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MYTH-MAKING AS SOCIAL EXCHANGE: ORGANIZING A WEB-BASED COMMUNITY

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Abstract

In this paper we make a contribution to the theoretical and empirical discourses regarding Web-based communities and online social interaction. The significance of myth-making within a web-based community is the primary consideration for this paper. This phenomenon provides the critical framework for deconstructing and understanding the interaction and identification of participants within Web-based communities. In order to do this we have utilized empirical evidence drawn from the complete archive of a well-established Web community that has been in operation since 1997. The paper draws upon an interdisciplinary analysis incorporating information systems research, anthropological, sociological and management studies to argue that myth-making is integral to the organizational practices of web-based communities. This work contributes to knowledge regarding the organization of web-based communities by recognizing the significance of activities that maintain long-term social solidarity. Examination of longitudinal data from the online community also reveals the dominance of a small number of participants who construct a negotiated but dominant identity for the group. Myth-making is consequently shown to be an activity that assists in the creation of a participatory community that maintains a social hierarchy and ensures order through tacit forms of governance.

Keywords: Web -based communities, myth, social hierarchies, social exchange, critical research.

1 WEB-BASED COMMUNITIES: MYTH-MAKING AND IDENTITY CREATION?

Web-based communities are increasingly a major focus for research. The enactment of more and more web-based communities and group forming activities has been a steady process supported by government policies, commercial enticements and the various temptations of freedom(s), entertainment and “free things”. The ‘normality’ of this situation commends online ‘communities’ to continuous, systematic and theorised investigation. While the use and direct participation in Web-based communities can in no way be claimed as a universally shared experience they are increasingly important facets of many organizational, institutional and - more broadly - social exchanges. In this sense, critical interpretation of the meanings and impact of this form of community provides understanding of their wider social meanings and implications as well as offering explanation for their longevity and solidarity. The variety of bespoke technologies that these communities utilize apparently offers few opportunities for comparability and this paper concedes there are a wide variety of specific experiences that separate visual chats (and complete virtual worlds) from simpler message boards, forums and older technologies. Our examination is not directly concerned with the specific technical mechanisms that enable the focus of our attentions or any community - online or offline. We argue that the consideration of community should not be isolated to ‘special’ or possibly even ‘specialist’ consideration simply because of a digital provenance as this is not the *social* mechanism that constructs and maintains a community. By avoiding the dangers of technological determinism we claim that the central mechanism for maintaining and perpetuating a web-based community is found within various practices of social exchange including conflict. In this paper the emphasis of our claim is oriented around those practices that provide the social context for a web-based community and perpetuate individual knowledges that are formalized as negotiated myths. Mythologies are the range of assumptions regarding places, events, popular culture and ideas that are made as if they are natural when they are social and ideological constructions (Barthes 1970). More importantly we see myth as an ‘account of origins’ and an ‘active form of social organization’ (Williams 1983, 211).

Orlikowski and Gash (1994) highlight the importance of understanding how people incorporate ‘sense-making’ into their own personal interpretations of technology usage. They (Orlikowski and Gash 1994, 175) state that in order...

To interact with technology people have to make sense of it; and in this sense-making process, they develop particular assumptions, expectations, and knowledge of the technology, which then serve to shape subsequent actions toward it.

Each stakeholder carries and conveys particular representations of their social group, technology, a workplace and those elements that contribute to their daily existence, including Information Systems and Web-based interaction. Meaning and sense making are reciprocal activities associated with the social relations that exist between individuals, groups and the organisations with whom they interact. Increasingly tools for social organisation such as Information Technologies are being drawn upon to enhance these interactions and improve organisational practices. Management therefore plays an important role in the construction of meaning for employees, employers and consumers as it impacts on the formation and reciprocity of social relations.

