
Hybrid Organisational Innovation: The Case of Tela Botanica

Gothenburg. The next speaker at [AoIR 2010](#) is Serge Proulx, who is interested in how sharing practices are organised in the collaborative knowledge environment *Tela Botanica*. What does it mean to contribute to this type of online environment? The site is a French-language site for discussions on botany, founded in 1999, and highly successful in its field (with some 12,000 members to date).

The site publishes a weekly newsletter with some 7,700 subscribers that is open to contribution to all and allows for comments attached to articles; it also posts events and job offers. There is also the E-Flore database of plant descriptions which uses can contribute to (and which is professionally overseen), an online resource of bibliographic references, and a collaborative project space that allows site members to develop specific projects.

The site was examined through participant observation, interviews, and focus groups. What emerged from this was a characterisation of *Tele Botanica* as both a social network of likeminded francophone botanists; a Web platform for information; an epistemic community engaged in collective knowledge production; a not-for-profit organisation; an innovative organisation that is managed under a quasi-business model and takes part in international research projects; and a commons that organises activities focussing on pro-social behaviours, mutual collaboration, and the generation of collective goods.

This exhibits traits of two models of peer production – crowdsourcing and virtual community-based peer production: on the one-hand, lightweight micro-participation by many anonymous members connected by weak links; on the other, substantial

commitment and contribution by strongly connected members in the online community. It is a kind of dual-track community, then.

Tela Botanica can be described as a knowing community, too: both a community of practice, collectively developing their competencies in their chosen field, and an epistemic community, made up of a network of professionals with relevant knowledge and an authoritative claim to knowledge in their discipline. What is novel about the site is that experts and non-experts are part of the same collaborative network here.

Internally, this leads to complex interactions between professional and amateur botanists here, but externally, it also affects the institutional status of the site: initially, generating tensions with the botanic establishment in France (such as the organisation producing the official codebook for French botanists), but eventually also leading to its acceptance as a credible authority in the field, and to official collaboration.

The question which arises from this, then, is whether it becomes possible for such non-profit organisations can act in a businesslike manner; whether communities based on voluntary collaboration can participate in professionally organised research networks. How stable is this organisational form, too – in terms of its internal organisation, its external recognition, the scale of its projects, the quality of its work, and its external relations and connections?

Tela Botanica is an example of organisational innovation that is not primarily bottom-up, but combines community and innovation. It is a hybrid for-profit / not-for-profit model that engages in community-

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driven innovation but also generates professional outcomes.