

## **SOCIAL ROLES IN ELECTRONIC COMMUNITIES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Individuals' behavior in groups is constrained by several factors, including the skills, privileges and responsibilities they enjoy. We call these factors a social role, and explore using the concept of social roles as an analytical tool for studying communities in Usenet newsgroups. Our understanding of what roles are and how they function is derived from sociolinguistics, social psychology, and the ethnography of communication. We conducted an observational study of several Usenet newsgroups and, from the collected data, constructed a taxonomy of roles, with which we analyzed social interactions and their impact on newsgroup communities, especially how communities change over time.

### **INTRODUCTION**

People's behavior in social situations is not random and completely unpredictable, nor is it uniformly identical in each situation. Rather, people act differently toward different people, and depending on the circumstances at hand; this much is readily apparent. The reason is that, besides having personalities, by being part of a social group, people occupy positions in the social structures of groups that allow them to do and say certain things, as well as constrain them from saying and doing other things. This mixture of allowances and constraints, combined with the choices the individual makes given this mixture, constitutes a social role. Understanding that people have roles in their communities allows others to contextualize their behavior. Moreover, we suggest that the researcher/ethnographer can gain a more thorough understanding of the behavior of individuals and their communities, as well as the link between the two, by studying them in terms of the roles the participants play.

Usenet is a particularly interesting environment in which to study roles, because all the roles and, indeed, all the social structures that are present in newsgroup communities arise solely through the behavior of the participants. There are no roles that are technologically imposed from the outset, save the role of moderator in some groups,<sup>1</sup> yet newsgroup participants emerge as de facto leaders, protagonists and antagonists, shaping their newsgroup communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Our work generally excludes moderated newsgroups; at least, to the extent that we exclude the role of moderator from our analysis. This is because the moderator is a technologically imposed role, and we focus on the roles that emerge informally rather than those that are assigned.

Moreover, though all newsgroups share the same technology and basically the same plain-text user interface, each newsgroup develops its own social norms regarding what kinds of conversations to have and what kind of speech is acceptable. Some communities are welcoming to newcomers; others are not. Some enjoy rigorous debate; others shy away from controversy. Whatever a community's standards are, they are the result of the evolving tastes of the members in the group; these standards are continually enforced and challenged by the behavior of those members.

In this paper, we present a framework for using social roles as a tool for analyzing Usenet communities. In general, the study of online communities seeks to understand the social dynamics of those communities and their members. Previous studies have approached online communities in terms of network structure (Agrawal et al. 2003), finding significance in Usenet's threading of messages, or have used statistical methods to learn about individuals (Smith 2001) or about newsgroup communities (Whittaker et al. 1998). Others have analyzed particular conversations or newsgroups as case studies that document prestigious behavior (e.g. Baym 1995) and deviant behavior (e.g. Herring et al. 2002). We find value all each of these, and suggest that a role-based framework can explain the behavior of both individuals and their groups, and can explain the establishment and negotiation of cultural norms and social hierarchies within newsgroups. Moreover, we propose that understanding these phenomena in terms of roles provides an important explanatory link between the behavior of the communities and the behavior of the people participating therein.

We conducted a study of approximately sixteen newsgroups as unobserved observers for several weeks. The newsgroups were chosen arbitrarily, with the proviso that the groups be unmoderated, have a significant volume of conversation, and represent a wide variety of topics. These topics included technical fields like chemistry and computer programming, hobbies like gambling and music, and social issues like parenting and religion. During the observation period, we compiled data about each participant and about numerous conversation threads. These data<sup>2</sup> formed the basis for a taxonomy of roles, which we employ in our analysis of interactions in online communities.

First we investigate what a social role is, and explore the prior work in sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication and social psychology from which the traits that we use to distinguish roles arise. Our taxonomy of roles is constructed using those traits; we describe these roles in detail. Finally, we provide examples of behavior in Usenet, which we explain using our role-based approach.

## **SOCIAL ROLES**

In everyday life, many of the roles people take on are well-defined and unambiguous; these tend to be the roles to which titles can be attached. Some are defined by legal and governmental means, like President and police officer. Others are roles held by virtue of employment, like teacher and bus driver, or supervisor and manager. Family roles have both biological and legal foundations and include husband, daughter and parent. Though roles like these are common and are familiar to most people, the individual relationships that people share are, to be sure,

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<sup>2</sup> Some of the examples herein are from conversations that took place in the observed groups prior to our real-time observations, and were instead retrieved through Google Groups, Google's Usenet repository.

idiosyncratic – every person’s personality and circumstances affect the dynamics of their relationships. However, the skills, privileges and responsibilities that are associated with them are deeply ingrained in their respective societies. For example, police officers can generally be counted on to have a particular set of skills related to law enforcement, and parents have a legal obligation to protect the welfare of their children. By knowing the title associated with someone’s role, one can have a reasonably good understanding of that person’s skills, privileges and responsibilities.

In sharp contrast to roles such as these, other roles are not so well defined and are far more ambiguous and flexible, constituted through repeated interaction and mutually agreed upon practices. These tend to be the roles that are unspoken or, at least, unnamed, yet are demonstrated by patterns in behavior. For example, in a group of friends one may emerge as the “group planner” or decision-maker. Similarly, another member of the group may grow to be seen as a trustworthy confidant, counselor or arbitrator within the group. Though such patterns are in general implicitly and mutually agreed upon, they also become social constraints that frame future interactions. The person who planned the previous three outings may be simply expected to plan the next one, and might meet with confusion if he fails to do so. In the same way that titled roles imply sets of expectations (though they do so from the outset), implicit roles grow as a result of the expectations associated with an individual.

Expectations about another’s behavior are useful because they give us some knowledge about how to act toward that person. Roles, in turn, are useful because, when they comprise sets of expectations, they allow us to generalize across people and have some *a priori* knowledge about entire categories of people, how to act toward them and what to expect in their actions toward us. More importantly, we categorize people precisely in order to understand them (Foucault 2003), because having expectations is so vital to our understanding of others.

An example of using roles and their associated expectations as tools for understanding and contextualizing people and their actions is Holland and Skinner’s (1987) study of college-age women. In their study, Holland and Skinner interviewed these women about the boyfriends and other males in their lives, and found that the category terms the women used to describe the men were rife with what they termed “implicit cultural knowledge.” The category terms had meanings that have developed within their social group; in order to understand what the terms – e.g. *buck*, *cowboy* and *frattybagger* – mean, one must have access to a whole range of background information about the kinds of lives these women and men lead, and the kinds of social interactions they share, which are mostly related to dating.

Holland and Skinner observe that these category terms are associated with the “social dramas” in which the men appear. The classification relies heavily on the associated social situation because the classification is an indicator of how to interact with that person. Though these categories have names attached to them, they still can be classified as informal roles because it is the individual’s behavior that causes the role to be ascribed to him, not the other way around.

It is understandable that, given the diversity of kinds of roles that one can have, there are numerous definitions in the sociology and psychology literature of what a role is. The most general definition of a social role comes from Bettencourt and Sheldon (2001), “a behavioral repertoire characteristic of a person or a position.” This definition is especially useful for our work, because in neither relying on nor precluding the assignment of status, it describes both

formal and informal roles. More importantly, it emphasizes the idea that certain behaviors are characteristic of certain people. One way of distinguishing formal and informal roles is that, in the former, the behavioral characteristics are a result of the role (e.g. the police officer upholds the law because it is her role), and in the latter, the role is recognized because of the antecedent behavior (e.g. the plan-making friend).

Goffman (1959) defines a role as “rights and duties attached to a given status.” This definition adds an important dimension to the understanding of what a role is, because it underscores the point that roles come with responsibilities. Being recognized as a leader, for example, comes with the privilege of being able work toward seeing one’s own wishes fulfilled, but it also comes with the responsibility to actually lead. Likewise, it is important to note that, just as roles give certain privileges to some, they restrict those privileges and make them inaccessible to others.

