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FORMS AND FUNCTIONS OF CONFLICT IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

As familiarity with the Internet grows among the general public, Usenet newsgroups, which represent a particular form of computer-mediated communication (CMC), are developing on a large scale. Usenet newsgroups may be briefly described as an "electronic bulletin board system carrying several million messages per year" [Hills & Hughes 1998, 48]. They are accessed through the newsreader in e-mail software and they are organized into eight major thematic categories and innumerable sub-categories. In the United States, the first part of a newsgroup's name reflects its broad focus, e.g. *comp.* for computers or *soc.* for society issues.¹ In other countries, the two letters conventionally used to refer to each country's name come first, while the topic comes second. The third and last part of the name further sub-categorizes the topic that messages are supposed to discuss.

Anyone can post a message to one of these groups, but messages can also be merely read, without any kind of response: such silent participants are known as lurkers. Responses are made through e-mail and they can be public, to the whole newsgroup, or private, to a specific person. Whenever a message gets one or several answers, it is the beginning of a "thread," i.e., a series of related messages whose title line remains identical throughout the whole exchange and thus acts as a marker of continuity. In each answer, the previous message is quoted in full or in part and can be distinguished from the current message by conventional typographical characters, such as [*<*], [*<<*] or [*<:<*]. Users are supposed to quote sparingly, so as not to overload the bandwidth.

Each group abides by a compilation of rules, rituals and customs known as Netiquette, originating in the desire for self-regulation among the initiators of the Internet. Courtesy is a prerequisite: one is supposed to

1. *news.* is devoted to current events regarding the Internet or to the creation of new groups; *news.newsannounce.newgroups*; *sci.* deals with scientific subjects : *fr.sci.astronomie*; *soc.* is broadly concerned with society: *fr.soc.politique* - *soc.culture.australian*; *talk.* is a generalist group : *talk.politics.misc* - *talk.euthanasia*; *rec.* (*recreational*) focuses on hobbies and leisure time activities : *fr.rec.photo* - *rec.skiing*; *misc.* (*miscellaneous*) is for whatever fits nowhere else *fr.misc.cryptologie* - *fr.misc.droit*; *alt.* (*alternative*): this prefix is used for unmoderated groups with especially extremist or wacky contents: *alt.aliens.visitors*. New categories have been added over time.

observe a group for a certain length of time before writing any sort of message; one should read the Frequently Asked Questions list (FAQ) as well as the archive of the group to avoid raising issues that have been previously discussed; there are rules for quoting; capital letters are assimilated to shouting and are therefore considered rude: this short sampling from a much longer list points to a set of behavioral constraints, indicating that CMC does not take place in a social vacuum, but contributes to creating a community online [Serfaty 1999].

The online communities this paper is going to examine are made up of Usenet newsgroups dedicated to politics in France, Great Britain and in the USA: they are *fr.soc.politique*, *uk.politics.misc* and *talk.politics.misc*.²

I. Formal Features of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC)

Usenet messages commonly display a number of features which, through text and some graphics, attempt to reproduce the rhythms and phrasing of speech, thereby tending to create a hybrid of speech and writing. This is due to the fact that Usenet dialogues and multilogues try hard to emulate face-to-face conversations, for a variety of reasons. Face-to-face conversations are romanticized because they are identified with Nature and the Human, whereas the written word is supposed to be analytical, devoid of spontaneity and cold. Such conceptions of the superiority of orality over the written word originate in the Socratic distrust of writing, as exemplified in Plato's *Phaedra*³ and have been maintained up to the present time [Derrida 1967]. They also stem from the primacy of speech in every infant's experience [Rosolato 1969]. Writing is rejected for its supposed "technologizing" of speech [Ong 1982]. Speech is indeed purported to possess all the qualities of transparency and warmth supposedly characterizing early communication experiences.