Managers (in whatever guise they may be labeled) draw upon a plethora of management techniques to focus goals, direct tasks and achieve organisational objectives and outcomes. However, it is predominantly processual and temporal methods that are used. A processual or time focused account to the management of an Information System stresses structure and reasserts the centrality the organisation over the social and physical environment. As Ciborra & Lanzara (1992, 162) state, what characterizes all such stories of computerization is a sort of deterministic, linear explanation strategy, and specifically the “closed”, instrumental role attributed to systems: they are “designed”, embed “purposes” and accordingly provoke “impacts”. It seems that despite their intrinsic complexity systems are artifacts that never show unexpected features and cannot

influence the premises, the goals, and the frames adopted by the actors involved in the computerization process. In other words, each actor seems to have a clear view, and stance, with respect to what a system should do or should not do, and the system behaves accordingly.

Their (Ciborra & Lanzara 1992) description of systems analysis suggests that the rational organisation is a response to forces that must be understood and controlled. The organisation proceeds, in this framework, as a series of responses to 'errors', as counter-manoevres to internal uncertainty, and by establishing the appropriate processes that will maintain maximum stability and consensus (Cooper & Burrell 1988). It is time and indexical processing that is predominantly drawn upon to manage such uncertainty (Agre 1999).

The focus - in light of the managerial focus upon all types of systems - for this paper are the ways in which myths have positively contributed to the construction and maintenance of a community that has persisted for over seven years. The paper draws upon anthropologically inspired examinations of traditional communities, as well as other recent literature in the social sciences, as a means of identifying the significance and form of these practices. This approach is also a tacit argument that a wider and long-standing body of literature examining 'communities' is available to the theorised examination of this phenomena. Myth and mythology are concepts related to socio-cultural groups that have been systematically examined in many contexts (for example Barthes, 1970; Hebdige, 1979; Grimble, 1954) and offer strong well established theoretical positions from which to disentangle understanding of contemporary culture from the observation of a Web-based community.

2 THE PROBLEM OF COMMUNITY

Our examination of a web-based community articulates a number of observations that offer comparability with other Web-based communities. Gotved (2002, 405) explains that online communities "like any community before the advent of the Internet... is hard to define in a satisfying way. Basically, community is about inclusion and exclusion and thereby is defined differently by insiders and outsiders, and the more or less symbolic maintenance of the borders is important to keeping the community alive". Drawing on a single definition of what constitutes a community is a contentious issue in social science literature (Palmer et al 1995) – we have addressed these inconsistencies, at least partially, through the an anthropological examination of myth making within communities (Barthes, 1970; Hebdige, 1979). The dominant mechanism for constructing and perpetuating myth is through non-reciprocal social exchanges. Myth and story telling offer a means from which to enable inclusion and enact exclusion. Myths reinforce community ties by providing cultural reference points from which identity formation can be defined and maintained. Exploring myths and story telling offers substantial explanation for many socially observed activities in Web-based communities. Exploring myth formation and story telling does not require representation of communities as being based upon the construction of individual trust regimes (Boyd, 2002; Rutter, 2001; Jarvenpaa et al 2001; Oxendine, 2003), Foucaultian self-governance (Loader 1997) or structuration theory (Giddens 1984). In a similar manner to these previous examinations, we are faced with the conundrum of asking what is it that constructs and maintains a successful longstanding web-based community.

Despite the diversity of existing research on web-based communities (Haythornthwaite, 2000; Bakarbjieva, 2003) a number of consistent themes can be identified in the majority of these works. Specifically, many of the works observe a distinction between groups formed in online and offline contexts (Gotved, 2002). Others assume the automatic presence of a positive 'community' within online groups (Stewart, 1999; Abdul-Rahman & Hailes, 2000; Jarvenpaa et al, 2000) or essentialize the concept of individual trust in the creation and maintenance of these groups (Rutter, 2001; Jarvenpaa et al, 2001; Oxendine, 2003; Boyd, 2002). Despite the consistency of these research agendas, Wellman and Gulia (1996) express disquiet with this plethora of opinion that reflects our own concerns,

...most scholarly accounts of on-line interactions have been quite positive. Although we share this basically positive evaluation, we also suspect that this enthusiasm is partially attributable to the fact that most research has been done by academics and those working for private organizations who have vested interests in showing how CSSNs [Computer Supported Social Networks] work.

Wellman (2004, 125) also reinforces this observation with the comment that the (Wellman and Gulia, 1996) paper, “took aim at the vogue for calling every interaction online a ‘community’.”

