

# Spinning Threads: Rituals of Sociability in CMC

Jason Rutter

ESRC Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition (CRIC), Tom Lupton Suite,  
University Precinct Centre, Oxford Road, Manchester, M13 9QH. UK  
Phone: +44 (0)161 275 6859 Fax: +44 (0)161 275 7361 Jason.Rutter@man.ac.uk  
[http://les.man.ac.uk/cric/Jason\\_Rutter/](http://les.man.ac.uk/cric/Jason_Rutter/)

&

Greg Smith

ESPaCH, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT. UK  
Phone: +44 (0)161 295 4706 Fax: +44 (0)161 295 5424 G.W.H.Smith@salford.ac.uk  
[http://www.salford.ac.uk/social/Greg\\_Smith/gwhs.html](http://www.salford.ac.uk/social/Greg_Smith/gwhs.html)

**Jason Rutter** is Research Fellow at the ESRC Centre for Research on Innovation and Competition and The University of Manchester and UMIST, UK. He completed a PhD at the University of Salford on the live interaction between performer and audience in stand-up comedy before moving into studying online interaction. He is the compiler of *Laughingly Referred To: An Interdisciplinary Bibliography of Published Work in the Field of Humour Studies and Research*, (1997) and has published a number of papers on comedy.

**Greg Smith** is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Salford, UK. His teaching and research interests are in ethnographic and interaction sociology and sociological and cultural theory. He is co-author of *Analyzing Visual Data* (Sage, 1992) and *Introducing Cultural Studies* (Prentice Hall Europe and University of Georgia Press, 1999). He has published on the sociology of Erving Goffman, most recently as editor of *Goffman and Social Organization: Studies in a Sociological Legacy* (Routledge, 1999).

## 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. A framework for analysis derived from Simmel and Goffman is presented. The paper examines five features of the production of convivial sociability: thread organization and content; terms and techniques of address; broadcast requests; playful recontextualizations; and

sociability thresholds. It concludes that investigation of the production features of online sociability yield insights into the complexities of netiquette's enactment.

# Spinning Threads: Rituals of Sociability in CMC

## 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. A framework for analysis derived from Simmel and Goffman is presented. The paper examines five features of the production of convivial sociability: thread organization and content; terms and techniques of address; broadcast requests; playful recontextualizations; and sociability thresholds. It concludes that investigation of the production features of online sociability yield insights into the complexities of netiquette's enactment.

## 1. Introduction

Information is one of the key terms of cyberculture. Castells is (1996, 1997, 1998) the most recent of a long line of commentators who have argued that we are coming to live in an age of information. The new information and communication technologies 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 the nature of the information is; by whom is it consumed? Some of these issues crystallize as standards that are enshrined in law, 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 around 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 analyzes aspects of the construction of newsgroup sociability. We focus on the production of congenial discourse and the communication of fellow feeling in RumCom.local.

Part of this paper's argument is that the studies of task motivated situations do not correspond with the interactional 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 more open-ended venture of diffused and ritualized sociability. There is a recurrent and largely accepted tendency for threads to "go off topic within a few posts" and, for a substantial portion of posters it seems, this is one of the attractions of RumCom.local. 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 to participation in the newsgroup. We believe that, contrary to the CMC transpiring within conference, task or CSCW contexts, interaction in newsgroups such as RumCom.local is not orientated towards a goal of 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's (1995) study of a similar newsgroup reminds us, the primary reason why people remain involved in a virtual community is fun. The recreational dimensions are paramount. 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. 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 Georg Simmel's notion of sociability and Erving Goffman's sociology of the interaction order have considerable potential as a framework for the analysis of newsgroup sociability.