We think of a role as having two components, the first component is related more to the individual and comprises the skills, privileges and responsibilities that that person enjoys; for this reason Goffman’s analysis is important. The second is related more to the other people in a social context, and is embodied in the expectations those people have about the individual and his behavior; Sheldon and Bettencourt’s definition captures this succinctly. One important benefit of thinking of roles as having these two components is that we can think of roles as being reflexive. Enacting the kind of behavior that is associated with a particular role solidifies one’s assignment to that role, which in turn may make one more likely to continue enacting those behaviors.

What is important about all of the roles we’ve discussed, from the formal, titular roles to the informal, behavior-driven ones, is that they are defined in terms of the people with whom one interacts. One is a teacher in relation to one’s students, a parent in relation to one’s children, and a citizen in relation to one’s country. Accordingly, one who is a teacher would not interact with one’s spouse or child or neighbor in the same way one would with one’s students. Likewise, though one might be the “planner” among one group of friends, one might instead be a more passive participant with another group of friends. One cannot be called a *buck* or a *frattybagger* in a social group where those words have no meaning. In sum, a role is contextual, and that context is the group of people with whom one interacts. This group of people constitutes a *speech community*.

## **SPEECH COMMUNITIES**

Defining a context as merely a group of people is not enough; those people need to be able to understand one another and need to be referencing a set of shared meanings and significances, like Holland and Skinner’s subjects were. Drawing from Hymes (1974), we use the *speech community* as the basis for defining contexts in which roles are enacted. A speech community is a group of people that “shar[es] rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety.” In the study of natural language, a speech community can be as small as two people or as large as all speakers of a language. Though all speakers of a language may, in general, be able to understand and communicate with one another, regional or class-based variation in accent and in some vocabulary terms segment particular subgroups, signaling identification and shared experiences with them.

Not all the rules of a speech community are about words; the rules can govern entire kinds of conversation. The rules regarding interaction and interpretation are normative (Hymes 1972); rules about language use are also rules about social behavior. For example, a social organization, workplace, or other speech community may develop its own practices about politeness or etiquette, including how to greet one another or how to provide criticism in an acceptable way.

We think of Usenet newsgroups, and indeed Usenet as a whole, as speech communities because they exhibit the main characteristic of a speech community, having their own rules for using and interpreting language. These rules can be stylistic, involving standards for capitalization and punctuation, or lexical, where specialized meanings for common words or acronyms may arise. For example, "BOYC" is an acronym that is common in *alt.callahans* meaning "beverage of your choice." The setting is a virtual bar called Callahan's, where this term is used to offer a drink to another participant. Using this acronym in any other newsgroup would be linguistically deviant, like speaking a completely different language, because the term is not part of that newsgroup's speech community's "linguistic repertoire" (Gumperz 1972). Moreover, a newcomer to the group, who has never seen this acronym before, is likely to have no idea what it means. Such a newcomer lacks what Hymes calls "communicative competence" (1974).

Participation in a speech community requires what Hymes calls "communicative competence" (1974). Communicative competence describes the skills necessary to understand the language of the speech community, beyond simply being able to utter grammatical sentences and parse them. One must, in order to be competent, understand the function of language in context. Hymes demonstrates that a phrase can have the same meaning, yet a different function, based on context. When the phrase "I'm hungry" is uttered by a child at night, it is often intended to postpone bedtime. The same phrase, uttered by a beggar, is intended as a request for charity. This example, though it is rather trivial, demonstrates how meaning and function are separable and contextual.

Understanding others' use of language is only half of the skill set necessary for communicative competence; one must be able to fully participate in the community, as well. This includes being able to say the right things to the right people, both at the right time and in the right way. Hymes uses the example of the child "from whom any and all of the grammatical sentences of a language might come with equal likelihood." He describes this child as "a social monster" (1974). Instead, the child must understand which sentences are appropriate in particular situations, and must internalize the societal beliefs and attitudes about the things about which he speaks. Saville-Troike's (1982) describes the child who does not "know better" than to use a "taboo expression in public" an example of an individual who has yet to learn the etiquette of particular social interactions.

One sensitive area involves the etiquette of question-asking. In many newsgroups, especially technically-oriented ones, newcomers typically ask questions, ranging from the elementary to the complex. Seasoned participants often enjoy answering them, but questions must be asked in a way that is acceptable to the group. Questions that are worded in a way that seems the asker feels entitled to assistance, or questions that demonstrate little effort to first help oneself,

are seen as impolite and are met with rebukes. Indeed, newcomers may not know how to ask a question in this group; they lack the communicative competence necessary to do so.

People ask questions because they seek information; learning about a community – for example, knowing what topics interest them, and knowing something about those topics – is necessary, if one hopes to become part of that community. This is because any conversation must be predicated on some mutual knowledge, called “common ground,” in order for the participants to understand one another (Whittaker et al. 1998). We consider “common ground” to consist not only of the knowledge that resides in a community, but also knowledge about community members’ attitudes toward that knowledge. For example, members of a newsgroup that discusses taxation may not only know tax law, but may also widely share opinions about those laws. In our taxonomy, having or lacking common ground is a key indicator of the roles that one can play.

### **PARTICIPATION: HOW AND HOW MUCH**

Participation levels in Usenet newsgroups vary widely, from users who post many dozens of messages a day, to those who post messages once a year, one time only, or even never. Whittaker et al. (1998) studied over two million messages posted in 500 newsgroups over a six-month period. They found that a condition of massive *participation inequality* is in effect. In their sample, a very small portion of participants (2.9%) wrote a disproportionately large (25%) percentage of the messages posted, while 27% of the participants posted only a single message and then never again.

Far from being merely a statistical oddity, unequal levels of participation underscore the fact that participants are not all the same. Some participants may be satisfied by participating infrequently, while others enjoy devoting large portions of each day to their newsgroups of choice. Likewise, some people may be interested in many topics, while others might have interest in only one. Users’ participation levels vary because their interests and personal goals vary. As a result, when combined with other factors, users’ levels of participation can tell us a great deal about them. A participant whose posting frequency is very high, for example, may be deeply passionate about a given topic, or may feel strongly connected to a particular group of people.

A user’s participation frequency has a strong impact on the role he or she can play in the newsgroup. The infrequent or one-time poster has contributed little time and energy to the group and has made a relatively small impact on the group as a whole. This person is therefore less likely to have gained any reputation at all, much less one of prestige, and can therefore have only a marginal role. In large numbers, however, occasional posters may have a strong influence on a newsgroup’s social landscape. On the contrary, someone whose posting frequency is very high may have a tremendous impact on the community, either because of the content of their posts, or even because of the sheer volume of them.

As people participate in newsgroups, the responses (or lack thereof) they receive from others provide valuable clues about how well received their contributions were. When a participant receives positive feedback, his behavior is rewarded; when he receives negative feedback, or none at all, his behavior is punished. These rewards and punishments lead to positive and negative feedback cycles. A negative response that suggests a participant’s behavior was

inappropriate may disincline a participant to participate again, while a positive response may encourage a participant to become further involved. These cycles also help to explain participation inequality

Positive feedback may be encouraging to the participant, so that he continues to engage in social interaction and as a result grows further acquainted with the norms of the speech community. A positive feedback cycle develops, and the speaker participates in the social community with greater frequency. Of course, what makes feedback positive is variable. Someone who is joining a conversation might consider a strongly worded disagreement to be negative. Someone looking for an argument, perhaps on politics, might find such a response to be positive, in that it is just what he is after. Positive and negative feedback have less to do with the tone of the response, than with the sense that the person's behavior was in line with the community's standards.

When an individual's behavior is not in line with the norms of the community, the response he receives may chastise him for his inappropriate behavior, but he may also receive no feedback at all, which is itself also a kind of negative feedback; this is called "freezing out" (Zurher 1983). For example, there is in many groups a prescription against messages that provide too little new content; such a message is likely to receive no response at all.

Hackman (1992) observes that people are adept at determining whether or not they can find satisfaction in a group; if a participant feels that the feedback to his participation is negative, he has several choices. He can discontinue attempts at participating in the community if he feels that it is hopeless. Alternatively, he can alter his behavior and try again. This may require investing time in learning how to interact with the group properly.

