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The Network Meets Community: The Boundaries and Ethics of Online Groups

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Most words are metaphors,¹ and the words used to describe social phenomena carry the baggage of history, pre-established imagery and emotional heft. The purpose of this essay is to interrogate the conceptions behind, and trappings of, the words “communities” and “networks” in the discourse online social worlds. This is a deliberate binary. Of course, some of the literature on the Internet engages the nuances inherent in the online experience, yet few articles and texts fully explicate their use of the above terms; mainstream discourse on Internet phenomena, moreover, greatly under-analyze the words they use, often to the detriment of their argument. The purpose of this artificial binary is force distinctions between different online environments and various forms of online interaction in order to approach more precise descriptions of what it means to participate online. I will attempt to uncover what it means to call an online group of individuals a community or a network; what is at stake in these metaphors; what happens when an enclosed, presumably unified or group of individuals is opened up; and finally what sort of ethics arise out of framing online groups as communities. In the end, this paper seeks to lay the groundwork for a realistic ethics of online unity and community-building, one that incorporates the very slippages in erecting these boundaries.

To shift this essay beyond mere theoretical and historical claims, I will examine key moments in recent Internet history that represent moments when these issues were

¹ Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

brought to the fore, or, as I call it, when the network met the community. This essay will focus on discourses in blogs and news articles at a moment of controversy to see how people talk about it and what ethics they prescribe. The incidents are varied: the suicides of Abraham K. Biggs and Kevin Whitrick on live streaming websites PalTalk and Justin.tv; the incident of a teenage girl crying out for help on YouTube; and the Kathy Sierra incident involving hate comments on blogs.² These are three of the more prominent incidents of hate and insensitivity online. It is only somewhat coincidental they mostly involve minorities, young people and women, as anecdotal evidence suggests these are often the targets of hate online.

Broadly speaking, this paper claims invocations of “community” suggest online groups with shared interests, norms and substantial personal connections (personal and political investments tied to interests of others) in spaces that are bounded either conceptually and psychologically or physically by a URL, while categorizations based on the “network” focus more on how those connections are sustained and aggregated in more open spaces, coupled with an inability to place boundaries around those involved. To say the network meets the community is to suggest there are moments when groups with shared norms and interests collide with more open swarms of connections less intimately tied with those operating in a discourse, whose references points to broader structures than those constructed by the person or persons within the presumed community. The idea of being personally invested in the machinations of the group is key: if these spaces were not personal, and personally meaningful, these incidents would not be noteworthy, either in the media or to people on the site.

² It is significant that many of these incidents involve young people – sometimes teenagers – who are still working through their identities.

First, I will look at a critical moment in academic formulations on communities and networks, through the works of Howard Rheingold, Benedict Anderson and Manuel Castells. Then I will examine current scholarship on social network sites to see how scholars are currently framing these online phenomena. Lastly, I will examine the aforementioned incidents in depth to reveal the discourses around them, how both the media and each sites' participants frame the ethical implications and ethnographic realities of those moments.

**COMMUNITY IN A GLOBAL WORLD:
Benedict Anderson, Howard Rheingold and Manuel Castells in conversation**

Howard Rheingold, Benedict Anderson and Manuel Castells started to write at time when anthropologists and sociologists began to rework the theories around “community” in an era of globalization. How does one discuss community in these times, when people and cultures cross borders, when corporations dominate the public sphere and when power appears increasingly international and interconnected (wars span continents and markets have no bounds)?

The conditions of the networked world are exhaustively detailed by Castells in *The Rise of the Network Society* and his subsequent books on the topic, so they need no recounting here. What is relevant to this essay are his theorizations of the global and the Net, both of which map well onto the notion of online social networks, and their importance to both identity, individual (self) and collective (community). Rheingold and Anderson both describe amorphous communities – the community beyond the village, brought to fruition by connections made through lived dependency and equality. For Anderson, this community is the nation, and his book, *Imagined Communities*, is a

detailed account of how the nation became a community, one not so much a “real” community as a mutually agreed upon fiction created by its members.³ For Rheingold, the community is similarly disparate, in his case literally “virtual.” Rheingold describes the mechanics of early (what we would now call) social networking sites on the Internet. Rheingold strives to prove that what may seem virtual and spurious online is in fact a tangible and lived community. Both scholars, then, have a stake in preserving some notion of community in an increasingly decentered world. All three arguments, I will show, coincide, even if their objects of study differ, and each envisions a similar kind of community: one with boundaries constructed its participants, safely preserving it for a networked world.

Anderson’s imagined community is the nation, a lofty construct but a useful one for demonstrating the idea of community as fixed not in space but in the mind. Anderson defines community as such: “...regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation [community] is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” (Anderson 1999, 7) In showing how this “deep, horizontal comradeship” arose, Anderson implicitly defines the basic building blocks of “community.”⁴ A community – Anderson focuses, of course, on “nation” – must give some sense of meaning to a life. In his tome, that meaning arises in death: one must have “died for” something. (Anderson 11, 205-206) (Obviously, not every community demands to be died for, but both Castells and Rheingold implicitly and explicitly speak of communities giving meaning to life). Communities must have some concepts of shared time.