## 2. Sociability Studies

In sociology, the study of sociability begins with 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. His specification of the conditions of sociable interaction differs from psychological approaches. Psychological studies often define sociability as the individual's willingness to interact with others (there is a clear continuity with dictionary definitions 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 represents an apposite starting point for the sociological analysis of

newsgroup sociability that is more empirically developed by Goffman's sociology of the interaction order

### **3. Informational and Ritual Dimensions of Interaction**

According to Goffman, 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 emphasizes 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 obtain in an attempt to control how those others see them. Drawing on Durkheim's ideas about the social character of religious ritual 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 - that we show our respect and regard for the feelings of others and the beliefs we hold about the proper treatment of them. 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 ordinary interaction. Morality is not something that is diffusely located in "society" but is rather mediated and renewed in everyday social encounters.

There are two root images of the individual to be found in Goffman's sociology: the potentially manipulative, egoistic games-player and the sacred object who is due deference and displays of considerateness. These images derive from two of the 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, although certain universals of politeness behaviour have been postulated (see Brown and Levinson, 1987) standards of respect

and so forth are enormously culturally variable. With certain modifications, these premises about social interaction are also relevant to the analysis of features of CMC.

#### 4. RumCom's Culture

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 and the methods through which the selves of posters are honoured in newsgroup messages.

Like the virtual communities explored by Rheingold (1993) and Baym (1995) 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. ... 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.

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, it is an enthusiastic subscriber, not a member of RumCom staff, who maintains this page. A similar example of the supportive 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 staff of RumCom - including the most senior members of the company - are not remote from their customers: they are accessible at the end of the phone or an email and have attended organized social gatherings (RumRendezvous) of RumCommers. Contrasting RumCom practice with that of a much bigger and better-known ISP, one interviewee noted, "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 was founded in 1994. 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 the telephone costs that are still charged for local calls in the UK. 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. Through this key staff member the assumptions informing BBS were carried forward into RumCom newsgroups. 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: the technology rules out hit and run flaming.

History, culture, seclusion and acceptable use policy all contribute to a distinctive culture 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 five features of RumCom.local discourse that are productive of convivial sociability:

1. organization of threads
2. terms and techniques of address
3. broadcast requests
4. playful recontextualization and a license to pun
5. the “space” for conviviality

