

# Ritual Aspects of CMC Sociability

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Cite as: Rutter, J. & Smith, G.W.H., 1999. "Ritual Aspects of CMC Sociability", *Ethnographic Studies in Real and Virtual Environments: Inhabited Information Spaces and Connected Communities*, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh.

## Abstract

This paper explores a set of resources for the investigation of newsgroup postings. It suggests that there is considerable potential in using sociological analyses of sociability and social interaction (and in particular the work of Goffman) for this task. After brief overview of our working concepts the paper looks at thread organisation and content, focusing on four areas: terms and techniques of address; broadcast requests; playful recontextualisation; and sociability thresholds. It concludes that the enactment of netiquette is a complex phenomenon deeply linked to the development of a sense of community.

## Introduction

Information is one of the key terms of cyberculture. We are coming to live in what Castells (1996, 1997, 1998) calls the information age. The new information and communication technologies (ICTs) afford the prospect of information that is more reliable, more accessible, more comprehensive, more subject to scrutiny and analysis than ever before. The handling of information by human agents raises contentious issues concerning its availability and disclosure: who is offering information; what is the nature of the information is; by whom is it consumed? Some of these issues crystallise as standards that are enshrined in law in forms such as the Data Protection Act and, the Obscene Publications Act in the UK, others distil into the routinely taken for granted beliefs and practices of particular virtual communities. This paper examines the latter in one thriving virtual community based on the newsgroup "RumCom.local".

Calling on a corpus of over 900 threads (approximately 17,000 messages), questionnaires and both face-to-face and virtual interviews, our paper examines the construction of newsgroup sociability. We focus on the production of congenial discourse and the communication of fellow feeling in RumCom.local. We argue that contrary to the assumption often made by research that has explored CMC within a conference, task or CSCW context, the interaction in newsgroups such as RumCom.local is not orientated towards a goal or generating information. Threads move away from the exchange of facts and data towards a Simmelian notion of sociability in which interaction takes priority over transaction. As Baym (1995) points out of a similar newsgroup, the primary reason why people remain involved in a virtual community is essentially for its fun and recreational dimensions. Our purpose in this paper is to propose some conceptual resources for the investigation of newsgroup messages grounded in sociological analyses of sociability and social interaction. In particular we suggest that Erving Goffman's sociology of the interaction order has considerable potential as a framework for the analysis of newsgroup sociability.

## Limitations of task orientated models for exploring ritual sociability

Our broad argument in this paper runs contrary the trend evident in much work previously undertaken into CMC and computer-supported co-operative work (CSCW) which takes a predominantly instrumental of human action. Our main objection to this route of enquiry given our current project is that the model assumes a shared object or goal motivates and organises CMC. We shall show the sociability displayed in the RumCom newsgroup fails to manifest these characteristics.

CSCW or groupware environments often appear at the centre of CMC research for a number of possible reasons: they appear to be a "practical" manifestation of CMC; they are profoundly sociable in character and, further, are culturally influenced. CSCW environments are readily amenable to an established natural scientific methodology of experiment, analysis and evaluation. Such studies provide concrete results which can either be integrated into proposed development plans (e.g. the airline booking systems explored by Wooffitt *et al.* 1997) or used to provide policy or good practice recommendations (e.g. Colomb and Simutis, 1996) on CMC's potential role in teaching writing). Such a pragmatic approach is often visible both in the research focus itself and its choice of research subjects and methodology.

Part of this paper's argument is that the studies of task motivated situations do not correspond with the conduct found in the corpus examined within our work. For example, even threads that appear puzzle-solution motivated, such as requests for information, are far less singly motivated. Discussion rapidly moves from the apparent task in hand to the greater venture of diffused and ritualised sociability. There is a recurrent and largely accepted tendency for threads to "go off topic within a few posts" although for a substantial portion of posters this is seen as one of the attractions of RumCom.local. (What does appear to be more negatively valued is the common practice of trivialising a topic by "making a joke about everything in every thread"). Indeed, when asked in interview, regular contributors to RumCom.local find it difficult to recall much about the threads that they have taken part in: the ambience of participation appears to occlude recollection of its precise content.

Something far more important than the exchange of information must be motivating participants to invest such large amounts of time and energy in participating in the RumCom community. While there *is* exchange of information -- anything from cooking recipes to the precise location of obscure towns in Denmark RumCom.local does not exist primarily for such exchange. We suggest that a useful framework for understanding the role of information in sociable exchanges is provided by the tradition of studies of sociability established by Simmel and by Goffman's sociology of the interaction order.

