Constructive "Noise in the Channel": Effects of Controversial Forwarded E-mail in a College Residential and Virtual Community

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Abstract: As part of a case study of electronic community building in a college freshman dorm, discussion list messages were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Messages were categorized by social purpose (housekeeping, social dialogue, or critical dialogue) and as either forwarded messages or original messages. Forwarded messages included jokes, polemics about politics or social issues, and electronic chain letters deemed offensive by some participants – e-mail forms that, along with metadiscussion, have been widely perceived as distractions and impediments to serious online discussion. A series of discussion threads about gender issues, however, reveals that such "noise in the channel" can frequently lead to constructive critical dialogue, both online and offline, in the context of a residential student community.

Introduction

Many studies have analyzed electronic newsgroups, scholarly mailing lists, and other discussion groups as virtual communities (e.g., Rheingold 1994; Herring 1996). Other studies have looked at classroom uses of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its effects on learning communities (e.g., Cooper & Selfe 1990; Harris & Wambeam 1996; Colomb & Simutis 1996). Only recently, however – in new contexts such as fully-wired college dorms -- have we had the chance to study the interplay between virtual and face-to-face community in residence-based communities. What are the social effects and potentialities of CMC when participants also live and study together? Critics fear that students who spend more and more time in front of computer screens – even "talking" to their teachers, classmates, and dormmates online instead of in person – are becoming more isolated. According to the *New York Times*, "Some scholars say 'plug per pillow' campuses are undermining the ideal of a residential college" (Gabriel 1996). Former hacker-turned technology critic Clifford Stoll says, "We're turning colleges into cubicle-directed electronic experience and denying the importance of learning to work closely with other students and professors, and developing social adeptness" (qtd. in Gabriel 1996).

For such critics, the whole idea of a dorm e-mail discussion list would seem to be antisocial or, at best, superfluous. But as I have argued elsewhere, the fears of Stoll and others are based on dubious either-or and zero-sum assumptions, the faulty notion that computer activities and community-building activities must be mutually exclusive (Holeton 1997). On the contrary, residents of the dorm I studied used their discussion list in highly social ways and even found the list more valuable than traditional or face-to-face media for purposes such as discussing social and political issues. Their live dorm programs and their hallway and dinner discussions often complemented the e-mail list, and vice-versa (Holeton 1997). In this kind of hybrid residential-virtual community, participants share dorm hallways and lounges, bathrooms, mealtimes, social events, and intramural sports teams as well as the electronic discussion space. With the familiarity and intimacy that are missing from distance-based virtual communities, we should not only expect less rudeness or flaming online but we should also question previous assumptions about forwarded e-mail trivia, chain letters, and metadiscussion – in particular the widespread perception that "in written communication these messages constitute noise in the channel that interrupts discourse" (Korenman & Wyatt 1996, p. 239). The poor reputation of metadiscussion in virtual communities is encapsulated in a widely-distributed e-mail joke entitled "How many Internet mail list subscribers does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: 1,331:

> 1 to change the light bulb and to post to the mail list that the light bulb has been changed
> 14 to share similar experiences of changing light bulbs and how the light bulb could have been

changed differently
7 to caution about the dangers of changing light bulbs
27 to point out spelling/grammar errors in posts about changing light bulbs
53 to flame the spell checkers
156 to write to the list administrator complaining about the light bulb discussion and its inappropriateness to this mail list….
[etc.; about fifteen additional categories of responses typically follow]

Must forwarded messages, inane or offensive jokes, and metadiscussion serve only as time-wasting distractions, irritants, and bandwidth hogs? To what extent, instead, can they function as constructive discussion prompts or make positive contributions to residential and virtual community building?

About the Study

Rinconada House, Wilbur Hall, is an all-freshman dorm of 94 students (including 5 upperclass residence staff) at Stanford University, where during the 1990s all dorms were wired with in-room ethernet connections to complement networked residence computer clusters. The study is based on a complete archive of over 1200 messages posted to the dorm e-mail list for the academic year 1995-96. Rinconada's history includes the use of dorm e-mail discussion lists for a number of years and its 1993 claim as the first college dorm with a home page on the web. My wife and I served as Rinconada's Resident Fellows, faculty leaders of the residence staff who live in an adjacent cottage, from 1990 to 1997, and thus – especially where qualitative judgments are made -- I am necessarily a participant-observer in the study. All the house residents, including the staff, were subscribed to the discussion list. The full study, including data from which this paper is derived, is available on the web at *http://www.stanford.edu/~holeton/wired-pages/wired-main.html*.