Once people believe that they can find satisfaction in a group, they must determine what their strategy to achieve that satisfaction will be. Goffman (1969) takes a game-theoretic approach to "strategic interactions", describing social interaction in terms of *players*, *moves* and *turns*. In each turn, a player may choose from available moves (strategies) in order to advance his goals. In a group decision-making task, for example, two potential strategies are browbeating those who disagree with you, and advocating the merits of one's own preferred decision. Each choice requires the other people involved to react, making a choice of their own about how to respond.

These strategies are built upon Goffman's (1959) theories of self-presentation, in which he explored the ways individuals can tailor their own behavior in order to make a particular impression on others. Goffman's work gives considerable attention to the fact that the impression one desires to make on others is not necessarily the impression that others receive. He calls this the *impression given* (that which the actor would like others to see) and the *impression given off* (that which others interpret the former as). One such example is intimidation; though an individual may try to present himself as intimidating, others may see such behavior as an affectation and not actually be intimidated.

Jones and Pittman propose five strategies for presenting oneself when negotiating a "strategic interaction" (Goffman 1969). These are: intimidation, supplication, ingratiation, exemplification and self-promotion (Jones and Pittman 1982). Each of these strategies may be employed, either alone or in combination, in order to achieve one's desired ends. The intimidator stresses his ability to cause harm to his intended victim, whereas the supplicator pleads incompetence and

relies on the good nature of others to get his way. The ingratiation seeks to acquire the trait of simple likeability. The exemplifier seeks to gain respect by setting himself up as a role model and self-promoter tries to earn admiration by possessing enviable qualities. Three of the strategies - ingratiation, self-promotion and exemplification - rely on the actor gaining a more positive image in the eyes of others. Being moral, smart and likeable, for example, are traits that bring others closer. Conversely, supplication and intimidation rely on the actor gaining a more negative image. Supplicators and intimidators attempt to get their way by proving themselves in need of help or by proving themselves a potent force that must be mollified.

We suggest that the role one plays in a community is deeply connected to the strategies one employs in one's social interactions. Recall that, for informal roles, it is from observed behavior that we categorize one another into roles. By defining Jones and Pittman's five strategies as categories for behavior, we can associate those categories with the roles in our taxonomy. It is useful to observe not only which roles are associated with which behavioral strategies, but also which roles are *not* associated with particular strategies, as well. That is to say, certain strategies are not available to people in certain roles, or are not consonant with those roles. For example, a participant who failed to ingratiate himself into a community and failed to promote his own ideas may attempt intimidation as an alternate strategy. In short, while these behavioral strategies determine particular roles, the roles explain the choice of strategy, as well.

## **A TAXONOMY OF SOCIAL ROLES**

In the preceding sections, we discussed what a social role is, and discussed the ideas we will use as tools to construct our taxonomy of roles. These included communicative competence, Hymes' concept of the ability to conduct oneself linguistically according to social norms of the community; participation inequality, Whittaker et al.'s (1998) observation that users participate at widely different rates; and Jones and Pittman's (1982) five strategies for strategic self-presentation. Now we present several roles that can be identified in terms of these ideas.

Several of the roles that we observe - for example, "Celebrities" and "Ranters" - are roles that we posit in order to classify a particular set of characteristics. Others, however, are categories that are well-established within many Usenet and other online communities and have been studied by CMC researchers. This includes "Lurkers" (e.g. Nonnecke and Preece 2000; 2001), "Trolls" (e.g. Herring et al. 2002; Donath 1998), and "Newbies." For this latter group of roles, we reanalyze them using the same set of tools that we use for those roles not previously studied as such.

Some roles can undoubtedly be found virtually everywhere, like "Newbies" and "Celebrities," given the frequency of new participants arriving, and the likelihood of prolific leaders emerging. Other, more specialized roles (or aspects of them) may be specific to individual groups or kinds of groups. For example, seeking help through question asking will be rare or nonexistent in newsgroups where the topic of discussion is not related to a skill or practice.

It is not the set of roles that we study here, nor even the particular characteristics we use to distinguish and classify them, that we find important. Rather, we seek to establish the importance of a unified analysis of community and individual behavior in online communities based on an understanding of participants' roles and the relationships between those roles.

## THE CELEBRITY

Sociolinguist William Labov (1997) suggests that, when performing fieldwork, “In every neighborhood, you need to know the people who are the central figures so that you can understand how society works and who influences who.” The Celebrity is the prototypical central figure. Celebrities are prolific posters who spend a great deal of time and energy contributing to their newsgroup’s community. Because they post so often, everyone knows them; it would be virtually impossible for the casual lurker to read the newsgroup without encountering posts by many Celebrities. By virtue of the volume of the Celebrities’ posts, the casual participants’ impression of them will be their impression of the newsgroup. To put it succinctly, it is the Celebrity who defines what the community is.

Celebrities embody participation inequality; they are the small percentage of participants that Whittaker et al (1998) observed generate the largest volume of posts. Consider the example of *alt.computer.consultants*. In approximately one month of our study, 137 individuals posted messages to the newsgroup. The top twenty most frequent participants (14% of the total number of participants) authored 75% of the newsgroup’s messages. As the following table shows, even among the top twenty posters, there is an order of magnitude variation in posting frequency; the most frequent poster authored over twenty times the number of posts of the twentieth most frequent.

<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>POSTS</b>	<b>AUTHOR</b>	<b>POSTS</b>
1. insurancenj@aol.com	515	11. test01a@ziplip.com	43
2. nietszsche@large.com	383	12. David.M.Fabian@sbcglobal.net	41
3. alexy@mindhelicalwire.com	255	13. antispam9@attbi.com	39
4. lizs2000@swbell.net	205	14. cantunes@cox.SPAMTRAP.net	36
5. arthures@magpage.com	174	15. nomoreh1b@yahoo.com	36
6. NorForJunkEmail@directinternet11.com1	170	16. ElmerFudd@yahoo.com	30
7. LESLIE@JRLVAX.HOUSTON.RR.COM	149	17. clipper@prostart.net	28
8. dontspam@nospam.com	96	18. tbartkus@hotmail.com	28
9. cscharff@mail-resources.no.spam.pls.com	73	19. usenet@mpreston.demon.co.uk	27
10. joec@aracnet.com	43	20. CTOCIO@e-janco.com	24

Figure 1. Top 20 Posters in *alt.computer.consultants* by message count, during our observation.

The three most prolific participants’ posts comprised almost 50% of the top twenty participants’ posts. More importantly, these three together posted over 35% of the newsgroup’s overall messages. With only three people authoring over a third of all posts in the newsgroup, these three have a profound impact on what conversation in the newsgroup is like.

Celebrities are known for more than just being prolific; they typically display high communicative competence and share much common ground with the community, as well. This is, in part, because they are the ones who typically define what the prestige speech forms are and what knowledge and beliefs are important to the group. In contrast to a Celebrity, a frequent poster who does not display competence will become a nuisance and will, with each additional post, be held in lower regard by others, not higher. Likewise, a frequent poster who sends only news articles or advertisements to a newsgroup is one example of a high-frequency poster who serves no social role at all, just a social function that may be in support of or detrimental to community. In fact, such a poster may be a computer program.

Competence is a desirable trait; it is demonstrated through posting messages that are socially acceptable by community standards. Acceptability varies by context, however; *rec.gambling.blackjack* requires that arguments be backed up significantly by statistics. *alt.folklore.urban*, a newsgroup devoted to exploring and debunking urban legends, requires solid corroborating evidence in the form of names, dates, facts and figures and, where possible, primary source document references. In contrast to these two groups, where acceptability requires evidence, *alt.anagrams* participants have evolved a norm by which subsequent anagram posts are acceptable only if they praise the anagrams that came before them before presenting their own. Though not all participants always praise the previous anagram, it would likely be socially unacceptable to routinely not provide praise to the other anagrammers.

