

Online Communication & Social Norms

On October 2, 1999 Gene Weingarten decided to enter an AOL sports chat room. He assumed the role of an “lurker” and quickly proceeded to display a lack of communicative competency in relation to the norms of that linguistic community. In other words, he wanted to see how far he could stretch the boundaries of what was acceptable conversation and what wasn't within the chat room. Weingarten found that there were extreme bounds that exist within that virtual space that caused less than a creative and intelligent conversation. By comparing norms of behavior found in chat rooms with Blum-Kulka's analysis of politeness, this paper will show that the behavior that Weingarten discovered was created by the terms of service that apply to chat rooms, and by the social norms that held the chat room together. By trying to stretch the boundaries of what was acceptable within that space, Weingarten created instances of speech divergence and was restrained by acts of social control imposed on him by the AOL authorities.

Weingarten was struck by the lack of intelligent discourse being created before his eyes at break neck speed. This was partially created by the chat room's norms (outlined in the AOL Terms of Service Agreement) that limited the length of user's comments to 92 keystrokes, and therefore limited extensive commentary. Weingarten decided to post questions that were well outside the

bounds of that structure like: “Anyone a fan of latter 19th Century French impressionist painters?” in an attempt to see if there what response would occur. He was fully aware of the setting of the discourse, and the anonymity that the Internet provides was most likely one of the impetuses for his bold behavior. He knew that any social stigmatism he experienced would only affect his virtual identity and would not negatively affect his personal and professional life (unless he decided to write an article about his experience). By “lurking” on the conversation for a period of time before becoming engaged, he established that the users for this chat room were enthusiastic about NFL football, and that they displayed a particular style of written communication that was similar other forms of online communication (short phrases versus long dissertations).

He also observed that the goals of the chat room seemed to encourage the creation of a space where enthusiastic fans could hurl insults and abbreviated comments at each other in rapid succession. One user would post a comment about his hate of another team, and a fan from the other team would respond back in defense. The tone of their conversation was mostly competitive and insulting toward each other. The norms that exist during face to face verbal encounters that make insulting others socially unacceptable were not applicable in this space. Most of the insults were not aimed at individual users, but toward groups of fan, and short comments and a lack of formalized politeness phrases littered this particular chat room. This space encouraged a streamlined way of communication where the conservation of text and typing allows for faster

processing of ideas. Any words that were typed that didn't focus on the content at hand were considered wasteful, and especially with the character limits posed by AOL chat rooms (and others) polite phrases are almost universally discarded.

Until Weingarten entered the chat, the discussion was predictable and followed a pattern found in most chat rooms with a singular focus of keeping the focus within the topic area. Weingarten quickly learned that whereas the AOL chat room did not have geographical boundaries, its participants still adhered to the norms and rules associated with traditional speech communities. As defined by Saville-Troike in the Ethnography of Communication, a speech community is a group within society that has anything significant in common and has a full range of role opportunities (Saville-Troike , 1989, p.18). Within this chat room, the users were bound together by their love of sports, and the discussion was structured by the role of the volunteer hosts as well as by the company's monitors. The ultimate authority over group behavior was the volunteer host, but any user could decide to volunteer to be the host.

Those who were regulars in the chat room exhibited a communicative competence within the expectation of who may speak and when within the room, but also toward the appropriate topics of conversation. For all of AOL's chat rooms, the topics that are available for discussion are outlined in the AOL Term of Service Agreement which prohibits vulgarity, specific 'anatomical sexual references' and other objectionable discourse with a section about "off-topic" chat which are deemed disruptive. (Weingarten, 1999) What is most interesting is that there is also a clause that forbids the "discussion of or complaints about

AOL Terms of Service policies, discussion of and/or complaints regarding freedom of speech issues.” It is this last restriction that makes AOL more limiting in its allowance of communicative variance than other online chat areas.

As a means of comparison, USCity.net Chat had the following as its boilerplate term of service agreement:

"Forum" means a chat area, bulletin board, or e-mail function offered as part of this site. You shall not upload to, distribute through, or otherwise publish through this site any content that is libelous, defamatory, obscene, pornographic, threatening, invasive of privacy or publicity rights, abusive, illegal, or otherwise objectionable that would constitute or encourage a criminal offense, violate the rights of any party, or that would otherwise give rise to liability or violate any law.

