

# **The Internet's Information Gift-Economy: Technological and Sociological Aspects / Belous, Yifat**

## **Abstract:**

As we live in the Information Society, Information and knowledge became major economic resources and required commodities. Even though different individuals and organizations often try to gain competitive advantage by various acts of information closure and privatization, many Internet users tend to do the opposite and give professional and useful information to other users on a daily basis, without receiving any material benefits in return.

Internet users tend to exchange free information with each other using Internet technologies such as e-mail, Web forums and chats; tend to publish useful information for the benefit of others in blogs, wikis and websites: release open source software codes and make use of controversial file-sharing software such as KaZaa and Emule to exchange valuable files without having to pay for them. The transfer of goods or services without receiving any material benefits in return is often referred to as Gift and as a result is seen contradictory to modern economic laws. Not only goods or services can be seen and treated as gifts, information too can be given without payment from one individual or firm to others, and create gift-relationships among them.

The basic theory of the gift claims that gift-giving is not a single voluntary act, but rather a link in a chain of similar giving acts, a chain that is driven by three social obligations: to give, to receive, and to repay. This chain creates a social reality, in which a giver is also always a receiver, and a social system of relationships, solidarity, and status is weaved among the parties involved. A social-economic system that depends solely on this kind of exchange is often referred to as gift-economy. In the information world, where information can be easily disseminated and is not a part of a "zero-sum" game, this kind of economy has different and interesting implications.

Information gift-giving often requires the donor to invest his time and energy for the benefit of other people, and when it is done within the anonymous environment of the Internet; most of them are usually even strangers. Obviously, questions about the human motivations for this kind of behavior often arise. Different researchers tried to answer the question why people give information for the benefit of others without receiving any payment or assured reciprocation of any kind; however, most of them examined organizational environments which are characterized by the personal or organizational familiarity between the information givers and receivers. The few studies that did treated this phenomenon on the Internet either focused on a small range of motivations or on a single information sharing technology.

The purpose of this study was to first examine the phenomenon of online information-giving and its motivational factors in a broad, deep and empirical manner while comparing different Internet information sharing technologies. In order to achieve this goal, we reviewed a vast multidisciplinary literature in the areas of gift-giving, exchange theory, altruism, economics, clinical and social psychology, management and information science, and categorized almost all giving motivations mentioned into five basic groups: rewards for information-giving, obligations for information-giving, power and control variables, social variables and altruism. Using an online research questionnaire among 897 Israeli Internet users who tend to give professional information to other users on four different technological platforms (forums, websites, blogs and wikis) and in four professional areas (computers, medicine, law and parenting), we examined the agreement levels toward each motivational group and correlated them with the respondents' willingness to give information online.

The results of this study show that while many motivational factors are involved in the Internet's information-giving process, the two most salient ones are the intrinsic rewards (good and pleasant feelings of joy, happiness, satisfaction and fulfillment) that the information-giver enjoys as a result of his or her prosocial act, and his or her sense of self-efficacy (e.g. the belief in one's own ability to supply valuable and qualitative information to other users).

While previous information-sharing studies suggested that extrinsic rewards (such as professional promotion, social status and alternative resources time saving) and trust among exchange parties are very important motivators for information-giving and sharing, this study suggests that in continuation with older and classical giving and helping theories, pleasant feelings are correlated with information-giving on the Internet. This study also suggests that expertise and self-efficacy in the professional area of the information given, might contribute to the development of different reciprocation expectations among different types of givers. Expert givers tend to be driven more by extrinsic rewards but also experience a stronger obligation to give; while non-expert givers might seek a sense of community and thus experience a stronger obligation to repay. Future studies will need to continue this inquiry in order to fully understand the phenomenon of the Internet's information gift-giving.

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