The messages were broadly categorized according to three larger social purposes, which suggest a rough hierarchy from lower-order to higher-order uses of CMC:

1. *Housekeeping* (lost and found, arranging meeting times, etc.)
2. *Social dialogue* (publicizing dorm or university events and programs, sharing outside interests, relieving stress, etc.)
3. *Critical dialogue* (discussing social, political, academic, or intellectual matters; discussing dorm community issues or controversies; etc.)[1]

Generally speaking, critical dialogue is the type of discussion encouraged in academia, where matters of social or intellectual importance are negotiated in a reasoned, collegial way, and its inherent value in learning communities will be presumed. Metadiscussion -- discussion about the medium itself or how the list should be used, or "talk about talk" (Korenman & Wyatt 1996, p. 238) – was classified as critical dialogue. Messages were also categorized as either (a) forwarded messages or (b) original messages or replies. Forwarded messages are those passed on to the list by members but whose content originated from a person or organization outside the group (the list was closed to unsolicited junk e-mail or direct "spam" from Internet mass-mailers). In the many cases where forwarded content was framed by the sender's own commentary, I made a judgment about whether the primary content of the message was the forwarded material or the original material.

After measuring the various proportions of these message categories, I analyzed the relationship between forwarded messages and sustained threads of the higher-order, critical dialogue. I also considered the effects, in my observation, on the face-to-face community. My discussion focuses on the most sustained critical dialogue of the year, a series of related threads about gender issues that comprised dozens of messages and lasted most of autumn quarter.

Findings and Discussion

In addition to the numerous political calls to action, urban legends, electronic chain letters, Top Ten lists, and jokes that have proliferated on the Internet, a whole genre of undergraduate e-mail humor has

[1] In designing these categories I was influenced by Ziv's "Taxonomy of Communicative Purposes" (Ziv 1996, Table 2, p. 247).

developed as college students got online throughout the 1990s. Typical titles in this genre include "50 things to tell your professor when you turn your exam in late" and "100 ways to torture your roommate." A more insidious subgenre includes material, often with humorous intent, deemed offensive by women, men, specific ethnic groups, gay or lesbian people, or other social groups. These messages are widely forwarded among college students around the world, and the Rinconada list was no exception.

In terms of larger social purpose, from lower-order to higher-order uses of CMC, 13% of the total messages in 1995-96 were classified as *housekeeping*, 57% as *social dialogue*, and 30% as *critical dialogue*. One-quarter (n=306 out of 1244 or 24.6%) of the total messages were classified as forwarded messages. The vast majority of forwarded messages fell into the *social dialogue* category (and more specifically, the sub-categories "Sharing outside interests" or "Relieving stress"). Of the 711 *social dialogue* messages, 269 or nearly 38% were forwarded messages. See Figure 1.

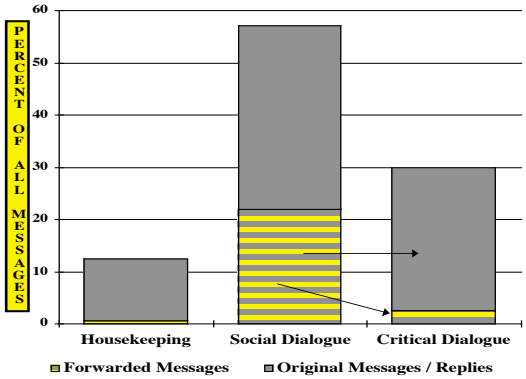

Figure 1: Proportions of Forwarded Messages by Social Purpose. The two arrows indicate that forwarded messages in the *social dialogue* category frequently led to *critical dialogue* messages or to "answering" forwards.

The majority of this busy traffic in forwarded messages were ignored by other participants, so initially we might be tempted to view them, as others have, as "noise in the channel." Anecdotally, some residents reported being put off by common Internet banalities such as those described above. On the other hand, I would argue that there is some inherent value, in a diverse educational community, in participants being exposed to one another's range of interests and passions as reflected in forwarded e-mail messages. Further, a lack of online response doesn't necessarily mean that a joke or piece of trivia wasn't appreciated or didn't provide some needed levity. Residents frequently made offline responses to online chatter, a phenomenon that should be studied further as a potential contributor to community building. Online, some participants answered forwards, playfully or seriously, with another forwarded message taking an alternate or opposing view. For example, a jocular list entitled "How to tell if you're a Republican" would be answered by an equally-jocular "How to tell if you're a Democrat." Sometimes this kind of sparring led to a substantive discussion thread when participants framed their answering forward with extensive editorial comments.

