed on the basis of friendship or location. Members of subgroups often hold virtual meetings in chatrooms or face-to-face meetings (parties and other social activities). Members continue building their public image in those meetings. They know each other more closely, gossip about each other's private life and thus share knowledge behind the scenes. Rumours and gossip contribute to members' popularity (for good or bad reasons). Rumours and gossip is later transformed into jokes, and informal exchanges publicly published in different Houses. Rich knowledge of a discourse also enables its members to write short stories and poems about each other without insulting each other. Clearly, they 'know' and 'feel' the boundary of acceptable behaviours. Discourse evolves dynamically with members shifting and developing the discourses towards their interest or comfort zone.

Similarly to *PoetryForFun*, a discourse formed and was practiced within a sub group empowering its members. Members within a group tend to support and promote each other in *VietKiem* in order to maintain their personal relationships. Dominating members gain power in the form of popularity through practicing discourses. However, in contrast to *PoetryForFun*, discourses were formed both via on-line communications (private messages and chatrooms) as well as face-to-face communications.

Discourse, whilst serving as a source for inspiration and the creation of power of attention, creates confusion amongst some members. A few members have expressed their bitter feeling of being isolated and excluded "no one reads/bothers replying to my messages even they are interesting."

Observations indicate that there are two types of leaderships. Each type is associated with different forms of acceptance and resistance. Formally accepted leadership and power are exercised by the governing class including masters, high ranked Officers and House Leaders. Informally accepted leadership is exercised by members who do not have formal positions but are well-known public figures and hold close relationships to members in a 'mainstream discourse'. These are often people with strong personality or deep knowledge in specific areas.

There is a pattern that growing popularity may evolve into informally accepted leadership and later becomes formally accepted leadership. In fact, most members of the governing class went through these steps. Informally accepted leaders are 'promoted' to House Leaders through their active involvement with the government class and community life. Some get further promotions to higher ranks, but there are no clear criteria for such promotions. This observation extends Douglas's (1998) view of hierarchy of organisational positions in virtual communities.

## **6 DISCUSSION**

In the complex socio-technological context of *PoetryForFun* and *VietKiem*, social relationships and power relations emerge and evolve very dynamically and in different ways. These include addressing languages; multiple and dynamic motivations; constructing public image and building personal relationships; leadership, acceptance and resistance via multiple discourses; and channels of communications. Looking at the two virtual communities presented, power relations emerge and evolve as follows.

In the *PoetryForFun* 'cyber village', organisational structure, though informal, mimics real life organisational structure. That is, the roles carry meanings from the real world into the virtual world.

There is no need for explicit organisational decision making and agenda setting in the traditional understanding of the members, but there is a decision making process in place: the owner decides who is allowed to join, and members decide whether the community is worth joining, leaving, or staying. Social relationships and power relations are, to a large extent, pre-defined by off-line context and knowledge. Power is strongly linked to the concepts of popularity, respect and personal relationships which are largely informed by national culture – practices such as losing face, and pre-established networks of personal relationships in real world are fundamentally important.

In the *VietKiem* ‘cyber city’, the community context is informed by national culture (martial art). The organisational structure is hierarchical, sophisticated and imitates the traditional cultural context. For the governing body, decision making involves the facilitation and moderation of topics as well as the administration of members’ accounts and their behaviours. For all members, decision making involves their choice to join, stay or leave the community and their preferences to certain topics and with authors of topics.

National culture influences and is influenced by relationship building and power exercises. Fear of losing face and personal relationships are still dominating decision making factors amongst members. Power is strongly linked to the concepts of popularity, respect and personal relationships. However, since age and gender are not visible due to the anonymity in cyber space, power and leadership is exercised through a complex combination of different factors. Leaders gain respect primarily by their knowledge; “cyber popularity”; active involvement; and contributions to the social life. A discourse is built as social relationships are built. They are constantly changing as each discourse is challenged. Domination in discussions is typically formed by members of the same discourse.

We would argue that virtual space is inherently political. That is, virtual life imitates real life: everyone has an agenda (Myers and Young, 1997). And, just like real life, virtual community members will find any way to create, enforce and adhere to their agenda. In the case of the member not accepting a method of addressing within the virtual community, they challenged the discourse with their own. They resisted and challenged the existing discourse. Via this challenge, they were able to establish their own discourse and agenda, which other members followed. We also believe that community resources do not distribute power equally. Again, this imitates real life. Equally distributed power does not occur in any situation. This is because if power were equal, power relations and power struggles would not exist. Power would become static and we would be faced with institutions that we cannot resist, challenge and change. There is always the resistance and challenge to power as opposed to equal power for everyone.

In conclusion, the two stories demonstrate that the virtual world is inherently hierarchical and political. Power practices are imbedded in the community building processes. Social actors’ on-line behaviours are driven by different motivations, their individual agenda. Access to, and usage of community resources reflects the dynamic and sophisticated structure of power relations. This therefore creates different potential for extracting relevant information from the system for constructing new social and personal identities, recruiting supporters, and other decision making and agenda setting activities.

We believe that observations not only extend current understandings of power relations within virtual communities but also provide useful insights which would assist virtual communities and multi-national distributed organisations in building and maintaining effective organisational structures.

Further organisationally focused studies will be conducted to investigate the role and exercising of power in a business context rather than the social context in cyber space.

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