This paper employs Wellman’s critical sentiments and incorporates resistance to what has become a ‘traditional’ view of online communities. Consequently, we do not uncritically or automatically perpetuate the claims of these earlier researchers. We see instead online groups as having many key similarities with ‘offline’ social organizations (Howard, Rainie & Jones 2003, 47). Wellman and Gulia (1996) observe that the Internet “is only one of many ways in which the same people may interact. It is not a separate reality.” Wellman and Gulia’s observation implicitly questions any automatic assumption regarding online groups as being ‘positive’ communities and egalitarian, non-hierarchical, supportive or even friendly (Bird 2002). Fernback and Thompson (1995) describes these representations as “a romanticised notion of community” and Fox (2004, 48) in drawing on Anderson (1995) calls them an “imagined community.” The assumption and ascription of community also implies that individual members of these groups share common sets of interests, understandings or worldviews. In what is seen as an individually oriented and consensual environment the rubric of ‘trust’ also becomes tightly associated with the online ‘community’ (Rutter 2001; Jarvenpaa et al 2001; Oxendine 2003). Our resistance to this perspective requires acknowledgement of a wider range of social practices being present within online groups that reinforce solidarity and group identity.

3 COMMUNITY AS MYTHIC IDENTITY

The group we observed for this research has a continuous seven year history in its present form and at its current domain. Before this time, the technology that supports the system originally began as a project at a university two years earlier. Moving to a commercial domain and arguably a more international profile was the consequence of the original university’s reorganization of its Web site and the corporatization of its Web profile. Since that time the original technology has been used by the university for small-scale student/staff interactions. Originally, the design motivation for the system was to offer a ‘simple’ interface that did not dominate the social interactions intended to be facilitated by this system. However, this is not a tacit claim for the neutrality of software. In many respects these initial design decisions for the system as well as the eventual formation and perpetuation of an intimate social grouping is closely intertwined with the day-to-day limitations, quirks and practicalities of the system. These combined influences assist in forming local myths that in turn assist in defining an online community.

The initial academic ‘bias’ for this community continues with a variety of separate ‘rooms’ that are primarily labeled by individual disciplines such as Philosophy, Sociology, Gender Studies and Information Systems. However, over time requests from individual participants has also prompted the construction of other less academic ‘rooms’, such as Music and Consciousness & Metaphysics. A ‘Meeting People’ was also created not from a direct request but rather it was sought by regular participants to ‘clean up’ the other rooms that they felt were becoming cluttered with trivial chatter.

An important aspect of the community we observed is that the concept of ‘rooms’ is not definite as is the case in other web-based communities. The observed fluidity is the result of a complete lack of any formal rules or guideline being imposed on the community through technical restrictions or a stated ‘code of practice’. No moderators exist to patrol for ‘off topic’ or ‘inappropriate’ conversations. The governance of this community has been entirely imposed by the community itself and has continuously evolved throughout its seven year history. Each ‘room’ is less of a structuring principle than a convenient label for identification. In many instances individual participants identify with a

single home 'room' that has almost iconic meaning. A recent example of this identification was the result of the changes to the community's software and the reactivation of some rooms...

(28 Jun 2005 23:40:44 GMT) [P1]: hi [G1], thanks. I always think of Philosophy as the front door to <<community name>> discussions - nice to have it open again.

(29 Jun 2005 13:29:58 GMT) [D1]: Thanks [G1]! This has always been my favourite room!

Identifying with a 'room' offers participants a passport to different parts of the community as well as an escape valve for explaining or justifying inappropriate comments. The concept of a 'room' has a deeper justification that reflects Lévi-Strauss's view regarding the structured interrelationship of different totems (** Levi Strauss). While this does not articulate as eventual affiliations the implied alliances of academic disciplines offers similar permeability between 'rooms'.