Although many forwarded messages went unanswered, *the most sustained threads of critical dialogue that developed over the year all began as reactions to forwarded messages.* As we might expect, the most controversial or inflammatory messages – those with the most loaded social or political content of interest to undergraduates – evoked the most reaction, including forwards about sex, rape, neo-Nazis, and free speech. The remarkably constructive quality of the dorm's reactions to these prompts, which dispute the claims of pessimists that virtual communities are inevitably being broken down by "flamers, cranks, fetishists and monomaniacs" (Chapman 1995), is revealed especially in the autumn-long discussion threads about gender issues.

Subject: I'm disgusted (fwd)

In October, 1995, an infamously misogynistic e-mail originating at Cornell University called "Top 75 reasons why women (bitches) should not have freedom of speech" was widely disseminated at colleges. It evoked a furor that made national headlines (e.g. Grunwald 1995). Some of the more politely-phrased "reasons" included, "If she's in the kitchen like she should be, no one can hear her anyway" (no. 2), "If she can't speak, she can't cry rape" (no. 38), and "Only one set of lips should be moving at a time" (no. 43). Phyllis[1] forwarded the message to the Rinconada list with the subject header "I'm disgusted," initiating a month-long discussion thread.

Vigorous metadiscussion about the appropriateness of posting the "75 reasons" message to the list ranged from Duncan's plea to "think twice before passing this kind of thing on" to defenses of freedom of speech. The staff did not intervene in this discussion but purposely let residents negotiate norms for the e-mail list, attempt to establish shared values, and, hopefully, assert collaborative ownership of this electronic space. Their initial success is indicated by Adelle's assessment of the metadiscussion (i.e., meta-metadiscussion?): "It was nice that for once people expressed their ideas about e-mail without becoming rude or over personal. I guess people are starting to become more considerate of others over the e-mail. What was so hard about doing this?"

The "four players of Cornell" who composed the controversial message (and even put their real names on it) got flamed from far and wide, issued apologies, and faced disciplinary charges. Meanwhile at Stanford on the Rinconada list, Gregory started a serious discussion of gender issues by objecting to how such incidents reinforce negative stereotypes about men. Several other men participated thoughtfully in this thread. For example, Duncan wrote, "On behalf of my gender I would like to emphasize that the majority of men do not think this way about women, that many find it sick that some people actually perpetrate such filth, and that the guys who wrote this in the first place are probably loving every angry response that they receive."

Subject: Re: Something Serious To Think About (fwd)

Less than two weeks after the "75 reasons" forward, an e-mail chain letter originally called "YOUR PARENTS WERE RIGHT ABOUT THIS ONE" was forwarded to the list by Mona with the new subject header "Something Serious To Think About." Interestingly, Faith had previously sent this message only to the women of the dorm, and now Mona prefaced her posting with explicit appeals to her male dormmates for a continuation of reasoned discussion:

> To all the women of the dorm, sorry for cluttering up your e-mail with a repeated message, but I wanted to send this to the guys, and this was way easier. Guys, please don't take this as an attack on males, cuz it's not. I just thought it was an important message for the state of the world we live in, regardless of gender. Faith was great enough to send this to all the girls, and I thought there might be guys in the dorm who would appreciate it as well (for male/female friends, for themselves, or just as a reminder that you can't trust everyone in this world, unfortunately).

Mona concluded her persuasive preface with gender-neutral appeals to dorm spirit and Stanford spirit ("Rinc Rules and Weenies Got Roasted!" -- a reference to the recent Big Game football victory over Cal-Berkeley). The forwarded narrative itself depicts a generic date rate ("He knocks on the door. She doesn't really know him well, but her friends party with him often. So, she smiles and settles back onto her bed as he walks in…."), offers moral lessons ("we all learned in kindergarten – ask before taking, and don't touch what isn't yours"), and exhorts readers to spread the word:

> This is a chain letter. Send one to the people you care about, or are afraid of. In any school, in any country. Please write the name of your school at the bottom, and place an X beside it if someone you know has been a victim of assault or rape. [A long list of colleges and universities marked with Xs follows.]

In response, the previous thread about male stereotyping evolved into a discussion about rape, with extensive contributions from Gregory, Ronald, Buff, Betty, and others. Gregory and Ronald argued that the generic date rape in the narrative grossly oversimplified what can be a complex series of miscommunications.

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[1] All names are pseudonyms.

Buff sent a four-page self-described "treatise" on rape rebutting Gregory's and Ronald's arguments, Ronald sent a rebuttal to the rebuttal, and so on. Six days into the thread, Betty tried to get the discussion refocused on basic feelings and human communication, suggesting that the argument had gotten too analytical and theoretical – a classic example of what some have identified as a female communication style (e.g., Tannen 1994) contrasted with the male "agonistic," warlike debate style (Ong 1981):

> I think it's fine to analyze all the little points of the law and of ethics on a theoretical level, but it seems to me that the real issue here is a lot more broad. It's about respect and communication. You should respect yourself enough to both voice your desires or concerns and then respect your partner enough to ask about their feelings and listen to their response.

Subject: 75 REASONS. PLEASE FORWARD. (fwd)

Yet another forwarded message – "75 Reasons Why Angry Cornell Women (Your Worst Nightmare) Are Exercising Their Freedom of Speech," a reply to the original inflammatory "75 reasons" list – re-ignited the gender threads again in early December. It was posted by Carolyn, Rinconada's Resident Computer Coordinator (RCC), an upperclass member of the residence staff. The Cornell women's message cited a number of statistics from the Women's Action Collective, establishing a scholarly tone. Some men on the Rinconada list, such as King, reacted defensively: "Men are often depicted as villains that suppress and abuse women…. I want to question the validity of some of the statistics given in the message." Ronald questioned the Women's Action Collective's statistics by offering his own research and citations from the *Western Journal of Medicine*, *The New Republic*, and other sources, as in a formal academic paper. And Betty and Clarisse challenged the men with a thread called "Could we just forget semantics for a minute?"

In a virtual *touché* that seemed to go largely under-appreciated by the men, Clarisse connected the political discussion about gender directly to the dorm face-to-face community, chastising the "guys" for referring to Carolyn, the RCC, as "The Computer Lady." Although Clarisse qualified her objection as a "random thing," it wasn't random at all, because of course Carolyn had posted the Cornell women's rebuttal.

Along with Carolyn, the rest of the residence staff had many opportunities to make similar connections between the virtual and the residential community. We organized formal residential education programs with gender themes, such as a consciousness-raising exercise led by the Resident Assistants called "Gender Alliances." Not surprisingly, numerous conversations at meals and late at night in the hallways extended and complemented the online discussions. Such conversations fed back into the e-mail discussion list as more participants got involved; 60% of the dorm's residents participated in critical dialogue threads at one time or another.

Moreover, the value of all this online discussion about gender issues was by no means limited to those who did most of the "talking." A survey I conducted near the end of the year showed that even those who participated little online were active as *readers* of the list and thought it was very useful for discussion of social and political issues. These so-called "lurkers" were not necessarily inactive in the face-to-face community – and vice-versa, the most active e-mail participants were not all similarly active in physical dorm activities (Holeton 1997). Thus, online interaction and offline interaction together offered residents more, often mutually reinforcing ways of communicating, exploring and negotiating ideas, and getting to know one another. In these complex and sometimes surprising ways, the "four players of Cornell," the "Angry Cornell Women," and the purveyors of other chain letters and forwarded messages helped enhance, rather than diminish, the community experience at Rinconada House.

Conclusions

A dorm e-mail discussion list or other electronic discussion space can be very useful for the kinds of critical dialogue encouraged in academia. At least in this higher education context, the kinds of forwarded e-mail trivia, controversial messages, and metadiscussion that have disrupted other virtual communities need not preclude higher-order uses of CMC. Messages forwarded by participants from outsiders, even if annoying, preachy, or distasteful, can prompt substantive discussion and serve as valuable tools for building community. On the Rinconada 1995-96 e-mail list, the most engaging and successful critical dialogue threads of the year started as reactions to controversial forwarded messages.

With the proliferation and specialization of e-mail lists in the late 1990s, some college dorms have begun separating discussion lists from announcement-only lists. This kind of strategy for filtering out forwarded messages might result in missed opportunities for higher-order electronic discussion and associated benefits for the community.

Hybrid virtual-residential communities like today's fully-networked college dorms, where residents have a good deal at stake in their relationships both online and offline, will become increasingly common in the near future. Teachers, residential educators, list administrators, and others with experience in such hybrid communities should continue to explore the effects and best uses of electronic discussion and other emerging technologies.

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