

Let A Million Blogs Bloom: The Social World of Botanical

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In the early years of the Internet, social analysts sometimes worried that it would be an anti-social force, taking people away from human relationships and communities as they turned instead to isolation and interaction with a machine. Some early social science research (Kraut et al. 1998) seemed to confirm these fears. More recently, however, social science has moved away from contrasting the technological with the social, to looking at the interface between the technological and the social.

From its inception, the internet was intended to be a site of social interaction, so perhaps it should not surprise us that there are now so many forms of interaction available there. Research on how people use computer technology shows that the most common use of home computers is communication with others (Kraut et al. 2002). Initially, the major avenue for internet communication was e-mail; this remains important, but the influence of social networking applications as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube has been growing rapidly. Another growing form of online interaction is the weblog or blog. It is difficult to get any accurate count of the number of blogs, but recent estimates put it at anywhere from tens of millions to over 100 million. Although blogs began as publicly available personal journals, they have developed into a form of communication that emphasizes social interaction (through comments and responses) and networking (through links to other blogs and websites).

Its increasing importance as a venue for social interaction makes the internet a compelling focus for social science research. Some analysts have wondered if internet interaction would be impoverished by the narrow band of interactive cues available to participants. Others have theorized that interaction would be liberated

by the very absence of social status cues that constrain face-to-face interaction. Still others, however, have argued that norms of social interaction will be more stringent in cyberspace to compensate for the narrower range of available interactive cues (Spears et al. 2002).

Research has shown that Internet users tend to blend rather than segregate their on-line and off-line worlds. One important use of the internet, for example, is interaction with those who are too far away for face-to-face interaction. In a series of studies of Internet use in Pittsburgh, Kraut et al. (2002) found that those who were already rich in social relationships used the internet to enhance and further develop those relationships. Internet users may also form new relationships online. In a study of newsgroup members, McKenna et al. (2002) found that online relationships sometimes developed more easily and quickly because members began to interact from a foundation of mutual interest and because social characteristics that can serve as barriers to face-to-face interaction are much less salient online. Contrary to concerns that the anonymity of the internet encourages fraud and deceit in online interaction, however, Zhao et al. (2008), in a study of student users of Facebook, found that their online interactions were most often "anchored" offline as people had access to offline sources of information about one another. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that McKenna et al. (2002) found that almost 2/3 (63%) of their sample had offline interactions with those met online and that more than half had developed those relationships in face-to-face interactions.

Just as social relationships can be developed and maintained through internet interaction, so too can social communities. Sociologists, in particular, have been interested in virtual communities, social communities located in cyberspace.

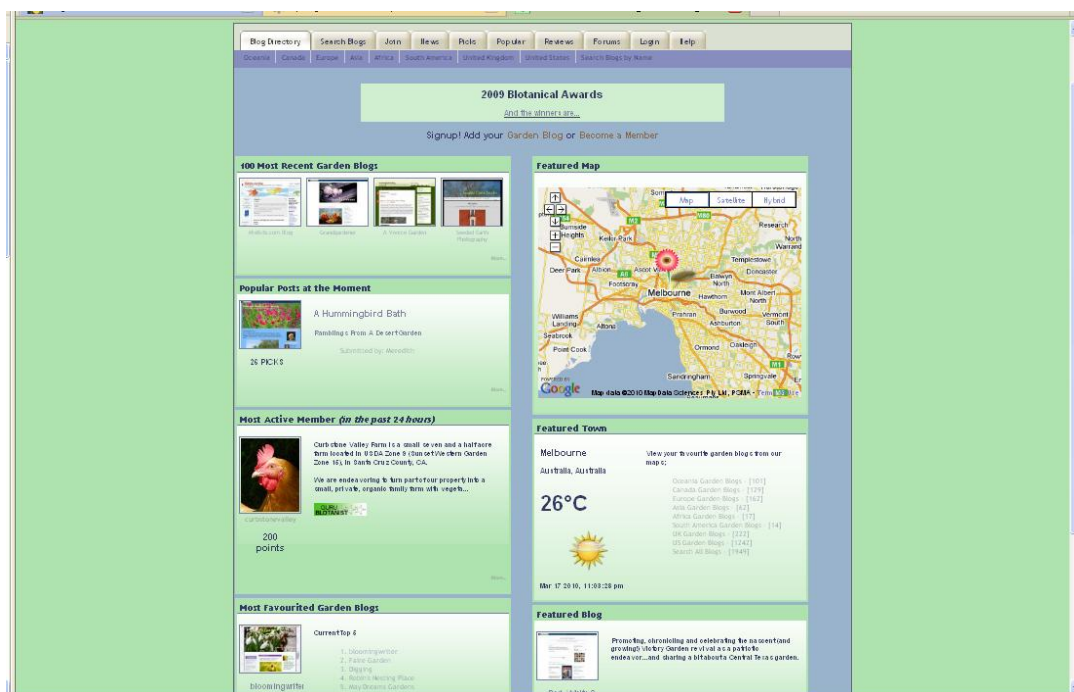
(Wellman et al. 1996) This paper explores the nature and development of virtual communities through a case study of one particular virtual community, Blotanical, a hybrid blog directory and social networking site for garden bloggers.