A celebrity is not always uncontroversial. A Celebrity's views may be in the minority, so long as he presents them in a way that is deemed acceptable. In many newsgroups, high-prestige participants will sometimes engage in heated debate. Disagreement is acceptable, but the terms of the argument must be in keeping with the community's standards. This could involve statistics or names and dates, as in *rec.gambling.blackjack* and *alt.folklore.urban*, respectively. When a participant cannot employ methods of discussion respected by the community, his competence is in question. Such a participant may be seen as a Ranter, a role we describe later.

We have termed this particular role Celebrity because a celebrity (small c) is more than well known; a celebrity is *famous*. Celebrities are public figures, and can themselves be topics of conversation for others. In the following example, Sven is not part of this conversation, yet his high standing in the community makes him a subject of conversation of others. One must be important and well-known to be a subject for others; it is impossible to publicly discuss someone who nobody knows.

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(1) From: dsew@packrat.aml.arizona.edu (David Sewell)
Subject: RFD: comp.software.sven
Newsgroups: comp.mail.elm,comp.editors

A year or so ago I engaged in a brief flamewar with Sven Guckes over the issue of
bouncing e-mail from spammers. Sven being the dominant voice on comp.mail.elm, I was a
bit irritated that he was always so sure he was right, and I was even more irritated that
he won his argument with me.
However, it has become increasingly clear to me that Sven really *is* right most of the
time, at least about the Right Software To Use.
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This poster is referring to Sven, a Celebrity in the *comp.mail.elm* newsgroup. As the maintainer of a variety of popular software programs, Sven is very knowledgeable in the areas of the newsgroups he frequents. By consistently providing useful advice, he has grown to be a recognized voice of authority in the *comp.mail.elm* community. A fixture of the community, a Celebrity is often mentioned by name in the posts of other participants, as Sven is here.

Why do people spend time participating in a community, devoting their energy to their respective newsgroups? Some participants spend years developing a reputation as an expert and take on de facto responsibility for the community. Chen and Gaines (1996) hypothesize that positive contribution to a social group has two results. The contributor gains a positive self-image and social power. A positive self-image may mean that the poster sees himself as nice, helpful or altruistic from helping others. He may also see himself as smarter or better than them because he possesses knowledge they do not. The second compelling result of

contribution is social power, which is exhibited frequently in Usenet. By contributing frequently and in a positive way, one can establish oneself as a voice of authority, further leading to a development of positive self-image.

The authority of the Celebrity extends to defining community standards, which is done largely as a by-product of enacting behavior that puts them into practice; by collectively behaving in a way they find acceptable, Celebrities set an example for others. They combine strategies of exemplification and self-promotion; not so much of themselves, but of their way of being. With an investment in the community made up over months or years of participation, Celebrities have an interest in seeing new participants behave in a way they find acceptable, lest the new participants radically change the community or “steal” it from those who were there first.

### *THE NEWBIE*

The Newbie, or new user, is one of the most widely-recognized roles in Usenet. The prototypical Newbie generally has little communicative competence and may have little common ground with the group. Common ground, measured by knowledge in a particular area, is often lacking most in Newbies in technology-related groups in the *comp* hierarchy, where technological know-how is highly prestigious. Communicative competence is often lacking most in Newbies in more socially oriented groups, where ritualized yet subtle behavior may be in greater use but invisible to the new participant. To make up for these shortcomings, many Newbies enact a role of supplication, pleading ignorance and relying on the kindness of others to ease his socialization process.

To address the perceived problem of Newbies’ lack of communicative competence and common ground, many newsgroups with FAQs will advise new participants to “lurk” for some time before participating. Lurking is the practice of reading the newsgroup’s conversation without participating oneself. For the new participant, time spent reading before participating serves as a socialization period, intended to teach him or her, by example, the expectations of the newsgroup. The principle at work is the “law of social proof,” which states that, “we view a behavior as correct . . . to the degree that we see others performing it” (Cialdini 2001). It is through observing others that we learn how to behave ourselves.

For some groups, this acculturation period is very important, because posts lacking competence are highly stigmatized. Posts that are not about a sometimes rigidly defined topic are grounds for public chastising. For example, in the FAQ for *rec.arts.bodyart*, it is stated that only certain types of body decoration may be discussed:

(2) If you would like to discuss bodypainting, please post to alt.art.bodypainting. The exception to this is the discussion about henna, which stays on your skin for a long time. Some people assume we discuss bodypainting because "bodyart" *can* include bodypainting by some . . . Since rec.arts.permanent-bodyart is an overlong and clumsy title, the founders of this group chose the simpler newsgroup title.
--

However, for some groups, like *alt.support.stop-smoking*, this is not the case:

(3) In most newsgroups, you are requested to "lurk" (read but not post) around a newsgroup for a few days before joining the conversation. By lurking, you get a feel for a group's character, its conventions, and the people who post to it. You don't have to do this in AS3!<sup>3</sup> Jump right in and post as often and as much as you need to, BUT if you're thinking of posting to an ongoing argument or an angry thread which seems to focus on personalities and not on smoking/quitting issues, it might be a good idea to hold that post aside for a day or two, before you join the fray.

The FAQ in *alt.support.stop-smoking* advises Newbies to "jump right in" to the conversation. In a group that highly values topical conversation, a suggestion like this could be a dangerous invitation for annoyance. However, *alt.support.stop-smoking* routinely has conversations that are off-topic (i.e. the topic of quitting smoking) by design. For this group, topicality is less important than posting material that is interesting to the participants. Arguably, however, this requires a more sophisticated understanding of the group's tastes. If *alt.support.stop-smoking* were simply about stopping smoking, then it would be relatively easy for participants to decide what is and is not acceptable. On the other hand, when all possible topics are up for consideration, a deeper understanding of the newsgroup's collective likes and dislikes is necessary. This may not be a serious problem in practice, because new participants may also be likely to be cautious about the material they post.

Sometimes Newbies can be cautious to the point of excess. To make up for a potential lack of competence or common ground, a Newbie may resort to excessive supplication. This may include unnecessary apology or employing hedges:

(4) From: "just me" <No@ThankYou.com>  
Newsgroups: misc.kids  
Subject: Re: The problem of Mother Keesha solved

"Douglas and Jennie Jackson" <dandj\_spamblowsit@alphalink.com.au> wrote  
> Pardon my intrusion in the discussions about and from Mother Keesha but it seems to  
> this newbie that the best way to get rid of her is just to have everyone ignore her  
> posts and then basicallly, if we are lucky, she'll just go as no one will be listening  
> and responding to her asinine posts.  
> Jennie Jackson

You're no newbie! Newbies don't know that stuff! You are totally right: ignore the troll and it goes away.  
-Aula

This message-reply pair exemplifies a Newbie's post and positive reinforcement from a more seasoned participant. In response to a disruptive participant, Jennie Jackson says to ignore the disruption. She does this in a way that is rather self-effacing; she apologizes for participating ("Pardon my intrusion") as though she did not belong and employs a hedge ("but it seems to this newbie") while calling herself a Newbie, which is generally a low-prestige role. Aula acknowledges that Jennie is demonstrating knowledge of a common piece of advice on Usenet: if people are being disruptive, the best policy is to ignore them. She is paying Jennie a compliment and giving her positive reinforcement by saying she's "no newbie" (though Aula likely does know that Jennie is, in fact, new). Zurcher (1983) suggests that seasoned participants in social environments will often offer positive reinforcement in response to a new person learning and enacting acceptable group behavior.

<sup>3</sup> AS3 is shorthand for *alt.support.stop-smoking*. Many newsgroups will abbreviate the newsgroup name in a similar way. This applies even to participants; *rec.arts.bodyart* is called RAB, and its participants RABbits.

