

Missed Cues: How Disputes Can Socialize Virtual Newcomers

H. L. Weber

Moab Arts and Recreation Center

Abstract

This study considers how newcomers are socialized into an online group for sexual abuse survivors. The focus of the article is a dispute wherein a newcomer does not behave according to the group's expectations regarding the nature of communications between regulars and newcomers. In the ensuing dispute, regulars send explicitly instructional messages to the newcomer, who eventually apologizes and assumes the stance appropriate to newcomers. The analysis highlights ways in which the dispute serves to reveal and re-affirm the social organization of the group. In concluding, it is suggested that aspects of the medium may increase the number and likelihood of disputes in Internet forums as compared with comparable face-to-face interactions.

Introduction

In his concluding remarks to a volume of dispute studies, Grimshaw (1990) asserts that disputes have socializing functions, including the negotiation of identities and the appropriate nature of interpersonal arrangements. He claims that during disputes, implicit or explicit, instruction takes place about both the realities and different perceptions of social structure, and the normative proprieties of talk and of interaction. In this article, I explore the ways in which a single dispute on a Usenet newsgroup reveals social statuses and alignments between them and simultaneously reaffirms these for the community. The dispute involves a newcomer who aggressively challenges an old-timer. In not behaving as newcomers typically do, she encounters much opposition and by her own confession, "learns the hard way." She ultimately adopts a style, and thus a stance, appropriate and usual to newcomers.

This study thus considers how newcomers are socialized into a Usenet newsgroup. Inherent in this question is how participants mark the statuses of "newcomer" and "regular" and alignments between them. In the first section of the article, I describe the typical ways in which newcomers and regulars interact. My argument is that the ritual nature of communications between regulars and newcomers suggests that most newcomers enter group discussion already somewhat socialized. Presumably by lurking, newcomers accrue a sense of what is expected of them prior to actual participation.¹ In the second section, I examine a dispute wherein a newcomer does not behave according to expectations, indeed, flouts them. In the ensuing dispute, regulars send explicitly instructional messages to the newcomer—since she did not learn by lurking, she has to learn by direct instruction. In the final section, I consider how the dispute serves to reveal and re-affirm the social organization of the newsgroup. I claim that disputes may be an important way for virtual communities to stipulate what they are and what they are not, especially to newcomers. I also suggest that aspects of the medium may increase the number and likelihood of disputes in Internet forums as compared with comparable face-to-face interactions.

The Group

The group under study is a Usenet newsgroup whose focus is support for those “in recovery” from sexual abuse.² Usenet newsgroups may be likened to bulletin boards where people can electronically post messages and also read posted messages. Participants are not able to control how long it will take between the time when they post the message and the time it actually appears on the newsreaders for other participants to read. This means that they do not have the power to place their message into a particular sequence with other messages. Participants can, however, quote verbatim messages posted earlier within their own and respond to them, lending a post facto interactivity to messages. Usenet newsgroups are termed “asynchronous” in contrast to “synchronous” electronic modes where communications are close to instantaneous (see Baym, 1996 and Smith, 1999 for more information on Usenet). During the period from which messages for this study were taken, between 300 and 500 messages per week were posted. Because of the sensitive nature of the subject matter discussed in the group, many participants post anonymously and use gender-neutral nicknames; thus I did not have access to the gender or other demographic information of the participants.

Method

Three months’ worth of messages were originally collected for my doctoral dissertation, of which this article is an outgrowth. I subsequently restricted my study to a single month of messages, for a total of almost 2,000 messages. These messages were posted in the fall of 1995.

In addition, prior to archiving and analysis, I observed the group and archived many batches of messages over a period of one-and-a-half years (1994-1995). My observation of this group, both systematic and casual, resulted in familiarity with individual participants and the group’s typical practices, as well as the accumulation of a certain degree of “native intuition.” However, I never posted messages to this group, and so cannot be considered a participant. Besides the practice of ethnographic observation, this article utilizes two methods: the comparison of many similar interactions, and the analysis of a single interaction. Like many practitioners of Conversation Analysis (CA), I analyze examples of comparable speech events to discover patterns within them and consider what they reveal about talk and social interaction (see, e.g., Schegloff, 1974; Schegloff & Sacks, 1974; Schiffrin, 1984 & 1993). This is the method used for the first section, which concerns habitual communications between regulars and newcomers.

In the second section of the article, I study a single dispute. This dispute involved 16 participants who posted slightly over 50 messages over a time period of two weeks. Various scholars explicate single interactions as a way to reveal how talk and its speakers are organized (see, e.g., Goffman, 1981). Elucidation of this dispute offers two advantages not available through the first method. First, it affords a detailed examination of how different kinds of participant alignments and shifts between them are communicated in a single interaction. Second, since the dispute results from unusual behavior on the part of a newcomer and ultimately leads to her expression of more typical behaviors, this dispute is an “exception” that proves the rule of typical interaction.

In discussing the dispute, I give brief excerpts from participants’ messages. In these, I retain spelling and grammatical irregularities, although I have regularized the line spacing to enhance readability.