Garden Blogs and Blotanical

The world of garden blogs provides fertile soil for the growth of online relationships. Those who interact with one another in garden blogs begin with a common interest (often a common passion), gardening. There are a number of features of garden blogs (and garden bloggers) that anchor them in the offline world. Most garden bloggers include their real names in their blogs – at least their first names and often last names also. Their sidebars often include photos of partners, children, and family pets. Moreover, conventions of garden blogging require a fair amount of information about the conditions under which the blogger gardens; so , information about where people live, photographs of their gardens, and maps of their property are common features of garden blogs. This basis of personal disclosure then encourages further disclosure in blog posts of personal information about personal events and aspirations, about illnesses, about personal/family crises that have some impact on the garden or the garden blog. This self-disclosure, in turn, lays the foundation for the development of fairly intimate personal relationships.

Blotanical, which was begun in March 2007 by Australian garden blogger Stuart Robinson as a blog about garden blogging and a directory of garden blogs, provides a vibrant example of the development of virtual community. Over time, it has grown both in size and in complexity. Today, more than 2000 garden blogs are

listed on Blotanical. Moreover, Blotanical has developed into a complex social networking site. All blogs listed on Blotanical are located on a map, and the map feature allows users to find other members in a particular location. The site's member profiles include information about gardens, gardening preferences, and gardening experience as well as information about the listed blog. Forums provide discussion of garden-related, blog-related, and Blotanical-related topics, and Blotanical's message system allows individual members to communicate with one another in a somewhat less public way than their blogs' comment sections. Members can also access lists of recently published posts from Blotanical blogs, and they can "pick" posts that they want to recommend to others. In addition, they can name "favorite" blogs. Anyone who logs onto the Blotanical site sees a list of the five "most favoured" blogs as well as the current most popular post and most active member. In addition, the front page features a map, a town, a blog, and a list of the most recently added blogs.



Blotanical is an interesting case of virtual community because of its hybrid nature. Most of those who join Blotanical are not intending to get involved in a social networking site. Rather, their intention is to increase the readership of their blog by listing it on a blog directory. (Although membership is open to anyone interested in gardens or nature, almost all members are in fact garden bloggers.) It is only after prospective new members click "join" that they discover the opportunity to create a profile with information about themselves and their gardens as well as the information about their blogs that is more typical for blog directories.

Research Methods

The analysis that follows is based primarily on my observations and experiences as a Blotanical member since September 2009. These have been supplemented by information from the Blotanical archives and by a systematic analysis of data from a sample of 116 garden bloggers who joined Blotanical between September 16, 2009 and October 22, 2009. (This is the universe of those who joined during that period, except that I have excluded myself.)