Not all Newbies are created equal. Being new to Usenet in general is very different from being new to a particular group. Like the *rec.arts.bodyart* FAQ, many FAQs will warn Newbies not to post empty messages or post the same message repeatedly due to unfamiliarity with the technology. This is a mistake only a Newbie new to Usenet would make. Though it is an effect of the technology, such a mistake is a competence issue as well – being able to communicate competently requires being fluent in the medium as well as the content. Content-level deviant behavior, like posting a classified ad or personals ad style message, are mistakes that either type of Newbie could commit. Yet another sort of social violation, like failing to quote material to which one is responding or typing in all capital letters, is a hybrid of the two – the Newbie might not have the technical knowledge to perform the socially accepted behavior.

The use of acronyms and specialized vocabulary is yet another social barrier for Newbies; recall the “BOYC” example from earlier. For any person who is new to that newsgroup, an acronym such as this will be opaque at first. Since it may not be possible to learn the meaning of an acronym from context while lurking, some new participants may post a message asking that it be explained.

```
(5) From: "box412" <nospam-troy_lea@hotmail.com>
    Newsgroups: aus.motorcycles
    Subject: What does squid mean4

    Might be a silly question but what does squid mean, is it an acronym or is it as simple
    as it sounds, squished all over the road looking like a squid? I saw lots of them out on
    Sunday, quite a few of the thong variety I must add.
```

This person is undoubtedly new to the *aus.motorcycles* newsgroup, though perhaps not to Usenet.<sup>5</sup> The fact that acronyms arise in newsgroups is further evidence that social communities are in fact thriving within them, and underscores the difference between Newbies to particular groups and Newbies to Usenet in general.

The single most prevalent behavior among Newbies is question asking. New users have not been part of the community for very long and are often therefore less knowledgeable about the topic of the group. That is, they have less common ground. This is especially common in *comp* groups. It is so common that conventional forms of asking have arisen. The following two examples demonstrate some of these conventions.

```
(6) From: Cayd Meier <cayd@attbi.com>
    Subject: Beginner's Question
    Newsgroup: comp.lang.c++

    I'm going through the book "Teach Yourself C++". There's some code listed in the book
    that will not compile without errors on Visual Studio. However, if I make a small change
    to the code it compiles fine.

    Here's the first few lines of code as it is in the book: . . .6
    No errors occur. Right now, it seems as if I can't trust the book. But I'm sure it's a
    little more complicated than that. Any help would be greatly appreciated.
```

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact, “squid” is an acronym for “Small, Quick, Underdressed, Imminently Dead.”

<sup>5</sup> The *aus* hierarchy is for Australia-based newsgroups. *aus.motorcycles* is in many ways similar to *rec.motorcycles*; in fact, they share this acronym.

<sup>6</sup> Source code sample removed.

```
(7) From: "Denis Gurchenkov" <dgurchenkov@excelsior-usa.com>
Newsgroup: comp.compilers7
Subject: looking for C pre-processor
```

```
Could somebody point me to a C pre-processor that is provided with source code? . . . I
would be thankful for any information, including "have never seen such a thing" messages
;-)
P.S. I'm aware of GCC and lcc.
```

The first post, from Cayd, has a subject, “Beginner’s Question.” The author explicitly acknowledges his relatively low status in the community. His status is doubly low, because he is a new user (that is, he has never posted here before; whether and how long he had been lurking is of course unknown) and an inexperienced one (the book he is using is an introductory text). Subjects like “Beginner’s Question” are used with great frequency. Though it is a supplication, an attempt to take advantage of one’s low status, it belies a partial lack of competence. The experienced users in informational newsgroups, especially in the *comp* hierarchy, answer many questions from less experienced or knowledgeable participants; a subject like “Beginner’s Question” is uninformative and it may suggest that the post’s content is likewise uninformative, turning potential helpers away. Cayd begins his post by explaining the steps he has taken, showing that he has made an effort to fix his problem. Experienced users are unwilling and unable to offer advice if the poster does not do any work to resolve the issue himself first.

The second post’s author includes information about what he already knows (i.e. GCC and lcc), showing that he too has done some background work. Not only does this show that the author has invested himself in finding a solution, it gives the potential helpers more information to work with. After an explanation of the problem, question/help posts frequently end with pleas to the group for aid. Conventional phrases like “Any help would be greatly appreciated” and “I would be thankful for any information” are quite common and establish the poster as a supplicator; Indeed, the request for information, by its very nature, makes the poster a low-status participant, whose well-being depends on others’ adherence to the social norm of responsibility to help others (Jones and Pittman 1982).

### *THE LURKER*

Another widely-recognized role is the Lurker, the participant who reads a newsgroup’s conversations, but does not participate himself. As discussed in the section on the Newbie, a FAQ will often suggest that a new participant lurk for a time before participating, in order to learn about the group and prevent socially inappropriate behavior. However, lurking is not simply a stage in the life of a Newbie that is completed when one begins to post messages; lurking, for many reasons, is a strategy that can be sustained for as long as one wants.

One of the problems with studying the Lurker is that he is, by definition, not visible. Usenet’s technical structure is such that it is trivial to calculate how many people are posting messages, but it is impossible to determine how many people are “lurking,” as no readership data is

---

<sup>7</sup> Comp.compilers is a moderated newsgroup. This message, however, is typical of new-user questions in both moderated and unmoderated groups.

collected. There may be few lurkers in a particular newsgroup, or the lurkers may significantly outnumber the posters; what is certain is that nobody can really know. We consider lurkers to constitute an “invisible audience” that we simply assume to be present.

Nonnecke and Preece (2000; 2001) have studied the lurker extensively, from their demographics (2000) to their motives (2001). In their work, in which they studied lurkers in email-based discussion lists, they found several reasons for lurking, including discomfort in public forums, fear of persistence of their messages, and simply not feeling posting to be necessary (2001). While it is unfortunately not possible in Usenet to perform the demographic analysis that email discussion list servers make possible, it is likely that many of the reasons for lurking in discussion lists hold true in Usenet as well.

The Lurker is an interesting role because, although all lurkers engage in a similar behavior – reading but not posting messages for an extended period of time – they may do so for very different reasons, which suggests that not all lurkers are created equal, and that it would be a mistake to consider grouping them all together under a single title to signify complete undifferentiation.

Many lurkers have never posted a single message. They may intend to post someday, or may be content learning from the newsgroup’s posters. We can categorize them as having lower communicative competence and lower common ground, much like Newbies, with very low participation frequency. Since nobody knows who they are, they would necessarily have low standing in the community.

In contrast to the never-posting lurkers, some participants may choose to post messages only once in a great while. This presents the problem of setting a threshold; what low frequency or volume of posts qualifies as lurking? For the present discussion, we can consider “a long while” to be a nebulous but sufficient time span. Lurkers who post once in a while (i.e. have very low participation frequency) may not necessarily have low standing in their community, but could be mistaken for someone who does. A side effect of having an “invisible audience” is that a formerly frequent-posting, high-prestige participant who takes an extended leave from the group will be as invisible as a lurker who has never posted. A prolific poster may take a break from posting to the group but will continue to read the conversations taking place. Given a long enough absence, however, he may return to find himself unknown to and misunderstood by the people who joined the community in the interim:

```
(8) From: Rusty Martin (rustyblkjk@aol.comBATSPAM)
Subject: Re: Where's the old crowd?
Newsgroups: rec.gambling.blackjack
Date: 2002-10-30 11:29:24 PST
```

```
Like Ralph said, answering the same questions over and over across the years has become a bit tedious. So I mostly lurk, and I'll throw in a smartass remark now and again. I think anyone who's discovered this group in the last year probably thinks I'm only a smart aleck troll rather than someone who once lived and breathed this game and this newsgroup.
```

Rusty is a former Celebrity in the *rec.gambling.blackjack* community who has grown dissatisfied with the changes in the community and has ceased participating frequently. Rusty notes that new participants will understand him differently from how longtime participants will. More recently joining participants’ expectations of group behavior will have been formed in a context

that does not include large quantities of posts from Rusty, Ralph and their friends. Rusty's delurking emphasizes one of the effects of groups' styles and norms changing over time.