Terminology

In this study, I describe an “entrance” frame where newcomers introduce themselves and are welcomed by regulars, as well as several types of dispute frames. I use the term “frame” to refer to what Tannen and Wallerstein (1993) call “interactive frame,” “a definition of what is going on in an interaction” (p. 59). (See Tannen, 1993, for a review of the term “frame” and how it has been used in a variety of disciplines.) By “alignment” I refer to the way in which participants position themselves relative to one another. As Schiffrin (1993) points out, this includes “their relationships of power and solidarity, their affective stances, their footing” (p. 233). I use the term “status” to refer to the length and regularity of group participation, i.e., whether one is a “regular” or a “newcomer.” I do not use the term “identity” in this sense, which tends to be used to refer to more enduring qualities, such as one's gender or race, since if one is a regular in one group, but moves to another, one becomes again, and for a time, a newcomer. The term “role” for regular or newcomer is also dispreferred since there are several “roles” a regular or newcomer might assume within a group. For example, in the entrance frame, both regulars and newcomers may occupy the role of either enterer or greeter. A newcomer may be greeted by either a regular or relative newcomer. A regular who has been absent may also re-enter the group and be greeted by either regulars or newcomers. However, the ways in which newcomers and regulars enact the roles of either enterer or greeter are different because of their different statuses.

Newcomers, Regulars, and Politeness

Lave and Wenger's (1991) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation* considers newcomers' participation in groups. Lave and Wenger view the newcomer role as one of learning; they claim that learning is a condition and evolving form of membership. Learning takes place through practice, and via those practices, newcomers gradually shift in their participation from peripheral to full (or from the status of newcomer to regular). According to Lave and Wenger, studies of apprenticeships often do not address the conflictual character of access for newcomers and problems of power and control between newcomers and regulars (but cf. Honeycutt, 2005 for an analysis of the “hazing” of newcomers on a television fandom Internet message board). During the dispute described in the following section, these problems are clearly demonstrated when the newcomer steps beyond appropriate bounds. In this section, I suggest that what newcomers write in Internet discussion groups often reveals an acknowledgment of their peripheral status within the group, and that they try to act in such a way so as to gain acceptance and sympathy from regulars. In other words, issues of power and control are omnipresent, if not immediately apparent, even when newcomers and regulars act in accordance with norms of practice.

Given that newcomers are of peripheral status, one would predict that they may be more polite than a regular participant, at least initially. This in fact turns out to be true, making Brown and Levinson's (1987) systematic study of politeness strategies useful as a means for examining newcomer messages. According to Brown and Levinson, many universals of politeness in language reflect strategies that attempt to minimize or redress damage to face when face-threatening actions (FTAs) are committed. Brown and Levinson divide the notion of face into positive and negative face, each with its own “wants.” Negative face includes the claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights of non-distraction. Negative face wants, generally, are

the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition. Positive face is the claim to a positive self-image or personality. Positive face wants are met by expressions of appreciation and approval by others.

Brown and Levinson (1987) outline the several courses one may consider before undertaking a face-threatening action: decide against taking the action because the possible risks outweigh the possible benefits; commit the action off-the-record so that one cannot be held responsible for committing the action and leaving room for an off-the-record refusal ("boy, is it cold in here" would typically not be responded to negatively and directly as a request that someone close a window, though it may be treated as one by a willing addressee); commit the action baldly (this is sometimes a risky strategy, other times an entirely appropriate one); commit the action with redress. Redress includes actions that either enhance the positive or negative face of the addressee or damage the positive or negative face of the speaker (thus relatively enhancing the face of the addressee). Redress functions as face-compensation when a face-threatening action is committed.

Newcomer Messages

When an uninvited stranger enters a group, group members' negative face is potentially threatened. Entering a support group and "speaking" can be regarded as a significant imposition; it is a request to be listened to, sympathized with, and perhaps, advised. Many newcomers accompany their entrance messages with all varieties of redress, taking actions that enhance group members' positive and negative face and taking some that damage their own face.

Contents typically found in newcomers' messages include: a greeting; a description of the person's contact with the group thus far; a reference to sexual abuse experiences or related problems; and a request. These findings fit with those of Herring (1996), who identifies typical content and sequence patterns in messages posted to asynchronous Internet groups. That I can generalize about the style and content of newcomer messages suggests that they are enactments of roles within a frame. I term this frame "entrances;" the roles associated with it are "enterers" and "greeters." Within this frame, newcomers and regulars take on particular alignments relative to themselves and each other. In what follows, I briefly discuss each of the typical contents listed above. In particular focus is how a model of a newcomer and relations between newcomer and group are portrayed by the way in which the newcomer writes.

Greeting

At first glance, one might regard the category of greeting as so universally ritual as to require no further comment. However, Herring (1996) notes that many electronic discussion group postings do not contain greetings, and Veselinova and Dry (1995) find that the length and frequency of greetings decrease over time as familiarity increases among participants. Similarly, on the sexual abuse survivor newsgroup, some types of messages rarely begin with a greeting. Newcomers, in contrast, often begin their messages with "hi," "hello," "hi folks," etc. The greeting serves to mark the beginning of an interaction between the newcomer and the group. As such, it implicitly marks social distance, or unfamiliarity. Greetings may also belie subtle differences. Another case where greetings are used but communicate a different social relationship is when regulars who have been absent from the group resume participation. Typically, they might write something like "hi, X here" and go on to explain why they were absent or what has transpired in their off-

line life since their absence. Their greeting marks the resumption of interaction due to an absence, not a beginning of interaction, and their greeting does not indicate social distance or unfamiliarity; in fact, it indicates the opposite: "I know you and you know me, and I have returned."