I followed these 116 new Blotanical members for two months, recording data one month after they were enrolled as Blotanical members, and then again at two months. I measured each member's Blotanical activity level at these two points in time, using information readily available at members' personal pages or "plots." These measures include the number of times a member has logged into the Blotanical site, the number of messages sent to other members, the number of posts picked, the number of blogs listed as "favorites" and the total number of Blotanical points earned. Based on these numbers, I designated each member's

activity level as minimal, very low, low, moderate, high, and very high. (See Appendix A for specific criteria for each category.) In addition, I gathered information both from members' Blotanical profiles and from their blogs to measure three variables I thought might influence their level of activity: their geographic location (country and continent), gender, and their professional status in relation to horticulture (whether the blogger is an amateur gardener, holds a Master Gardener or equivalent certificate, works in a horticulture-related profession, or is writing a blog that is part of the website of a horticulture-related business).

Creating a Virtual Community

Norms and Socialization

Any social community, whether virtual or not, requires norms to enable social interaction, and new members must be socialized into the community's norms. Interaction among Blotanical members includes three overlapping sets of social norms – norms for being a garden blogger, norms for being part of the community of garden bloggers, and norms for being part of the Blotanical community. Socialization begins when the new member logs onto Blotanical after joining (perhaps just to see if the membership has been activated) and discovers a half dozen or more messages of welcome to Blotanical. And beneath each message is a set of menu options, the first of which is "comment back." From this, the newcomer learns that members of Blotanical should interact with other members.

Through that interaction, the novice learns still more norms that govern interaction. Some welcome messages may include phrases like "I hope you'll get a chance to drop by my blog." One of the messages will be from Stuart, Blotanical's

founder, explicitly advising the new member to interact with others “by leaving them messages, Picking their posts or choosing them as Favourites.” New members thus learn about several interactive features of Blotanical and also an important norm of garden blogging, that garden bloggers should read other garden bloggers’ blogs. As they read others’ blogs and observe which ones are particularly popular, new members will be socialized into many of the norms of garden blogging, including the expectation of posting regularly, the importance of photography, the world of garden blog memes, and especially the importance of comments and responses as a form of interaction among garden bloggers.

One noteworthy norm of interaction among members of Blotanical and garden bloggers more generally is that interaction should always be positive or supportive. There is no flaming here. Rather, the rule seems to be my mother’s old adage of “If you can’t say something good, don’t say anything at all.” Comments on blog posts most often express praise for the post, the blogger’s garden, or the blogger’s talent, and messages exchanged on Blotanical are primarily expressions of thanks. So strong is the norm of positive interaction that a when one blogger recently asked for constructive critiques of her blog and another blogger left a comment that included only critiques and no praise, it was shocking.

Interaction among garden bloggers is governed by norms of reciprocity. If a blogger visits your blog and leaves a comment, especially if they do so repeatedly, you should return the favor. The expectations of reciprocity carry over to the Blotanical web site. If another blogger “faves” your blog or picks one of your posts, you should reciprocate. The reciprocation doesn’t have to be in the same form. For example, if someone lists your blog as a favorite, but their blog is just not to your

taste, you don't need to fave it in return – but you should make a point of not only thanking them for the fave, but also reading, picking, and commenting on at least some of their posts.

Norms of reciprocity lead to the development of relationships between Blotanical members. These relationships are carried out through the exchange of comments on blogs and the exchange of messages on the Blotanical website. But they may also move beyond these venues to exchanges of emails, to sharing of plants or seeds, and to in-person meetings, including group outings (e.g., to a public Blotanical garden) or visits to one another's gardens. Within six months of joining Blotanical, I received two separate invitations from other bloggers to join them for outings, and bloggers often write about such personal meetings on their blogs.

Celebrating the Community

Members of Blotanical do not take their virtual community for granted; rather, they make a point of discussing and celebrating it. It is not unusual for members to publish blog posts about Blotanical, usually hymns of praise that emphasize the ways that the Blotanical community has enriched their lives. These posts are rewarded with a high number of "picks" and often spend some time featured on the front page of Blotanical as the current most popular garden blog post. Recently, Blotanical experienced serious server problems and went down for almost two weeks. During that time, members went out of their way to share information with others through email, tweets, and blog comments. For the most part, these communications did not express irritation about the prolonged outage, but emphasized the importance of the Blotanical community. Members commented on

how much they missed Blotanical, and there were quite a few joking remarks (including at least one whole blog post) about Blotanical addiction.

