The 90-9-1 Principle - How Users Participate in Social Communities

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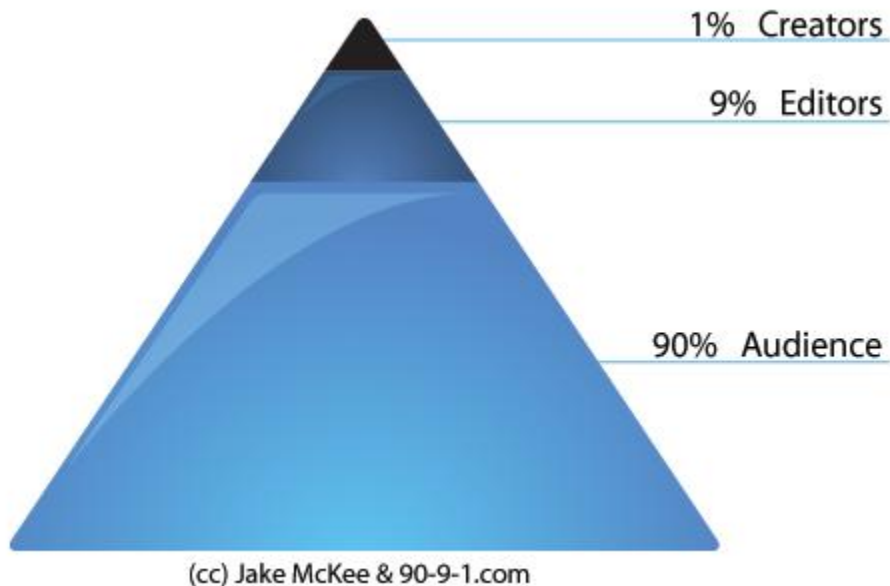
If you spend any time at all talking about online communities, you're bound to stumble across the 90-9-1 Principle. The idea is simple: In social groups, some people actively participate more than others. Researcher Jakob Nielsen calls this "Participation Inequality".

These three groups make up an ecosystem, of sorts. Pulling on one group affects the distribution of the other. Of course, it's typically not possible to change the distribution in significant ways, as the more people added into one group directly drives the growth of the other two groups, maintaining something close to a 90-9-1 split. Social participation tends to follow a 90-9-1 rule where:

- **90%** of users are the "audience", or lurkers. The people tend to read or observe, but don't actively contribute.
- **9%** of users are "editors", sometimes modifying content or adding to an existing thread, but rarely create content from scratch.
- **1%** of users are "creators", driving large amounts of the social group's activity. More often than not, these people are driving a vast percentage of the site's new content, threads, and activity.

Principle in Action

Interested to hear how the **90-9-1 Principle** plays out in the real world? A very simple example is a cocktail party. Think about a group conversation at a cocktail party. Typically there are 2 or 3 people having a bulk of the conversation, a few more than that who are also pitching in small parts of the conversation, and the bulk of the group standing and listening to the conversation.

In the online social space, we can see examples that track very directly to the 90%, 9%, 1% split.

- 167,113 of Amazon's book reviews were contributed by just a few "top-100″ reviewers.
- Over 50% of all the Wikipedia edits are done by just .7% of the users … 524 people.
- In December 20, 2007 on the MSDN Community site, 1866 edits out of 10851 total edits were made by the top five contributors (three of whom are Microsoft employees). That percentage is slightly above one percent at 1.72%.
- Just 0.16% of all visitors to YouTube upload videos to it, and 0.2% of visitors to Flickr upload photos.

Additional Resources

Want to learn more about the **90-9-1 Principle**? Here are a few additional discussions

- Jakob Nielsen paper on "Participation Inequality"
- Wiki Patterns 90-9-1 Page
- Understanding the 1% Rule
- The 1% Rule: Charting citizen participation
- What is the 1% Rule?
- Reconciling Social Technographics and 90-9-1

Download a 8.5″ x 11″ poster you can post or hand out!

Is there a missing link here? Please email it to Jake!

Questions & Concerns

Bring up the **90-9-1 Principle** and you're almost certainly going to hear gears start to turn. People wonder if there's a way to drive that 1% group closer to 50%. There are concerns about the influence of a tiny minority over larger majority. There are questions about whether to optimize submission tools for hardcore users or light users.

Here are a few tips to improve the social dynamic across these three groups:

- **Make contributing easy for everyone.** Design contribution tools that scale in complexity, giving power tools to power users, while easing usage for light users.
- **Encouraging editing over creating.** Blank pages are scary. Create templates, rough examples that can be easily edited, content suggestions, and tons of examples that help eliminate the fear factor.
- **Reward participants.** People will give up their first born for a gold star next to their name. Go easy on the rewards, but certainly bake them into the process of participation.
- **Identify both power users and up and coming users.** Call out your power users with featured spots on your home page or corporate blog. And don't forget that if you always call out the top 10 users, the other 90,000 won't feel like they have a chance. Shine the spotlight on the up and comers too!

Interested in getting in-depth and nerdy? Join the discussion happening on the Community Guy blog!

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