³ While Anderson is largely historical, it should be noted that his reading of history is greatly influenced by the knowledge of globalization; for Anderson, globalization is centuries old.

⁴ I acknowledge an opportunistic reading of Anderson.

(Anderson 26) The presence of an “other” or the recognition of competing and similar communities can foster a sense of shared purpose. (Anderson 48, 69-70) Furthermore, Anderson implies in his discussion of colonized regions that communities are bound as some kind of unit, isolating them from others (Anderson 52); and in his discussion of sites of religious convergence, communities arise from central places – people realize that, as others flock to one place, they must share something in common. (Anderson 54) With the coming of language, communities (as nations) became something to aspire to (Anderson 67) and lived through in text (Anderson 74).

If these are the central ideas located within Anderson’s text, it is possible to imagine the existence of communities in a virtual space: online groups have forms of collective meaning and can make life meaningful, that meaning is formed in relation to others, they have common languages and have strategies for isolation. Rheingold describes in *The Virtual Community*, various kinds of community online, describing the Internet as “a conduit for...our images of who ‘we’ might be...” (Rheingold 2000, 11) The central premise of Anderson’s book that the nation arose only as its citizens began to imagine a “we” to be fought for, is ratified in Rheingold. Rheingold even makes the connection himself, citing Anderson – via a student – that online “...what must be *imagined* is the idea of the community itself.” (Rheingold 64) Since the Internet is amorphous and uncontrollable, it becomes, in the imaginations of its users at the time of Rheingold’s writing (the late 1980s) a proxy for the nation, a community of individuals who may not know each other in any immediate, physical sense, but nonetheless have conceptualized a group consciousness – or, at times, a “groupmind.” (Rheingold 110-111) What is perhaps most fascinating about Rheingold’s thesis is the wires of the web,

the connections themselves, come to grow into an “overarching culture,” such that “imagining” becomes the central facet of the community, not only a process from which it arises. Castells sees this form of communal imagining as well, but around politics, arising from the failure of the state and growth of global networks. (Castells 2004, 64)

The meaning communities create are both lived and imagined. For Rheingold, attending the funeral of a member of his online group made the community all the more real (Rheingold 37), while Anderson found the national community in the tomb of the unknown soldier. (Anderson 10) Yet as much as the two conjure similar images of community, there are key differences, and the funeral provides an example. Rheingold finds his communities online in lived experience – in his immediate, personal connections with other individuals online and offline. Rheingold talks about “...people do[ing] something for one another out of a spirit of building something between them...” and “the pleasure of making conversation and creating value in the process.” (Rheingold 59) His entire first chapter is predicated on personal relationships, not the meta-associations that proliferate in Anderson. This is significant. One of the current conundrums of the web, since it has grown so vast and unwieldy since Rheingold, is whether individuals have any sense of their broader participation in the web, or even in a website like YouTube or Facebook, or whether, as I will argue, they imagine boundaries around their own community.

Further still, Rheingold’s communities are based often in places and not much imagined at all. Since users meet in “groups” around various issues – like parenting – it is possible to see the virtual community as a “public,” a Habermasian café or common room, a point Rheingold himself makes. (Rheingold 25-26) Is a café a community? The

question has led to other less community-focused theses about online groups, most notably danah boyd's exposition on "networked publics." (boyd 2007).

How do we reconcile the Rheingold's interpersonal and particularistic community with Anderson's meta-community? Both have boundaries, constructed and assumed. The bounded nature of community, I would argue, is key: it links the nation (and Diaspora) and online social group, meaning-making occurs in both. Here is where Castells makes an intervention. Castells starts from the presumption that globalization and technology have altered the meanings of self and community, creating networks that reach beyond, connect and challenge individual and collective selves: "There follows a fundamental split between abstract, universal instrumentalism, and historically rooted, particularistic identities. *Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the self.*" (Castells 2000, 3) As a result of these broader forces, Castells saw a possible retrenchment, groups and communities creating borders for identity and community protection. (Castells 2004, 64-5) All the tenets of community espoused by Anderson and Rheingold exist online – communities as both lived and imagined, as conduits for meaning birthed by shared sense of time, purpose and enemies. But the groups are made more aware of what surrounds them and how porous those tenets are. In the cases to be examined in this essay, this is arguably what is transpiring; various individuals, assuming borders around their communication, find them breached. What follows is a debate about where the borders are and a negotiation of whether the community should remain so or if the network is inevitable. This process of negotiation is what scholars should be aware of, for it shows how deceptively simple terms like community and social network are constantly being fought over.

CURRENT LITERATURE ON ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND NETWORKS

The question of how ethnographers – especially those doing research online – should approach the question of communities and networks is of utmost importance to research in the 21st century. While scholars disproven – largely – the notion that community has been “lost” to technology and urbanization over the past century (Wellman 1999: 333), the definition of community and how it manifests itself online is still up for debate. Its relationship to networks is similarly unclear, yet occasionally fleshed out, in the literature on social networking sites online and off.