## **Sociability Studies**

In sociology, the study of sociability begins with Georg Simmel's classic essay of 1911 (Eng. trans. Simmel 1949). For Simmel sociability was a distinct social form that distilled "out of the realities of social life the pure essence of association, of the associative process as a value and a satisfaction" (Simmel 1949: 255). Sociability extracts the serious substance of life leaving only "togetherness", the sheer pleasure of the company of others; as such it is the "play-form of association" (*ibid.*). The individual is bound to others in sociability by "nothing but the capacities, attractions and interests of pure humanity" (Simmel 1949: 256). Simmel speaks of a "sociability threshold" which has upper and lower limits. On the one hand, during sociability the individual is required to hold at bay objective differences of status, knowledgeability, skill and so on. On the other hand the individual must not allow personal moods and fates, "the light and shadow of one's inner life", to enter sociable dealings with others. Sociability thus generates an artificial but democratic world in which "the pleasure of the individual is always contingent upon the joy of others"(Simmel 1949: 257). Freed of connection with the serious contents of life, sociability is truly a "social game" an end in itself.

Simmel's analysis ends on a dual note: sociability is not only an artificial world cut off from the weighty matters of life, it is a superficial world, a "flight from life". Yet it is a most attractive world, even to the serious and thoughtful, for in it 'we construct and experience the meaning and force of [life's] deepest reality but without the reality itself' (Simmel 1949: 261). In sociability form becomes autonomous, disconnected from content: people talk simply for the sake of talking. Simmel's approach distinguishes the very general social bases of sociability. Simmel's specification of the conditions of sociable interaction differs from psychological approaches. Psychological studies often define sociability as the willingness to interact with others (there is a clear continuity with dictionary notions of sociability as being 'friendly' or 'affable') (Gifford 1980). Simmel's general approach, however, recommends the close study of the interactional characteristics of sociable conduct (see also Watson 1958), not the personality characteristics of sociable individuals. It thus represents an apposite starting point for the analysis of newsgroup sociability.

## Goffman, Information and Ritual in Interaction

Underlying the apparent diversity of Goffman's published work is a set of assumptions about the nature of interaction. To begin with, people usually want to engage in interaction that runs smoothly and is comfortable to all involved. This desired state of interaction contrasts with those states in which participants feel self-conscious, flustered, awkward or embarrassed (1953:243-247; 1961:44-45). It is this possibility which, in Goffman's famous epigram, makes interaction a "gamble". Uncomfortable situations can only be held at bay by people "working" to maintain the tone of the encounter. In other words, they must possess certain interactional skills and use them appropriately.

In examining the flow of information in encounters, Goffman repeatedly emphasises our capacity to design and control our interactional activity. This idea of "impression management" suggests that people present the impression of themselves that they wish others to receive in an attempt to control how those others see them. This emphasis has given rise to the common complaint that Goffman's view of human nature is thoroughly "Machiavellian" - that he sees people as entirely manipulative, egotistical and cynical beings. Although not without foundation, this interpretation concentrates on only one side of Goffman's thinking about interaction, the informational side. There is another side, centring on Durkheim's notion of ritual, which articulates the various kinds of care and respect (or their opposites: disregard and contempt) that we extend to others. This side presents a very different picture of human nature.

Here Goffman borrows some of Durkheim's ideas about the social character of religious behaviour and proposes that they can shed light on certain aspects of face-to-face interaction. Durkheim's thinking about religious ritual is extended to the interactional sphere. Thus, Goffman argues that it is through a multitude of minor acts - addressing someone as "Mr" or "Mrs", fetching a chair for a guest, apologising for late arrival - we show our respect and regard for the feelings of others and the beliefs we hold about the proper treatment of those others. These minor acts can be seen as "interaction rituals" through which we affirm the proper character of our relationship to others. Correspondingly, if we wish to snub or insult others, we do so through the self-same medium of these interaction rituals. Attention to the ritual dimension of interaction leads Goffman (1955) to propose two very basic social rules. For mutually satisfactory interaction to take place, persons must follow a rule of self-respect (they must conduct themselves in a way that shows some pride, dignity and honour) and a rule of considerateness (they must treat others tactfully).

