

# ***BUILDING IDENTITIES ON-LINE: THE TRANSTEXTUAL CONSTRUCTION OF AN ISP BOGEYMAN***

Jason Rutter (ESRC Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition, Harold Hankins Building, Booth Street West, Manchester M13 9QH, England. UK [Jason.Rutter@man.ac.uk](mailto:Jason.Rutter@man.ac.uk)) & Greg Smith (School of English, Sociology, Politics and Contemporary History, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT. UK [G.W.H.Smith@salford.ac.uk](mailto:G.W.H.Smith@salford.ac.uk))

*Paper presented at the Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction Couch/Stone Symposium, Tampa Florida, 2000.*

## **Abstract**

The advent of hypertext as a technology, and the active process of reading it creates, has many implications as technological processes and critical analysis blur (Landow: 1992). It is becoming increasingly implausible to accept that a text exists in isolation and without relation to other documents. Indeed, the nature of what counts as a text has changed. Nowhere is this clearer than in the rich networking of information on the Internet: texts link to and embed each other in an often fluid way and may contain not only the written word but images, sounds, speech, music, etc. This paper draws upon developments both social and literary theory, to explore the case of one particular newsgroup subscriber who comes to be constructed and presented as an outsider. It looks at the development of the triptych of characters for this person (Steve/Evil Steve/Trucker) and the manner in which his “talk” and actions eventuate in his placement on the periphery of the community and categorisation as the RumCom bogeyman. Our exploration will take in the migration of the “Trucker” character into new newsgroups and the development of “Evil Steve” web pages which archive his thoughts, writings and software pranks. Further, it draws upon interviews with newsgroup members whose narratives surrounding Steve/Evil Steve/Trucker offer further insight into the dynamics of the exclusionary process and the construction of a “destructive” identity.

In the course of an ethnographic study of a UK-based newsgroup, “RumCom.local,” we quickly became aware of the power to infuriate of one of its more controversial contributors, “Trucker.” During the five months in 1998 when we undertook our initial online fieldwork in a newsgroup (which we refer to as RumCom.local) Trucker was one of the posters who figured frequently. In this phase of intensive message gathering we found that we could trace Trucker’s energetic disputes with both RumCom management and a number of his fellow posters to .local. Further exploration allowed us to chart the public dimensions (i.e. messages on .local) of his debate

about RumCom's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP), the suspension of his account by RumCom, his subsequent reinstatement, and his eventual departure from the Internet Service Provider (ISP).

We suggest that the exchanges in which Trucker featured throw into relief important aspects of the cultural life of RumCom.local. His posts represented an extreme case that highlighted what passes as normal as he tested the standards of toleration of this particular newsgroup to the limit. Interestingly, this he did not through obscenity or profanity, not by voicing extreme or obnoxious opinions, but by constant sceptical questioning. He insisted throughout on evidence-based argument and reasonable assumptions about free speech. To this fiercely rationalist stance was coupled a sardonic and persistently ironical take on the world. Yet the very features that made his posts so distinctive - their sceptical questioning of authority and what others read as his cynicism - proved to be his undoing: Trucker left the ISP-specific group in the face of if not mounting hostility at least widespread absence of sympathy for his case and cause. However, although absent, Trucker's critical relationship with .local and RumCom continue. With a small group of sympathisers, he colonised an unoccupied newsgroup where he still posts. A prominent aspect of Trucker's current posts and websites is a thinly disguised critique of RumCom.

Trucker utilised the possibilities of hypertext and generated, edited, and published his accounts, thoughts, fiction and parodies of events surrounding his time with RumCom. His postings and multiple websites created a rich set of texts and images surrounding a creative self-publicist who was explicitly vague about his "true" identity. Indeed, for such a high profile poster to .local, he was very reticent about letting others into his offline world. Although there were often rumours to suggest otherwise, Trucker never attended any of the semi-regular gatherings held by members of .local.

These meetings, or RumRendezvous, are organised and attended by members of RumCom.local and provide opportunity to verify both the mental images that have been developed of other RumCommers and the descriptions they have offered. These offline, informal meetings (similar to those discussed by others including Kendall 1998, Turkle 1995, and Rheingold 1993) take place about four times a year in a variety of locations throughout the UK. The gatherings, which tend to be held in a pub and restaurant over a Saturday and Sunday, offer an opportunity for those who have only met online to test their assumptions face-to-face and to continue with the identity guessing game. There is a preoccupation at the RumRendezvous with the question,

“Who are you?” Those new to the gatherings will tell of trying, when entering the venue, to work out who may be a RumCommer and which of the bodies fits the particular online identity. The members of .local have learned something about the technical self and so want to find the “real life” self – and, so often, they are not that different. Those RumCommers whose online persona were markedly similar to the selves presented in the newsgroup found that the meetings afforded an opportunity to smoothly shift from the virtual to the corporeal. For Trucker such a shift was impossible – how could he possibly physically represent a character that could only be portray online within the container of three characters?

Through his absence from RumRendezvous, Trucker has avoided the threat of having to unify his textual creations (and thus far tempting him to reply to our invitations to answer our research queries has proved impossible). As he travels in various identities across the ‘net he appears to leave behind him defunct e-mail addresses and publicise bogus ones. When we tried to contact Trucker on one reliable-looking address we received the following automatically generated message:

Trucker is not interested in your product or service, and does not wish to receive any further email about it.