Statement of Participation

Usually, newcomers in some way indicate their newcomer status.³ They may say how long they have been lurking, say "this is my first time here," "this is my first post," "I'm new here," or refer to themselves as a "newcomer" or "newbie." This explicit linguistic identification of self as newcomer is probably more necessary in computer-mediated communication than in face-to-face situations where mere physical presence may announce one's "newness" and perhaps elicit introductions by other group members. Medium considerations aside, an announcement of oneself as a newcomer may be an implicit request that regulars allow the newcomer certain transgressions they would not allow other regulars.

Reference to Sexual Abuse History

Although there is great variety in the way this is accomplished, there is a uniform function to reference to one's sexual abuse history: to claim candidacy to the group's membership. Such history is frequently responded to with the wry, formulaic comment "sorry you qualify."

Requests

Many newcomers approach the group with some kind of request, whether it is for help, information, or just someone to talk to. Requests may be made baldly, may be combined with some form of redress, or may be committed off-the-record. As noted in the summary above of Brown and Levinson (1987), redress may take the form of positive or negative politeness to the addressee or of damage to the speaker's negative or positive face. Some strategies used in making requests which enhance the addressee's face and/or damage the speaker's face include: informational questions, which depict the addressees as persons of authority and knowledge, and the writer as a person of ignorance; conventional politeness phrases, which express an unwillingness to impose on the addressees by the writer; hedges, which function similarly to conventional politeness phrases; thanks and proffers which acknowledge that an imposition on the addressees has taken place, and that the writer would like to make up for this by offering return favors.

Requests which imply expertise on the part of the addressee (and not on the part of the speaker) simultaneously function to enhance the positive face of the addressee and damage the positive face of the speaker. Conventionalized polite phrases such as "Can anyone help?" instead of "Will you help?" reduce the threat to an addressee's negative face. Hedges can also express negative politeness, as in "Anybody else out there have this wide range of feelings? Thanks for listening, anyway." In this example, the hedge "anyway" appears to function as an "out" for readers who do not wish to respond, and saying "thanks" acknowledges indebtedness on the part of the speaker, thus damaging her negative face. Another type of phrase which damages the speaker's negative face are offers that follow requests, as in "I need someone who ... I will do the same for you." This may also be regarded as a form of positive politeness, as it communicates reciprocity between speaker and addressee.

Politeness, among other behaviors, is a way for people to “give off” information about themselves. Goffman (1959), the inspiration for and dedicatee of Brown and Levinson's study of politeness, asserts that the need to “give off” and “get” information about one another is a basic aspect of social interaction. Goffman claims that when an individual enters a situation, people look for information or use information they have about him and that that information about the individual helps to define the situation—people know what to expect of him and he of them. In the electronic medium of Usenet where strangers interact, one's discourse is the only way to “give off” information about oneself, so discourse performance as a social tool is crucially important. Discourse performance is how individuals communicate who they are, and hence, how an electronic group is populated and regulated.

“Being polite” allows a person a way to communicate this kind of information. The positive politeness strategies used in newcomer messages typically demonstrate camaraderie with regard and appreciation for the group's participants; they communicate that the newcomer is a potential friend and ally. Negative politeness is a way to demonstrate oneself to be a responsible, thoughtful person. By damaging one's own positive face, one demonstrates humility, and by damaging one's own negative face, one demonstrates a willingness to take on social debts, again a sign of responsibility.

The politeness strategies used by newcomers suggest social distance in two senses: first, that newcomers are strangers to the group and its participants; and second, that as newcomers, their status is peripheral, and to become more central to the group requires that they be accepted by others who are already central. This can probably be said of many kinds of groups. However, there are a number of self-denigrating politeness strategies common to newcomer messages in this particular group that are striking enough as to warrant explication. Below, I describe some of these, and follow with a discussion of what they suggest about how newcomers are expected to behave.

Many messages express the writer's fear and hesitation at participating in the group. Some participants describe themselves as undeserving, distressed, and even helpless. They may stress their technological incompetence. Such damage to the speakers' positive face is sometimes accompanied with expressions that enhance group members' positive face. Below are expressions of uneasiness at participating, some of which are combined with uncertainties about the technology involved:

- 1) Well, I feel ... *nervous*
- 2) Am I even using this thing right?
- 3) this is the FOURTH time i have tried to post. never done it before. too scared, i guess ... i am very very scared ... i really hope this works.

The following examples express self-denigration (and enhancement of the positive face of the addressees in the first and third examples):

- 4) I have never posted myself. Because I never had the courage to break the silence and because my stuff is really not that bad compared to what has happened to other people here
- 5) can anyone provide a luckless newbie with some clues?
- 6) I feel a bit of a schmuck, lurking when so many of you bravely TELL

This tendency to self-deprecate reveals an aspect of the group's culture and its expectations of newcomers. It suggests that for this group (and by extension, possibly, for other sexual abuse victim organizations, and for support groups in general), a focus on one's suffering and incompetence may act as a better entrance than if one were to stress well-being and competence. In support of this point is the fact that very few newcomers enter directly into an ongoing thread or debate. Those who do tend to make use of politeness strategies in a way that acknowledges that they are entering the group in an atypical fashion. I quote one such message extensively to demonstrate the lengths to which its writer goes in order to avoid giving offense to others. In brackets, I note the kind of politeness strategies employed in this message, as described in the above sections:

- 7) This is my first time posting to this group, and (naturally for me, *sigh*) I am picking a very complex subject to comment on [damage to S's positive face] ... I appoligise [sic] in advance for the great length of this post [negative politeness] ... I hope that the author of this post to which I am replying does not take my comments as a personal attack against him. I have no intention of doing that, and I have no intention of implying that he wishes to do any children harm. Apologies in advance for any toe-stepping-on which I may do in this post. [all negative politeness] I understand that he was also a victim, and in this regard my sympathy goes out to him. [positive politeness]

The extensive use of negative politeness strategies in this message marks the fact that in entering a debate as a newcomer, the writer is acting unusually and risks being seen as insulting or imposing.