It is important first to track how scholars – in particular sociologists – connected the idea of a network from that of a community. The classic definition of a community as a neighborhood, a specific, physical place populated by people with similar interests, a view Barry Wellman identifies as dominant in the early and mid-20th century, fell out of favor as technology and modernization raised questions about the primacy of physical space. “Community” started to incorporate people’s “networks of interpersonal ties...that provide sociability and support.” (Wellman 1979: 365) This broadened the prevailing theory on community: “The liberated argument contends that a variety of structural and technological developments have liberated communities from the confines of neighborhoods and dispersed networks ties from all-embracing solidary communities to more narrowly based ones.” (Wellman 1979: 377) Thus, by taking the focus off place, and focusing it on connections between people, sociologists were able to preserve an idea of community, one that specifically focused on notions of the individual – “personal communities” (Wellman and Potter 1999) – and incorporated the effects of technology (the car, plane, phone, Internet). The focus on “social networks, not local

groups,” though predating the rise of the Internet, certainly laid the intellectual foundation for online social network analysis that began in the 1980s and hit its stride in the 2000s.

Preserving notions of community was a key aim of early new media scholarship. Sherry Turkle, in her early investigation of identity in the age of computers, noted that, among early adopters in 1970s and 1980s – programmers, scholars – was a concerted effort to reinvigorate the spirit of the 1960s:

But there was also talk about the rebirth of ideas from the sixties, in which, instead of food cooperatives, there would be ‘knowledge cooperatives’; instead of encounter groups, computer networks; and instead of relying on friends and neighbors to know what was happening, there would be ‘community memories’ and electronic bulletin boards. (Turkle 1984: 171)

Thus the early ideological framing of the Internet included an explicit citation of community-based counterculture. This has been corroborated by a number of scholars (Turner 2006, Matei 2005). Matei argues that revolutionary new communication technologies, starting the 19th century, have fostered “dreams of social harmony and homogenization.” (Matei 2005) The writings of Barry Wellman and Howard Rheingold and their experiences on WELL – Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link – similarly evoke notions of communities born of affinity and belonging, “...intense feelings of camaraderie, empathy and support that they observed among people in the online spaces they studied.” (Preece 2005) Many of these connections had the benefit of proof: Wellman notes one anecdote in which a WELL user’s home burns down and members send aid via physical mail. (Wellman and Giulia 1999: 339)

Thus, when social networking sites made more concrete the connections between people online, with such terminologies as “friends” and “fans,” it seemed only natural

scholars would seek to find how community instantiated itself online. Online social research has been increasingly concerned with these social ties, and most of the research focuses on how people make connections and what those connections mean. Behind this research various scholars make claims to different notions of networks and communities. A review of the literature on social networking sites and online communities demonstrates a wide variety of claims to both terms. Some of this were organic. As boyd and Ellison note, many early social network sites were organized around a particular subculture: “AsianAvenue, MiGente, and BlackPlanet were early popular ethnic community sites with limited Friends functionality before re-launching in 2005-2006 with SNS features and structure.” (boyd and Ellison 2007). In addition, both Cyworld and Skyrock began around various nationalities (Korean and French, respectively). Ethnicity, race and nationality, primary loci for tight kinship networks and comfortably bounded around identities, lend themselves quite easily to community analyses.

As social network sites grew in size and diversity, becoming more open and expanding beyond their niches, descriptions of online communities became more nuanced. Without physical space, scholars sought to find how people created boundaries around their groups, or how these boundaries manifested themselves. Several articles attempted concrete definitions:

...[A] virtual community is defined as an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms. (Porter 2004)

The notion of a “shared interest” became key under this kind of standard. “Norms” too are an important of social network sites conceived as communities. Nancy Baym discusses social network sites as a community in practice: “at the center of the practice

approach is the assumption that a community's structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting or practices." (Baym 1999: 22) For Baym, online communities demonstrate a "shared engagement in a project" through common practice – linguistic choices, ways of using the site and other aspects of social networking could be included in this term. Shared meanings, linguistically maintained, are the key to creation of online community. Mutual interests cause "clustering," according to Yochai Benkler, such that social network sites form digital manifestations of real world groups: "Australian fire brigades tend to link to other Australian fire brigades, conservative political blogs...in the United States to other conservative political blogs in the United States." (Benkler 2007: 12) This like-attracts-like model puts the focus on types of individuals – ethnic and age groups, for instance.

Yet there are other conceptions of how to make sense of online connections, ones that reconceptualize these frameworks to better account for the diffuse and complex nature of online relationships. Analyses that focus on networks, it seems from the literature, focus more on how connections are formed and sustained, rather than the similarities among the participants: "The focus, we propose, should be on the glue: that which keeps message threads and their authors together, and what makes the groups and their interaction tick." (Rafaeli and Sudweeks 1997) The focus is on patterns and modes of conversation – message threads – rather than the topic of conversation or place of conversation. Ridings and Gefen demonstrate that there are various types of online communities and some do not privilege "social support" and instead sought an "exchange of information." (Ridings and Gefen 2004) The level of support – more intimate,

community-based interaction, I would argue – versus information exchange – more utilitarian, though often based on shared interest – varied based on the type of site.

Thus not all narratives of social networking sites have invoked filial communities of interest as its organizing principle. Much of the research on online communities focuses on how individuals self-conceive of their connections, leading to terms like “personal communities” or “imagined egocentric communities.” (Wellman and Potter 1998: 49, boyd 2006) Underlying these theories is an agreement that social network sites “are primarily organized around people, not interests” or groups. (boyd and Ellison 2007) Each individual is placed at the center of his/her community, which, in the end, begins to look more like “network” – a system of connections, borne out in practice and less bounded by customs.