### *THE FLAMER, THE TROLL AND THE RANTER*

The notorious roles among Usenet participants, the Flamer, the Troll and the Ranter are recognized for their negative behavior in newsgroups. That they share a general goal of disruption is likely responsible for their popular conflation; the category "troll" is often used to define any disruptive behavior, overt or otherwise. In the scholarly literature (e.g. Donath 1998; Herring et al. 2002), however, trolling is defined more narrowly, as being about a deception in which the Troll feigns honest participation. Here we examine their strategy differences – the blatant, brute-force disruption tactics of the Flamer (a commonly used category), and the honest participation of the Ranter (a category of our own devising) – to further elucidate distinctions among categories of disruptive participants.

The Flamer is known primarily for his aggression; he adopts intimidation as his primary strategy. Even having no reputation in a community, a Flamer is identifiable from his first post. He does not seek to become a legitimate part of the community, so establishing communicative competence is not an issue for him. His key behavioral strategy is intimidation through very aggressive language, yelling and controversial speech.

The term "flame" can be either a noun or a verb. A flame (noun) is an extremely hostile message consisting of hateful speech and aggressive language. To flame someone is to send someone such a message. A Flamer, then, is a person who habitually engages in flaming behavior. Flamers travel from group to group, seeking victims with whom to pick fights. While not attempting to construct an argument, a Flamer may identify the subject or subjects that are contentious for this community and make controversial statements about them. For example, a Flamer visited *misc.kids*, a parenting newsgroup, and wrote about the ugliness of babies, a topic parents would hardly find tolerable:

```
(9) From: redtyrel@my-deja.com (Red Tyrel)
Newsgroups: misc.kids
Subject: Kindly keep your babies out of my face!

Look moms (and dads), you little babies ARE NOT cute. Sorry to break the news, they are
UGLY. So stop bringing them into the office so that fat old bags (who couldn't if they
tried) can get up off their fat arses and say things "oh isn't that cute". YUCK.
```

This particular Flamer has insulted Linux users in Linux advocacy newsgroups, pro-abortion activists in abortion newsgroups, and Blacks in many newsgroups across Usenet. The topic itself is relatively unimportant, so long as it is something over which someone could be hurt.

We distinguish between the Flamer as a role, and other flaming behavior that is undertaken for purposes other than disruption. The true Flamer is not part of a community; whether he is successful in angering people or not, he will likely move on to another group seeking more victims. This contrasts strongly with the community member who occasionally engages in flaming behavior. When a conversation becomes particularly heated, it can "descend into a flamewar," which is a protracted argument that has ceased to be about the topic at hand and instead has become a volleying back and forth of hateful, angry speech. It is particularly useful to note that the verb "descend" is paired with "flamewar." This emphasizes the stigma

attached to flaming behavior. Because there is a stigma associated with flaming, excessive flaming behavior by a participant in a conversation may be met with criticism from the participants who are more level-headed and less emotionally involved in the conversation at hand.

Though in general it is true that, for most social communities, excessive flaming is stigmatized, there exist communities for which this is not the rule. The community in the *alt.flame* newsgroup, for example, is focused entirely on flaming. Indeed, being able to write quality flames is highly prestigious. The conversations in *alt.flame* do have topics, but the topic seems to exist only as a vehicle for achieving the “communicative goal” (Dundes et al. 1972), which is hurling abuse in order to display one’s prowess at inventing creative and cruel insults. Even a conversation about video games becomes a flaming exhibition in the second message of the conversation thread:

```
(10) From: skippy@hell-flame-wars.net (Skippy)
      Newsgroups: alt.flame
      Subject: Re: What PC games are you currently playing??

      JamesKirk@Enterprise.com (Fox Mulder) wrote:
      >I am enjoying the free ride mode in Mafia very much.
      >Splinter Cell is really cool too.

      Splinter Cell is old news. Completed it ages ago on the X-Box. Get some new games, you
      tight-fisted ringworm.
```

Goffman (1969) observes that “verbal jousting” like this is cyclical; each round of insults must be bigger and more insulting than the previous. It is important never to let your opponent have the last word. A mediocre response is an implicit admission of defeat (Dundes et al. 1972). Participants who have failed in the past to top their opponents develop reputations for ineffectiveness and as a result have lower social status:

```
(11) From: Hogarth <hogarth@address-pending.com>
      Newsgroups: alt.flame
      Subject: Re: Tonight's agenda.....

      Diaper Boy! You finally summoned up the balls to post in alt.flame again. How's the
      incontinence these days, anyway?
```

This person, Hogarth, is flaming in the above example now is required to either respond with another insult or suffer the social consequences. The nickname “Diaper Boy” seems to have been attached to the person at whom this attack was aimed. The content of the message suggests that he has a history of not responding with a better insult and is now suffering further insults because of it.

The flaming taking place in *alt.flame* is a ritual insult, a kind of insult that Labov (1972) distinguishes from a personal insult. The former is about social play, whereas the latter is a serious attack. Competence in this community requires being able to engage in the former effectively, where effectiveness is measured in ability to outdo one’s opponent, leaving him or her unable to produce a better retort. This is most often in the form of long dyadic interactions that the participants call “duels.” This sort of flaming is done for the purposes of prestige within the *alt.flame* community. Its participants do not share the same goals as Flamers; their flames are positive, not negative actions, and a very good flame writer may indeed be a very

prestigious member of the group. They do not travel from group to group seeking victims; they stay in their communities, performing for their intended audience.

Like the Flamer (i.e. the traveling sense), the Troll and the Ranter are social deviants whose relation to the social community is, on the surface, generally negative. Their strategies are similar, in that they both engage in what is designed to appear to be topical debate. However, they are also known to engage in flame-like behavior and use intimidation when their more topical debates wane (Donath 1998) but the victims are already baited. It is important that the victims are indeed baited before the Troll engages in intimidation, because an established relationship is necessary for intimidation to be most effective, so that the intimidated does not simply give up and leave (Goffman 1969). The Troll's early conversation builds that initial relationship through deception, and only later uses it as leverage for intimidation.

The Troll is a master of "identity deception" (Donath 1998). He makes others believe he is someone he is not. A Troll attempts to pass as a valid member of the social community and begins to subtly provoke other members by writing messages that outwardly appear as honest attempts to start conversation but are really designed to "waste a group's time by provoking a futile argument" (Herring et al. 2002). Herring et al. further posit that a Troll's formula for success is to make a show of willingness to engage in legitimate discussion while "refusing to acknowledge" or "willfully misinterpreting another's point" in order to perpetuate conversation.

For the Troll, then, communicative competence is the most important trait. He must be adept at understanding and using the styles of speech a community deems acceptable, so as to not appear as an outsider. The Troll is dangerous precisely because his identity as a Troll and therefore his true motive is not known until it is too late. Donath (1998) considers the Troll's actions to be part of a "game" he is constructing and forcing the others to play against their will and without their knowledge. His conversation begins innocently enough; this is how the trap is set. For many Trolls, this trap is for Newbies especially. If the Flamer attacks like a bomber, seeking to harm everyone, the Troll does so like a sniper, seeking the especially vulnerable Newbies. Because they are less familiar with the community's standards and practices, Newbies are more likely to fall for a less-than-perfect performance by a would-be Troll. Goffman (1959) notes that, "a single note off-key can disrupt an entire performance." For this reason, more experienced participants in the group are likely to "out" the Troll by noticing the "off-key notes" and posting a response to the Troll's, directly accusing him of being a Troll. The more competence one has in the register of the community, the easier one will be able to identify a Troll's deviant behavior.

It is advantageous for a Troll to appear to be like any other new participant in the community. If a Troll is considered to be just another Newbie, then his lack of competence may be written off as inexperience instead of insincerity. While this can work to the advantage of a Troll, it can be to the detriment of a Newbie; on occasion, posts from previously unknown participants will be met with accusations of being a Troll.