Ritual considerations may impinge on impression management. Goffman maintains that our self-presentations have a moral character. That is to say, when we present ourselves in a certain way (e.g. as students), then we have a moral right to expect others (e.g. teachers) to treat us in that way. Rights and duties are part of how we present ourselves to others and their treatment of us. Thus, Goffman shows that moral obligations are built right into the detail of interaction. Morality is not something that is diffusely located in "society" but is rather mediated and renewed in everyday social encounters.

The ritual element of interaction is very clearly to the fore in some of Goffman's mid-fifties work ("On face-work" [1955]; "The nature of deference and demeanor"[1956]). In a manner reminiscent of Durkheim's "Individualism and the intellectuals" (1969), Goffman writes, "...this secular world is not so irreligious as we might think. Many gods have been done away with, but the individual himself stubbornly remains as a deity of considerable importance." (1956:499) Attention to the ritual dimension in interaction leads to a contrasting image of human nature to that of the cynical gamesman: individuals are seen as little islands of sacredness. Moreover, attention to the ritual dimension also leads to a general conception of interactional process as involving the tactful collaboration of the parties to the encounter rather than individualist strategising.

There are two root images of the individual to be found in Goffman's sociology: the potentially manipulative, egoistic games-player and the little god who is due deference and displays of considerateness. These images derive from the two major constraints on face-to-face interaction, informational and ritual. Informational constraints concern the expression and control of information given and given off. They are ultimately determined by the limits of the physical capacities of the human body and thus admit the possibility of pancultural formulations (the "system constraints" of Goffman 1981). Ritual constraints concern the interactional expression and control of one's own feelings and those of others. Of course, standards of respect etc. are enormously culturally variable, although certain universals of politeness behaviour have been postulated (see Brown and Levinson, 1987). With certain modifications, these premises about interaction are also relevant to CMC.

Unlike Goffman's face-to-face interaction, text is the basic tool which organises and facilitates the transaction of information in newsgroups such as RumCom.local. The asynchronous exchange of ASCII postings allow for interaction which can appear more basic and less rich than face-to-face forms and biased towards information rather than sensation. Noting this it is tempting to rapidly reach the over-excited mode that Jones (1995) warns us about, where we convince ourselves "that more information is desirable and better" (p.28). However, what we want to suggest is that to focus on the method of communication rather than the nature of the interaction itself serves only to fetishise the technology and lose sight of the people involved. We can surmise that the interrelation informational and ritual dimensions of interaction means that exchanges between participants in CMC will be styled and shaped in ways that are cognisant of the moral dimensions of human personhood.

## Organisation of Threads in RumCom.local

Perhaps the most basic organisational feature of the interaction that goes on in newsgroups is the ordering of postings by their subject. A common feature of newsgroups (and e-mailing lists also) is the use of a descriptive subject or topic in the posting's header which gives some indication of what the post (and in turn, the thread) is about. This subject is then used to guide other readers' judgement as to whether to read the thread or not. This topic-focused organisation is consolidated by the software used to read newsgroups which, unlike e-mail packages, gives organisational priority not to the author but to the subject in the post's heading.<sup>1</sup> This creates boundaries in threads and lends them properties often seen by participants and observers alike as analogous to a conversation. Given this central position of the thread it is worth devoting a little time to exploring its organisation further. A basic step towards this is to consider what actually constitutes a "thread" and for how many postings threads last (i.e. thread length).

Drawing parallels with common understandings of face-to-face conversational interaction we have chosen to define a thread as three or more postings to a newsgroup by two or more people that are orientated towards a single topic. As such neither single postings that are not responded to or postings that receive only one reply can be considered threads. They can be best understood as announcements and exchanges respectively. As postings that do not attain thread status make up 254 of the total messages to RumCom.local, this means that the 1160 subjects reduce to 906 threads.