## **5. The Discursive Construction of Online Sociability**

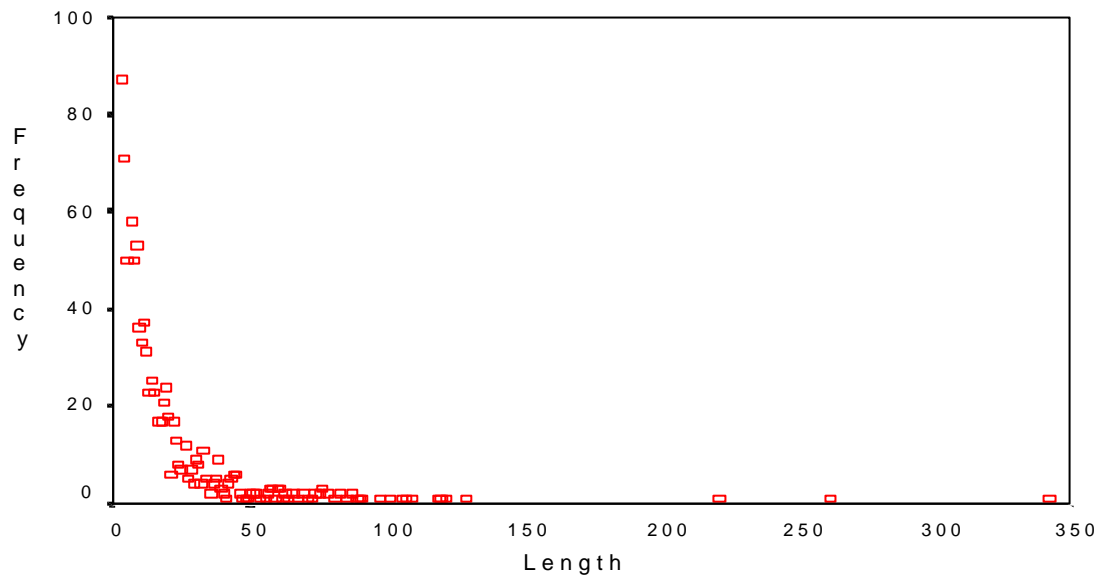
### **5.1 Organization of Threads**

Unlike Goffman’s interaction order, text is the basic tool that organizes and facilitates the “talk” in newsgroups such as RumCom.local. The asynchronous exchange of ASCII postings allow for interaction that can appear more basic and less rich than face-to-face forms and biased towards information rather than expressivity. Noting this it is tempting to rapidly reach the over-excited mode that Jones cautions us about, where we convince ourselves “that more information is desirable and better” (1995: 28). However, to focus on the technology of communication rather than the nature of the interaction itself serves only to fetishize the technical and lose sight of the people involved and the manner in which they organize their interaction..

Perhaps the most basic feature of the interaction that goes on in newsgroups is the organization of postings by their subject. A common feature of newsgroups is the use of a descriptive subject or topic in the posting’s header that 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 organization is often consolidated by the software used to read newsgroups which, unlike e-mail packages, gives organizational 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 as an interactional unit it is worth devoting a little time to exploring its

organization further. A matter to be considered first is what actually constitutes a “thread”. Next there is the quantitative issue of thread length: how long are threads?

Building on the parallels drawn between face-to-face conversation and threads offered by members of RumCom.local in interview 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*. Single postings that are not responded to and postings that receive only one reply cannot be considered threads under this definition. They can be best understood as announcements and exchanges respectively. Looking at our corpus of postings we can see that 254 of the total messages to RumCom.local do not attain thread status. This means that the 1160 subjects reduce to 906 threads.



**Figure 1: Threads Lengths and their Frequencies**

Looking further into this organization 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 are standard thread lengths within RumCom.local and this appears to be borne out in newsgroup subscribers’ everyday experience. In interview and at Rum.Rendezvous discussion often focused on 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).

## 5.2 Terms and Techniques of Address

Since newsgroup postings are asynchronous and because threads develop in a virtual rather than a shared physical space it becomes necessary for posters to recognize, orient to, and negotiate what we shall call a layered organization of address. 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 recognize 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 organization 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 address techniques which seek to make messages more inferentially rich.

Of the forms of address we have identified, first-naming is the norm. The personal identification that first-naming implies 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). The ability for posters to use each others names on such a regular and casual basis indicates a developed familiarity and suggests a community-like form of social interaction. With this use of address posters are displaying their familiarity with each other and displaying their position as “regulars”.

Using specific address one poster will direct a message, or a section of that to a particular contributor to the thread. In the extract below it is apparent that Dede is specifically addressing her reply directly to, and in response to, Wayne’s earlier posting.

> Maybe you can compare notes with Dede at Basildon?  
> Wayne

What? Who? Me? <wakening up..> I’m afraid I’ve very limited knowledge of men, Wayne...

Dede <married to an Englishman>

Such a use of address is different from similar forms that may be found in e-mail and other one-to-one methods of CMC in one important aspect. In the newsgroup forum the addressing of a message to an individual does not exclude other readers from viewing the message. It is as though the message is posted “especially” to one individual while still playing a part in the development of the broader interactional sequence. For example, below the poster (Carl) while orientating his posting to a comment made by Jake that “Celtic man dont shag sheep:))” keeps the message within the theme of the thread. Just as Dede ensured her specific comment fitted within the developing theme of regionality by appending “married to an Englishman” to her sig, below Carl does similarly by moving from comment on Jake to reintegration of Celtic men

Still giving it plenty of wellie, eh Jake?  
I hope you’re not inferring that the Celtic man does not enjoy a good following!..... ;)  
You can’t pull the wool over my eye! ;))))

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 salutationary form similar to a letter or telephone conversation opening is employed:

Hello Leslie,

> Oh come on Dede, grow up!