Thank you.<sup>1</sup>

This is not to say that Trucker was not aware of our research intent. If we were in any doubt that such an avid member of RumCom had managed to miss mention of us in .local or missed reports of our attendance at a particularly well-attended RumRendezvous, Trucker showed us otherwise. After this RumRendezvous a number of photos were posted to an attendee’s website. One of the photographs featured a mysterious “ghostly presence” in the background, which prompted Trucker to write:

---

<sup>1</sup> This creation of non-legitimate e-mail addresses appears to have started when Trucker posted his short stories to rumcom.interest.writing from an e-mail address that tallied with his Evil Chris *nom de plume*. But when he began hiding his email address in other RumCom groups he attracted the complaint that he was in breach of the AUP. When pointing out inequalities in the way the AUP was applied Trucker received the following reply from one of RumCom’s principle staff:

Given that you've posted with a disguised email address, and in news. I shall ignore this complaint until it's put to me in email from a RumCom address with a correct RumCom email address.

Just goes to show. You never know when a Trucker is watching you. I learned quite a bit about sociologists, for instance. Perhaps if they discover something important about rumcom.local from their survey, Salford will call it the Smith-Rutter Effect in their honour? Or maybe they'll have a fight over calling it the Rutter-Smith Effect? :)<sup>2</sup>

Why did Trucker's disputes and departure strike us as in any way odd? After all, people come and go on newsgroups all the time. They try the waters and when it no longer suits, move on. Dropping in and out of newsgroups is usually a good deal easier than, say, entering a new workplace or leaving a personal relationship in the physical world. Virtual presence does not create the same order of difficulty that so readily accompanies the embodied kind, and places fewer restrictions on sociability options. On Trucker's own account, he started off as "one of the crowd" on RumCom.local, meaning he received favourable responses to his posts until the end of 1997, when he began to question RumCom's Acceptable Use Policy (AUP). Thereafter, he became a "bogeyman" not only to the ISP's management but also to many RumCommers as well. In what ways can this transformation be understood and what can it show us about the way internet texts are used to create and communicate identity?

The paradox in the evolution of Steve into Trucker and Evil Steve is that RumCom.local enjoys what seems to us a justified reputation as an easy, friendly newsgroup. Therefore, a prime question for us is, how did Trucker come to exceed the boundaries of what was tolerable such that when he left, he had so few supporters? To understand how Trucker became a widely reviled and even feared figure on .local, our paper examines aspects of the virtual community of RumCom, its sociability conduits and processes, and the resources it affords for the construction of identity and reputation. Our paper focuses on the single case of Trucker to consider some centrifugal forces that are at work in a pocket of the Internet that approximates to the Rheingoldian ideal of supportive virtual communities.

---

<sup>2</sup> This post contains a rare spelling error by Trucker who is normally an excellent typist and perspicuous writer.

## **THRESHOLDS OF INTERPRETATION**

At the very opening of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Goffman (1959/1990: 1/13) points out that:

When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed. [...] Although some of this information about the individual seems to be sought almost as an end in itself, there are usually quite practical reasons for acquiring it. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and what they may expect of him.

Thus, in our everyday encounters we anchor and orient ourselves to those around us by the push and pull of sign activities. We *give* expressions - that is, explicitly offer details about our person - and *give off* expressions - i.e. unconsciously or otherwise, we exude views of ourselves (Goffman 1959/1990: 2/14). At the same time we look for similar evidence from those with whom we are “copresent”.

When approaching life online it is very tempting to see what happens fairly unproblematically as interaction – computer-mediated may be – but interaction none the less. What we want to suggest here is that such an assumption fails to recognise a number of things, especially when exploring asynchronous communication such as newsgroup postings. For example, we can not with total safety assume that all newsgroup postings ever get read by anyone, nor can we say with any confidence when and where they are read, by who, in what order or what environment. The texts may have interactive potential (i.e. when read meaning becomes associated with them), and a particular audience may be intended or imagined, but when looking at computer-mediated communication it is useful to remember that we are using texts as analytical proxies for the study of interaction. Given this, to comprehend how Trucker was demonised requires an examination of the fundamentally textual resources at his disposal. We must examine not just the content of his writing but its form and organisation as it creates his virtual presence and his growing identity as the ISP Bogeyman.

Although Goffman is specifically writing about physical copresence, there is every reason to expect similar interactional practices might be found in text-based online fora, for these too are sign-rich environments (see also Kendall 1998: 130). Goffman’s lead provides direction for the

empirical investigation of George Herbert Mead's (1934: 140) proposal that "the self, as that which can be an object to itself, is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experience." Our approach bears similarities to Aycock's (1995) analysis of newsgroup postings that frames them as Foucauldian (Martin *et al.* 1988) "technologies of the self." Trucker uses his newsgroup posting and web presence to develop his collection of persona.

Elsewhere (Rutter & Smith 1999b) we began to open up the textual construction of identities online and have described and illustrated a number of techniques for mobilising identities in virtual encounters. These we want to develop by calling on the work of Gérard Genette and his notion of *transtextuality*. What interests Genette is the way texts are read and the way they position themselves in relation to each other. Given our interactional interest in online communication such an approach seems to carry with it great promise, even at this early stage of our work with it. Genette offers a five-strand series of traits that describe the sets of cultural references that we (in this case both readers and Trucker) bring to the texts. Briefly, they are:

- ***intertextuality***: "the literal presence of one text within another" such as quotation, plagiarism, allusion
- ***paratextuality***: the relation between a text and its 'paratext' - that which surrounds the main body of the text - such as titles, headings, prefaces, epigraphs, dedications, acknowledgements, footnotes, illustrations, dust jackets, etc.;
- ***metatextuality***: explicit or implicit critical commentary of one text on another text
- ***hypotextuality***<sup>3</sup>: the relation between a text and a preceding 'hypotext' - a text or genre on which it is based but which it transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends (including parody, spoof, sequel)
- ***architextuality***: designation of a text as part of a genre or genres (Genette refers to designation by the text itself, but this could also be applied to its framing by readers)

Given the limits of time and space we cannot examine the relevance of all these devices. We want first to focus in this section of our paper on paratextuality and return to aspects of the other

---

<sup>3</sup> Genette's term was hypertextuality but we here follow precedence in the renaming – e.g. Stam *et al* and Chandler – so as to avoid confusion with hypertext as a technology. Genette (1998) uses hypertext to refer to a text (e.g. Joyce's *Ulysses* which is superimposed upon a hypotext (such as Homer's *Odyssey*). We wish to retain the notion of computer-

categories later in the paper. Our task here is to open up discussion on what it is that makes a newsgroup posting; what are the paratextual traits which define it and make it recognisable for what it is?