Members also emphasize building the virtual community through support of new bloggers. All those messages of welcome to new Blotanical members are part of this process. But Blotanical members also make conscious efforts to mentor new garden bloggers. Not long ago, the Nova Scotia garden blog, *Bloomingwriter*, published a post noting the large number of garden blogs now available, worrying about new garden blogs simply getting ignored or lost in the crowd, and calling on readers to think creatively about how to encourage, support, and mentor new bloggers. This post generated a great deal of discussion, including 85 enthusiastic comments (an unusually large number for a garden blog). The author ended up writing another post several weeks later summarizing the various suggestions that had been made; and she and many other bloggers took action by implementing many of these ideas.

Memes and Community Building

Another way that garden bloggers build community is through ritualized posts called memes. A meme is a type of post that is repeated by a number of different bloggers. For purposes of community building, there are two types of memes that are particularly important. The first type is a ritual that is repeated on a regular schedule. Probably the most successful meme of this type is Garden Blogger's Bloom Day, which was begun at the blog *May Dreams Garden* in February 2007 and invites garden bloggers from all over the world to post on the 15th of each month, documenting what they have in bloom. About 30 garden bloggers participated in the first Garden Blogger's Bloom Day; three years later, more than 100 typically

participate each month. There are many other memes of this type, including Garden Blogger's Muse Day on the first of each month, Wordless Wednesdays, Macro Mondays, Blooming Fridays, and Skywatch Fridays.

The other type of meme that is particularly important for creating community is the blog "award." Although they are called awards, these memes are more akin to chain letters; the blogger who is recognized with the award is asked to write a particular type of post and then to pass the award on to a number of other bloggers. Thus, the number of those participating grows exponentially. Many of these awards involve recognizing or celebrating others' blogs. Recently, for example, I was asked to participate in a "favorite photo" meme, which involved choosing a favorite photograph from among those I have taken, publishing the photo on my blog, and then naming several other bloggers whose photography I wanted to recognize by asking them to choose their own favorite photo. Another very popular award meme has been the "Honest Scrap" award, which asks the blogger to post seven honest statements about themselves and to then pass on the award to a number of other bloggers. This award builds community not only by acting as a community ritual, but also by encouraging the type of self-disclosure that can form the basis for more intimate relationships among garden bloggers.

Structure and Agency

The creation of a virtual community at Blotanical provides an opportunity for examining the interplay of structure and agency. Participation in this community is a voluntary activity, and not all those who list their blogs with Blotanical choose to participate. In trying to understand what leads new members to participate in the

virtual community and which members do so, I will examine two different types of structure, the structure of Blotanical itself and larger social structures.

The Structure of Blotanical

The Blotanical website includes a complex set of structures designed to encourage and shape interaction among members. New members who log on to the site after joining find themselves at an individualized web page known as their “plot.” There they find blank spaces for describing themselves and their garden, uploading an image, naming some of their “favorite things” (e.g., favorite plants, prettiest flowers, favorite garden books, etc.), and describing their garden experience. Most new members fill in at least some of this information. As noted earlier, new members will also discover that they have messages left at their plots, and I doubt that many can resist the temptation to look at these messages to see what they are. If they decide to click on the “comment back” link below a message, they have begun to interact with others in the virtual community.

The screenshot shows the Blotanical website interface. At the top, the logo reads "blotanical" with the tagline "where garden blogs bloom". Below the logo is a navigation menu with links: Blog Directory, Search Blogs, Join, News, Pics, Popular, Reviews, Forums, Jean's Plot, and Help. A secondary menu includes "This is your personal gardening space" and "Accounts and Gadgets".