(12) From: "Andersen Henrik" <Henrik.Andersen@iu.hio.no> Newsgroups: alt.computer.consultants Subject: Format C:
--

```
One day it came to my mind that I should get rid of that old Windows 95 OS and install a newer version of windows. So I formatted my hdd. So far so good. But when I booted the PC I got this awful error- message:  
Invalid system-disk!  
Try again, Abort etc....
```

```
No matter what I did I got the same irritating message. I expected to get to the command-line with the C: prompt. What have I done wrong?? Is there a simple way out of this misery?? Please help....
```

This post may or may not have been a legitimate request for assistance. “Is this a joke?” one participant responded. “Are you really asking why there isn't an OS after you formatted the drive or are you pulling our legs?” asked another. Said a third, “If you are trying to be funny, it worked. I laughed.” They did not accuse him outright of being a Troll, but they were clearly suspicious of the poster’s sincerity. Donath (1998) observes that excessive trolling in a newsgroup can undermine the trust that the group gives to new participants. This has the effect of making new participants uncomfortable, leading to diminished growth in the community.

It remains unclear whether this post was an attempt at trolling or not. Since a Troll intentionally begins a conversation innocuously, his deceit takes time to build and execute, and an initial trolling post is, by design, indistinguishable from any other post. Further, since this person has not participated in the community before, there is no history of interaction that other members can use to contextualize the current behavior. If a question like this came from a participant who others already associated with innocuous question-asking, then the likelihood of him being called a troll might be much smaller.

Like the Troll, the Ranter seeks to stir up pointless debate. A prolific writer, the Ranter posts with great frequency on a particular issue or issues and is unique in his or her lengthy posts and single-mindedness. Ranters exhibit some Troll-like characteristics, in that they feign participation in a legitimate debate in order to goad others into responding. Unlike a Troll, however, a Ranter has an agenda. For the Ranter, the topic of discussion is of utmost importance. The FAQ of the *alt.troll* newsgroup, where Trolls gather to discuss their art, draws a distinction between Ranters, which they call “mission posters,” “nuts” or “net loons,” and “trolls” because the latter engage in what they are doing for fun, whereas the characters described by these three terms actually believe what they are saying.

Because of their high posting frequency, Ranters may appear statistically similar to Celebrities. One Ranter, who goes by the name “Chive Mynde,” pushes a radical environmentalist agenda that includes distrust of science’s effects on global health in newsgroups like *sci.chem*, a community of people who make their livings as scientists. There are some differences between this Ranter and the Celebrities in his midst. For example, typical of Ranters, he does not participate in conversation threads that he does not initiate himself. His messages are responded to at a lower rate, than those of the average participant. Like most Ranters, Chive Mynde has a lot to say and says it at great length, but he is not well-received by the group as a whole.

Some participants will take it upon themselves to fight with the Ranter to defend the perceived threat to the group. Those who do are often trapped in endless argument. The Ranter’s primary behavioral strategies are exemplification and self-promotion. As an exemplifier, the Ranter claims to present the unquestionable truth and, as a self-promoter, the Ranter

emphasizes the “integrity and moral worthiness” (Jones and Pittman 1982) of his argument. The foil his opponents tend to employ, then, is discrediting him and his purported facts. Words and concepts like “lies,” “truth,” “evil” and “fraud” emerge in conversations with Ranters. As discussed above, however, Ranters, like Trolls, may not be susceptible to discrediting, as they do not seek legitimate argument.

## **ROLES IN COMMUNITIES**

Now that we have presented several roles that might be identified using participation frequency, communicative competence, common ground, and Jones and Pittman’s (1982) five strategies, we demonstrate how these roles can be used as a tool for thinking about activities in the newsgroup community as a whole. Since notions of acceptability play such a large role in our taxonomy, we use the community’s boundaries of acceptability as a locus for observing roles in action. We divide the examples into those that involve protecting the community’s boundaries, and those that involve pushing them.

### *PROTECTING BOUNDARIES*

Members of a community have an inherent interest in protecting the community from outsiders. This interest is especially strong for people who have spent a considerable amount of energy investing in community building, like Celebrities and other leader types. Usenet’s technology includes a practice called *cross-posting*, which allows an author to post a message to multiple newsgroups at once. This has the effect of allowing readers of all newsgroups to which the message was posted to participate in the conversation together. This can have both positive and negative consequences; preventing the negative consequences is a task that is often taken up by group leaders.

When a post is cross-posted, two or more distinct social groups are thrown together, without their knowledge or consent. As a “region . . . bounded by barriers of perception” (Goffman 1959), a newsgroup that is part of a cross-posted conversation has its boundaries violated. The set of people with whom one could now interact has grown considerably, without the time or context necessary to assimilate these new people into the collective perception of the group. Consequently, a cross-posted conversation can be disconcerting to the newsgroup, just as any population explosion would be to any social group. For this reason, most groups’ participants are interested in keeping cross-posting to a minimum.

One method of bringing a cross-posted conversation thread to an end is to remove the newsgroups’ names from the list of groups to post subsequent messages to. This is called “trimming” the list of groups, and allows the conversation to continue only in one’s “home” group. In the next example, Aula guards the integrity of conversation in *misc.kids* by removing cross-posted headers and limiting the thread to *misc.kids* only.

```
(13) From: just me (No@ThankYou.com)
      Subject: Re: Barbie shop with me cash register?
      Newsgroups: misc.kids

      /notes wild crossposting.
      /cuts xposts except for those directly related to parenting
      /figures that probably will mean the idiot who has shut himself in a small glass box will
      miss this post. oh well. trolls are trolls, after all!
      -Aula
```

As a respected poster to the group, Aula has an unspoken license to act on the group's behalf in such a way for everyone's common benefit. She acknowledges that the person from whom the post originated is likely cut off from the conversation now and will likely not see her reply, but this is a small price to pay for ensuring the group's social boundary remains secure. Though participants cannot build rigid fences around themselves, removing cross-posts is one way to minimally defend against invasion.

Cross-posting is not the only way a community's boundaries can be violated. Unwelcome individuals, if not given a clear message that they are in fact unwelcome, may attract others. As observed earlier, new participants are notorious for asking questions and seeking help and advice. While knowledgeable participants may like answering questions for all the reasons already described – self-image, public praise, etc. – these participants are a limited public good and so must be wary of free-riders (Kollock and Smith 1996). Free riders are people who take advantage of the resources offered by a community without contributing anything themselves. In this case, the resources are the answers that knowledgeable people provide. Though all new users are initially free riders – they don't have anything to offer the community yet – it is important to identify which ones will never contribute back. One way community members can protect against the eternal free riders is to raise the standard for asking a question in the community. By requiring that answer seekers demonstrate that they have spent some time researching their problem themselves, a community ensures that fewer and worthier come seek their assistance.

One manifestation of this raising of the standard is *sci.chem's* “no homework” policy. “Uncle Al” Schwartz, a Celebrity in that newsgroup, answers more questions than any other participant, but often does so in a terse way:

(14) From: UncleAl0@hate.spam.net Newsgroups: sci.chem. Subject: Re: avidin  *selah* wrote: > At what temp. is avidin in raw egg white deactivated?  Wei, R., and Wright, L.D. "Heat Stability of Avidin and Avidin-Biotin Complex and Influence of Ionic Strength on Affinity of Avidin for Biotin" Proc. Soc. Exp. Biol. Med. 117 341 (1964)  Why couldn't you do that?	(15) From: UncleAl0@hate.spam.net Newsgroups: sci.chem. Subject: Re: organic chemistry  shirin wrote: > > what is the IUPAC name of cubane  Now why would a person need to know that except for homework?  <a href="http://www.acdlabs.com/iupac/nomenclature/93/r93_689.htm">http://www.acdlabs.com/iupac/nomenclature/93/r93_689.htm</a>  Or look up the C8H8 in a "Chemical Abstracts" Collective Formula Index.
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Observe that, in both examples, he provides the answer the poster is seeking, but does so in a way that makes it clear that the way the question was posed was somehow inappropriate for the group. A closer look at the first post shows that, after providing a brief yet unmistakably helpful answer, Uncle Al rebukes the poster for obviously not putting any effort into seeking his own solution before asking publicly for help. The original poster is informed subtly that further supplication will not be looked upon kindly. The second post demonstrates *sci.chem* participants' general aversion to homework questions. A simple nudge like, “Now why would a person need that except for homework?” is a kindly way to provide help and to get the point across that continued questions like this would be even more unwelcome. By providing

double-edged answers that both assist and rebuke, members of this community can continue to provide the social support of a community while protecting themselves against those who would take advantage of them.