The ritualized ways in which newcomers enter group discussion reveal that newcomers already have a sense of what is expected of them as newcomers, and know that not to behave according to those expectations may result in repercussions. Because virtual newcomers are able to observe groups prior to participating (in some sense, prior to being “present”), a socialization process is already underway before they post their first message. This apparent socialization may reflect that the newcomer has not only observed this newsgroup carefully before participation, but has also been involved in other on-line groups, and is savvy to the general status of newcomers on Usenet groups. As mentioned earlier, included in the notion of alignment are power, solidarity and affect. Newcomers write in a way that acknowledges their peripheral status (hence minimal power within the group). They convey an affect that combines regard and timidity—consonant with the less powerful/more powerful relationship between newcomers and regulars. Newcomers also communicate potential future solidarity, as fellow sexual abuse victims, with the newsgroup's other participants.

Regular to Newcomer Messages

The content of messages by regulars responding to newcomers may be divided into two major categories: socially supportive gestures, and instruction. By socially supportive gestures, I mean expressions that are used to welcome, encourage, include and sympathize with newcomers. By instruction, I refer to the giving of advice and making of representations about the group, its participants and practices. Below I describe each type, and discuss how they serve to index an alignment between newcomer, regular participant, and the group.

Socially Supportive Gestures

In a style that is ambassadorial-like, regulars may try to make the newcomers feel welcome. They may greet them with “hi” or “hello,” calling the newcomer by name. Frequently in these messages, they will say “welcome” or “welcome to the group.” Because the requirement for full membership is a misfortune, sexual abuse, this “credential” is often acknowledged with an expression of sympathy, “sorry you qualify” or “sorry you have to be here.” Newcomers are encouraged in their off-line life and in participation in the group, as in “keep on posting,” “hang in there” and “glad you found us.” Often towards the end of the messages are goodwill gestures such as proffers of e-hugs, “strength and peace,” “all the best to you” and “good luck.” If a newcomer's message contained expressions which damaged his own positive face, he may receive reassurances, e.g., “you did just fine” “boring, no!” and “you ARE special.” In addition, responses to newcomer messages frequently contain exclamation points (sometimes in clusters of more than one at the end of sentences) and smiley-faced emoticons (sometimes several in a single message).

Though greeting a newcomer may be a common practice, the way in which a group does so is particular to that group. In using the gestures described above, regulars on the sexual abuse survivors' newsgroup implicitly represent the group and themselves as friendly, caring and supportive.

Instruction

In this category of discourse, the regular indexes her experience and knowledge of the group. This knowledge is shared with the newcomer whose inexperience is conversely indexed. Regulars tend to stress that there are others like the newcomer in this group, i.e., people who have had similar experiences, and that participating on the group can be helpful in one's “recovery.” Lexemes used in these statements make implicit representations about the group, its participants, its purpose, and valued behaviors or attitudes. These include terms and phrases such as healthy support, safe place, journey in recovery, share, explore feelings, listen, and help. These representations subtly inform and guide the newcomers about the practices and expectations of the group. A newcomer who wishes to be accepted by the group is implicitly instructed as to the behaviors and attitudes that can encourage that acceptance.

There are two formal qualities of note in these responses. The first is that authors often use the proximal deictic “here” to refer to the newsgroup and “we” or “us” to refer to participants in the newsgroup. “Here” marks the newsgroup as a place the writer “is,” and “we” marks the writer as a spokesperson for the group's participants (and apparently, qualified to fulfill this role). The second formal property of note is that regulars tend to alternate between declaratives and imperatives. Declaratives are used to make representations about the group. Imperatives are used

to tell the newcomer what he or she should do. In the examples below, the relevant deictics are underlined, and the order of declarative and imperative is indicated in brackets.

- 8) There are a number of us on here who are male and who have been through the same (similar) as yourself. Don't be afraid.
[declarative, imperative]
- 9) stay as safe as possible we're all here listening
[imperative, declarative]

Declaratives mark the writer as one of the group, familiar with and a source of authority about the group, and the newcomer as one who is less familiar. While the imperatives in these examples communicate concern for the newcomer and do not demand any action of them, they nonetheless communicate authority and therefore, an alignment of more and less powerful between the regular and newcomer, respectively. Similarly, the use of deictics functions to mark an asymmetric alignment of central/regular and peripheral/newcomer. The affect in these messages communicates care, as well as solidarity among regulars, newcomers, and the group.

The Dispute

I now turn to examine a dispute wherein a newcomer enters a frame inappropriate to her status and in a style that communicates an alignment that is also inappropriate, assuming she someday wishes to become accepted as a central participant in the group. I first describe an exchange I call an “insiders' fight” and the cues that mark it as such. I then describe the newcomer's participation in it, and finally, how the dispute was ultimately resolved.