The main content area is divided into several sections:

- BLOTALICAL NEWS:** A list of recent posts, including "Public 2: Photo Identification - DRAFT", "Uploading the PIC 13.0.0.0", "Public Feedback", "Virtual Just Happened - February, 2009", and "Madgardeners: Visit on the 19th!!".
- PROFILE INFO:** A sidebar with statistics: Messages Sent: 1294, Messages Rec'd: 1192 (NEW), Views by Others: 1492, Your Pics: 1902, Logins: 647, Forums: 1, Profile Posts: 14192.
- ABOUT ME:** A section with a profile picture of a woman and a bio: "I am a professional sociologist and passionate amateur gardener. I must say that I'm fascinated by Blotanical as a social world; there might be a research article here sometime. I mostly grow flowering perennials and do most of my gardening in East Poland, Maine (although I also have a small garden in Georgetown, PE where I teach and own a townhouse). I have spent the past 15 years slowly landscaping and planting in perennial beds around my little house in the woods. Since my garden is tucked away in the woods at the end of a dirt road, not many people get to see it - so the blog is a great way for me to share my garden with others." Below the bio are fields for "Blogged Since: 29 Sep 2009", "Blogged: 118 Blogs", and "User Ranking: 44".
- FAVOURITE THINGS:** A section titled "Here's a few of my favourite things..." with a list of favorites:

My Favourite Plant	Isid. geranium and day lily (don't make me choose!)
The Prettiest Flower	abernans
Greatest Tree	hemlock
Fruit in My Garden	red strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries
Vegetables I Grow	chives and herbs
Dearest Gardening Style	informal, but neat
Garden To See Before I Die	Great Duster
I Love For This Season	summer (for the garden) and fall is most glorious season in New England
Garden Tool in My Shed	an entire pair of garden gloves (with holes in the fingers), garden fork, edging spade and long-handled spade, bypass pruner, garden shears, trowel, and linepad
Gardening Book I'm Currently Reading	Doctors, Beautiful Address
Default Favourite Colour	yellow
- QUICK LINKS:** A section with dropdown menus for "Detective" and "Visit a Member", and "Detective" and "Visit a Blogger".
- blotanical Garden:** A section for "Jean's Garden" showing a count of "53" and a "Google Custom Search" box.

Blotanical also has a structured set of incentives to encourage interaction. In addition to noticing they have messages, new members will also see that they have “points.” A link conveniently located beside the point total leads the curious to a separate page that describes the point structure in detail. Basically, a member earns points by coming to Blotanical and interacting with others – 1 point for each login, plus 1 point each time someone visits your plot or leaves you a message. Being the initiator of interaction is valued more in the point system than being the recipient; you get 2 points for sending someone a message and 3 points for picking a post. The number of points a member has accumulated determines their status level at Blotanical, from “Blotanist” (fewer than 500 points) at the bottom to “Guru Blotanist” (more than 10,000 points) at the top. The higher your status level, the more blogs you are allowed to list as “favorites,” from 24 for Blotanists to 100 for Guru Blotanists. And, the more faves you have, the more influence you have in determining Blotanical’s ranking of “most favorited” blogs. Here is the official explanation:

The point of having more Favourites means you become more influential in your votes for the top blogs. For example, it's much better to be Ranked #1 on a list of 100 than Ranked #1 on a list of 24. For those who don't like to rank their Favourites it is still more beneficial for your Faves to be shown on a larger list than a smaller one.

Therefore, the more influential you become on Blotanical, the greater chance other members will seek you out. This is good for you as a Blotanist but should also filter to your own blogs as well.

The quickest way to accumulate points at Blotanical is to “pick” others’ blog posts. In order to pick a post, you need to look at it; so the point system also supports the norm of reading other bloggers’ blogs. Whenever a Blotanical member publishes a new blog post, it appears on one or more “pick lists” where others can

see the title and description of the post and can click to read it and then to pick it if they choose. Members have access to a number of different pick lists, including an individualized list of posts from their “faved” blogs, a list of posts from the newest 200 members, a list of posts from the top 200 popular blogs, and several alphabetical lists. Very active members may pick 100 or more posts in a single day and more than 1000 in a month. Because the posts of new members are featured on a special page, they get quite a few picks (and hits on their blogs), which entices them to get involved with the Botanical community.



The point, pick and fave systems are not the only features built into the structure of Blotanical that reinforce norms of interaction, reciprocity and support and that create a sense of community. Blotanical members can easily access a list of those who have picked their posts, and each name on the list is accompanied by a link you can click to send a message of thanks. Some events also trigger automatic email messages from Blotanical. Each time someone faves your blog, for

example, you get an email from Blotanical congratulating you, telling you who has added your blog to their favorites list, and suggesting that "You might want to head on over and thank them and possibly even get to know them." Recently, I was startled to get an email from Blotanical telling me that the author of one of my faved blogs was having a birthday and suggesting that since she "is one of your faves you might want to head on over to her Plot and celebrate her special day with her." Sure enough, when my own birthday came along a couple of weeks later, I received dozens of birthday messages from members of the Blotanical community.