The individual who seeks to protect the community enjoys a personal benefit. Every time a participant successfully protects the social boundaries of the community, he reaffirms that he has the right to do so. Uncle Al, for example, demonstrates that he is indeed permitted to speak for the *sci.chem* community and say what sorts of questions are unacceptable and why. This is good for the newsgroup because it ensures that there are people willing and able to support its best interests, and it is good for the individual who gains social prestige by having this privilege.

Though a newsgroup's participants often seek to defend their community from change, sometimes change is good or inevitable. Group members may push the boundaries of what is acceptable by developing a related interest, or may have a change in topic thrust upon them, especially given a significant change in population.

### *PUSHING BOUNDARIES*

We have seen that longer-term, more active posters who have invested in the community have a relatively greater stake in seeing the community succeed, and have more power in enforcing group boundaries. Aula's cross-post trimming and Uncle Al's curt replies in the previous section demonstrate this. From these examples, it may seem that Celebrities and other leader types define success as maintenance of the status quo. However, because of their high prestige, longer-term, more active posters have greater privilege to push and extend boundaries of acceptable conversation; this is because, as Labov's "central figures," they define what is acceptable:

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(16) From insurancenj@aol.com
      Newsgroups: alt.computer.consultants
      Subject: Re: BITCH!...BITCH!...BITCH Was.... "H-1Bs now can stay longer"

      >From: Carey Gregory antispan9@attbi.com
      >That's because medicine is broken into specialty now. The "GP" of yesteryear is, for
      >the most part, a thing of the past. Most of the doctors you would call a "family
      >doctor" today are certified in internal medicine or similar. You will find very, very
      >few doctors in the US who don't fit into one of the categories listed in that URL.
      >
      >But I think we've drifted far off the subject matter of alt.computer.consultants.....

      True but I think we have had a pretty good conversation. Here is a question for you. Do
      you think that there would be a shortage today if 50 years ago congress instead of
      letting the corporations import cheap nurse made those same corporations improve working
      conditions and maybe put a buck or too into the education of Americans kids looking for a
      career?
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In this example, the conversation has drifted in topic from health care and immigration to specialization in medicine. InsuranceNJ is the most prolific author in *alt.computer.consultants*. He participates in many conversations in the group, has posted more messages than almost any other participant, and is often controversial. InsuranceNJ feels comfortable enough in this environment to have whatever conversation he likes, regardless of its relationship to the central topics.

We have seen, on one hand, that long-term, very active, high-prestige participants work hard to maintain boundaries of the groups they have invested in, but they also are the ones who have the power to push what those boundaries are. These are not contradictory interests; we suggest that they apply to two different concerns, first the newsgroup, then the conversation. Precisely because Celebrities can maintain boundaries on what is generally acceptable in a newsgroup, they can push what is acceptable in a particular conversation without having to worry about significant newsgroup-level changes taking place. In short, Celebrities are forces of short-term change and long-term stability.

How, then, does long-term change take place in a newsgroup? The newsgroup *alt.computer.consultants* is an example of a group that has undergone radical topic shift in its recent past. In this upheaval, a number of Ranters were able to take control of the group, establishing themselves as the dominant figures in the group and fundamentally changing the community existing there. In mid 2000, a number of now very active participants arrived in *alt.computer.consultants* and began to discuss the H-1b visa program and influx of Indian programmers in US technology jobs. Over the course of a few months, the newsgroup changed from being a resource for computer consultants (sharing technical support, how to budget a consulting business, etc.) to being a xenophobic, racist group, spouting hate toward Indians and anti-immigration propaganda about US economic policies. Charting the frequency of the terms “India” and “H-1b” shows the change that took place within the newsgroup:

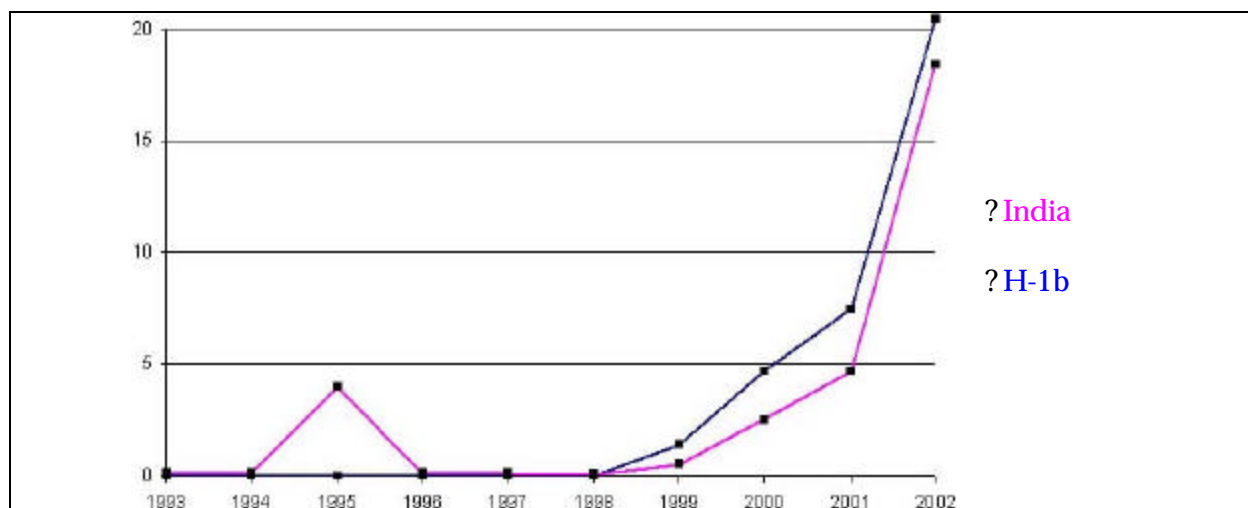


Figure 2. Occurrences of “India” and “H-1b” in subject lines per 100 posts in *alt.computer.consultants*.

A change in population is responsible for the change in topic. InsuranceNJ and a number of other now very active participants in *alt.computer.consultants* began to participate in the newsgroup around this time and participated eagerly in the immigration discussions that continue to this day. In response to this change, many participants who were dissatisfied left the group to create a moderated version of the group, *alt.computer.consultants.moderated*, instead. The new group is moderated; a responsible volunteer moderator must approve all posts. In the case of *alt.computer.consultants.moderated*, moderation is a community protection tool. When the members of *alt.computer.consultants* who were not interested in discussing immigration and H-1b visas left the group, the proportion of those who did rise. This change in community also effected a change in roles for the participants. Those who began as Ranters – highly active

participants with little common ground – became the de facto leaders of the group. The topics important to them – immigration, etc. – became the prestige topics; their ideas and beliefs became the new basis for establishing common ground, and the takeover was complete.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate the usefulness of the social role for classifying and explaining the behavior of participants in Usenet newsgroups. We have selected a variety of criteria – communicative competence, participation frequency, common ground, and Jones and Pittman's (1982) strategies – and have used them to create our taxonomy of roles. While we believe our criteria to be informative, we suggest that additional criteria may further refine the taxonomy by refining the roles we have observed, or by positing additional ones.

Throughout, we have thought of a role as a set of skills, privileges and responsibilities, constituted through repeated interaction and negotiation among group members. Communicative competence and common ground are vital skills for communicating effectively. With those skills, one may earn the privilege of leader status and its associated benefits. However, a leader also has the responsibility of defending the community against cross-posters, question answerers and other individuals who would disrupt them. New members, by virtue of their lack of knowledge, have the privilege of asking questions, but also have the responsibility of attempting to help themselves first. Observing how newsgroup participants push and protect their communities' boundaries, and how that behavior relates to their roles, we can see the link between each individual's role, and the structure of the newsgroup community as a whole.

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