The community itself has been continuously examined since its inception, however, between 28th May 2001 and 9th June 2003 a systematic collection of each message in all of the available rooms were gathered in a single diachronic order. In addition to the actual content of the posting and its date information about which 'room' the message was posted to, the name of the participant, their IP (Internet Protocol) address and their email address (if it was included) were all gathered. During this time 27,130 individual messages were gathered. However, the flexibility of the community and the ability of participants to self-select a named identity at the beginning of each session combined with the physical movement of participants across country and around the world prohibit direct calculation of the number of individuals involved with the community. Examining the self-selected identities within the community reveals the use of 1,341 different names. Such a raw 'head count' provides tentative indication of the number of participants during the data collection which balances the reuse or spoofing of names by multiple members of the community. Varying a single 'central' identity offers personal narratives to the community. The longest example of this activity – as an identifying name - was “[I1] from an netcafe in Kemer, Anatolia, sun setting in the mountains and orange trees, smells of seafood and pinetrees.” However, in contrast to this detail the number of lurkers - participants who choose to not post any messages - can only be estimated from the logs of the host server (Figure 1). In the final column of Figure 1 the passive requests are divided by four as each request for a single page creates four requests based on the current system's technology. Requests to the enabling code and the reloading of the page (i.e. participation in a conversation) are conducted outside the community directory. A decrease in the ratio of passivity to activity suggests that over the period of our examination there is an increasingly active engagement with the community.

| Month / Year | Requests to the Community directory (Passive requests) | Requests to the enabling code (Active requests and participation) | Ratio (Passive/4) / Active |
|----------------|--|---|----------------------------|
| February 2002 | 9018 | 1073 | 2.10 |
| March 2002 | 9451 | 1381 | 1.71 |
| April 2002 | 14759 | 2287 | 1.61 |
| May 2002 | 7127 | 1436 | 1.24 |
| June 2002 | 5695 | 1061 | 1.34 |
| July 2002 | 8565 | 1938 | 1.10 |
| August 2002 | - | - | Server crash |
| September 2002 | 7857 | 1257 | 1.56 |
| October 2002 | 13328 | 3046 | 1.09 |
| November 2002 | 12014 | 2811 | 1.07 |
| December 2002 | 13635 | 3922 | 0.87 |
| January 2003 | 19204 | 5471 | 0.88 |
| February 2003 | 13285 | 4485 | 0.74 |
| March 2003 | 11766 | 4223 | 0.70 |

Figure 1: Active and Passive requests to the community

While the consistent increase in participation is marked our aim is not to provide vague metrics for this community. The understanding that can be garnered from the server logs offers support for the central qualitative arguments of the paper. Specifically, the empirical data derived from the community makes it possible to identify that over 84% of all the messages posted to the community during the period of examination were contributed by only 30 people (or more correctly unique identities). Our primary focus on the data is to examine exemplars of myth-making within the many individual interactions of the community to reveal the slow accretion of common ideas that shape the mythology and identity of the community. It is this process that we claim contributes to the construction of a community's self-governance and by implication its longevity.

4 MYTH-MAKING AND LONGEVITY: THE BLOB

An unusual and possibly unique feature of the web-based community we examined - and a pivotal example of the constitution of community through myth - was the "blob". The "blob" was a physical package of items that was (snail mail) posted between early members of the community with the intention that each person would add a new item until it eventually returned to its originator. At this point "blobees", as they identified themselves, would also be permitted to extract a single item. The hope of the originators was that the "blob" would perpetually circulate among a constantly changing list of participants. The blob originated within the architecture 'room' and was initiated by its regular participants - not the system maintainers - but interest soon spread across all of the 'rooms' and among the majority of regular participants. The idealism expressed by the "blob" reveals some of the prevailing ideologies found within the community at that time. Most importantly the concept of the "Blob" relied on a belief in community and of the more general reciprocal obligations of social exchange. In effect, the originators of the "Blob" believed that everyone would act in 'real life' for the betterment and benefit of the community as it was already enacted through the Web. The "blob" activity was an expression in community trust without any recourse or reliance upon commercial exchange.

On the 25th July 2001 one of the original "blobees" responded to a query from another early member of the community. This exchange was conducted entirely within the architecture 'room', identifying aspects of the individuals, geographic locations and the name of the community have been made anonymous and are labeled with initials and square brackets.

(25th July 2001 8:10 GMT) [J1]: [P1]. actually only my contribution has returned. I think I only saw the work of [V1] and our friend the organic designer with the initials I can't remember ([L2]?) so the full blob never actually got here but it must have done a few rounds. I haven't been on the site for some time (years) so there may have been some feedback or updates which I never saw. Glad to see that the conversations are continuing in a reasonably civilised manner.

