ADDRESSIVITY AND SOCIABILITY IN "CELTIC MEN"

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The development of a culture of communication rooted in the local and small-scale into one that operates within a much larger virtual environment raises a number of interesting issues for those studying CMC. This paper looks at the organisation of the "talk" that goes on within a newsgroup whose core was established in a Scottish island but which is now open to all UK subscribers to RumCom.

The linguistic organisation of computer-mediated communication shares many characteristics with other corpora, including conversational speech, interview talk and fiction narratives (Collot and Belmore, 1996). There is little doubt that while CMC draws upon and hybridises other forms of communication it is culturally distinct in its content and organisation. Yet there is a scarcity of research that describes the basic features of the communicative practices used in computer-mediated channels. How do participants recognise and maintain agreed structures of communicative exchanges? What methods of self-presentation are employed during these exchanges? As Baym (1995: 29) points out, there has been a tendency in studies of Internet culture to focus on the more outstanding or spectacular incidents of communication and interaction, such as "sexual harassment, gender-switching, electronic cads who break women's hearts, flaming and other abuses." What this leaves unexamined is the communicative and interactional processes through which harassment, flaming, gender-switching and the rest are done. In our case, we are interested in the methods through which sociability is accomplished in an ISP 'local' newsgroup.

This paper is part of a larger project which examines the sociable dimensions of computer-mediated communication in local newsgroups on the Internet. This paper, however, takes as its primary data a complete thread of eighty five messages posted to RumCom's largest ISP specific newsgroup, rumcom.local. The messages share the subject header "Celtic Men" and play off contributors ideas about regional aspects of masculinity and male sexuality. As a whole they provide a good example of both a specific culturally located example of developing communication and a more general example of newsgroup CMC. Using this case as our exemplar we shall hold up for examination three matters: how the technology and software supplied by

RumCom influence the form of interaction within the newsgroup; how different types of addressivity are used by posters to manage their communication; and how the notion of sociability figures as a useful device to characterise the specific traits of newsgroup interaction.

Technological Influence

RumCom provides for its subscribers' use its own proprietary off-line reader that dials into the ISP and downloads compressed news and mail packets. This is a significant consideration as online telephone costs in Britain vary between approximately one and four pence per minute depending on the time of the call. Typically, subscribers will dial into the server, get online, download their messages to their own computer and then go offline while they deal with them. By its asynchronous nature it is not possible for contributors to a newsgroup thread such as "Celtic Men" to interrupt another speaker's turn as it would be in face-to-face interaction.[1] Each poster is able to compose their contribution to the developing thread offline before posting their entire turn in its complete form. This also has the effect that the paralinguistic contributions made by a listener in face-to-face interaction are absent from the interaction that takes place within the newsgroup. The readers of any one post (whether they be actively involved in the developing thread of non-posting "lurkers") are not required, and indeed cannot, demonstrate involvement in the interaction by nodding, smiling or using phatic phrases such as, "uhm," "yes," or "I see."

This "passive" or "inactive" cast of this part of the communicative exchange contrasts with what is generally acceptable in face-to-face talk.[2] Perhaps the most noticeable feature is that individuals simply seem to drop out of the interaction. More precisely, the communicative form itself includes a 'latent' phase (cf Goffman, 1983: 3) that is standard and allowable. Should a thread lose interest for a reader for whatever reason, the reader can simply just stop reading the thread of contributions by particular posters. There is no need for the reader to excuse himself or herself as they would have to in face-to-face interaction nor face any later ramifications for such an unannounced exit from the interaction. Unlike face-to-face interaction "time out" from communicative demands is permissible. The non-sanctionable character of these absences is, within some general limits, made possible by the nature of the technology and associated economic constraints.

[1] In this way it is similar to the synchronous CMC discussed by Werry (1996) in his exploration of Internet Relay Chat.

[2] This is not to say that interaction in newsgroups is itself passive. Downloading, reading posts in the newsgroup are all active roles regardless of whether one chooses to post or chooses to remain lurking.

Addressivity

Since postings are asynchronous and because threads develop in virtual space rather than a shared physical space it becomes necessary for posters to recognise, orient to and negotiate what we shall call a layered organisation of addressivity. By this we mean that both posters and readers demonstrate an ongoing and self-maintained awareness of the implications of addressing persons within a posting. They recognise who is being addressed in any posting (i.e. who a specific part of a posting is "to"); who the message may refer to (either implicitly or explicitly); and the difference in posting messages addressed to individuals, groups, or the entire readership of the thread.

Thus, addressivity is an important area of concern in computer-mediated interaction. Newsgroup postings have developed practical methods to indicate who is undertaking focused interaction with whom in the absence of the usual embodied cues that are apparent in face to face interaction. Instead, a range of addressivity techniques are employed which seek to make messages more inferentially rich. These techniques fall into the following categories:

- *Specific*, i.e. to a named individual.

    ```
    Xref: rumcom.co.uk rumcom.local:94443

    Hello Robin,

    > Oh come on Fifi, grow up!

    Well, I'll be celebrating my fortieth birthday shortly.
    ```

- *Thread specific*, i.e. to all readers of a thread.

    ```
    Xref: rumcom.co.uk rumcom.local:93281

    Dunno about the rest of Britain, but I can say that Scotsmen
    are definitely a breed unto themselves! Absolutely sexy,
    passionate, willing and fun - as well as deep, understanding
    and very, very warm and loving. Well, my Scotsman is,
    anyway! : ) (Much better than any American man I've
    known...)
    ```

- *Non-specific*, i.e. a posting to all potential readers of a list or lists. As suggested by the example below these are most often found either at the beginning of a thread of as an isolated posting.