The Insiders' Fight

In what on the surface appears to be a vituperative argument, two regulars have what I call an “insiders' fight.” I call it this because the argument takes place between friends with substantial experience with the group and one another, because the hostility they express is not extended to others who participate in the larger discussion, and because the interchange does not seem to be regarded as disruptive to the group as a whole by other participants. Some of the behaviors are unquestionably flame-like, including the use of sarcasm, personal insults and put-downs, and the assertion of extreme or absolutist statements (Herring, 1994, includes these in an inventory of flame-like behaviors).⁴ I do not examine these separately, as they should be self-evident to readers in the examples below.

The question I am concerned with here is the following: Without having personal knowledge of the participants, how could one know that this fight need not be taken seriously, i.e., that it is not a threat to the newsgroup nor to any of its participants, and thus, does not necessitate any defensive actions on the part of others? Re-stated, what linguistic cues are used to mark an insiders' fight as such? The cues are three-fold: 1) statements which refer to or imply a durative relationship between the two combatants; 2) the use of emoticons which key playfulness throughout the argument; and 3) the presence of politeness behaviors and the absence of flame-like behaviors in messages posted in the same thread by and to other participants. Additionally, while one combatant used flame-like behaviors much more than the other did, the other's responses reveal that he took the jibes lightly and without offense.

Durative relationships are indexed with adverbial phrases and verb phrases used to refer to past and ongoing events and behaviors. Examples of this are underlined in the examples below, taken from the argument:

- 10) Because, and we've bickered about this before ...
- 11) Yes, you do complain too much, and you do exaggerate. So what? It's your life. I am merely taking passing exception to your long-standing tendency to exaggerate about OTHER lives.
- 12) Dennis, between times I forget the major difficulty in carrying on a discussion with you. Not only do you have a huge and complex agenda of fears and prejudices, you also delight in making up your own definitions for already defined terms and phrases.

After some of the more insulting comments, smiley-faced emoticons appear, as seen in the examples below:⁵

- 13) Well, I don't have that special pair of Dennis-Colored glasses that allows me to see everything through your eyes 8), so ...
- 14) I guess I have the same sort of general right to call your weird ravings as I see them as you do to make outlandish charges and accusations against the dead 8).
- 15) But then I'm not as big on thought crime and attitude guilt as you 8).

In this dispute, emoticons appear to be used to key a frame of playful hostility.⁶ This affectual stance combined with indices of a durative relationship suggests that the dispute, rather than being disruptive and serious, is part of how these two participants socialize with one another. While this form of socializing is not part of the general culture of the group (as Schiffrin, 1984, argues it is for some Jewish cultures), the participants' messages suggest it is a habit for these two.

All of the statements quoted above were written by one participant, Georgie. Of the two, Georgie uses far more flame-like behaviors. Evidence that they are not causing offense to the other, Dennis, are his ready retorts:

- 16) Not getting your values here, kid.
- 17) Totally missing my point, again.
- 18) Coming from one who, can easily *underestimate* others' obvious abuses, I take that as a compliment.

Another indicator that this fight is an insiders' fight is the polite way in which others make their comments throughout the discussion and are responded to. These participants make use of negative politeness strategies to communicate they do not wish to intrude upon nor insult other participants in the debate. Examples of this are:

- 19) May I have your attention please: This is not a flame.
- 20) With all due respect Dennis ...
- 21) Not my thread, perhaps not my business, but ...

These other participants demonstrate good will toward others by using conventionalized politeness signatures, e.g., "take care" (a form of positive politeness). In their responses to others, Georgie and Dennis are also strikingly solicitous and polite. Their messages are devoid of the flame-like behaviors that are prevalent in their communications with one another. Below are some of the polite phrases used in their messages to other participants:

- 22) Thanks for your input, and have a nice day. Hope my ideas made some sense to you.
Regards
- 23) Good thoughts. How's the weather around your town these days?
- 24) Maybe you could answer some of my concerns?
- 25) Hi Jean. Thanks for your thoughts.

Together, the evidence above suggests that although it may superficially appear to be rude, disruptive behavior, this dispute is actually a form of play between two familiar colleagues that requires no intervention by others. Furthermore, the different styles used by and in addressing other participants suggest that the insiders' fight is a frame embedded within a more general debate frame in which others interact civilly.

The Newcomer Offends

As part of the same thread, a newcomer asks provokingly: "Georgie, are you here only to flame? Just curious." In a later message, she writes:

- 26) BTW, Georgie, I would also like to add one more thing. I'm sure you've been told this before, but you're attitude really sucks. It's self-centered and obnoxious. What is your deal? Try some respect once in a while.⁷

The newcomer adopts the hostile behavior used in the insiders' fight without benefit of the status of regular or the alignment of "insider." Her messages include no indices of a durative relationship; in fact, the phrase "I'm sure you've been told this before" indicates an ignorance of past events. She uses no emoticons to key playfulness. The newcomer not only flouts the tradition of making her first message one of entry presented in a polite, newcomer-like fashion, but she also enters a frame in which she has no proper role, and insults a regular who has been participating on the newsgroup for years.