All those blog posts celebrating Blotanical are also encouraged by structural features of the web site. When a member scrolls through the pick lists, some posts stand out from the rest because they are in bold and have a big red star beside them. The red star identifies a "Friend of Blotanical," and a member becomes a friend of Blotanical primarily by publishing a blog post that celebrates Blotanical and encourages people to join. So, while it is true that Blotanical members love those blog posts celebrating their community and often "pick" them, it is also true that there is an incentive to write such a post.

Social Structure and Becoming an Active Blotanist

In this section, I want to distinguish between Blotanical members who list their blogs and maybe visit the site occasionally and those I am referring to as "active Blotanists," who participate in the Blotanical community through the system of faves and picks and messages. I measured new members' level of involvement at Blotanical by noting numbers of picks, messages sent, and faves selected, and total number of points accrued at the one-month anniversary of being added to the member rolls and again at the two-month anniversary. (See Appendix A.)

The first thing I learned is that becoming an active member is the exception rather than the rule; most new members do not become active Blotanists. As Table 1 shows, almost one-third of new Blotanical members had minimal activity during their first month of membership. Many of these simply listed their blog; others logged in once or a few times after joining, but had no other activity. Another fairly large group (32%) had activity levels in the first month that were more than minimal but still quite low. Only the remaining 36% (those with moderate, high, or very high activity levels) could be described as active Blotanists during their first month of membership.

Minimal	Very Low	Low	Moderate	High	Very High
31.9%	13.8%	18.1%	15.5%	12.9%	7.8%

Moreover, while none of those with minimal or very low involvement during the first month went on to be active members in the second month, being active in the first month did not guarantee continued activity in the second month. Rather, the overall pattern was declining involvement in the second month of membership; 41.4% were less active during the second month than in the first month, compared with only 6.9% who increased their activity during the second month. The result is that more than half of this sample (52.6%) had minimal activity during the second month of membership, and only 22.4% had activity levels in the moderate-very high range during this period.

A small number of new members (6% of the sample) became very active participants in the Blotanical community during their first two months of membership. This group, which I refer to as the Superblotanists, had very high activity during the first month of membership and continued activity at or near that level during the second month, earning a minimum of 500 points each month. Superblotanists became very visible on Blotanical soon after joining, and because they were so active, they accumulated points and rose through the ranks quickly. The median number of points earned by the Superblotanists during their first month of membership was 1374, and one accumulated more than 2000 points. This group was also exceptional in that they didn't follow the pattern of declining activity during the second month of membership. On the contrary, they generally increased their Blotanical activity during their second month, earning a median of over 2000 points during this period. One Superblotanist accrued more than 6000 points during the second month of membership!

Since new members choose whether to get involved in the social networking aspects of Blotanical, and many choose not to, I was interested in learning who would become an active Blotanist and why. Two of the descriptive variables that I measured, gender and professional status, proved important for predicting Blotanical activity. Garden blogging is a predominantly female activity, and, as Table 2 shows, women are also more likely than men to become active members of Blotanical. While only 20% of the men were active members of Blotanical at any time during their first two months of membership, 46.2% of the women were. It is

	<u>Gender</u>			
<u>Activity Level</u>	Male	Female	Both	Unknown
Never Active	80.0%	53.8%	50.0%	70.0%
Active Declining	4.0%	16.7%	50.0%	30.0%
Always Active	16.0%	29.5%	0.0%	0.0%
N	25	79	2	10

interesting to note, however, that men were less likely than women to have declining levels of activity during the second month of membership; if they became active initially, they were more likely to stay active.