Genette (1997) understands a text<sup>4</sup> as a collection of words “endowed with significance” which is usually adorned and surrounded with other pieces of information such as the authors name, a cover, titles, illustrations, etc. which *present* the text. These devices, he argues, are part of the *threshold* of the text: both part of and external to the text but essential for its existence as, for example, a book. Like Genette’s text, postings to newsgroup are marked by paratextual elements. These elements obviously include headers (hidden and other wise) which give details of the messages origin and its route to the newsgroup; encoding used in the post; author details; subject line; and often details of organisation affiliation.<sup>5</sup> Access to these details are controlled by the software that “holds” and displays the newsgroup postings. In many ways these can be seen like the covers of a book – they frame the experience of reading and control the display of the texts themselves. Given the wide variety in news client software and the almost total use in RumCom of in-house software this element of the paratext is better discussed elsewhere. However, the example of newsgroup paratext we do want to pursue here is that of signatory practices.

Signature files (or, more commonly, sigs) are short pieces of texts that are often appended to the bottom of newsgroup and e-mail postings (often after a line containing only a double dash). Just under half of the postings to RumCom.local contain a sig file.<sup>6</sup> These short texts appended to postings contain further information that the author looks to provide signification of them as “real” people. They will contain

---

based hypertextuality because of the distinct manner of reading (or interactivity) which it implies as a text that takes the reader directly to other texts (regardless of authorship or location)

<sup>4</sup> Specifically, the published, paper-based book (usually in his examples a novel). We use the term here more generically.

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of these features see Baym, 1995a.

<sup>6</sup> Although no comparative figures exist this figure may be somewhat low if compared to other newsgroups. This hypothesis is based upon the almost total use by subscribers to RumCom of a proprietary piece of software written by the company’s technical director and distributed free to RumCom subscribers. This software handles sig files but does not automatically append them to messages as do some other news and e-mail clients.

- URLs to personal pages
- URLs to their fan or specialist page (football teams, TV programmes, artists, etc)
- ICQ or Fidonet numbers
- Amateur radio call signs
- Jokes or humorous slogans
- Quotations
- Poster's name
- E-mail addresses
- Reminders of forthcoming events (e.g. the next RumRendezvous)
- Pseudonyms used on IRC, MOOs etc.
- Indication of employment as in
- Small ASCII art pictures

Unlike the sig files used in many work orientated e-mails and newsgroup postings such as those discussed by Donath (1999) or discussions lists postal addresses or phone numbers appear very rarely to be part of the RumCom sig. Similarly neither do “Geek codes” or variations of such systems. These blocks of text, originally designed by Robert Hayden but based upon “bear”, “smurf” and “twink” style-and-sexual-preference codes from lesbian and gay newsgroups.<sup>7</sup> This seems hardly surprising given the general focus of .local banter and its fairly consistent make up.

What this paratextual device offers Trucker and others is the opportunity for further displays of identity and comment outside the standard body of the newsgroup posting. Web pages and contact details offer further means for the curious of verifying the self presented in the newsgroups postings while the transtextual allusions and reference to hobby pages suggest a frame through which to view the author. Unlike many members of RumCom.local Trucker changes his sig file on a fairly regular basis in order to pass humorous comment on events:

©1998  
Trucker©

For use only as a newsgroup posting.  
Do not dispose of in fire.  
Contains AsciiText©.

extracts from his self-consciously hackney poetry:

---

<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.geekcode.com/> and The Geek Code Decoder Page at <http://www.ebb.org/ungeek/> for further



©1998  
Trucker@

"Though they'll never fathom it  
Behind my sarcasm  
Desperate memories lie."

anti-spam versions of his e-mail address:

```
n/|
>o-O u
~~~~~Steve "Trucker"@ Tibbs
email to: TEE-are-SEECKhay-e-are[at] (...) (dot) "com"
```

and self-reflexive comments on ongoing conflicts:

```
Trucker is innocent!
Free the Basildon One!
Save the Trucker!
```

A certain amount of cultural capital is gain by Trucker with the regular inclusion of ® and © symbols in his sigs. The software used by most RumCommers for posting to the newsgroup, “Rumprog”, only handles ASCII text rather than the MIME format supported by other pieces of software (e.g. Outlook, Agent, etc). This means that the inclusion of these symbols can only be done by manually entering the ASCII code. Such exhibitions, like references Trucker makes to other texts both technical and social, appear to play a major part in the pride he takes in posting. Trucker described himself thus in one post:

```
USENET is my hobby. I don't go to the cinema, I don't hire videos, I
don't even watch TV - I read, and post to, USENET. Call it nerdish, I
don't care. I *enjoy* doing it. I connect 30 maybe 40 times a day.
That's how *much* I enjoy it. And I don't like having it taken away
because of shoddy service, and I'm even *less* fond of having it taken
away due to management incompetence.8
```

As a writer, debater and rhetorician of some merit Trucker used his skills to encourage debate and speculation on his identities. Trucker did not draw attention to his posting under three identities, but enjoyed the attention that the aliases attracted, and was adept at dealing with queries, as in the black humour of:

```
> Please enlighten us z.local newbies by stating your *precise*
```

---

details of Robert Hayden's Geek code.

<sup>8</sup> This may need slight contextualisation: Local phone calls in the UK still carry quite a high unit cost and minimum charge specially when done during office hours. To connect as often as Trucker does and incur the regularly inflated phone bills that goes with it further support his claim to commitment.

> relationship with Evil Chris.

I'd rather not. People who talk about Evil Chris tend to be washed up.

On remote beaches.

> Poole, Dorset.

Nice harbour there, I understand. Ever seen it from the bottom?

In the boxing or dancing metaphors so frequently drawn upon to describe the conduct of arguments, Trucker was a lively, confident, sure-footed, nimble debater while his opponents often came across as plodding or flatfooted. He brought imagination to the task whereas his opponents sometimes had little more than their indignation to contribute. This could be seen in the posts leading up to his departure from RumCom in spring 1998 but was even more clearly in evidence in his brief return to the ISP in the autumn of that year.

Trucker's interventions to a less popular newsgroup, RumCom.support, have been preserved on a friend's website. They record three disputatious threads where Trucker took issue with aspects of the service provided by the ISP. This, along with Trucker's own web pages, demonstrates that in the developing hypertexts of his writing RumCom.local is only the "front" region for display: it is by no means the totality – or necessarily the greater part – of it. As has been pointed out elsewhere, "many individual identity deceptions are acts of omission, rather than commission; they involve hiding one's identity" (Donath 1999:52): often members of .local do not wish certain discussions, opinions or pieces of information to be generally displayed to all the group. In such situations a certain amount of interaction takes place through other channels. We have already discussed the importance of the RumRendezvous but Internet Relay Chat (IRC), and other synchronous chat systems, along with direct e-mails and telephone calls form the "back" region of identity construction for RumCommers.

In the interview and observational phases of the research it became clear to us that there was much telephone, e-mail and other communicative activity taking place outside the public arena. We can only hazard guesses at the extent of this underlife that RumCom.local supports. In part such subterranean communications can be seen as active recognition of the public limits of argument in RumCom.local. Interviews and informal conversation with RumCom subscribers suggests that "private" communications play a different role in acceptable RumCom interaction.

They serve to carry information or comments which, while pertinent to the developing conflict and process of resolution, are outside the acceptable limits of propriety. Obviously, our access to such exchanges is partial in the extreme but we do have some evidence that certain disputes transpire and are resolved entirely outside the gaze of .local. For the ethnographer it is impossible to estimate with any accuracy or confidence the amount or level or importance of such interaction since much of it remains deliberately hidden from wider view.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, it was only after nearly a year of research that the hidden side of RumCommers' identity management started to become partially visible to us. As core RumCom.local participants became familiar with us, stories of personal animosities, quarrels and illicit affairs started to be shared with us and verified by the parties involved.

### **CONFLICT AS SOCIABILITY**

RumCom.local is relatively distinct in that rather than being a topic-orientated newsgroup it is one that pivots around chat and "general" talk. The absence of a common theme or topic for the group helps to provide a straightforward, "conversational" quality to the messages posted. Further, it has a reputation for "friendliness" that seems to extend over and above the standards of civil exchange outlined in the company's Acceptable Use Policy. In interview one poster told us:

... 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]*

RumCom then, is a gated cybercommunity, an electronic suburb. Trucker himself likened it to the "shallow end", the nursery slopes, and acknowledged that there was a worthwhile place for such venues on Usenet. For so knowledgeable and cosmopolitan citizen of the Usenet as

---

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion of online ethnography see Rutter & Smith 1999c.

Trucker it might be thought that it was a place that could hold few attractions, especially as he energetically resisted the path to resigning from .local in a mounting atmosphere of conflict.

To approach the conflict represented in the newsgroup posting (and other web-based texts) it is useful to refer to the literature in conversation analysis that considers speakers' preference for agreement (Sacks 1987; Bilmes 1988; Lerner 1996). Preference organisation is a feature of the structures of talk, not a claim about the psychological dispositions of speakers. In everyday conversation a basic organisation is the simple adjacency pair, where an invitation is made or an assessment is advanced. The preferred response is for the hearer to respond in the affirmative. For illustration we can draw on the following example taken from RumCom.local:

```
> is it anywhere near the railway station? I'll be travelling by train
> to this one. Could someone pick me up if it is'nt?
```

```
Yes we can pick you up,
```

The first poster's turn presents a request for a favour that the second turn fulfils. That is, an agreement response has been achieved. Given the supportive nature of the RumCom.local community, such a request is not seen as unreasonable and the poster can be fairly comfortable with the belief that even if no-one is able to offer help, the request will not be seen as unacceptable. The preference for agreement is so strong in RumCom.local messages that even if a request cannot be satisfied, individuals will post to the newsgroup apologising and presenting reasons:

```
> And all this has come about because they changed her account
> to her name instead of mine. So if anyone is wondering where
> she has gone, the answer is nowhere!!
```