(25th July 2001 8:32 GMT) [E1]: Hi [P1]. I recall you asking about the whereabouts of the blob before, but this happened before my time at <<community name>>. I find it very interesting though even if it didn't involve me. Must be 4 years old by now

(25th July 2001 11:38 GMT) [P1]: Possibly the blob has grown to a blurb.. maybe even a blurr...

It would be interesting to know when <<community name>> first came online ... [G1]? [E1], hi..when did you take out <<community name>> citizenship? You could be the Mayoress.maybe.. hehe

(26th July 2001 1:31 GMT) [P1]: [J1], [E1], I 'accidentally' came across my 'blobfolio' last evening and it was dated June 23rd, 1997. I had been communicating on <<community name>> for at least a year, maybe two, when the blob idea came about. [V1], I agree that the problem must have been personal as well Coleman is likely very sensitive as many black Americans have become due to the real racism here. Wold you happen to know Jacob

Voorthius (sp?). We taught together in <<location>> and were good buddies until I found that he conspired against me for discussing 'American' ideas and the neutralizaion of meaning such as the Deconstructivists. I was fired in the proper, British manner after being celebrated the year earlier, by the same person. If you know Jake, get his e-mail for me. I have a score to settle in the impropoer American way. As I am already the bad guy, I have a reputation to protect!

(26th July 2001 1:31 GMT) [P1]: <<community name>> originally emanated from a server in Australia....now its in the Eastern USA...

(26th July 2001 1:34 GMT) [P1]: [J1], come to thin of it, I sent it to [L2] first because I recall including the wrong envelope in the package with him and calling him t find out if it was still there when the package arrived. I had placed \$12,000.00 <<location>> dollars rather than a cover letter which was quickly stolen likely by customs. This was about \$400.00 USD at the time..

(26th July 2001 1:34 GMT) [P1]: Last on <<community name>>, I was away for over one year at one point as well. The community has been truly extraordinary....

At this stage in the community's development [P1] was regarded as one of the longest served and most respected participants within the community. His statements are given authority despite being somewhat celebratory and cliched. The last message in the example above is the extreme example of this celebration. It should also be noted that this person is an academic, a role he does not endeavor to hide. It was also [P1] who was a key motivator in developing the idea of the 'blob'. The general flow of discussion reveals an assumed hierarchy that incorporates reference to a 'Mayoress.' [P1]'s reference to the activity of the 'Blob' four years previously along with a detailed itemisation of its contents and destination reinforce his own status within the community while also contributing to the community's mythology through covert nostalgia.

5 SOCIAL ROLES AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

As a social environment the web-based community is imbued with what could be described as an "everyday life" level of engagement. Participants do not confine themselves to the stated topic of a 'room' and without the intercessions of a moderator there is no obligation to stay 'on topic.' Fluid conversational practice is significant for the way in which it strengthens social bonds between individuals within the context of community. While the basis for the individual conversations are themselves less relevant in this sense the following conversation is interesting for a number of reasons. It is a conversational and off topic 'chat' that attempts to clarify details surrounding two regular personalities involved in the community. It also reveals the level of play that is regularly introduced into the community, in this case [D1] is clearly male but the conversation does very little to define the gender of [M1]. Finally, the conversation represents the 'classic' discourse relating to web based communities and gender. Interpreted in isolation the example could overly emphasize the issue of gender relations within this Web-based community. However, our argument regarding the importance of myth and social exchange within web-based communities offers an alternative reading. [M1] and [D1]'s conversation contributes to another myth of the community. Is [M1] male or female? Is there any significance attached to actually knowing this or is the play and the continuation of the mystery that is more important?

(27 Jul 2001 04:24:07 GMT) [D1]: [M1]...are you a woman?! I have always thought you were a man...but?!

(27 Jul 2001 11:36:36 GMT) [M1]: Well there you go, [D1]. You will never know! Quite irrelevant.