The relationship of garden bloggers to horticulture also influences the likelihood that they will become active Blotanists. In this analysis, professional status refers to whether bloggers are amateur gardeners, holders Master Gardener or equivalent certificates, workers in a horticulture-related profession, or employees writing a blog that is part of the web site of a horticulture-related business. The majority of

	<u>Professional Status</u>				
<u>Activity Level</u>	Amateur	MG or Equivalent	Professional	Business	Unknown
Never Active	58.3%	42.9%	52.4%	81.8%	75.0%
Active Declining	16.7%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%	12.5%
Always Active	25.0%	57.1%	19.0%	18.2%	12.5%
N	60	7	21	11	17

new Blotanical members in this sample are amateur gardeners, but as Table 3 shows, only 41.7% of these amateurs became active members of Blotanical, and

only 25% stayed active in the second month of membership. Although the numbers are small, three other patterns in Table 3 are worthy of note. First, those writing blogs for business web sites were very unlikely to ever become Blotanical members (although the small number who became active stayed active). Second, those in horticulture-related professions were particularly likely to become inactive during the second month of membership. Third, those with Master Gardener certificates were much more likely to become active Blotanists and to stay active.

Superblotanists play an important role in creating a sense of community at Blotanical. This group helps to keep Blotanical functioning by being very active in picking posts. They are also likely to leave welcoming messages for new members who join after they do and to make a special effort to pick new members' posts. In that way, they help recruit additional members into the ranks of active Blotanists. The Superblotanists are also active in leaving comments on others' blogs. Thus, their presence is much larger than their numbers because they interact with so many other Blotanical members.

Although their numbers are very small and the analysis can only be suggestive, it is useful to explore the characteristics of those in my sample of 116 who became Superblotanists. Professional status shaped being a Superblotanist in the same way that it shaped being an active Blotanist more generally; those with Master Gardener certificates were particularly likely to become Superblotanists and those writing blogs for business websites were particularly unlikely to. The influence of gender is more complex. We have already seen that men are much less likely than women to become active Blotanists, but that those who do become active are more likely than women to maintain their active participation. In Table 4, we see that, at

Table 4: Levels of Blotanical Activity by Gender			
	Men (n=25)	Women (n=79)	Both or Unknown (n=12)
Ever Active	20%	46.2%	41.7%
Always Active	16%	29.5%	0%
Superblotanist	8%	8.9%	0%

each higher level of participation, the differential between women and men declines. Thus, women are more than twice as likely as men to ever become active members of Blotanical, but they are less than twice as likely to remain active, and they are no more likely than men to become Superblotanists.

Discussion

This exploration of one virtual community, Blotanical, demonstrates that such communities are built up from interactions governed by social norms, and that these norms both emerge from social interaction and are encouraged and reinforced by structures built into the technological design. We have also seen that strong sense of community can be created even when only a minority of members participate.

The exploratory analysis of the characteristics of those who become active members of this virtual community tells us something about *who* becomes an active Blotanist, but it doesn't tell us *why* they become involved in the virtual community. That would require further research, perhaps including both in-depth interviews and survey research with members. For now, we can only speculate about what draws people into a virtual community like this one. This would include both minimum

conditions that must be met and additional factors that either pull or push people to choose virtual community.

Let's begin with the minimum conditions. Obviously, one must have some kind of interest in gardens or the natural world to get involved with Blotanical. Beyond that, becoming an active participant in this community requires discretionary time. It takes time to read and pick dozens of blog posts, to write comments on others' blogs, to leave welcoming messages for new members, and to respond to those who comment on or pick your blog posts. My impression is that active members of Blotanical tend to be older, with any children already grown and gone. It would be interesting to know how many of these Blotanists are retired and no longer working outside the home. Active Blotanists who mention paid employment often do some kind of free-lance work or are members of couples without children at home. Mothers of young children who are active Blotanists tend not to have fulltime jobs outside the home.

I am assuming that participation in Blotanical is a leisure activity, even for those whose blog may be a professional activity. This may explain why those whose blogs are part of a business website are unlikely to participate; presumably, someone is being paid to write the blog as part of their work responsibilities, but they are not being paid to read dozens of other blogs, pick posts, and exchange off-blog messages with other bloggers. At the opposite end of the spectrum, certified master gardeners have already shown a great commitment to and passion for gardening and a willingness to spend their own time and money to learn more about gardening. Participating in a virtual community of garden bloggers may just be another expression of their passion and commitment.