```
> ...Lauren
```

```
Oh dear Lauren, sorry to hear this.
```

```
No, I didn't receive a message, otherwise I would definately have
replied!
```

The reply to Lauren's post begins with a positive interaction ritual, a supportive interchange in which the person identifies the other as a worthy interactant ("Oh dear Lauren"). It then shifts into a remedial frame, accounting for the remiss act of not replying because of the non-receipt of the original message. Lauren's respondent treats the absence of an earlier response as a "virtual

offence” (terms from Goffman 1971), a worst possible reading of her failure to reply sooner. As the presence of a preference for agreement is so strong it is usually difficult, even in environments not as community focused as RumCom.local, to respond to a turn with a directly disagreeing response.

Yet in .local, as in other social environments, disagreement can be an effective method of promoting sociability between persons, and sometimes circumstances are designed to elicit a modicum of disputatiousness:

It is regularly the case that the way that one gets people participating is to have an argument. Argument may not shut down conversation, it may make for ‘the best conversations.’ The circumstances under which, when arguments occur others talk, and when arguments occur others don’t talk, may have to be differentiated. And it may well be that various characterizations of who the participants are, is specifically relevant to the usability of argument as a technique for generating happy conversations. Let’s note that when, for example, a host or hostess is putting together an evening intended as an evening of talk, one way they go about, e.g., guaranteeing that it will be lively, involves an orientation to selecting ‘people from different groups’ or ‘people with different opinions.’ If you’re intending to have, say, an evening of political talk, then the way to make it lively is to have some representatives of each of various opinions. That will not only make for ‘lively talk,’ but arguments. It will make for arguments not only by virtue of the fact that of course these people will disagree, but that such people are obligated to produce talk which disagrees.

(Sacks 1992:707-8)

RumCom.local is a place where “lively talk” can occur (as the unofficial FAQ page puts it, .local is a place in which most tones and talk are welcome “even have heated discussions and arguments - within limits of course <g>.” Indeed both observations of the newsgroup postings and interviews with newsgroup subscribers reveal that conflict is seen and enacted as an inevitable part of the everyday nature of newsgroup and as a positive form of interaction. Controversy is encouraged and accepted but is not the primary or major purpose of local - there is another newsgroup (.soapbox) intended for those who wish to seriously pursue serious discussions.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, while Trucker succeeded in infuriating many RumCommers, his posts were also enjoyed by substantial portion of posters to .local. On one personal web page a .local poster displays her cartoons of some of the regulars. One cartoon is a warm portrayal the seven

---

<sup>10</sup> Arguments on .local are typically different from those formats (such as talk radio) where the pursuit of controversy is an end in itself and scepticism a routine feature (see Hutchby 1996).

ages of Trucker, from precocious child to aged intellectual, busy on his computer or puzzling over computer code chalked on a blackboard. The caption reads:

R.local had an apparantly split personality of a poster who liked nothing better than to post replies to himself.....

He even claimed to have had posters of computers on his bedroom walls when a teen!!!!!!!

A second cartoon depicts Trucker standing on a pedestal ringed with barbed wire and bearing the caption “Master of Disguise.” The tone of this and the previous cartoon is playful, not malicious.

We suggest that many of the arguments found in .local can be usefully understood as what Schiffrin (1984) characterises as “sociable arguments.” Sociability is interpreted in Simmel’s (1949; orig. 1911) terms as interaction undertaken for its own sake, for the moment itself, in which the objective differences between people of talent, status and intelligence are set aside as is the “light and darkness of the individual’s life.” Sociability takes place in a zone between these upper and lower sociability thresholds. What gives the sociability an argumentative character is, first, a *preference for disagreement*. For example:

> Why should the sexual activities of the President of the USofA be of  
> any interest to me?

Because, as Charles said, he is the most powerful man in the world with the finger on the trigger controlling more than enough H bombs to wipe out the world several times over. Is is not his sexual activities as such which are the worry but his apparent lack of good judgement and the attempts to cover his tracks by asking his victims to lie for him. If the accusations are true he, like Nixon, will be forced to resign or suffer the humiliation of impeachment before a hostile congress.

Sustained disagreement characterises some of .local exchanges, which can run over several messages. Email systems themselves facilitate the process of disagreement. Argument has claim and counter-claim at its base (the canonical form of the argument is “You say X but what about Y” [Hutchby 1996]). In face to face conversational encounters the disputant’s position can be strengthened through the practice of “recounting” (summarising, restating) the opponent’s claim or position (Mabry 1997). Nearly all email systems have a cut and paste feature for editing messages that enables the disputant to readily engage in the task of recounting (a task

further facilitated by the enclosure of the received message within <<...>> brackets). The editing of prior messages makes easy the identification of message elements that are deemed contentious.

A second feature of sociable arguments is the ever-present *vulnerability of argumentative frames*. What starts as a “serious” exchange can subsequently be reframed. Humorous reframing either of self or the other is common. So we find self-deprecating comments like:

```
> I leave you with one last unkind thought that has crossed my mind
> more than once in the recent past. If DWG really is the wonderful
> person he makes himself out to be why does he spend so much of his
> time sitting alone in front of his computer?
```

```
When did I ever claim to be wonderful? I spend time on my computer
simply because I enjoy it Don't we all! It takes very little time
countering twaddle with fact when the reference sources are on CD. I
don't need to work more than a few hours a week, and I have a very
full social life with a wife, many friends of both sexes, children
and a growing band of grandchildren. Apart from a few million pounds
what more could I want!
```

And attempts to humour the argumentative adversary:

```
> Again, your skills of comprehension are lacking, and your irony
> detector unplugged. However, your unwitting response to my mirror
> image of your simplistic labellings and assertions amply illustrates
> how silly they are.
```

```
You continually assert that the USA was a greater threat to democracy
than the USSR. A massive failure of any sense of proportion is
indicated. It probably can be treated!
```

Sociable arguments can thus move between serious and sociable frames. For this to be achieved a modicum of *cooperative disagreement* is required. Beneath the surface competition of claim and counter-claim and associated threats to speakers' selves there must be mutual cooperative assumptions about the worthiness of those selves (see also Schiffrin 1990). In interview one respondent expressed satisfaction that in RumCom.local:

```
nobody minded if you say something and it's a bit out of turn, you've
misunderstood something. It'll be pointed out to you and nobody shouts
at you for it, which I've noticed in one or two other news groups, you
know people come back and get quite offensive.
```

Expressed views get contested in .local; the presentation of the other's moral self is much less a target.

The *evaluation of disagreement* is a further feature of what transpires in .local. The assessment of different types of disagreement is an underlying assumption of sociable argument. The disagreements that make up the bulk of our data are not outright fights but attempts to persuade the other of the rectitude of the claims being advanced. They work with notions of limits and a sense that airing differences can be beneficial to all the parties concerned. The need to keep a “sense of perspective “ is evident, for example, in the following Trucker-centred thread:

> trucker@anut.com> writes:

> >“Come back Trucker,” they said. “Liven up a boring .local,” they said.  
 > >So I did. And look what happened. Let’s face it, people were only ever  
 > >nice to me when they thought I was leaving.

> Stop feeling sorry for yourself on that account. People were \*never\*  
 > nice to you. They just enjoyed it when you took the piss out somebody  
 > they didn’t like.

I was amused at the original with its threats of recovering the costs to RumCom from misbehaving rumcomers and Brian’s revisions are generally correct. However, everyone seems to be taking themselves far too seriously with all the talk of legal action, and the end of the world as we know it! The only effective sanction if anyone misbehaves is to pull their account and it is unlikely anyone would be so silly as to try to resort to the courts. It is, for instance, a waste of time suing someone who has no money as you end up paying your own costs if they get legal aid.

In RumCom.local, the manufacture of sociable arguments actually encourages interaction and involvement. Indeed, as Myers (1998) points out of moderators in focus group interactions, it often rapidly becomes apparent that certain individuals nominate themselves as regular source of contention and argumentative statement. In RumCom.local these posters become “characters” known to the group, they quickly begin to expect conflict from these posters and effectively grant them license to argue beyond the normal regulation of politeness. In interview we were told:

There's a fellow Fred Bolton who is... used to make quite a lot of interesting post and he... I haven't seen his name for a long time. The other one was Gareth Williams and they often used to have lengthy debates. Gareth’s still there, but he doesn't do as much as he used to do.

As the name of the author becomes a paratextual element which effects whether people read or delete a posting as well as the way they choose to read it. The author’s name, gender and



regularity of posting all effect the audience's approach to the posting. Trucker was very aware of such recognition, which is perhaps why he developed his range of personas each, apparently, with a different account. Further, he played metatextually with his sharp logic, dry wit and often cutting observations (not to mention his sarcasm and condescension.)

It may be written in my usual tongue-in-cheek style, but that too has gotten me into trouble in the past. That's just the way I am. That's how I post. I make no apologies. A lot of people like it. If you are not one of those people, if you find light-heartedness offensive, then

STOP READING THIS MESSAGE NOW. DELETE IT NOW.

Whereas disputatious characters such as Trucker people the folk gallery that makes RumCom such a source of pleasure and satisfaction for its subscribers not all arguments are sociable in character: some spill over the bounds we have sketched.

### **THRESHOLDS OF SOCIABILITY**

Smith *et al.* (1997) suggest that one interesting trait of conflict in Usenet groups is the "ease in which offenders can 'duck out' of accounting for their behavior" and suggest that within the newgroups they examine (rec.arts.tv.soaps; soc.motss; soc.singles; rec.sports.hockey; and comp.sys.ibm.pc.games) the practice is not uncommon. Ducking out can involve simply dropping out of a thread or it can involve leaving - or being asked to leave - the ISP. These are groups which are globally distributed via various news feeds and, from even a casual examination, appear to have a large transient membership in addition to its core of regulars (see also Baym 1995a, 2000). This stands in contrast to RumCom.local, which is only available to RumCom subscribers and which, during our five month period of message collection, had only approximately 250 posters and showed a large percentage of long-time members compared with posters who rapidly dip in and out of newgroups. Whether the longevity of members within the group is a *product* of the sense of community within RumCom.local and loyalty to the ISP or a *cause* of it is unclear, but it does place pressure on individuals not to take the ducking out route when faced with conflict.

The most serious offences can result in the ISP management cautioning offenders and even requiring them to leave. In the early part of the period of investigation he led a very public debate about RumCom's AUP, which he considered restrictive and arbitrary in its application. Early in our study period Trucker took issue with Rumcom's acceptable use policy (AUP) and proposed a detailed alternative. When one poster queried the value of the entire exercise:

```
> [...] There is nothing in either version to which I have any
> objection. Nor is there anything that in any way impinges on what I
> choose to do.
```

Trucker, who despite his larger than life personas appeared to have a concern for the 'greater good', was quick to spot the complacency embedded of the claim:

```
And that's what all this is really about. It doesn't bother *you*, it
doesn't bother *a lot of people*. Fine, so you/they need not be
concerned. Why get involved, if you don't mind one way or the other?
```

```
But it does bother *me*. On principle. Having experienced oppression
first-hand, I hold the principle of freedom of speech very dear indeed.
And as if it isn't limited enough already in free-thinking Britain, the
RumCom AUP trammels my right of free speech severely - just as it does
*yours*.
```

```
You might be happy to cede that right. Fine and dandy, if it works for
you. But you don't speak for me. I do *not* give up this right, such
as remains of it.
```

```
So, because it bothers me, I object. I would have liked a little
backup from some like-minded people, but no matter. I have won tougher
battles than this without help. But what do I find? Not only do
others not support my objections, but they actually *object* to me
objecting!
```

In these exchanges Trucker came across as a shrewd and articulate debater who was adept at revealing the contradictions and inconsistencies of those who challenged his views. After a suspension for breaking AUP rules he continued to post to .local using the RumCom software but from two different ISPs (under two different names - Steve and Evil Steve). It took some time for .local regulars to realise that these were one and the same person. The debate about the AUP was pursued from these outside addresses and the foibles of RumCom software and technical staff lampooned. When challenged Trucker always had a cogent reply. Matters came to a head when Trucker posted messages with very long headers and a subscriber complained that her database has been corrupted, the result she believed of Trucker's mischievous posting. Trucker's reply was that the fault was with a bug in RumCom's software that they had failed to

correct (to intensify the debate he posted as Evil Steve blaming Trucker for all the recent difficulties with the ISP). Sharp exchanges occurred and Trucker then posted a series of messages to .local that gave vent to his indignation at his queries not being answered by RumCom management. He made it plain that he felt wrongly accused and that he was being made a scapegoat for problems that were not of his making. Trucker was suspended by the Managing Director himself (Trucker commented sardonically about this "personal touch" when he was subsequently reinstated). In a perverse sequel to his posting with overlong headers Trucker posted a series of messages with a single letter as their subject. Some RumCom subscribers reported that upon deleting this message they had lost an entire day's mail; again Trucker was accused of mischief-making but by now belief in Trucker's claims was wearing thin among many posters.

At this point Trucker "apologised openly" to .local:

```
I know how irritating it is when things go wrong, so I would like to
take this opportunity to apologise to anyone on .local who lost data in
connection with my recent postings.
```

```
I can explain.
```

```
As you may or may not know, I recently had my account suspended for no
reason other than I posted a few messages with long subject lines, on
the grounds that it was causing RUMPROG to fail.
```

```
As several people have pointed out, there is *no way* RUMPROG will fail
as a result of long subject lines. And if RumCom don't know this, they
should*. Even so, they waited two and a half days before deciding to
chop me, which was plenty of time to send me an "official" email asking
me to stop, rather than taking such a ridiculously drastic measure.
```

```
Consequently, I felt that they had acted without thinking. As this is
not the first time I have been suspended as a result of one of their
cock-ups, I was naturally a little miffed.
```

```
Since it was quite clear that RumCom weren't going to do anything to
un-miff me, I decided to have a go at them in the newsgroup. Yes, it
was childish, but I was *fuming*. And still am, for that matter. I am
still waiting for any kind of "official" reply.
```

```
And since they were alleging that the trouble had been caused by my
long subject lines, I posted my rebuttal in several threads with short
subject lines - one character is as short as you can get. This was
certainly petulant, but it wasn't malicious.
```

```
I had forgotten that due to a bug in RUMPROG, these threads would, if
deleted by thread, take a lot of other threads with them. In other
words, I acted without thinking - which is precisely what I accused
RumCom of doing to me.
```

So, whilst I feel it would be unfair if I were to receive \*all\* the blame for what is, after all, a bug in a program I didn't write, I also accept that I should have thought before posting, and I am therefore at least partly responsible.

Once again, I apologise.

Opinion was sharply divided in response to this posting. "Less of the injured innocence. You were b-----g about unnecessarily just to see what happened," said one. But another likened Trucker's situation to that of Socrates, forced to take hemlock because of what Athens had become.<sup>11</sup> Trucker himself vigorously contested the deviant or criminal characterisation of his activity:

If the consensus of opinion is that I am making a mountain out of a molehill, I shall gladly do the decent thing. If, OTOH, my ideas turn out to be not so outrageous, then I would appreciate RumCom actually listening to them for a change, instead of making me feel like a criminal for daring to criticize.]

Others were genuinely bemused or puzzled. In many quarters patience and thus sympathy with Trucker had just run out. After three months of threatening to leave RumCom Trucker finally did take that step, but not after first occupying an empty newsgroup with a few friends and supporters who likewise left RumCom at this point. A last attempt was made to build a bridge to others in RumCom with a thread telling of the location of the "real" RumCom.local, but if Trucker hoped for a mass exodus, it did not appear.

Trucker's goodbye message to .local was an elegiac response to the popular "pub" analogy favoured by many of the RumCom.local regulars we spoke to:

<jilly@RumCom> wrote:

>Or, the pub you loved and enjoyed was slowly taken  
>over by people who delight in plastic gnomes and  
>train spotting and all the conversation revolves  
>around bunions. The regulars all leave for more  
>interesting climes and occasionally pop their heads  
>round the door to see if 'the good old days' are  
>back.

---

<sup>11</sup> The allusion to Socrates echoes Durkheim's (1982:102) famous observation in the *Rules* about the role of the criminal in the evolution of morality. For Durkheim Socrates' resistance helped keep open the pathways to social change.

Or you realize that another year has passed, you are another year older, wiser, more experienced. And you have changed. And the cosy little pub you used to like so much now seems a little quaint. Parochial. Perhaps even a tad claustrophobic.

And you hang in there out of habit, and a fear of change, and a fear of the unknown if you were to leave your familiar but uncomfortably close surroundings.

And you are ashamed of this fear, so you don't blame yourself - you blame the world. After all, you don't \*feel\* any different. Ergo, it must be the entire rest of the world that has changed, right?

We've all been there.

>It all depends on your perspective and the  
> willingness to take the rough with the smooth.

Or just go to alt.freedom

Trucker

"Though they'll never fathom it  
Behind my sarcasm  
Desperate memories lie."

For some kinds of conflict ducking out permanently - exile - is the only option.

For a long time we believed that this was Trucker's final post and that he had left RumCom for good. In the summer of 1998 he relocated his opposition to RumCom in the newly colonised newsgroup and developed a website where he could lampoon "CrapCom" at will. His activity in exile was foreshadowed in one of his posts debating the AUP some four months earlier. There he justified his right to criticise in a post to a member of RumCom staff:

You are leaving the customer with no options. With respect, might I remind you that we are \*paying\* to use this service - you are not. I therefore feel justified in demanding some input to the rule-making process. If you present "the rules" as you have done, as a fait accompli, and say "there it is, shape up or ship out", then the customer - who may have only one or two trifling complaints - has no alternative but to vote with his or her feet. And once they are no longer \*with\* RumCom, what sort of things might they say \*about\* RumCom?

What we seem to have witnessed was the stigmatisation and exclusion of an unpopular member from the group. But while some of the events leading to Trucker's departure can be understood in labelling terms - in particular his experimentation with very long and single letter headers, which looks very much like textbook deviance amplification - other features are less amenable to