    ```
    Xref: rumcom.co.uk rumcom.local:93243

    Are Celtic men a breed apart? How do they differ from the
    men beyond the Welsh border heading towards London?
    ```

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My mother said the Welsh are deep and brooding silent types.
Rather like Heathcliffe!
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- *Mis-addressed*, i.e. postings which are posted to a thread or newsgroup in error or as a spam such as this inappropriate advertisement for a pornographic web site posted to alt.binaries.missing-adults:

Xref: rumcom.co.uk alt.binaries.missing-adults:2235

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Over 70 Categories and growing.. 2 Absolutely FREE samples
in each category plus links to more porn then you can ever
shake your dick at !!! special offer
http://freepornpages.com/cgi-bin/receive?news
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- *Non-addressed*, i.e. a "me too" posting to a troll or dead thread. An example of this would be a posting from a newbie to one of the "Free Warez" (pirated software) or "Free Porn" threads which feature in a number of the alt.* newsgroups. Except for the first posting which claims to be building a list of recipients for the free goods/passwords/pictures these threads are made up almost entirely from people postings "me too" to a request to be added to the list. As these list get longer the original posting is deleted from news servers and the "me too" posting which follow it are effectively addressed to no one and read similarly.

Xref: rumcom.co.uk alt.2600.warez:65668

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>Please add me too ubatchelor@hotmail.com
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Please add me too
delcastillo@earthcorp.com
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As the origins of these illustrative extracts suggest as we descend towards the bottom the list of forms of addressivity their presence within the Celtic Men thread decreases. This is due in part to the intimacy and sense of community maintenance that is associated with a rise along the above list.

With detailed reference to the development of the Celtic Men thread our research explores the use of addressivity techniques to secure differing 'footings' (Goffman, 1981). Footing refers to the 'alignment we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance' (Goffman, 1981: 128). We show the relevance of this concept for an analysis of the message-by-message constitution of a thread.

Given the virtual nature of newsgroup interaction, that all these categories must be constructed, recognised and responded to only through cues and

integrated into the text of the posting themselves.[3] Like the radio DJ, there is often no way in which a poster can know who or how many people they may be addressing through a single posting or how that may vary through a series of such. Similarly, even when addressivity is highly specific and posting are directed at a single reader of the newsgroup there is not, in general, a knowledge or relationship prior to or beyond the virtual familiarity that the addresser and addressee have.

It is at this point that the "Celtic Men" thread becomes a particularly useful working example as posting on rumcom.local are, at times, an interesting counterpoint to this general state. Because the ISP has its roots in a scottish sland there is still an unusually high amount of people subscribed to RumCom who live in this remote area. These people have often known each other before moving online and this pretextual knowledge is often highlighted in their postings. Therefore, "real life" relationships are singled out as separate and distinct from online ones.

Sociability

It is central what goes on in many newsgroups in general but rumcom.local in particular that the interaction and communication is sociable in Simmelian (1950) terms. That is it "has no ulterior end, no content and no result outside itself." Unlike business e-mails, task orientated CMC projects or web-based learning the main reason for involvement in the rumcom.local interaction is the pleasure that the interaction itself promotes. Not only do the threads in the newsgroup often taken on and playful, humorous and flirtatious complexion but even when arguments and heated debates occur they act as "The lively exchange of speech [which] unfolds it attractions" (Simmel, 1950). In short, "people become involved because they want, not because they have to" (Baym, 1995: 31).

The issue our research explores is how the organisation of CMC permits the posters of these messages to present themselves as agents with distinct identities and personas and how this is achieved within the frame of sociable interaction.

Although this mixture of physical acquaintance and virtual familiarity would suggest that there is a little need for individuals to "flesh out" their off-line identities in postings the Celtic Men thread demonstrate poster desires to paint physical pictures of themselves. Messages include individual allusions not only to broad physical attributes such as hair colour, body size or age but also more

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[3] It may be useful to delineate recognition of the organisation of addressivity as a general concept which is acquired through and applicable to newsgroups as a general interactional phenomenon and the specific encoding and recognition as a pragmatic example of specific communication within individual postings.

intimate revelations such as marital status, names of children and even experience of one night stands. Further, the thread, and postings to the newsgroup in general, demonstrate that as certain individuals post more often (and write more consecutive postings) to the newsgroup they become "known" and recognised by other readers and posters.

From an interactional perspective, the offering of such pieces of information suggests that a community-like environment is being maintained in which not only does the organisation of the CMC facilitate the ongoing talk but a sense of trust is being offered and accepted by those involved. Much of this exchange of information is done within a sociability frame (the 'thresholds' [Simmel, 1950] of which are eventually exceeded, which quickly leads to the termination of thread). Like the "sociable arguments" explored by Schiffrin (1984) the thread terminates unpredictable and "without speakers realigned toward a previously disputed issue." Further, because of the sociable nature of such debates there is no evidence that this failure to reconcile viewpoints carries with it any negative consequences and indeed appears to help build and maintain the community culture within shetlandcom.local and emphasis the closeness of the participants in that community.[4]

The manner in which addressivity (who talks to whom) and (self-) disclosure (what they say about whom) manifest themselves makes this form of CMC a specific form of interaction and marks the interaction as temporally and culturally specific site for the negotiation of identity.

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[4] Indeed, subscribers to shetlandcom.local often arrange "meets" in different parts of Britain. These are fully participated in by both contentious and non-contentious posters.