Analyses focused on networks have shortcomings as well. As Annelise Riles explains, individuals consciously acting within networks – in her case, NGOs – reify the construct they engage in, focusing on its solidity, rather than its indeterminacy:

As we have seen, the naming of a Network is the existence of a Network, and the existence of a Network is synonymous with Action on its behalf. The Network *is* analysis (the missing “link”), and it supersedes reality; in other word, one need not show a link once on pronounces the existence of a network. (Riles 172)

In this case, instead of shared interests and customs creating artificial boundaries, the notion of connection in itself comes to stand in for an organizing principle. Riles’ network is a bit different from that of a online social network, but she properly categorizes the Network “ideal of constant communication” as “spontaneous, collective and internally generated expansion.” (Riles 176, 173) Her point is clear: just as creating artificial boundaries can be problematic, so can ignoring the bounds or assuming less-bounded communication is any more seamless. Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing characterizes

cultures in global networks as “ co-produced in ... ‘friction:’ the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference.” (Tsing 4) While Tsing is not only speaking of connections between individuals, her theory is relevant: the connections online are often shockingly complex.

Several conceptions of online groups arise, then, from the literature. There are communities of practice and affiliation (enclosed, tight knit, shared values and practices); community of primarily composed of weak ties (perhaps, a subculture); networks with filial connections (Riles’ groups working independently toward a common goal); and free markets of ideas and expression (unwieldy globalized networks). To complicate matters, each of these overlap one another and operate simultaneously. The purpose of this paper is to explicate these slippages and show however various parties try to rectify them, sometimes clumsily, sometimes with nuance.

CALLS FOR SUICIDE

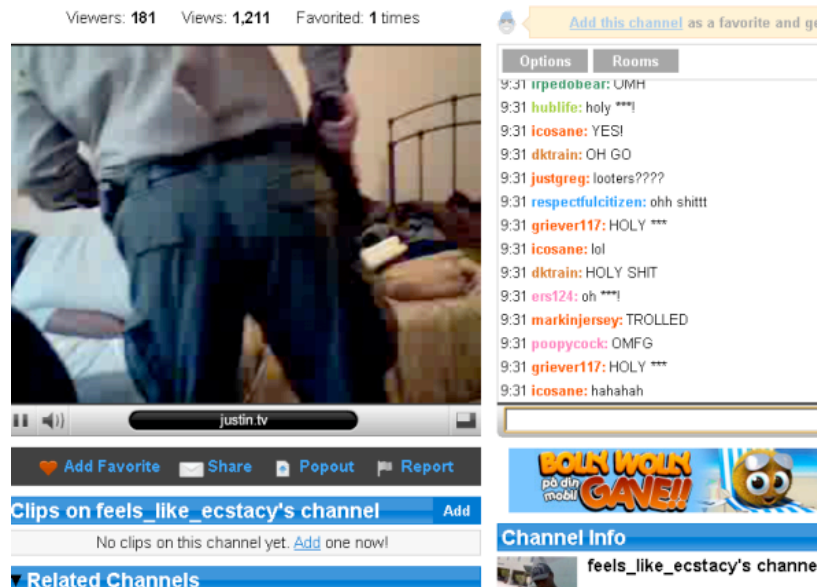


Figure 1 A screen grab of Abraham K. Biggs' Justin.tv channel at the moment the police arrived the afternoon on the day he died.

Early in the morning on November 19, before dawn, Abraham K. Biggs, a 19 year-old black college student from Pembroke Pines, Florida, posted a suicide on a chatroom. He said he was in love with a girl but thought he was not good enough for her, that he was having a hard time in college – “in college but barely” – and so was letting his parents down, and that he had done some bad things – “I am an a@#hole.” Biggs, who was bipolar, posted the notice of his suicide on Bodybuilding.com, a site he frequented, detailing the combination of drugs he was taking: “I've had 7 roxies and 3 ultram and now I have lexapro left.” (Agrell 2008) He then linked to live streaming site Justin.tv, to broadcast his suicide, taking the fatal combination of pills. Upwards of 1,000 people watched as he slowly slipped out of consciousness. (Harvey 2008; Leonard 2008) Starting at around 3 a.m., the incident dragged on until twelve hours later when police finally showed up at the scene and turned off the camera. Reports later suggest he died at around 11 a.m. (CNN 2008) In light of this fact, one line in his suicide note stands out: “I have reached out for help so many times, and yet I believe, I was turned away because of the things I did, that it is a punishment I am willing to take, for I know that being who I am has only brought myself and others pain.”