(27 Jul 2001 15:52:58 GMT) [D1]: Does it matter what sex you are?! Why so shy ?! Gentle dove! I am sure you are a woman now!

(27 Jul 2001 23:15:39 GMT) [M1 anonymously but identified by IP number]: I am no gentle dove! Have learnt to take the world on single handed. Shy? never. A woman? you may have your wires crossed here [D1]! Another word of advice - never be sure of anything.

(28 Jul 2001 16:19:24 GMT) [D1]: I read a poem today, where a wounded eaglet is spoken to by a dove....or rather wisdom speaks to it through a dove...I've always liked you [M1], but this does not matter ! Admit it!

[D1]'s final comment also continues his role within the community as a self-appointed hell-raiser who regularly attempts to antagonize community participants. The importance of this and similar conversations to the perpetuation of myths within the community are highlighted by a much more recent message...

(29 Jun 2005 15:36:27 GMT) [A1]: I know, [P3].. It kept him OR her with us.. Wasn't it [E1] who kept his gender secret.... or was that someone else... it all seems to blend at times.

Gender, in this case at least, is not the priority or pivotal concern to the community but rather the mechanism through which to share the recollection of experiences and interactions. In effect [A1] is contributing to myths of personality concerning the community. The nostalgia and reference to previous participants provides the community with a history while also driving new threads of conversation.

6 SOCIAL SOLIDARITY AND COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE

Conflict is an aspect of the myth-making activities of the community. The negotiation of the meaning of the community among its participants is rarely uncontested as the result of mutual consensus. Some of the most powerful myths of the community are the result of sustained conflict between prominent participants. Their disagreements, the statements of personal opinion and the consequent recounting of the community's social history support its continuity. In the following example, the source of conflict is centered around the meaning and purpose of the theology 'room'. The meaning and purpose of these 'rooms' are usually uncontested aspects of the community or the system that it utilizes. However a small number of these rooms, including theology, architecture and philosophy closely overlap with individual participant's professional identities. These particular rooms are also among the busiest parts in the community. The conflict outlined here clearly intersects with the personal (theological) beliefs of many of the key participants in the community. [P1]'s initial comment also emphasizes his own sense and belief in the presence of a community.

(04 Jun 2001 00:27:13 GMT) [P1]: [E1]: I would guess that [R1] refers to the mindless graffiti that appeared before his comment. All of us who enjoy open discussion and debate here at <<community name>> must feel a sobering sense of diminishment and loss of respectability when these vulgar and pointless postings appear here in Theology.

(04 Jun 2001 00:37:06 GMT) [R1]: [P1] - Spot on!

Then continuing the disagreement but posted in the Parenting 'room'...

(04 Jun 2001 00:40:46 GMT) [P1]: [H1]: What's this all about then? Have I missed some insults directed at you? If you have some parenting advice to offer the board don't allow anyone to intimidate you. Out with it!

(04 Jun 2001 01:49:55 GMT) [R1]: On 1 June [17:10 GMT] [E1] said, "Anyone can believe what they will. I couldn't care less." Would it be possible to FORCE any mature human being to believe anything AGAINST his or her will? But if a person comes voluntarily to a

THEOLOGY CHAT ROOM, it seems reasonable to wonder who or what the GOD or THEOS of his or her theology might be.

(04 Jun 2001 02:52:39 GMT) [D1]: Is [P1] telling us we MUST feel diminishment and loss of respectability when the postings he mentions appear?! I feel nothing of the sort! (:D) You're nuts!

(04 Jun 2001 02:54:09 GMT) [D1]: what if I don't have a god or a theology to fit it into?!

(04 Jun 2001 06:47:01 GMT) [L1]: [D1], A rude person (not me of course) might reply that you should not then be here and leave the room for those with a more positive attitude. If you reason against theological or religious statements or positions then that is fine. If you use the room simply for abuse then it is not.

(04 Jun 2001 08:15:10 GMT) [P2] (The new number which possibly might be shown is due to the fact that I am using a new computer.): Well, [L1], this is one side of the game only. If some in here declare that they are the only ones who know or are able to participate in these discussions fully (because they have faith) then this inhibits discussions far more than the occasional swearing. This does not mean that I cherish abuse and bad language. But I would plead for a relaxed stance in that regard. It is strange that some theology residents do claim the need for some special requirements you would have to meet in order to be deemed a worthy participant. I never experienced that let's say in philosophy. Nobody told me there that I would need a philosophy in order to participate. Maybe not the best of examples, however, it might do the job.