a labelling approach. In substance and style, Trucker's posts were far from straightforward instances of a deviant being labelled by powerful agents of social control. Rather, Trucker was a resisting deviant who disavowed the "troublemaker" status. He made a brief return to RumCom in the autumn of 1998. Posting on .support rather than .local, he succeeded in once more drawing RumCommers and RumCom staff into a debates where he was sure to have the last word.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper is a first pass at tracing the development of Trucker's "bogyman" status. Our paper has reviewed the sociable role of newsgroup argumentation, presented a narrative outline of the escalating disputes that led to Trucker's departure, and identified some of the textual resources that Trucker was adept at deploying. Trucker's aim, through his growing disputations with RumCom – whether playful or wilful – was to present a certain view of things. Through his writings he struggled to establish the acceptance for set of knowledges that demonstrated injustices and inconsistencies in a social world that he spent time in. In many ways the internet and the hypertextual/intertextual possibilities that it presents for textual and identity games were an ideal forum for Trucker. We hope that we have shown that what is concerned is much more than a simple, inilinear process of labelling a powerless "deviant." Trucker played an active role in achieving an outsider designation even as he complained about the injustice of the process. He exalted in his labelling as evidence of the rectitude of his claims.

In particular, we have endeavoured to excavate some of the textual resources that ground Trucker's online persona. His reputation as a disputatious poster is not simply a content matter i.e. a matter of the topics he raises, the positions he takes, the reasons he advances, the claims he opposes, the knowledge he displays - important though these content considerations are. It also depends upon his fluency in the rhetoric of newsgroup postings. In the analysis of this rhetoric we hope we have begun to indicate the ethnographic utility of some of Genette's ideas on transtextuality.

## REFERENCES

- Aycock, A. (1995) "Technologies of the self: Michael Foucault online", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1(2). Available: <http://jcmc.huji.ac.il/vol1/issue2/aycock.html>
- Baym, N. K. (2000) *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom, and Online Community* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Baym, N. K. (1995a) "The Emergence Of Community In Computer-Mediated Communication" pp.138-163 in S. Jones (Ed.) *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, London: Sage.
- Baym, N. K. (1995b) "From Practice to Culture on USENET", in Susan Leigh Star (Ed.) *The Cultures of Computing*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Bilmes, J. (1988). "The Concept of Preference in Conversation Analysis". *Language in Society*, 17, 161-181.
- Donath, Judith (1999): "Identity and Deception in the Virtual World", in Marc A. Smith & Peter Kollock (Eds) *Communities in Cyberspace*, London: Routledge. URL <http://persona.www.media.mit.edu/Judith/Identity/>
- Durkheim, E. (1982) *The Rules of Sociological Method, And selected texts on sociology and its method*, S.Lukes, ed. and Introduction, W.D. Halls, trans., London: Macmillan.
- Genette, G. (1997) *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Genette, G. (1998) *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, University of Nebraska Press
- Goffman, E. (1971) *Relations in Public*, London: Allen Lane
- Goffman, E. (1959/1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York: Doubleday/Anchor; London: Penguin.
- Hutchby, I. (1996) *Confrontation Talk: Arguments, Asymmetries, and Power on Talk Radio*, Mahweh, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kendall, Lori (1998) 'Mean and Identity in "Cyberspace": The Performance of Gender, Class, and Race Online', *Symbolic Interaction*, 21(2): 129-153.
- Mabry, E. A. (1997) "Framing Flames: The Structure Of Argumentative Messages On The Net" *Journal Of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2(4) Available: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/mabry.html>

- Mead, George Herbert (1934): *Mind, Self and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Landow, George, P. (1992) *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Lerner, G. (1996) "Finding 'Face' in the Preference Structures of Talk-in-Interaction," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 59(4), 303-321.
- Mabry, E. A. (1997) "Framing Flames: The Structure of Argumentative Messages on the Net" *Journal Of Computer-Mediated Communication* 2(4) Available: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/?mackinnon?.html>
- Martin, L. H., H. Gutman, and P. H. Hutton (1988): *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault*, Amerhurst, Mass: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Myers, G. (1998) "Displaying Opinions: Topics and Disagreement in Focus Groups", *Language in Society*, 27: 85-111.
- Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Rutter, J & Smith, G. (1999a) "Spinning Thread: Rituals of Sociability in CMC" (ms.under review).
- Rutter, J & Smith, G. (1999b) "Presenting the Off-Line Self in an Everyday, Online Environment" paper presented to Identities in Action!, Gregynog.
- Rutter, J & Smith, G. (1999c) "<professional.stranger@ethno.com>: Presence and Absence in Virtual Ethnography", Qualitative Methodology session, American Sociological Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois.
- Sacks, H. (1992) *Lectures on Conversation*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sacks, H. (1987) "On the Preferences for Agreement and Contiguity in Sequences in Conversation," pp.54-69 in G.Button & J.R.E. Lee (eds) *Talk and Social Organization*, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Schiffrin, D. (1984) "Jewish Argument as Sociability", *Language in Society*, 13(3), 311-335.
- Schiffrin, D. (1990) "The Management of a Co-operative Self During Argument: The Role of Opinions and Stories," pp.241-259 in Grimshaw, A. (ed.) (1990) *Conflict Talk: Sociolinguistic Investigations of Arguments in Conversations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1949) "The Sociology of Sociability" *American Journal of Sociology* 55, 254-61.



- Smith, C.B., McLaughlin, M.L. and Osborne, K. K. (1997) "Conduct Control on Usenet", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2(1) Available: <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol2/issue4/smith.html>
- Tannen, D. (1998) *The Argument Culture: Changing the Way We Argue and Debate*, London: Virago.
- Zimmerman, D. (1989) "Prendre Position" pp.218-30 in I. Joseph (ed.) *Le Parler Frais d'Erving Goffman*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit.