Enabled by information and communication technology, online communities have emerged as a new form of distributed societies. In the beginning they were mainly considered a spontaneous social phenomenon. But, with the advent of the discussions surrounding e-commerce business models and of community-oriented knowledge sharing in organizations, the awareness of the economic importance and potential of online communities has spread widely. This provokes the demand for organized stimulation and creation of online communities.

Online communities are constituted by two elements: 1) the community of communicating agents and 2) the enabling electronic medium. Thus, in order to foster and initiate online communities the appropriate digital medium, i.e. a community supporting platform must be built, which meets the community-specific requirements for communication and cooperation.

Community supporting platforms are a new type of information system, which implement the concept of distributed virtual environments. Therefore, they are complex platforms combining numerous communication and coordination mechanisms as well as knowledge representation technologies. Despite their growing importance in electronic commerce and knowledge management, the topic of information systems and platforms for community support is not yet addressed in a systematic, generic manner.

This minitrack aims to initiate a forum supporting the discussion in the field of community-supporting platforms. The minitrack received seven submissions, from which four were accepted. All submissions were subject to review by two to four reviewers.

The accepted papers fall into two categories: 1) papers pointing to the need of community-oriented platforms and providing generic frameworks for their construction and 2) papers describing concepts for specific platforms supporting defined communities. Into the first category falls the first and the second paper presented in this minitrack.

The first paper, written by Jacky Swan, Sue Newell and Maxine Robertson, is based on a comprehensive empirical study of prevailing approaches for the introduction of knowledge management. The authors conclude that there are two alternative approaches of knowledge management: the community-based and the cognitive model. The paper clearly points out the differences and advantages of the community-based model as well as to the demand for building of appropriate community supporting platforms.

In the second paper Katarina Stanoevska-Slabeva and Beat F. Schmid propose a generic component-based architecture for community supporting platforms based on the generic media model and the related media reference model developed by one of the authors. The architecture is based on an interdisciplinary approach combining the paradigm of multi-agent systems with the paradigm of component-based software. The proposed architecture may be used as a guideline for the design and implementation of specific community-supporting platforms.

The third and fourth papers fall in the second category of papers and discuss specific community-supporting platforms. Achim Karduck discusses the technology portfolio necessary to enable the participation of disabled people in different online communities in the third paper. The paper concludes with the concept for the “Furthwangen Community Butler”, a specific platform supporting disabled people.

The last paper written by Petra Schubert explores online communities as part of E-commerce strategies and electronic product catalogs as community catalyst.

We hope that this first minitrack on the topic of Community Supporting Platforms will provide an initial step towards the establishment of a scientific community in this exciting research field. We appreciate the efforts of all authors who submitted a paper to this minitrack and offer thanks to those, who served as reviewers.