Because face-to-face conversation is the goal each newsgroup participant strives for, and because each message is a quest for the Other, whose response assures us of our own existence, a series of writing strategies have emerged to bypass what is perceived as the dryness of text-based messages,

2. The study outlined here was carried out over a three-year period, from June 1996 to June 1999. The full results appear in Viviane Serfaty, *L'Internet, l'imaginaire, le politique: perspective comparatiste sur quelques aspects du réseau en France, en Grande-Bretagne, aux États-Unis*. Doctoral dissertation, under the guidance of F. Barret-Ducrocq, Université de Paris 7, 1999.

3. "[L'écriture] produira l'oubli dans les âmes en leur faisant négliger la mémoire: confiants dans l'écriture, c'est du dehors, par des caractères étrangers, et non plus du dedans, du fond d'eux-mêmes, qu'ils chercheront à susciter leurs souvenirs; [...] ce que tu vas procurer à tes disciples, c'est la présomption qu'ils ont de la science, non la science elle-même." [Platon 191]

to reinstate the voice or the body as a whole in their central position. These writing strategies are graphics, conventional signs and redundancy.

i) Graphics

Emphasis is shown either by the use of asterisks on either side of the word, or by using some typographical characters to underscore a word. It is interesting to note that, although it is now possible to use bold characters or italics when writing a message, or to add pictures or music files, these developments have been completely ignored on Usenet, where the messages keep being posted in their initial simplicity.

Yet signatures are often graced by very simple drawings, entirely made up of typographical characters, as in the following examples:

Example 1

```

',*      "" /-----\
 (**)    (**) | Quand j'entend le mot "Autoroutes de |
-ooO--( )--Ooo-----ooO--( )--Ooo---| l'information" je sors mon revolver. |
\-----/
    
```

Example 2

```

Dean J. Robins      (_____) _ . | | _
dean@robins.org    / ( oo \ . } | _
                   / \ _ | \ _ (
Member PETA (People Eating Tasty Animals)4
    
```

Example 3

```

(*      ~V~
|
(%)      ~V~
/ / : \ \
| % % % % % |
(% % %) ===== |
# | Institut .... |
# | .....@..... |
# | http://www-.... |
# | Portez comme un joug le croissant |
# | Qu'interrogent les astrologues |
# | ^^^^^^^^ | Je suis le sultan tout puissant |
# | ***** | O mes cosaques zaporogues |
| | | Votre Seigneur eblouissant 5 |
    
```

4. This signature subverts the meaning of the acronym PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals).
 5. Guillaume Apollinaire, "La chanson du mal-aimé," *Œuvres Poétiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1956), 121.

Through their mixed use of graphics and text, as well as through the mention of the writer's homepage URL, which is an invitation to further contact, the three signatures tend to establish a more complex fictional personality than would be possible through the use of a mere pseudonym. Because they are made up of typographical characters, the drawings are only marginally figurative and function as playful commentaries on the humorous or poetic fragments of text. A vivacious mischievousness is often the most salient characteristic in these careful constructions of fictional identities.

Because of their repetitiveness, these signatures function as visibility markers: participants use them to offset a fragment of their personality and build up their *persona* within the group. The size of characters as well as non-alphabetical symbols and typographical characters combine to give textual density to the signature, but also to the participant's fictional identity.

ii) *Conventional Signs*

The ubiquitous "smiley" is a set of typographical characters which can be interpreted by tilting one's head to the left; one can then see:

a smile: :-)
a frown :-(
or a wink: ;-)

Smileys are akin to the phatic utterances face-to-face conversations are interspersed with, i.e. the various linguistic and non-linguistic ways in which people engaging in dialogue make sure their message is getting through. The smileys thus convey some of the emotions the writer has been unable to express through words alone; they also attempt to influence the emotions of the reader, or at least to indicate how the message should be interpreted. Smileys can thus be seen as oralizations of the written word.

The use of acronyms is also pervasive: messages are variously interspersed with IMHO (in my humble opinion), LOL (laughing out loud), BTW (by the way), AFAIK (as far as I know) or AFAIC (as far as I'm concerned). Only a few of these acronyms have been translated into French. Others and most particularly LOL or ROTFL (rolling on the floor laughing) are commonly used in French-language newsgroups.