Later [P2] returned to the philosophy 'room' and added a new angle to the debate...

(04 Jun 2001 08:47:43 GMT) [P2]: In the beginning was the word. And some preachers came afterwards. They retain the right to preach anywhere they want. They claim that their theology page must be kept free from blasphemic nonbelievers. But they keep flooding other pages with their scriptural quotes. Well, what they say do, but don't say what they do.

Which was met with the response...

(04 Jun 2001 10:24:48 GMT) [R1]: Which are more offensive - "blasphemic nonbelievers" or "blasphemic believers"? Authentic believers and authentic non-believers are surely all welcome in [Community] Chat Rooms [Theology or whatever] so long as they observe the common courtesies of civilised behaviour.

(04 Jun 2001 12:21:04 GMT) [L1]: [P1], I am really quite surprised at the tone of your comment. My post in reply to [D1]'s question as to whether he fits in in this page , was that provided he does not use it just for abuse (which he has done in the past but not to me) then he has as much right to post here as anyone else. There is no claim on my part , or as far as I know by anyone else that qualifications of any sort (your word 'requirements') to participate here .

(04 Jun 2001 15:16:45 GMT) [D1]: [L1], who have I abused?!!!!! You don't mean [R1] do you?! [R1], I haven't abused you have I?

(04 Jun 2001 21:11:59 GMT) [P2]: [R1], this is really strange. You are saying a lot of unproven things about academic theologians, now, in a great effort of dodging my original question. So, keeping well in mind that you earlier refused to answer my question about the dogmatic definition regarding faith and reason as made by Vatican I as well, I ask you again: What makes a "true/authentic" theologian a true and/or authentic theologian? Anything besides standards of learning and scientific research?

These extracts are an example of a disagreement that continued in various 'rooms' and with various perspectives on these issues through many subsequent months. The basic disagreement that underlies this conflict was never resolved, however, the role of these participants within the community are increasingly well-defined and respected by others. The solidarity of the community is reinforced

through these conflictual activities as knowledge of the basis for the arguments incorporates other participants and helps to define a boundary between those inside and those outside the community.

7 FUTURE RESEARCH: LONGEVITY, SOLIDARITY AND CONFLICT

Having questioned the prevalent managerialist agendas in relation to online communities and examined the communications of a specific group in light of myth-making it is now possible to suggest an alternative research agenda that enables other critical thinkers can approach their explorations of Web-based communities.

Summary of the research agenda...

- An alternative research focus: Assuming a community-focused study of identity creation and maintenance examined through the social interactions of its participants. By obtaining perspective on a community's identity we gain a sense of how this identity impacts upon social solidarity and a participant's own identification with that community irrespective of whether it is based upon work or interest-based concerns.
- Social understanding: Studying the significance of myth-making in a community reveals the strength of its social solidarity and the formation of its self-governance.
- Consideration for the impact of temporality within Web-based organizational practices: The mobilization of notions of temporality and their role in shaping and perpetuating social and group identity. Associated with this perspective is the need for critical examination of time management practices and issues of cooperation and power.
- Conceptions of identity formation: mobilization of social constructionist approaches to identity and community that are not reliant or embedded upon notions of trust or consensus.
- The role of social relations associated with work: A study of identity and membership in Web-based communities across and between work and interest based groups.

Our interpretation of a Web-based community is an intellectual round-trip. While previous literature has either implicitly sought to examine and emphasis the difference between Web-based and traditional communities or alternatively to celebrate the return of an imagined community we find both positions untenable in the long term. Web-based interactions have firmly become aspects of everyday life that both inform and are informed by other day-to-day activities. Our argument and presentation of an alternative agenda for research asks for more nuanced examination that incorporates myth, conflict and disinformation. Analysis of this type will assist system designers and developers in achieving the realisation that they cannot "design" a community. What can be hoped for are systems that enable a community in all its aggressive reality.

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