This need for empathy marks an important aspect of why some people – particularly young people – participate in online communities. Biggs, however, was not met with empathy. As shown in Fig. 1, a number of users, even at the moment of his death, laughed off his suicide. Wendy Crane, an investigator for the local police office who read through the comment section as Biggs was performing his act, said users typed in, “oh, that's not enough to kill you” and “go ahead and do it.” (CNN 2008) Comments on the bodybuilding site where Biggs was a familiar presence were no different: “You

want to kill yourself?...Do it, do the world a favour and stop wasting our time with your mindless self-pity,” and “People who commit suicide go to hell.” (Agrell 2008; Sarno 2008) To be sure, not everyone devolved into the sinister, there were pleas for help, but they were in the minority, according to one of the few reporters to actually read parts of the full comment thread:

This record is an eerie chronicle showing the conflict among the concerned, the skeptics and the downright cruel. Those with an impulse to help remained the minority for too long: According to time stamps on the forum posts, members did not begin calling the police until nearly 10 hours after Biggs had reported taking the pills. (Sarno 2008)

Skeptics may be the silent majority. Several news accounts quoted users who did nothing out of disbelief, conditioned the preponderance of spectacles and the lack of authenticity in online video and chat:⁵ “I watched the video over and over again and talked with a popular guy on Justin.tv about this and we were thinking it's fake . . . but after the video on Justin.tv got deleted I started to think maybe he did kill himself.” (Lillington 2008)

This is the web’s age-old problem. The ability of users to lie, a rare at the time but constant possibility, problematizes the idea of mutual equality and shared purpose: “but the authenticity of human relationships is always in question in cyberspace, because of the masking and distancing of the medium, in a way that it is not in question in real life.” (Rheingold 147)

I am recounting this traumatizing experience to provide a grounded image of what happens when a bounded space, Bigg’s Justin.tv channel and the site in general, suddenly loses its internal coherence, its constructed boundaries, and its openness is revealed. It is significant that Biggs linked from Bodybuilding.com, a presumed connection to a

⁵ Lonelygirl15 is the prime example and the touchstone for these arguments, in which viewers assumed a young girl vlogging on YouTube was authentic, when she was actually an actress. See Christian 2009.

subculture to Justin.tv: he had some notion of an audience, if not of peers, then of like-minded or generally sympathetic individuals. The New York Times reported Biggs, in one post, wrote the forum had “become like a family to me.” (Stelter 2008) It is also significant that thousands of onlookers did nothing, encouraged Biggs or talked amongst themselves – “People who commit suicide go to hell” – on a site built as much on two-way communication – Rheingold’s “pleasure of making conversation” – as on spectacle and voyeurism. The site’s management, admittedly doing damage control, consistently referred to Justin.tv as a community, as did the press (Western Mail 2008; Harvey 2008; Whitworth 2008) Yet the presence of “trolls” – non-participants and non-regulars – were occasionally blamed for doing little to stop the incident. (Evitt 2008) Trolls, a common term in web discourse, are hidden and different; they are outside the community. Labeling them is a way to define the space and place arbitrary boundaries around it.

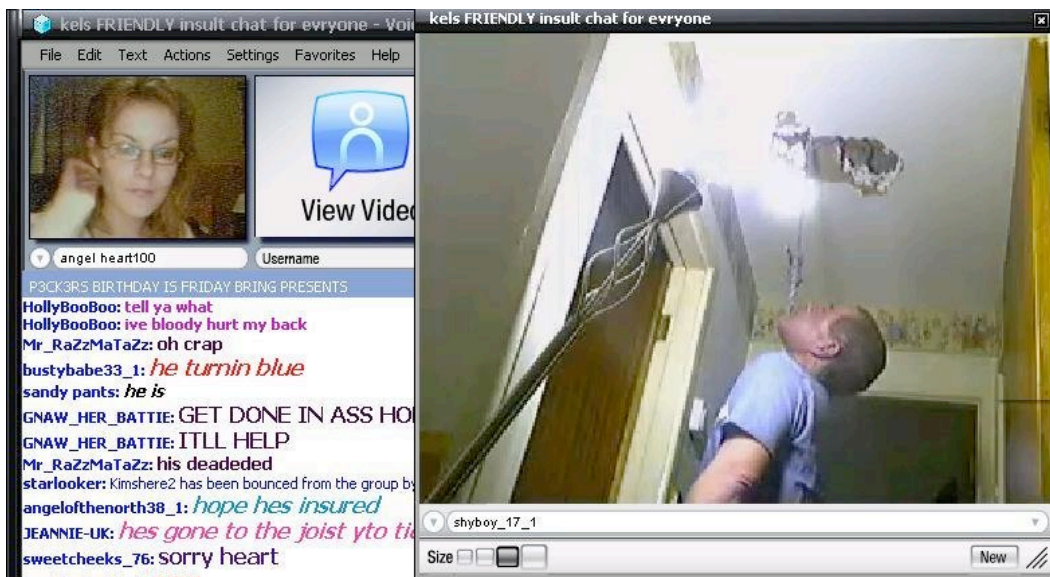


Figure 2 Kevin Whitrick was also encouraged to hang himself live on video chat site PalTalk.