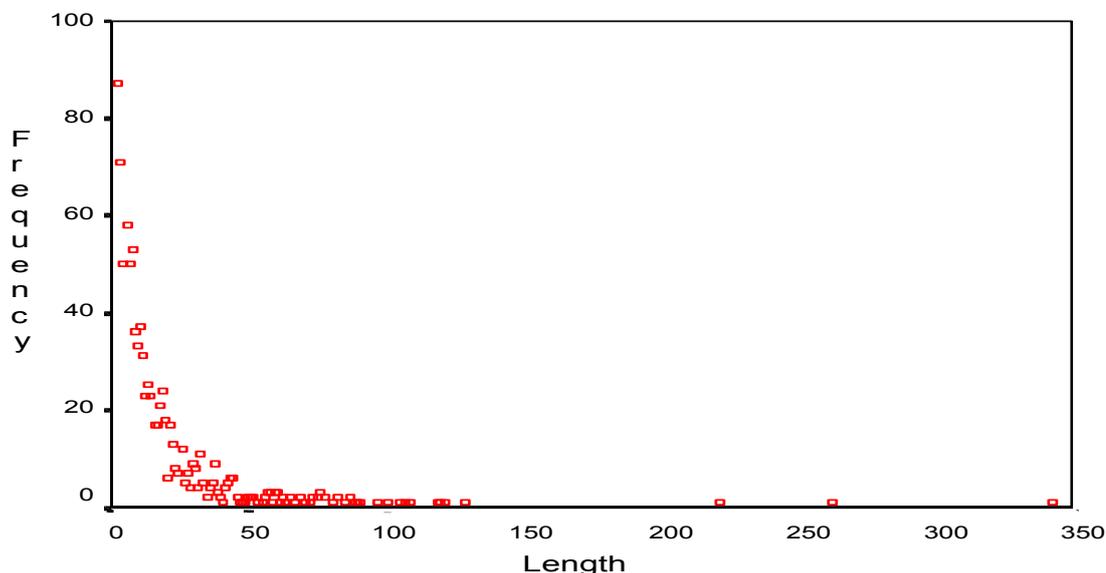


Figure 1: Threads Lengths and their Frequencies

Looking further into this organisation of threads and their length we can see (as in Figure 1) that although there is a substantial range in thread lengths (min=3; max=343; range=340) there is a tendency towards shorter threads. Over half of the threads contain between three and eleven postings. This suggests that there

<sup>1</sup> Some more sophisticated news clients such as Forte's Agent offer option to organised posts not only by subject but alternatively by author, files size or posting date. However the default remain subject orientated.

are standard thread lengths within RumCom.local and this appears to be borne out in newsgroup subscribers' everyday experience. In interview and discussion at Rum.Rendezvous message posters will often talk about long running threads. At these meetings, questions such as, "How many is XXX thread up to now?" are not uncommon and cultural capital is to be gained by having a history with .local long enough to recall past high posting threads (RumCom.local folklore has it that the longest thread, "The wages of sin", exceeded 2000 messages).

## Honouring Online Selves

Newsgroup sociability, we propose, has a significant ritual aspect. The notion of ritual draws attention to "acts through whose symbolic component the actor shows how worthy [s]he is of respect or how worthy [s]he feels others are of it" (Goffman 1955: 219). In the newsgroup context, ritual directs attention to the culture of a given newsgroup the methods through which the selves of posters are honoured.

RumCom.local has a reputation for "friendliness". In interview one poster put it this way:

... Demon dot Local, I mean you go in there, you're *[laughs]* within your first few posts you're likely to be flamed. People that come into RumCom dot Local are made welcome. You know I mean so the hand of friendship is offered there, which in other news groups quite often until you become established people will ignore you or be downright rude to you. The ethos of dot Local, you know, it's like going into your local pub, does seem to be true in that respect. . . it's just the fact that it is quite a friendly place. It's an easy place for a newbie to step into and know they're not going to be particularly flamed, unless they start typing in capitals, which I recently did to somebody and quite upset him and his mother. *[laughs]* Bad day!

The unofficial FAQ webpage welcomes readers to "the wonderful world of RumCom" and continues:

You see, that's what RumCom is -- a community, not just another ISP. Through the world of RumCom.local (although there are other RumCom based newsgroups for general discussion, RumCom.local is the most popular) people can talk; get to know each other; discuss problems, current issues and bizarre facts of life; even have heated discussions and arguments -- within limits of course <g>.

Interestingly, this page is hosted by an enthusiastic subscriber, not a member of RumCom staff. Another example of the blurring of the division between ISP staff and customers is found in RumCom's list of newsgroup definitions, which is compiled and updated by a subscriber who undertakes the task on a voluntary basis. The "friendliness" of .local extends to the ISP itself. The people who run RumCom are not remote from their customers: they are accessible at the end of the phone or an email and have attended meetings (RumRendezvous) of RumCommers. As one interviewee put it, "I don't think the ordinary punter normally could get through to the Managing Director of AOL".

These features of the culture of RumCom are tied in with its history. The company is a little over four years old. Its administrative headquarters is on a small island off the Scottish coast. A significant proportion of the ISP's early customers were people from the island who wished to support local enterprise or people from mainland Britain who were intrigued by its remote location. However, it began to grow rapidly in the mid-1990s in part due to its very competitive pricing system. For a time it held an advantageous market position because of its in-house software which allowed emails to be read offline and thus not incur expensive telephone charges. One of the developers of the software was a programmer with extensive experience of bulletin board systems. This programmer was also responsible for implementing the acceptable use policy and dealing with complaints. The assumptions informing BBS were carried forward into RumCom newsgroups through this key staff member. He was also responsible for securing closure of the newsgroups to non-RumCom subscribers. The relative seclusion of the newsgroup from the wider Internet further helped the cultivation of a friendly ethos on RumCom.local.

History, culture, seclusion and acceptable use policy all contribute to the distinctiveness and the acknowledged friendliness of RumCom.local. How is this friendliness manifested in the routine development of threads? What are the features of sociability evident at the message-by-message level?

Below we discuss four features of RumCom.local discourse that are productive of convivial sociability:

1. terms and techniques of address
2. broadcast requests
3. playful recontextualisation and a license to pun
4. the "space" for conviviality: sociability thresholds

### Terms and techniques of address

Since newsgroup 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, rituals of address are of vital importance in the organisation of online interaction. Due to this newsgroup communication has developed practical methods to indicate who is undertaking focused interaction with whom and there can be seen a range of addressivity techniques which seek to make messages more inferentially rich. Of these first-naming is the norm. The personal identification that first-naming implies, albeit that it may rest on an extremely slender basis, is an important foundation of sociability for the simple reason that "the first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to know with whom one has to deal" (Simmel 1950: 307). Sometimes first-naming can be used to mark out the recipient's specialist knowledge or expertise, as in the following posting:

As a cyclist an an ex member of the Independant Republic perhaps Elizabeth can enlighten me on reasoning behind certain local authorities and cycle lanes.

Postings are addressed to the group but specific persons may be addressed in the body of the message. Person-specific techniques of address are most common when a thread is well under way. Sometimes a salutatory form similar to a letter or telephone conversation opening is employed:

Hello Leslie,

> Oh come on Jo-Jo, grow up!

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

along with:

Great Siobhan - would say keep it up, but Wayne will just make some rude comment. <g>

Jo-Jo

and

Linda, I'm pleased to say that in that word you have passed the audition for 'Eastenders'. Now what bew role would you like?

The greeting-like character of these address terms conveys a sign of connectedness to another: it is the first part of a minimal supportive interchange (Goffman 1971) that awaits the ratification of the addressee for its completion. These salutations demonstrate a familiarity and bondedness between the parties involved. The posters are not only on first name terms but demonstrate complex knowledge of the interests, expertise, points of view, and sense of humour of each other. This specialised knowledge that subscribers to RumCom.local acquire is also interesting in that the displays of connectedness are done in public. For example, although the discussion on cycle lanes above it addressed towards Elizabeth is not done so either exclusively or in a one-to-one environment. As such the first-naming acts both as request broadcast "especially" to one person and as a display of community membership in that the posters know who to prompt for a response in the posting.

## Broadcast requests

Posters may broadcast to the newsgroup a request for advice with some problem that they are confronted with. It acts as a general call and one to which any reader of the newsgroup can elect to respond to. For example:

I'm stuck. It's my sisters birthday soon and I cannot think of a present to get for her!

Any ideas please?

She is two years younger than me (I'm 35) and lives on her own, but has been divorced longer than I. She has a boyfriend, who lives in Kent, so suggestions like 'a 33 year old boyfriend' are out.

I would like to get something a bit more original than perfume or chocolates but have not got a clue what to get.

Thanks - Don

The request led to several suggestions of appropriate gifts. Note the 'please' and 'thanks' in the initial message. The 'please' is presumably in recognition of the imposition the request may cause, the 'thanks' is in anticipation of receipt of offers of advice to be given. Similarly, the playful posting below :

does anybody know the answers to the following.

9 p in the ss

88 k on a p

13 s on the a f

54 c in a d (with j)

1001 a n

TIA

Karen<sup>2</sup>

Requests expose the requester to "denial and rejection" (Goffman 1971:114), which may be avoided by the timely supply of assistance. Compared to face-to-face situations, and given the community-like nature of RumCom.local, the exposure is greater in that all subscribers may see the request in the newsgroup. The benefit of taking the risk is that a potentially bigger pool of offers may be tendered. In making requests and responding to them in the standard way, requester and recipient are afforded an opportunity to indicate their proper relationship to the rules of the interaction order and the moral selves thus sustained.

Broadcast requests in the newsgroup cover a diverse range of issues including themes such as computer buying advice, help sourcing/remembering song lyrics, veterinary advice, medical. Members of RumCom.local see such requests for help and the responses that they receive as a vital and distinctive element of the newsgroup interaction. In interview subscribers often comment on the readiness of other RumCommers to offer support, advice and help and the contrasting experiences they have had in other newsgroups:

But generally I mean *[laughs]* most people including me, 90% of the time, will help them. *[laughs]*  
*[...]*

So I mean self-help also counts for a lot. I mean if you were to try something like that on Demon, you'd just end up getting flamed. And all you have to do to (pile) that one up is have a look at (Demon dot Wilco). *[laughs]*...

This commitment to communicating connectedness is something that RumCommers return to in interview. It is important to be able to request help and expect that such a request will be fulfilled, it is also necessary to provide social recognition of that gift of advice:

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<sup>2</sup> For the curious the answers are: 9 Planets in the Solar System; 88 Keys on a piano; 13 Stripes on the American Flag; 54 Cards in a deck (with jokers); 1001 Arabian Nights.

The only thing that disappoints is that a small minority of people that you send help to, either as a follow-up or a direct mail, don't respond. You know they don't come back and say, Oh no, that really wasn't what I wanted, or thanks very much, but they're a small minority.

An expression of thanks marks the final phase of the "remedial interchange" (Goffman 1971) that the request initiated: a gesture of regard which brings the ritual cycle to an end.

### Playful Recontextualisation and a License to Pun

The organisation of email messages allows replies to quote from previous messages. This provides for the repetition of parts or the whole of a previous message and the embedding of the reply to these messages.

This device is widely used on RumCom.local and short contextual quotation is the norm. It is relatively rare for a contribution to a thread not to include quotation from a previous message. Quotation, not subject header, is the stuff that binds messages into a thread. This is the structural precondition that permits "going off-thread": to go off-thread all a poster has to do is to devise a reply that "follows", however tangentially, to a previous message. For example the thread below makes a link between the singer Toyah's hometown, Birmingham, and the pop group Brum:

> A bloody Toyah fan as well

My Kids have a 'Brum' video somewhere. Anyone remember 'Brum'? :o)

Dave

Going off-thread is appreciated by many of the keenest posters to .local, most of whom spoke of the pleasures of finding new twists and turns in the development of a thread (one told us "threads are more like braids!") Such valuations, however, were not universal: some posters told us they considered this "poor Usenet etiquette discipline" and used terms like "inane" and "puerile" to describe the practice. A primary example of such diversion is the tendency of thread to become increasingly jokey as the progress. For example, the thread below is taken from a recollection of a popular childhood toy to a sexual punning:

>> Does anyone remember knockers from the early seventies.

Karen! Really, I was a sweet innocent lad of 10 years old in 1972!

(They were clackers!)

The pun is undoubtedly the predominant form of joking found in RunCom.local that perhaps is not surprising given the text-based nature of the interaction. However, more than this, puns are suitable for a social arena such as this newsgroup in that they are short, easily appreciated, and contextually produced. That is unlike punchline jokes they tend not to have been previously committed to memory and are produced in response to the developing thread.

>...was trying to think of a pun for rogers....maybe not.;

How about - "once JoJo and Lurne have spent a night in Stafford with Johnny, they know they'll have been well and truly Rog"..... err well perhaps not.

Greg

The spontaneous nature of this punning may be seen as a democratic form of joking but it is also important with a social interaction in that it demonstrates that those involved are "'alive' to the situation" (Schiffrin 1977: 679) There puns only make sense given that backdrop of previous posting and the accepted licence to joke that is granted in Rumcom.local. Further, the dominance of double entendre in these puns helps them to act as bonding mechanism by appealing to a common denominator.