The availability of discretionary time may also help to explain the greater staying power of men who become active Blotanists. Research on time use (Bittman and Wajcman, 2000) has shown that men generally have more discretionary leisure time than do women. Some women who have explicitly announced their intention to cut back on blogging or on participation in the garden blogging community have cited competing demands and time constraints as the reason.

Even if someone has discretionary leisure time, however, that does not explain why they choose to spend that time participating in Blotanical. How many people actually find power reading through hundreds of blog posts a great source of enjoyment? And if they do, there are ways of doing so, like blog readers, that are more efficient than using the Blotanical pick lists. This leads me to suspect that an important part of Blotanical's appeal for many people is the experience of being part of a virtual community. In other words, I think many active Blotanists may be reading lots of garden blogs in order to be a part of this virtual community. One active Blotanist has twice announced her intention to leave Blotanical and/or blogging only to return because she found she missed the supportive community.

This leads me to consider who might be drawn to or pushed into this type of community. Feelings of social isolation may be a factor for some. At-home mothers, for example, may be looking for interaction with other adults, particularly in a time when there are many fewer such mothers than there once were to provide local communities. Gardeners who are not feeling socially isolated in a general sense may be feeling isolated from others who share their interest in and passion for gardening, and the Blotanical community may fill that need. It would also be interesting to know what part retirement plays in becoming an active Blotanist. Not

only does retirement free up discretionary time but some research on retirement (Weiss 2005) has shown that one of the difficulties of retirement can be the loss of a primary community that was located at work and with the work group.

The example of a prominent Superblotanist who recently announced in his blog that he was saying goodbye to Blotanical and cutting back on the frequency of his blog posts provides an interesting case study of how discretionary time might interact with desire for community. This member works at a plant nursery that shuts down for the winter. Thus he found time weighing heavy on his hands over the winter months, when he couldn't work in his garden and didn't have regular employment to structure his life. He filled some of that time and kept connected to his beloved garden by writing long daily blog posts and through extensive interaction with other garden bloggers. Although he describes himself as a loner, I suspect that his active participation in Blotanical also provided him with a community of like-minded passionate gardeners. With work starting up again, he is facing a time crunch and will cut back on the number of blog posts. The return to work at the nursery will also put him back in daily contact with fellow gardeners, making the Blotanical community superfluous as a source of such contact. In a comment on his "goodbye" blog post, one veteran Blotanist advised him not to resign from Blotanical but to "step back," leaving the door open for periods of increased activity in the future. It will be interesting to see if he becomes active again when the nursery closes for the season next fall and he once again finds himself with more time and an attenuated gardening community.

As digital technology shrinks our globe and makes communication with those who are geographically distant easier, virtual communities are likely to become an

increasingly important feature of the social landscape. The characteristics of virtual communities, their similarities to and differences from localized communities, and the social causes and consequences of participation in virtual communities should provide an important focus for sociological research.

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Appendix A: Measures of Blotanical Activity

Five separate measures of Blotanical activity were included in the analysis:

- total number of times a member logged in to the Blotanical web site during a one-month period;
- total number of messages a member sent to other members during a one-month period;
- total number of picks of other members' posts during a one-month period;
- total number of "favorite blogs" a member had named;
- total number of "favorite Blotanists" a member had named.

These measures were combined into a measure of overall Blotanical activity for each one-month period as follows:

<u>Level of Activity</u>	<u>Criteria</u>
Minimal	5 or fewer logins No messages, picks, or faves
Very Low	6-10 logins, with no messages, picks or faves <u>or</u> 5 or fewer logins with no more than 5 messages, picks, and/or faves
Low	10 or fewer (each) logins, messages, picks, and faves <u>or</u> 10-15 in one category of activity(logins, messages, picks, blog faves, blotanist faves) with 0 in at least two other categories and 10 or fewer in remainder
Moderate	Activity higher than criteria for low level of activity, but less than threshold for high level of activity
High	Activity above 3 rd quartile in at least four of five categories Total points less than 500
Very High	Activity above 3 rd quartile in at least four of five categories Total points 500 or more