USCity.net continues to outline their “online rules” which sound rather similar to AOL’s. Our specific online rules:

We don't allow obscene, racist, or sexually explicit language. We also reserve the right to remove postings that defame or insult anyone, as well as notes that are abusive or hateful. Any harassing notes or postings that might be construed as stalking will be deleted and made available to the proper law-enforcement officials. We also reserve the right to remove notes that are off the subject or not in English.

<http://www.uscity.net>

Here again, you find the “off topic” clause which in relation to preserving the community is essential. The only aspect that makes the sports chat room that Weingarten visited unique from all the other virtual spaces is its adherence to the topic of NFL football. Without adherence to the topic at hand, the users no longer have any similarity which maintains group coherence, and the whole social identity of the chat room which they joined is destroyed. It is therefore, not only the imposed norms of AOL that limited users (and Weingarten’s) behavior, but the shared social norms were also in jeopardy.

By posting questions about French painters, Weingarten was obviously encouraging off-topic conversations. And the “volunteer” monitor of the chat room quickly noticed the disruptions. Weingarten’s first attempt to disrupt the discussion resulted in an example of speech divergence from one of the users. The tone of the exchange changed once a specific user exhibited his dislike of Weingarten’s behavior. This user phrased a direct question at Weingarten: “Hey, what’s your problem?” Very quickly after this comment, the volunteer host informed all the participants that there was a way to eliminate from their screens the comments from a person they found annoying. Here one sees a very familiar social control act being utilized: an attempt to silence the user by ignoring him. Social control acts encompass a whole range of verbal behaviors aimed at affecting the behavior of others. These acts attempt to control the recipient’s freedom of speech and may result in a loss of social stature, and encourage the recipient to follow the rules of politeness. (Blum-Kulka, 1997, p.142). The volunteer host first initiated a social exile of Weingarten and he was then informed of the norms regulating the discussions within this space. Once Weingarten typed “Are you all idiots? Is there intelligent life out there?” he was muzzled by the host. Unable to send his messages to the chat room, Weingarten experienced the totality of the type of social exile that can occur in virtual spaces.

The existence of these types of social control acts in virtual space is one of the characteristics that support the argument that online communication can create and act like a “community”. According to Elizabeth Reid’s 1991 thesis

Electropolis: Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat for the
University of Melbourne, “(users) have evolved rules, rituals, and communication styles that qualify them as a real culture according to criteria defined by prominent social scientists.” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 181-182) As a part of these rituals, chat rooms have devised social mechanisms for regulating behavior (like reprimand, social exile and eventual termination) that are instituted by the host to maintain the environment of the chat. It was these norms that Weingarten rallied against.

Instead of accepting the norms of the discussions that occurred in this type of online space, Weingarten decided to continue to try to stretch the rules in an attempt to see where the line lies between acceptable and non-acceptable commentary. He was specifically interested in whether the chat was regulated by the users’ interests, or the rules established by AOL. He was interested in seeing if there were users out there who would like to carry on a deeper discussion about sports then the creation of insults aimed at other teams and their fans. Weingarten’s received an email from AOL threatening to discontinue his AOL membership, and upon talking to a customer service representative, he learned that if the topic of conversation had occurred naturally from the topic at hand, then his comments would not be outside the norms of the chat. This of course, only fueled Weingarten’s determination to see if he could get NFL fans to start discussing the metaphysical underpinnings of the game of football.

He found his opportunity to interject a “natural” divergence from the topic at hand when the discussion focused around a devastating spinal injury that one

player had recently occurred. Users started ruminating about the repercussions if that player died. Then, not quite innocently, Weingarten posted the question, “Does anyone here believe in God?” By shifting the conversation toward the spiritual, he discovered that other users within that chat found deeper subjects interesting. Of course, the host gagged both that user and Weingarten. This clearly illustrates that while the users of the chat room (if left to their own interests) would most likely take their commentary to a more in-depth level, the structure established by AOL and its volunteer host was not flexible toward the natural creation of discourse. On the other hand, if off topic discussion about spiritual matters were allowed, the topic might wander from sports all together and the core foundation on what the chat room was founded would deteriorate. Is there a chat without a topic? For the NFL chat room that Weingarten visited, the topic of discussion was paramount to its existence. Even though the users may not want to contemplate French paintings, they do want to talk ball, and their adherence to the topic at hand was structured by not only the norms established by AOL but also by the social identity of the group itself.

Works Cited*

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*APA Style