I should be clear: the point of this analysis is not to support argument claiming the web is an inherently vicious place of anonymous haters. I am not trafficking in the

pessimistic and narrow-minded arguments made by Andrew Keen, who said of Biggs' suicide:

...[It] does reveal the anomie, cruelty and narcissism that characterises much of the web. With or without the internet, Biggs was clearly a troubled young man fixated with taking his own life. But the existence of [Justin] Kam's always-on platform [Justin.tv] provided an ideally soulless environment for him to publicly act out his final moments. (Keen 2008)

There is nothing inherently soulless about the Internet. In fact the vast majority of online interactions are at the very least civil, if not outright loving. The recent intervention of actress Demi Moore in the attempted suicide of one of her Twitter followers shows how the Biggs incident could have gone differently. (Duke 2009) However, what interests me about Biggs' and other cases is how much they reveal about how individuals construct their relationships online and the expectations outsiders and participants place on online interaction. The expectation of a bounded conversation among people of shared interests is not an unreasonable one. Indeed, many news reports recounted the efforts of a man in India trying to contact the police. (Stelter 2008) The fascinating aspect of his story was, while he eventually managed to call the police himself, his plea to those on the site to call for help "was met with cynical replies declining to intervene on account of his 'troll status.'" (Cashmore 2008) He, looking to help, was an outsider, while the presumed insiders – a part of Justin.tv's community – were doing nothing. Yet this is, once again, not an indictment on web 2.0 in general. During the incident, Biggs' friends reportedly tried to contact him via MySpace, where after his death, RIP messages were tastefully posted. (Agrell 2008; Harvey 2008; Leonard 2008; Madkour 2008) So any accounts of online malice, such as a similar incident involving British man Kevin Whitrick, who

hung himself on live on PalTalk, and websites dedicated to suicide, need to be contextualized as spurious, out of the norm. (Macintyre 2008; Bourke 2008)

Yet exceptions are revealing. They reveal the assumptions that go unnoticed in everyday life. One interesting aspect of the coverage of Justin.tv is focus on the “unreal” quality of Biggs’ suicide. The *Times* referenced the “virtual nature of the community” breeding ambivalence and noting that if it were a person about to jump from a building, someone would have called 911. (Stelter 2008) This reference to an online community was pervasive, yet uttered without critique. Is the crowd surrounding the would-be jumper part of their community? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Yet the bounded space of Justin.tv, with its necessary shared codes – formatting – and practices, was. *The Hollywood Reporter* remarked that the onlookers were absolved from prosecution because of the preponderance of “hoaxes” online, while *The Gazette* mentioned the existence of fake suicides. (*Hollywood Reporter* 2008; *The Gazette* 2008) In the face of such confusion over reality, solutions beyond simply extolling “universal community” are impossible:

...[I]t is incumbent on Internet community providers of all kinds to ... instill a greater sense of moral accountability among its customers without getting heavy-handed. It's high time for pro-social initiatives that remind Internet users to retain a shred of humanity in their online interactions... (*Hollywood Reporter* 2008)

Instead of reinforcing slippery notions of community and filial networks, Internet sites could instead focus on knowing one’s networks, implementing tools for users to create tangible boundaries over their content (privacy functions, etc.) so the network of users surrounding them are more concrete. But an assumption of an already in-place community bars such discussions from occurring. The need for media and users to fall back on such notions is clear; Castells provides a useful framework for understanding

why. These dynamics and motives should be equally clear to sociologists and ethnographers who seek to study such spaces.

CALLS FOR SILENCE



Figure 3 Crystal, 16, turned to YouTube as a outlet for remorse over her court case and was met with abuse.

Overt signs of despair are rare on YouTube. When they do arise, they have been known to go viral, quickly becoming a spectacle. The “vitriol” endured by Chris Crocker’s crying plea for Britney Spears is the classic example on the site. (Popkin 2008)

Crystal, a 16 year-old from Orange County, Florida, entered this history when in early



Figure 4 The logo on Crystal's MySpace page, myspace.com/acryforhelp08.

May of 2008 she posted a YouTube video⁶ decrying the Florida state’s attorney’s dismissal of her case against Casey Mundling, 23, who she claims in the video raped and drugged her.⁷ “It’s the only way I know that’s going to work, that somebody out there

⁶ Soon after CNN published a story on her, the video raked in some hundreds of thousands of hits and was soon taken down.

⁷ The details of the case and the veracity of her claims are beyond the scope of this paper. Needless to say, documents on the case suggest she once said the relationship was consensual, though Mundling was using drugs and evidently abusive to her and her family. Documents also show Crystal had tried to commit

in the world's going to listen to me," Crystal says in the video. "I'm tired of Florida treating me this way...I have rights." She says she wants answers to questions why the state won't prosecute, that she fears for her life and has called both the media – including CNN's Nancy Grace – and the governor for help. The video ends with a dispirited call to action, asking YouTubers to call the state attorney's office (she posted the phone numbers, along with her case number) to demand the act on her case.

It is unclear to what degree Crystal knew what she was getting into. She was not a regular YouTuber before she posted this video, which was added one week before CNN publicized the story and the video went viral. Clearly, then, she did not already have a group of friends and subscribers on the site in place. Yet there are signs she assumed she would mostly here encouragement and support from activists. She linked to a MySpace page with a logo in place (Fig. 4) and a Livejournal site as well, helparapevictim.livejournal.com. Her YouTube channel as well was a call to activism – youtube.com/helparapevictim. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green theorize that the vlog – the style of video Crystal produced – is a necessary social genre: "Indeed, one of the basic communicative functions of the vlog entry is purely phatic - it announces the social presence of the vlogger and calls into being an audience of peers who share the knowledge and experience of YouTube as a social space." (Burgess and Green 2008, 7) This "audience of peers" is at least some form of a community, a word Burgess and Green use carefully in scare quotes. Hating, the kind Crystal was subjected to, has largely been absorbed into the culture of the site: YouTubers address it in videos, even delete and

suicide sometime during their relationship. (The Smoking Gun, 2008) Sadly, fewer than 5 percent of rape cases in Florida make it to court. (Fantz 2008) Although some allege negligence on the part of the prosecutor, who, judging from Crystal's class position and age (almost, but not, 16), decided she had "got what she deserved." (Dodai 2008)

ban users and has become a particularly important tool for minorities. (Christian 2009b; Christian 2009c): “To an extent, the communicative practices of the ‘haters’ have already become normalised in the cultural system of YouTube...but the community finds its own ways of contesting and shaping them.” (Burgess and Green 2008, 13) But these practices are normalized only for regular users aware of the porous boundaries surrounding their participation.

For users like Crystal, who interject themselves into sites like YouTube assuming to find some kind of community bounded by shared values, the results can be rather startling. Within hours of her story appearing on CNN.com’s front page, Crystal was flooded with thousands of comments. The earliest comments on the page, likely posted before the CNN story, were generally constructive, providing legal advice and emotional



Figure 5 User "Medvedev" mocked Crystal by miming tears.

support. As the thread continued, however, users posted streams of rather offensive material: “I bet you were bad in the sack;” “You are an evil liar. You suck;” “Ha! This is so fucking funny;” “of course is fake! lying cunt, cumbucket;” “5 bucks sez that she really enjoyed it up the butt;” “ill rape u bitch

!” As is clear, the same issues of authenticity – real vs. fake – arose in this comment section, laced with harsh misogyny. Support was offered: “Anonymity can either bring the worst or the best out of Human Beings,” one person said; another urged her to close down comments for her own emotional safety (an option that, as a irregular user, she

either was unaware of or unwilling to do). While it would be hard to say the majority of comments were abusive, a substantial portion was. Here, even the argument that anonymity breeds hatred did not hold water. In video responses a few users were willing to show their faces and mock Crystal (Fig. 5): Clementi69 told her to “enjoy her AIDS;” and BiznessMan dressed up in drag with fake boobs and mockingly recited her video back to her; MasticatorDeelux said “what you have here is a real life version of buyer’s



Figure 6 User "itsmeimdarapist" created an account specifically to cut this video attacking Crystal.

remorse;” Elroyelevator remade the video while pouring water over his face to simulate crying. Other users went to some lengths to attack her, with one, itsmeimdarapist, creating an account and cutting a short video laced with various vulgarities. (Fig. 6) The video responses were more bitter – but far fewer in number, at a couple dozen – than the text

comments, with only a few – including the only two women to respond via video – showing support and one popular vlogger on the site, AsaTheComic, cutting a video calling for the government to neuter all sex offenders. Sonicflymachine raised the question of why the media (CNN) chooses to focus on white women and not people of color.

I raise all of these reactions to show the various audiences the commenters were addressing online – this is not McAfee and RAINN’s anonymous chat rooms for survivors of rape, which is where the blog Valleywag suggested Crystal seek help. (Grant

2008) AsaTheComic is speaking to his subscribers – one way YouTube organizes community – when he posts a humorous video response to Crystal (the video appears on his channel). Sonicflymachine is speaking about social media constructs and to those interested in media politics, not the personal travails of a teenage girl. This is not the group of interlocutors Crystal sought, which is likely why she deleted the video and her channel.

Crystal's seeking of help from sympathetic ears online recalls Anderson's notion of "comradeship" in imagined communities and Rheingold's invocation of the constant process of imagining, the creation of a "groupmind." With collective action, like Riles' NGO networks, like-minded individuals seeking meaning could pressure the government into action. But YouTube, among the top five websites in the world, is not a community or a tight network of actors. Its network is vast, encompassing several groups with various shared meanings. Either the participants in Crystal's "flame war," including Crystal, were unaware of this, or they all suspended such realities for political purposes or personal gain (catharsis in writing a nasty comment). Either way, what may appear from the outside to be a conversation among individuals engaging in mutually agreed upon practices is much messier on closer inspection. There are hidden agendas (AsaTheComic wants video views because he gets part of the advertising revenue) and misunderstandings (we do not know whether Crystal knew how to shut off the comments). What, in the end, is YouTube? These controversies reveal competing ideas about what YouTube is for - a platform for communities of practice; a medium for weird, wonderful, and trashy vernacular video; a platform for the distribution of branded and 'Big Media' entertainment." (Burgess and Green, 8) There are many other things

YouTube is for, and even in the same place on the site, on the same page, these competing interests can be at work.

What made Crystal enter the network, or, what she thought of as a community that could help her? Castells' theory fits well again. The government, specifically the state's legal institution, had failed her and the institutions meant as a corrective – the governor, the media – were not responsive. She made a drastic move: “Revealing her face, her location, her IP address as a rape survivor may seem scary. But in this case, it made more sense than trusting offline law.” (Grant 2008) She turned to what she thought was a community and instead encountered the network.



Figure 7 A screenshot of the site "unclebobism," where various individuals posted hateful comments and photos about the tech blogger.

CALLS FOR BLOOD

Kathy Sierra herself could not pinpoint exactly what started the swarm of malice she felt threatened her life and disrupted her professional practice. Sierra, whose blog “Creating Passionate Users” focuses on how software developers can better their products and user experience, suspects her upbeat focus on the economics

of the Internet is the source of the hatred.⁸ (BBC News 2007) Yet the reasons quickly became irrelevant. In March 2007, Sierra's blog was flooded with comments such as "fuck off you boring slut ... i hope someone slits your throat and cums down your gob." (Walsh 2007) She cancelled her scheduled appearance at a tech conference and holed up in house (users had published her address). It was one of the first, most notable instances where the web 2.0 bubble burst and its seamier insides revealed.

What is most interesting about the Sierra affair is that the discourses around online "community" seen in the prior two cases were not as prevalent. Few cultural critics and bloggers assumed Sierra's blog was the center of some online community. This is partially because Sierra early on identified a small group of very specific individuals (detailed in her post on the topic; Sierra 2007) as possible instigators of the hatred. Yet, while she knew a "community" had not been violated, she did reference a "culture" of blogging gone terribly awry:

I do not want to be part of a culture--the Blogosphere--where this is considered acceptable. Where the price for being a blogger is kevlar-coated skin and daughters who are tough enough to not have their 'widdy biddy sensibilities offended' when they see their own mother Photoshopped into nothing more than an objectified sexual orifice, possibly suffocated as part of some sexual fetish. [Fig. 7] (Sierra 2007)

Her analogy is interesting here. Sierra references the "blogosphere" as if it were a society (a "culture"); her family is a smaller unit of it. Sierra, already a heavy user online, seems to take as given a lack of a "community" per se online, that weaker ties are inevitable, but she still believes in codes of conduct and rules of practice, central tenets of what communities are.

⁸ "These people are interested in rage and they think that if you aren't enraged then you are part of the problem. It seems that they hate my optimism. They think I am poisoning peoples' minds with my positive outlook."

Yet for Sierra, these rules are universal, or near-universal. Indeed, the most interesting aspect of the Sierra incident was not the act itself, but the widespread debate it fostered over the ethics of participating in conversation online – the kind of conversation that in the early days of the net, Rheingold’s virtual community, with its limited number of early adopters, was less problematic: “The online ‘community’ is fragmented and shares fewer background assumptions in comparison to older pre-Internet fan cultures, which were transmitted person-to-person and thus had more cohesion and more ability to enforce behavioral norms.” (Tushnet 2007, 140) Sierra’s situation was thus met by calls to recreate the more communal aspects of early web culture. Joan Walsh, Salon.com’s editor at the time, promised tougher regulation of serial haters. (Walsh 2007) One blogger told the BBC each blog should have a code of conduct for its users. Robert Scoble, friend of Sierra’s, suggested a one-week hiatus from blogging to discuss solutions: “The Internet culture is really disgusting... We have to fix this culture.” (Scoble 2007) Finally, the most publicized result of the incident was Tim O’Reilly’s – another Sierra friend – call for a blogger’s “code of conduct,” a set of minor measures – consider eliminating anonymity, ignore trolls, label your tolerance level – that nonetheless rested on the optimistic assumption that there was one “Internet culture,” rather than “cultures” mapped across various networks. O’Reilly told the BBC: “The fact that there’s all these really messed-up people on the internet is not a statement about the internet.” (BBC News 2007) Here we see Anderson’s citation of “othering” as a process by which people create community: in order to preserve a notion of one Internet culture, O’Reilly labels haters as “all these really messed-up people,” something echoed by others, including a

call to distribute icons proclaiming a website was a “ZERO Violence blog.” (Brandcurve 2007)

No blog exists in a vacuum. Indeed, many of the harshest attacks against Sierra occurred outside the space of her blog: in her email and on two independent sites, meankids.org and unclerbobism.wordpress.com. Skeptics of the code of conduct echoed arguments about free trade about globalization, that regulation would stifle creativity and innovation, like lawyer and blogger Denise Howell: “I think anyone who enjoys any aspect of the Live Web would celebrate this fact, and agree its vitality would be impaired if the law expected or required these ordinary people to envelop themselves and their sites in elaborate legal provisos and conditions...” (BBC News 2007) Howell’s invocation of the “live web” was essentially an invocation of the network, too vast for comprehension or taming. In response to the vastness of the network, bloggers like PBS’s Andy Carvin argued for focusing on “localities:” “...talking about the importance of safe digital social networking, digital citizenship, respect for others, etc.” (Carvin 2007) Approaching verbal violence online is probably best addressed through such viral and dependent strategies – Carvin proposed people post “stopcyberbullying” on the blogs or in their code every year on March 30.

What is important to take away from Sierra’s travails, and those of Abraham Biggs and Crystal, is the notion that artificial boundaries like URLs are not adequate markers of communal affiliation online: shared histories, practices, pacing or mutual imaginings. While these cases are extreme and extremely rare, they reveal that a blogger, like a YouTuber or lifecaster, is merely an actor on a network and may or may not be

aware of that which he or she is part. Such networks escape conviction because of their vastness, but their material effects remain and permeate online spaces.

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