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

And

>Wossgoingon?

Janice, 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 others: 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. For example, 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.

However, for address to be specific, like face to face interaction, it does not necessarily have to involve naming. For example, the message below uses the indexical "you" to orientate to whom the message is primarily addressed and who it is about.

The message <1998012819411777906@rumcom.co.uk>  
from Barbara Cowley <babs@rumcom.co.uk> contains these words:

> Having spen a year in Ulster during my late teens, I always found  
> Ulster men to be more than nice, oh those were the days:-)

I'll definately have to agree with you on that one:)

Unlike naming, the use of "you" has to be placed within a meaning-giving context. The embedding by Stewart of Barbara's posting and its framing as part of a previous posting by the use of ">" at the beginning of each line provides this information. The use of this regular newsgroup (and e-mail) convention acts not only as a context giver for the message but also marks the current poster as not the author of the embedded message and removes from them any responsibility for its text. This responsibility is reassumed in the move to non-embedded text.



was speaking generally, not personally. If you want to take this personally, and attack me, please do it by e-mail, not in public! I reject your smileys as adding insult to injury!

Leslie

Leslie, not only names Dede but refers to her as “you” and uses background knowledge of her job as a teacher gained from elsewhere in the newsgroup. This he does while claiming that he wants the debate to be conducted on an impersonal level.

Thus we can see that posters to rumcom.local are using address not only as a casual part of interactive pleasantries but to specific ends. They are using it as a way of orientating themselves as posters and readers towards the newsgroup interaction. In many ways this can be seen to have parallels with work done by Goffman on footing. Here Goffman is interested in the manner in which talk is used in order to secure any particular “alignment [that] we take up to ourselves and others present as expressed in the way we manage the production or reception of an utterance” (Goffman 1981:128).

Given the virtual nature of newsgroup interaction, all these categories must be constructed, recognized and responded to only through cues integrated into the text of the posting itself. Like the radio DJ, there is often no way in which a poster can know to whom or how many people they may be addressing through a single posting or how that may vary through a series of such. Similarly, even when address is highly specific and postings are directed at a single reader of the newsgroup there is not, in general, a knowledge or relationship prior to or beyond the virtual familiarity that the addresser and addressee have.

### **5.3 Broadcast Requests**

In RumCom.local posters do not only demonstrate their place within the online community via their using of first naming but, ironically, through the issuing of general calls to which any reader of the newsgroup can elect to respond to. Posters may broadcast to the newsgroup a request for advice with some problem that they are confronted with. 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

Although intuitively such a posting may not display any of the orientation towards the specific knowledge or types of address discussed above we want to suggest that it displays orientation towards RumCom specific interaction. For example, the posting does not have to announce itself as a broadcast request as it might need to in another non-sociability orientated groups. In information orientated newsgroups it is often considered good practice to mark a request as such in the subject line of the posting. In alt.2600.warez the FAQ offers the following advice to posters

**Q: What is the proper way to request?**

A: [...] The generally accepted format is "REQ: Program X version ## disk #, [archive name] filename.xxx"

alt.2600.warez Newsgroup FAQ:  
<http://www.invincer.com/2600W/FAQ.html>

Don's request demonstrates no such pre-sequencing but did lead 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) can only 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 searching for advice on computer buying, veterinary treatments, medical complaints and help sourcing and recalling song lyrics. However, these requests are not merely requests for advice but, in keeping with our view of interaction in RumCom.local outlined above, have an important value as an invitation to participate in sociable discussion. 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. This often contrasts with their experiences 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 Local. [*laughs*]...

This commitment to communicating a sense of connection 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:

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.

The absence of a "thank you" response can be "noticeable" because an expression of thanks marks the final phase of the "remedial interchange" (Goffman 1971) that the request initiated. It is a gesture of regard that brings the ritual cycle to an end.