Jack Goody showed in his study of oral societies that the abundance of repetitive, "standardized" phrases was one of the outstanding features of orality [Goody, 1993]. On Usenet, repetitive conventional signs and acronyms aim at reproducing the conditions of face-to-face conversation: these signs establish a set of attitude markers which provide the reader with a context

from which the content of the message can be understood. To put it differently, the message includes non-linguistic elements as well as phatic symbols which refer to both the voice of the writer and his attitude and gestures. These conventional signs function as a metonymy of the body, thus fighting the feeling that the screen and computer-mediated communication in general do away with the material dimension of the body. In a computer message as well as in traditional text, writing refers to “the hand and hence to the body” [Barthes 1981, 11].⁶ The body keeps on being present even when it seems to be veiled by the computer screen, even when it seems to be mediatized into immateriality or even nothingness. Oralizing the written word amounts to recreating the body language of face-to-face interactions.

iii) Redundancy

This refers to the custom of including previous messages in the body of the current one. This redundancy is reminiscent of the conditions of oral exchanges, where repetitions and hesitations are critical to understanding. Redundancy preserves the continuity of the context and ensures the consistency of exchanges in which a large number of people participate. Redundancy also produces the illusion of synchronous exchanges and hence strengthens the reference to face-to-face conversation. All three features—graphics, conventional signs and redundancy—when taken together, form a fully-fledged genre combining and interweaving in an original pattern the features of speech and of writing. In the USA as well as in France or in Great Britain, specifically oral features merge into writing to create a quasi-oral genre.

In addition to these formal features, distinctive social practices are being created through the interactions in these newsgroups where, as we shall see, conflict fulfils a major function.

II. Conflict in Online Communities

i) Norms and Conflict

In the readers' letters sections of newspapers or on radio or TV call-in programs, would-be participants are screened by assistants who carefully edit letters and keep wacky callers out. Were such editing to disappear, cranks and extremists would soon take over most of the media's discursive space. On Usenet, however, nobody selects which messages are posted, nobody cuts

6. My translation.

longer than average messages, nobody filters out eccentric content. Even when the newsgroups are administered by a moderator, his activity is limited to posting the charter of each newsgroup regularly, as a reminder of the group's rules, without any attempt at censorship. It is in fact the participants themselves who criticize the form as well as the content of a discussion, in a self-reflexive, self-managed way.

Conflict over the form of debates tend to focus around how to quote, how to spell and how to post. Thus in each thread, contradictory interpretations of Netiquette are bandied about by members who are well aware of the need for self-regulation.

Example 1: How to quote

>> On Sun, 16 Jun 1996 10:14:25 -0700, Bruno BOIRON

>> <phenix@club-internet.fr> wrote:

>

>> :-> Nicolas Huron wrote:

>> :->>

>> :->> Contre le financement public des fêtes de Clovis et

>> (... snip ... snip)

>> :->> Cordialement à toutes et à tous.

>> En voila un qui a compris toute la finesse du "quote" C'est con, je n'ai pas eu le courage de re-lire la prose de Mr Huron une deuxieme fois et je ne suis pas alle jusqu'au bout :))

>

> Ce n'est pas toujours mauvais les reprises, mais... c'est mieux lorsqu'il y a un certain délai, pour ne pas dire un délai certain. En passant, moi non plus je n'ai pas eu le courage de me retaper tout ça.

>Finalement, Nicolas, est-ce qu'il a écrit quelque chose dans sa réponse?

Example 2: How to quote

C'est gentil ça, de snipper [couper] l'essentiel et l'important de mon post [message publié], pour dire en lieu et place, que Nietzsche appreciait ses ennemis! De la sorte, l'information precise que j'ai voulu transmettre disparaît sous des considerations pour le moins generales, au point de devenir indifferentes. Bravo pour la methode...