Behind-the-Scenes Defense

In entering the insiders' fight and attacking a regular, the newcomer's behavior was so inappropriate that she unwittingly evoked another frame, the defense frame. The newcomer later announced to the group that she received several email messages in defense of Georgie, apparently severe enough to cause her to say that she will leave the group. She writes:

- 27) I can see by the response's in my Email that I *don't* belong here
- 28) you all can stop throwing shit at me regarding your *wonderful* georgie. it seems he can say whatever his little heart desires and anyone that speaks against him can go to hell. well it's getting warm here, gotta go won't be back

Of note here is not just that the newcomer received rebukes from other participants, but how she received the rebukes. She received the messages via email (a private channel) and not on the newsgroup (a public channel). Why did others respond to her privately, rather than publicly? It is not unusual for defensive messages to be posted to the newsgroup. However, that the attacker in this case is a newcomer appears to have created a conflict for regulars accustomed to acting in a welcoming mentor role to newcomers. If they were to be observed treating newcomers roughly in public, this could damage the group's face. At the same time, regulars feel compelled to defend their fellow group members. Defending the regular via the private email channel can be interpreted as a strategic resolution: group members are able to defend the regular without damaging the group's face.

Resolution

Despite her threats, the newcomer does not leave. Instead, she posts a message that reveals a radical shift in alignment. This lengthy message contains elements heretofore missing in her other messages—those associated with newcomer messages. She apologizes, self-deprecates, claims technical and social ignorance, and highlights her need to learn. She even requests permission to “start over.” Below are excerpts from this message:

- 29) I didn't know how to 'snip' and stuff, so I just posted the whole letter. I'm sorry.
- 30) I appreciate feedback on what's I've said, because I don't always express myself correctly. I need to know what I screwed up or what other opinions are out there. I can't learn unless I do... [I] never had the benefit of learning appropriate social interaction.
- 31) I wasn't clear enough in my attempt to say why ... There we many points in the post that ... They were missed, and it was my fault. I didn't know how to 'seperate' articles at the time (I'm still not very good at it), so nothing was really clear. I do apologize... I would like to start over, if that's ok. Just let me know.

The newcomer shows savvy in making the regulars' private communications publicly known simultaneous to her assuming a typical newcomer stance and role. In doing so, she keys regulars to assume the role and alignment appropriate to dealing with newcomers. However, she does not abandon her own perspective. In her message, the newcomer complains generally that the group is cliquish, and more specifically, that one of the regulars in the insiders' fight makes a wide

variety of insulting comments, apparently with *carte blanche*, but that she, the newcomer, was not granted such immunity. Another newcomer agrees with and expands upon this complaint. She, too, does this while making extensive use of politeness strategies.

Regulars next respond to the two newcomers in typical regular-to-newcomer style, highlighting their personal experience with the group, making representatives about the group, and instructing the newcomers. One of the issues they clarify is that the newcomer's original offensive stance evoked a defensive stance of and by regulars. They explain that an organizational line was drawn:

- 32) As for a bunch of people jumping on somebody who takes issue with me--or any other longtime poster--I rather suspect that is symbolic more than personal. This is a (dis)organization of formerly ripped-off people. We tend to go overboard--both in loyalty and anger
- 33) And sometimes, whether the friend is right or wrong to the world in general, the 'gang' will support the friend, even if ... We just see our friend hurting or being hurt or angry, etc. And SOMEone is making that happen to our friend, by G*d!

In both these quotes, the writers stipulate that it does not matter whether they especially like or agree with the regular; the regular is one of the group and must be defended.

The regulars' representations about the group and instructions to the newcomers are more lengthy and explicit in this instance than in those instances not precipitated by conflict. The dispute becomes an opportunity for newcomers to learn more about regulars and the group, and for regulars to get a little of the newcomers' perspectives. The formal elements noted earlier in regular-to-newcomer messages appear. The deictics "we," "us" and "here," and alternation of imperatives and declaratives are used in the regulars' messages. In their discussions of the group, adverbial phrases and verb phrases are used to indicate past and ongoing behaviors. A few use rhetorical questions. Together these indicate an alignment of a regular acting as an experienced instructor/representative of the group to the less experienced newcomers. Below are a few examples (with the formal markers indicated in brackets):

- 34) all i know is that everytime we start discussing ... here on this group, and it's happened at least ... it always ends with ...
[pronominal shift from 'i' to 'we', use of deictic 'here', verb and adverbial phrases that index experience with the group, declaratives used to make representations about the group]
- 35) ... learn what you can from it, and MOVE ALONG.
[imperatives]
- 36) Is this 'fair?' No, just human 8).
[rhetorical question]

In her final message related to this dispute, the offending newcomer thanks the polite newcomer who agreed with her complaint about the group. It is literal evidence that she has assumed what

Lave and Wenger (1991) assert is the stance appropriate to newcomers. In this brief note, she uses the verb “learn” twice: "I learned 'the hard way' that ..." and "I learned that here, too!"

Discussion

As noted in the introduction to this article, Grimshaw (1990) considers disputes an important way for groups to reaffirm social identities, mores, institutions and boundaries. Support for this idea can be found in the answers to three questions: 1) What do communications between regulars and newcomers suggest about socialization in this newsgroup? 2) What does the dispute between the two regulars and the newcomer suggest about the social organization of the newsgroup and the newcomer's socialization? and 3) What does the outcome of the dispute suggest about the nature of on-line social organizations and the function of disputes?

The ritual nature of communications between newcomers and regulars suggests that the newcomers are somewhat socialized prior to participation in the group. Presumably by lurking, and perhaps also by participating in other newsgroups, most newcomers enter the group with some knowledge of the group they enter and what is expected of them. When regulars welcome newcomers, implicit instruction takes place about the group.

The insiders' fight reveals that there is a variety of kinds of relationships among participants in what appears to be an egalitarian support group. The newcomer did not recognize that variation, nor did she recognize that her status as newcomer was peripheral and contingent on her acting appropriately. After being rebuked, she assumed a style and stance more consonant to her status as newcomer. Her shift, in turn, precipitated some explicit instruction by regulars to newcomers about the group.

Since my study is of a support group, the presence of hostile and frequent arguments is somewhat surprising, and even seems antithetical to the purpose of the group. Many CMC observers have noted that arguments and hostility are frequent on-line, more so than seem to occur off-line (e.g., Raja and Kim, 1991). Some researchers attribute this tendency to the technology itself, suggesting that it is socially distorting (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984), i.e., it has a disinhibiting effect such that people behave in ways that would be unacceptable in other situations (see Cherny, 1999, for a useful review of this literature). More recent researchers have downplayed and argued against technological determinism, focusing instead on ways in which participants utilize the medium to accomplish social work and community building (Baym, 2000; Cherny, 1999). Such researchers would view the use of arguments and hostility as context-bound and related to the culture and practices of the group in question. Herring (1994, 1996) looks at the use of flaming behaviors and finds them used more frequently by males than by females. However, these observations do not explain why hostility is found in a support group whose members are predominantly female.

Consideration of what this dispute may suggest about online social organizations and the function of hostility can be brought out by contrasting online and off-line groups, focusing on two aspects of each. The first has to do with access, and the second, feedback.

Imagine if one were contemplating joining a group: an addiction recovery group; the Elks' club; a golf club; a minority focus group; a women's auxiliary group. Actually attending any of these

could take some inquiring, some waiting, some traveling, and some social maneuvering. Some candidates to groups may be rejected and not allowed to attend meetings. In contrast, the ease with which people may “move about” on the Internet increases the chances of meetings between people who otherwise might not meet. Unmoderated Usenet newsgroups are available to anyone with access to the Internet. Since there are no filters of the kind present to face-to-face organizations, “poor” candidates and “good” candidates alike have full access to electronic newsgroups. This increases the number and variety of visitors to a group, and thereby increases the chances for conflicts. Herring (personal communication) suggests that easy access may also lessen participants’ perceived value of membership within a group and make some less careful in their behavior. Those who have participated in public electronic forums are no doubt familiar with inappropriate or trouble-making visitors. In such forums, disputes emerge as an important means of social control.

Next imagine a semi-public meeting attended mostly by regulars and some newcomers, in which a dispute occurs between two regulars, much like the one described in this article. A newcomer in this face-to-face situation could gather a lot of information about how to “read” the dispute by observing the various semiotic modes of communications of onlookers. Complicit smiles, whisperings between neighbors, eyes rolling, glances at a clock on the wall, and people slumping further down into their chairs are all behaviors that would suggest that the argument is an ongoing one, that it will not be resolved and should not cause undue concern, except perhaps for the time it takes from other business. The observation of onlookers as they respond to the interactions of active participants is an integral part of face-to-face, multi-party interactions that is not present in a Usenet newsgroup format. While observers of a newsgroup can gauge the reaction of active participants, the “silent majority” is invisible in this text-only format.

Additionally, in face-to-face communication, one receives feedback (linguistic or non-linguistic) as one speaks. Interpretation of this feedback may cause one to adjust the rest of one's message so as to increase the chances of a desired reaction. A Usenet format is one that does not allow one to alter one's message during its production in response to others' reactions. It can be like writing and mailing a passionately-felt letter on impulse, only to wish it could be retrieved from the mailbox. A Usenet newsgroup format allows one to make a fully articulated mistake—your words can and will be used against you.

It is likely that in a comparable face-to-face situation, having greater access to others' linguistic and non-linguistic reactions, the newcomer described in this article would not have made the challenges she did. Had she made them, however, it is probable that rather than being taken aside by several regulars and explicitly “taken to task,” she would receive dirty looks or be ignored. The Usenet format requires that one wishing to register distaste with another must make a linguistic communication, and this is a significant difference from face-to-face situations.

Given the semiotic limitations of a text-only format, if one wishes to communicate, it must be via discourse performances—with the major exception of ignoring or “killfiling” someone.⁸ Since the newcomer did not understand what she needed to about her status and the expectations attendant to that, the dispute became a vehicle for her to be expressly taught by regulars. This event supports Honeycutt's (2005) claim that disputes can be an effective way for online communities and their members to communicate their boundaries, identities, and relationships.

Arguments can function as an important means for lurkers and newcomers to learn more about a group, and help them decide whether they wish to participate in the group or not.

Notes

1. Lurking refers to the practice of observing, but not participating in, an electronic group (see Nonnecke & Preece, 2000).
2. Because of the sensitive nature of this forum, I do not identify the newsgroup by name nor do I identify its participants, many of whom post anonymously with a nickname (see King, 1996, for a discussion of ethical questions attendant to research of online groups). Where it is necessary to refer to a participant with a name in order to aid participant tracking for the reader, I try to use a nickname that matches the gender of the nickname used by the participant, be it feminine, masculine, or gender-neutral.
3. This leads to the question of how one could detect a newcomer if they do not announce their status. I have an imperfect means to discover such cases. First, I have been reading the group for a long enough period of time that I am alert to what looks like a new name. I then check my database for whether the name appears in any other earlier messages (since the database only contains one month of messages, this provides a shallow history). Finally, I look at any responses by other participants to see if they mention that the person is new (e.g., one person wrote to someone who was new, but hadn't mentioned it, "you're new here, aren't you?").
4. The term "flame" is used in CMC to refer to behavior that is deliberately argumentative and provocative (Lea, O'Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992).
5. "Emoticons" are figures used to represent facial expressions. They are typically created with parentheses (to represent a smiling or frowning mouth), and the number "8" (to represent eyes), and are visible as faces when one turns one head to the left, so that it is parallel with the line of type, e.g., 8).
6. That emoticons are used to key playfulness rather than actual hostility is also suggested by a regular participant who, during the resolution of the argument, explains to the newcomer:

another thing that makes a difference is being able to see the difference between irony (saying the opposite of what you mean) and quips with the net sign for humor :) a smiley...and the things people say sarcastically in order to hurt someone else, or make them look stupid.

On the pragmatic functions of emoticons, see Dresner and Herring (2010).

7. As a long-time observer of the group, familiar with its practices and participants, I shuddered when I saw this "move." I knew the newcomer was in for some rough treatment.
8. "Killfiling" or setting up a "kill file" is an instruction given to one's electronic account to not receive any messages posted by a particular individual. It is the on-line equivalent to giving someone the "silent treatment"; done as a community effort, it is equivalent to shunning or exiling someone.

References

- Baym, N. (1995). The emergence of community in computer-mediated communication. In S. Jones (Ed.), *Cybersociety: Computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 138-163). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baym, N. (1996). Agreements and disagreements in a computer-mediated discussion. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 29(4), 315-346.
- Baym, N. (2000). *Tune in, log on: Soaps, fandom and online community*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Cherny, L. (1999). *Conversation and community: Chat in a virtual world*. Stanford, CA: Center for the Study of Language and Information.
- Dresner, E., & Herring, S. C. (2010). Functions of the non-verbal in CMC: Emoticons and illocutionary force. *Communication Theory*, 20, 249-268.
- Giddens, A. (1988). Goffman as a systematic social theorist. In P. Drew & A. Wootton (Eds.), *Erving Goffman: Exploring the interaction order* (pp. 250-279). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Doubleday Anchor Books.
- Goffman, E. (1981). Footing. In *Forms of talk* (pp. 124-159). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Grimshaw, A. D. (1990). Research on conflict talk: Antecedents, resources, findings, directions. In A. D. Grimshaw (Ed.), *Research on conflict talk: Sociolinguistic investigations in conversations* (pp. 280-324). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Herring, S. C. (1994). Politeness in computer culture: Why women thank and men flame. In M. Bucholtz, A. Liang, L. Sutton, & C. Hines (Eds.), *Cultural performances: Proceedings of the Third Berkeley Women and Language Conference* (pp. 278-294). Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Women and Language Group.
- Herring, S. C. (1996). Two variants of an electronic message schema. In S. C. Herring (Ed.), *Computer-mediated communication: Linguistic, social and cross-cultural perspectives* (pp. 81-108). Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Honeycutt, C. (2005). Hazing as a process of boundary maintenance in an online community. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(2), article 3.
<http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue2/honeycutt.html>
- Kiesler, S., Siegel, J., & McGuire, T. W. (1984). Social psychological aspects of computer communication. *American Psychologist*, 39(10), 1123-1134.
- Kim, M-S., & Raja, N. S. (1991). *Verbal aggression and self-disclosure on computer bulletin boards*. Washington, DC: Resources in Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED334620).

- King, S. A. (1996). Researching Internet communities: Proposed ethical guidelines for the reporting of results. *The Information Society*, 12(2), 119-127.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Lea, M., O'Shea T., Fung, P., & Spears, R. (1992). 'Flaming' in computer-mediated communication: Observations, explanations, implications. In M. Lea (Ed.), *Contexts of computer mediated communication* (pp. 89-112). New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Nonnecke, B., & Preece, J. (2000). Persistence and lurkers: A pilot study. *Proceedings of the Thirty-Third Hawai'i International Conference on System Sciences* (p. 3031). Washington, DC: IEEE Computer Society Press.
- Schegloff, E. (1977). Identification and recognition in interactional openings. In I. Pool (Ed.), *The social impact of the telephone* (pp. 415-450). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schegloff, E., & Sacks, H. (1974). Opening up closings. In R. Turner (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology: Selected readings* (pp. 233-264). Baltimore, MD: Penguin.
- Schiffrin, D. (1984). Jewish argument as sociability. *Language in Society*, 13, 311-335.
- Schiffrin, D. (1993). "Speaking for another" in sociolinguistic interviews: Alignments, identities, and frames. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 231-263). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Smith, M. A. (1999). Invisible crowds in cyberspace: Mapping the social structure of the Usenet. In M. A. Smith & P. Kollock (Eds.), *Communities in cyberspace: Perspectives on new forms of social organization* (pp. 195-219). London: Routledge Press.
- Tannen, D. (1993). What's in a frame? Surface evidence for underlying expectations. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 14-56). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Tannen, D., & Wallat, C. (1993). Interactive frames and knowledge schemas in interaction: Examples from a medical examination/interview. In D. Tannen (Ed.), *Framing in discourse* (pp. 57-76). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Biographical Note

H. L. Weber [hlweber.paulsmyth@gmail.com] does technical editing in Grand Junction, Colorado.