#### **5.4 Playful Recontextualization and a License to Pun**

As suggested above, the organization of newsgroup messages and readers' orientation towards thread. It allows replies posted to a newsgroup 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. It is 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 (known colloquially as Brumm), and the now defunct children’s television programme, Brum:

> A bloody Toyah fan as well

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

Don

Going off-thread is appreciated by many of the keenest posters to .local, who 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 they progress. For example, the thread below uses a recollection of a popular childhood toy to provide an opportunity for sexual punning:

>> Does anyone remember knockers from the early seventies.  
Lauren! 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 RumCom.local. This 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. Unlike punchline jokes they tend not to have been previously committed to memory and seem to be produced in response to the developing thread.

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

How about - “once Dede and Laurne 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 within a social interaction in that it demonstrates that those involved are “‘alive’ to the situation” (Schiffrin 1977: 679). The puns only make sense given the backdrop of previous postings and the accepted licence to joke that is granted in Rumcom.local. Once again, the organization of the sociable interaction acts towards highlighting participants’ involvement not merely in the single message but in the development of the thread. Further, the dominance of double entendre in these puns helps them to act as bonding mechanism by appealing to a common cultural denominator.

## 5.5 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. Within the RumCom.\* hierarchy 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...”) - a secondary fact introduced in pursuit of the main topic of the thread. Usually, posters would only infrequently mobilize 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 in the paper are usually characterized 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 and the foundation upon which communication is built. For sociological analysis, however, we have to go beyond cataloguing the proprieties, the established and accepted guidelines for computer-mediated communication such as those set out by Rinaldi (1998), to examine the practices through which those proprieties are produced. Of course, the 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 as they build into thread and can be seen as both the means for maintaining sociable relations and as the vehicle of sociability itself. Through thread organization, terms and techniques of address, broadcast requests, playful recontextualization 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.

## References

- Baym, N. (1995) The Emergence of Community in Computer-Mediated Communication. In S. Jones (Ed.) Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community, London: Sage, 138-63.
- Brown, P. and Levinson, S. (1987) Politeness: Some Universals of Language Use. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Castells, M. (1996) The Rise of Network Society. Oxford: Blackwell.

- Castells, M. (1997) The Power of Identity. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Castells, M. (1998) End of Millenium. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Durkheim, E. (1969) Individualism and the intellectuals. Political Studies, 17, 14-30.
- Gifford, R. (1980) Sociability: Traits, settings and interactions. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 41(2), 340-47.
- Goffman, E. (1953) Communication Conduct in an Island Community. PhD dissertation, University of Chicago.
- Goffman, E. (1955) On Face-Work. Psychiatry, 18(3), 213-31.
- Goffman, E. (1956) The Nature of Deference and Demeanor American Anthropologist 58(3), 473-502.
- Goffman, E. (1961) Encounters. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Goffman, E. (1971) Relations in Public. London: Allen Lane.
- Goffman, E. (1981) Forms of Talk. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jones, S. G. (1995) Understanding Community in the Information Age. In Jones (Ed.) Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community. London: Sage, 10-35.
- Rheingold, H. (1993) The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier, Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Rinaldi, A.H. (1998) The Net: User Guidelines and Netiquette, <http://www.fau.edu/netiquette/net/>.
- Schiffirin, D. (1977) Opening Encounters. American Sociological Review, 42 (5), 679-91.
- Simmel, G. (1949) The Sociology of Sociability. American Journal of Sociology, 55, 254-61.
- Simmel, G. (1950) The Sociology of Georg Simmel. Ed K.H. Wolff. New York: Free Press.
- Watson,J. (1958) A Formal Analysis of Sociable Interaction. Sociometry 21, 269-80.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Some more sophisticated news clients such as Forte's Agent offer the option to organize posts by author, files size or posting date as alternatives to subject. However the default remains subject orientated.

<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.