Example 3: How to spell

Subject: Re: Clovis n'est pas la France

From: roger@---.univ-.fr

Date: 1996/08/01

Newsgroups: fr.soc.politique,fr.soc.divers,soc.culture.french

J-Philippe <jp@whorlnet.fr> wrote (écrivait):

> Pas de doute, et alors il faudra ajouter une autre FAQ intitulée "comment
> écrire indubitable
> avec un seul t".
> > -----2687334013695
> Content-Transfer-Encoding: quoted-printable
> Content-Type: text/plain
<coupe>
Et une FAQ "comment poster correctement". C'est pénible de te lire :(

Example 4: How to post

Subject: Re: Newt Gingrich Impresses on CNN's Larry King Live
From: -----@io.com (Elizabeth Laufer)
Date: 1996/07/02
Newsgroups: alt.impeach.clinton,alt.president.clinton,alt.politics.democrat-
is.d,alt.politics.usa.newt-gingrich,alt.politics.usa.republican,talk.politi-
cs,can.politics

Gary Eleanor <-----@bright.net> wrote:
>Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh have a lot in common. They have always
been social outcasts, >loudbombed, fatboys. They are divorced and both
went to great lengths to avoid the draft <snip>

The topic, Gary, was Gingrich's *ideas* as expressed in his college course, Re-
newing American Civilization. I realize that's more taxing than the usual tired
rant, but do you have anything to offer on that subject?

Example 5: How to post

>The Great African Blues Scale Bunkum was dealt with months ago. See De-
jaNews to catch up and >please be more attentive in future.

These examples point out how various participants in the debate state rules concerning each author's behavior as well as the reception of their messages. Each departure from Netiquette increases the sound/noise ratio, thus interfering with communication and increasing the risk of its breaking down.

Other frequent reprimands have to do with postings irrelevant to the group. There is a definite scale in the way they are formulated, as in the following example:

Example 1

Re: Criminal Blair, (Who is this nutter?)
Date: 1998/06/15
Author: ellmo <ellmo@-----.demon.co.uk>

Yea Klaus, we all totoally agree with everything you say here and weve heard it all before - go find some new disciples in say :) alt.sports.soccer.worldcup98.

Example 2

Re: Usenet ostracism

Date: 1998/06/29

Author: Roger Gissing<roger.gissing@bigfoot.com>

<snip>

>>The easiest way is to stick nutters like Klaus, ...

>

>Calling someone a nutter because you don't get the drift

>what he is on about is not exactly a sign of intelligence.

>

we understand exactly what you do. you take an excerpt from the bible (written in hebrew), assume that your ridiculous numerology can be applied in english, mis-spell elisabeth, then find some wholly arbitrary method by which you arrive at 666. there are three possibilities:

- 1) you are completely mad... => killfile
- 2) you are sane, but you are so astonishingly stupid that you actually believe this nonsense... => killfile
- 3) you are sane, you know that what you write is total bullshit, but you are just a tedious troll.... => killfile

please restrict your postings to lunatic-friendly zones like alt.conspiracy from now on.

Example 3

Re : Netcop Mary_G shakes her ass (was Re: Breast Feeding Babies!!!)

Date: 1998/06/25

Author: Spiro <spiro@driller.killer>

In article <6muavr\$3ni\$1@nnrp1.dejanews.com>, Mary_G@my-dejanews.com says...

>

>Would you adolescent neanderthals take your silly discussion
>somewhere else, please, before we complain to your admins and get
>your butts kicked?

You theatening me ya daft cow?

>Tit hooligans!!

Smelly cow.

Example 4

Re: Netcop Mary_G shakes her ass (was Re: Breast Feeding Babies!!!)

Date: 1998/06/26

Author: bWeEnRjDaMmUiLnLoEtRt.o <benjamin@whatwhatwhatwhat-WHAT-resurrection.com>

Please remove *uk.people.teens* from your newsgroup headers, I don't think any of us are very interested, and now you're all being stupid. Thank you.

The conflict stops immediately after this exchange and the group can then keep on discussing political subjects. These interventions are linked to the need for self-management and self-discipline perceived by regular posters to the groups. Self-regulation through conflict plays a thematic, formal and ideological role. It meets an essential need, i.e. setting the boundaries of legitimacy: the range of acceptable subjects is defined; any post which moves away from this range is sidelined as belonging to an illegitimate discursive universe. This is how the boundaries of the group and its distinctive features are established, produced and re-produced by regular participants. Without this unceasing thematic redefinition through the use of conflict and contradiction, the groups would founder in an undifferentiated mass, compounded by the widespread custom of crossposting a message on a large number of newsgroups.

In addition, out of conflict and contradiction regarding norms, another kind of legitimacy arises: it has to do with who is entitled to state norms and as such to embody the norm. In a pattern which can be observed in a variety of contexts, the construction of a prominent position within a given newsgroup derives from the ability to state and enforce norms through reasoned use of conflict and contradiction.

ii) Civility, Social Dominance and Conflict

The overall courtesy displayed even in heated debates is another important characteristic: even though varied insults are exchanged, the debate never breaks down, and the group refrains from expelling anyone, no matter how offensive. As can be seen from the following examples, sarcasm, irony and wordplay are consciously and efficiently used to neutralize unwanted behaviors, create in-groups and out-groups, and assert, civilly but unmistakably, a participant's dominance over others:

Example 1

> : > Ok then, racist conspiracy theorist, tell me how govt policies
> : > have been tailored to the 6 percent non-white population of
> : > the UK?
>
> : UK crime statistics are censored.
>
> By whom, and how?
[sarcasm on]

The worldwide, intergalactic Jooooooooooooish Conspiracy <tm> is
censoring them
[sarcasm off]

Though ironic, the answers remain within the boundaries of the acceptable; the conventions of quasi-oral writing make it possible to temper criticism without starting an all-out conflict: as sarcasm and irony are discursive modes enabling a socially acceptable expression of hostility, they are accordingly the favorite tools of posters. This points to the fact that one of the basic tenets of the social representation of communication in newsgroups is that dialogue should be kept up, no matter what the differences in opinion might be. The logical consequence of such attitudes is that a large variety of means has been developed to defuse conflicts. Expelling participants happens very seldom. Ignoring them or placing them in one's "kill file" so as not to view their messages is by far the commonest response to offensive posters. Another widely used method is based on the command of elegant language, as can be seen in the following example:

Example 1

Re: Body hair (was: First: The Problem)

Author: Alexander Forrest

Email: -----@panix.com

Date: 1996/06/01

Forums: alt.politics.nationalism.white, uk.misc, uk.politics.misc,
soc.culture.african.american

>> "D. R. MacIntosh" <----- @drmac.demon.co.uk> wrote:

>>

>>> The Problem

>>> -----

>>> Let's not beat about the bush: the problem is NIGGERS. (...)

>>

>> Of course, the fact that whites have more body hair than blacks,

>> seemingly implying a closer link to apes than black people have, just

>> goes right over your pointy head.

>Salamanders have NO body hair. Gee, they must be further evolved beyond
>ape-hood than either Aryans OR negroes!

Commander Scheisskopf,

Thank you for making my point for me.

Now go be a good Nazi and take a cyanide capsule.

Example 2

Now let us cool it all with a little understanding of what motivates Duncan MacIntosh.

From his name it is obvious that the man is Scottish. This poor forlorn race have been oppressed by the English for centuries. MacMillan is a worm who has turned. Bur he is not a big enough worm to try and worry his master race, so he takes out his wrath on other groups.

Now what might have brought this on?

Well, only a few weeks ago there was the commemoration of the 250th anniversary of the battle of Culloden. (...)

Perhaps this is the burr under Duncan's saddle causing him to kick and jump so much. (Sorry but the worm is now a horse)

When contradictory opinions end up in outright fights, the crisis is managed and ultimately resolved through the use of elegant language (e.g., drawing attention to the humorous use of a mixed metaphor, with its implicit scholarly connotations, underscores the crudeness of the more colloquial expressions used by this poster's opponent.) The mechanism through which a dominant social position is constructed is identical to the one we identified earlier: the command of a learned and sometimes scholarly vocabulary, combined with wit, is critical to achieving prominence.

The number of posts is another element which contributes to such a position: statistics show a clear correlation between participation and behavior control. Participants who try and control others' behavior tend to publish more messages than anyone else in the newsgroup. In so doing, they acquire a degree of visibility which enhances their position. In addition, they tend to be quoted more often than any other participants to be either approved of or heatedly discussed: if their word is not exactly law, it comes very close to it inasmuch as they are the ones setting the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion from legitimacy.

iii) Visibility Strategies

Participants thus construct their dominant position within the group thanks to their willingness to enter into conflicts and to contradict others whenever they deem it necessary to remind them of the group's norms. Their messages are numerous and productive, i.e. they elicit a large number of responses, sometimes sparking off conflicts extending over several months known as 'flame wars'. The skilful use of conflict, however, is not the only cause of such productivity. Observation shows that the messages nobody responds to contain far more information than productive messages [Hill & Hughes 1998, 61], thus suggesting that the search for information is the least significant aspect of newsgroup sociability. Additional studies have evidenced that messages to which others respond, thus starting a thread, are messages where the first-person singular is used more frequently: the authors of such messages reveal a great deal about themselves as their involvement in the group develops [Sudweeks, McLaughlin & Rafaeli 1997]. In so doing, they create for themselves a definite online identity, thus encouraging their identification by other

participants. Self-revelation, however, is part of a larger set of strategies designed to ensure visibility and hence recognition to those who use them. Two crucial, additional aspects are elaborate signatures and a good command of a quasi-oral writing style, as in the examples we provided earlier. The ability to switch from the use of elevated language to the most colloquial or even vulgar speech patterns is just as essential.

An additional aspect of this particular style is misspelling. The posts are characteristically interspersed with spelling mistakes: these paradoxically function as attention-getters, since the reader is forced into the role of editor. In addition, spelling mistakes function like slips of the tongue in spoken language, guaranteeing the spontaneity of discourse and its flexibility. As such, they can be viewed as evidence of the inscription of orality within written language. Finally, the spelling mistake is now evolving into a form in its own right, with people playfully distorting spelling as a way of asserting group-specific codes, thus pointing to the existence of in-groups and out-groups.

III. The Culture of Conflict

The art of conflict thus sets up an unmistakable hierarchy among the participants in a newsgroup and it is compounded by the command of a variety of stylistic strategies. But conflict does not merely function to define in-groups and out-groups: the opinions confronting one another day in, day out are essential to the development and maintenance of a culture of political conflict as distinct from a culture of political consensus. Although consensus must prevail as regards norms, civility and communication in the widest possible sense, conflict plays a crucial part in catalysing political opinions and allowing participants to take a stand. Consensus and conflict are thus inextricably interwoven and function dialectically to keep the channels of communication open between sworn enemies, even while making it possible for them to fight their differences out.

This insight into the culture of conflict owes a great deal to German philosopher Georg Simmel, for whom conflict is one of the elementary structures of society, especially when it takes the form of playful conflict, which he sees as an end in itself. For him, playful conflicts such as medieval tournaments generate social regulations. He further notes that "people unite to fight, and fight while submitting to norms and rules both sides abide by. [...] These unifying processes play no part [in the fight], yet without them, it could not take shape."⁷ In the case of newsgroups, the dimension of verbal sparring is obvious: the ceaseless repetition of rules and reprimands is preci-

7. Georg Simmel, *Le Conflit* (Paris: Circé, 1995), 17, my translation.

sely what grants the newsgroup its existence, even as the various factions keep adding fuel to current debates or starting new ones.

It is essential to underscore that unity is created between opponents as well as among the members of the same sub-groups: for Simmel, conflict actually generates social relationships. Only indifference means separation. Thus, the newsgroup members who take on the function of scapegoats or of antagonists do not break away from the group, are hardly ever expelled, but keep on participating. The newsgroups indeed offer an arena where even the fiercest opponents can meet to give vent to their disagreements and thus be bound, albeit marginally, through their interaction. Racist remarks, for instance, are not ignored, but rebutted in detail: in all newsgroups, conflict guarantees the continued existence of the group and its cohesiveness. The conflicts go on for months at a time and are carefully rekindled when they might die out, thus showing that participants are consciously looking for social relationships. This does not mean that the stake of the debate is unimportant, but that it is located on a different level, i.e. the symbolic level. Yet, this limited conflict reflects the conflict between social actors in the widest possible sense: in this case, conflicts result in the structuration of society and the shaping of its relationships with its environment. A similar process can be observed in newsgroups, which are produced and institutionalized through the staging of their conflicts in their discursive practices. Newsgroups therefore reproduce the dominance/subservience relationships which can be observed in society at large even while setting up a space in which they can be re-negotiated—up to a point.

Conclusion: Are Newsgroups Communities?

The self-proclaimed visionaries of the Internet as well as the first participants in the newsgroups [Hauben 1997; Rheingold 1993] saw them as ideal-types of communities, based on elective affinities. Newsgroups are indeed based on a shared symbolic construction which permeates the Internet as a whole and reproduces the underlying structures of utopia: the groups function on the basis of a strict principle of equality; they uphold a continuing fight against censorship as well as the rejection of commercialism [Serfaty 1999]. But is this enough to qualify as communities?

The notion of community developed by American social thinkers implies the existence of a network of solidarity and exchanges, of a degree of closeness, of a shared identity leading to the acceptance of a degree of social control [Parsons 1973; Effrat 1974; Etzioni 1991]. Defining communities as a set of interactions leads to disregard for territoriality: sharing the same space

is no longer deemed necessary to the establishment of a community. The notion can thus be applied rather loosely to a variety of groups, such as the diasporic Chinese community or the medical community. The community thus becomes an intermediate body, located midway between the individual and society at large, and conferring a pre-set identity to the individual.

Yet such a definition fails to take into account the structuring functions of conflict. Nor does it take into account the possibility for members to create their own identities, as communities confer on their members a collective identity. This is why newsgroups, with their reliance on a culture of ritualised conflict, with their endless opportunities for the redefinition of self and identity, can hardly be construed as communities.

Newsgroups therefore may best be defined as informal groups, as first and foremost process rather than end-result. Even though newsgroups have a core group of regular, committed participants, the group is never more than a process whose result is an unstable, ephemeral combination. The only element of continuity is the debate itself, which offers participants the narration of their involvement. Newsgroups exist first and foremost as a set of texts which, viewed over time and as a whole, constitutes the history of the group as well as part of the personal story of each group member. These texts are producers of meaning as well as producers of relationships. These unstable groups of individuals who carefully nurture relationships which might break down at any moment point to a basic premise, i.e., that there is no "common substance or common essence or common identity" [Nancy 1990]. Newsgroups exist first and foremost through the process of weaving relationships, while the debates themselves evidence the desire to set up and maintain a space for political debate. By developing original forms of sociability, newsgroup members contribute to the construction of public space. The civility norms widely shared and recognized by newsgroup participants structure all interactions and provide the common ground contextualizing and enabling these interactions. Evolved from the outset by the very first newsgroup participants, these norms are identical in France, Great Britain and in the USA, thus giving momentum to a degree of uniformity in social practices: the Internet can thus be viewed as a space where a genuinely new kind of sociability is being developed by the middle- and upper-classes of industrialized countries, where the network has been reaching critical mass. This new sociability, based on an apparently oxymoronic distant intimacy, is in fact superimposed on more traditional kinds of sociability, based on proximity. As such, the sociability enabled by the technical characteristics of the network has nothing to do with virtuality, but expands and diversifies the spaces in which it may occur.

Newsgroups are thus best defined as symbolic constructions producing social norms, social practices and above all, meaning.

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