## The "Space" for Conviviality: Sociability Thresholds

As noted above, Simmel (1949) postulates that sociability flourishes in a zone where certain orders of topic are proscribed: "personal" troubles lie below the lower threshold, "objective" differences between people and the issues they generate are located above the upper threshold.

The "relevance" of a topic to RumCom.local is one indicator of sociability thresholds: some topics were deemed inappropriate to the newsgroup. Topic relevance is initially stated by newsgroup definitions. These are updated monthly and subject to review by RumCom management. Subscribers are urged to orient their postings to an appropriate newsgroup. In particular it is worth noting the existence of the .soapbox newsgroup which is designed for "weighty" religious and political discussions. This newsgroup is, however, much less popular than .local and in fact a number of political and religious discussions do take place on .local. Many interviewees said they usually avoided participating in "heavy" threads (or threads that went off topic to become political or religious in character) and some said they deliberately avoided reading the postings of the persons they knew from previous experience to energetically propound their ideological convictions. Others felt that these discussions were instructive and said they enjoyed the lively exchanges between, for example, the newsgroup's Leninist and the right-winger who could always be counted upon to articulate an opposing view. Many people told us that if they had to select which messages to read they would select by topic and by their knowledge of posters inclined to "heavy" topics of discourse. Heavy topics exceed the sociability thresholds although it is not always clear in which direction. For some, the topics belong to an objective world of issues that are "too serious" for light discussion; for others, political and religious topics involve the expression of subjectively-held values that are best kept out of sociable discourse.

Other 'objective' matters such as occupationally-based knowledge were manifest in postings, although this information was usually presented to accredit the poster's competence or authority to answer a point raised in a thread or in ratifying their appropriateness to offer help in response to a request. Over time, regular readers become familiar with the occupational identities of posters to .local readers and may draw upon in their postings. In a few cases where posters were using work-based accounts, occupation may be apparent through their sig file. When presented, occupational information would often be volunteered indirectly ("When I worked in customs and excise..."). Most posters would only infrequently mobilise their occupational identity.

Less common were complaints about postings that contained material of a "personal" nature. One interviewee felt that the detailing of events surrounding the separation and divorce of a regular contributor to .local exceeded the bounds of newsgroup propriety. While sympathetic to the circumstances outlined, she suggested that *this* was simply not the place for such disclosures. (Nevertheless, the person concerned did receive considerable support from newsgroup members through private emails and offline support). The point the interviewee made was that online sociability should not be marred by the intrusion of such serious personal issues: it did not reflect well on the face of the poster. Postings containing very personal material seldom occur, which is testimony to the discretion that posters routinely exercise.

Within the upper and lower thresholds a wide variety of online sociability may transpire. The thresholds work to ensure that online selves are spared the embarrassment of excessive personal disclosure or the oppressive effects of manifest status difference, both of which may compromise successful sociability.

## Conclusion

In commentary on CMC the ritual concerns we have outlined above are usually characterised as matters of netiquette. The issues addressed by netiquette, we have tried to show, should not be dismissed as merely superficial or as secondary to the substantive, informational elements of CMC. Netiquette is far from "mere" and it extends beyond the stipulative lists of AUPs. We suggest that it provides a basic code and fundamental basis of the friendliness for which RumCom.local is renowned. Here our use of netiquette is twofold as it includes not only those established and accepted guidelines for computer-mediated communication such as those set out by Rinaldi (1998) but also those more subtle and local rules of interaction. These rules of netiquette codes have to be interpreted by users and implemented appropriately and these practical issues involve judgmental work that is open to disagreement and dispute by newsgroup coparticipants. This negotiation contributes not only to the sense of community found within the group but also the development of virtual boundaries around it, which mark it as separate for other internet users and newsgroups.

The information that is shared by the newsgroup is encoded within the messages and can be seen as both the means for maintaining sociable relations and as the vehicle of sociability itself. Through terms and techniques of address, broadcast requests, playful recontextualisation and an orientation to sociability thresholds individuals develop discourses of friendliness that shy away from suggesting serious consequence. We have tried to indicate some of the ways in which the practical activities of one newsgroup are suffused with ritual concerns. Further, we hope to have provided some empirical support for the claim that studies of computer-mediated communication need to be supplemented by the cognate notion of computer-mediated *interaction*. The detailing of this claim is, of course, the topic of another paper.

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