Chapter XLI
Form and Function of Metacommunication in CMC

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ABSTRACT

Online communities such as newsgroups and mailinglists are constructed around a common interest and a shared set of norms that regulates communication. These communicative norms can be studied either by observing the communicative practice of the participants or by analyzing what group members say about correct and appropriate behavior in that community (referred to as metacommunication). This chapter investigates the differing roles of metacommunication in online communities such as mailinglists, newsgroups, and online forums with an aim to provide a basis for the future analysis of group behavior. It explains how members are instructed about correct and appropriate communicative behavior, and how various evaluative means of metacommunication can negotiate these norms and contribute toward community building.

INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of online/virtual communities, researchers have been fascinated by the fact that people who are complete strangers, physically apart, and merely interacting via computer and the Internet, would readily engage in group activities as if they were meeting each other face-to-face. This raised questions as to how community building works in so-called "screen-to-screen" communication, how online community building differs from community building in real life, and what factors determine whether an online community will work and last, or not.

One way to examine group dynamics is to study what members of a particular community say about their community, and what they say about the behavior they expect to be displayed in the context of that community. This will be called metacommunication or metacommunicative behavior, respectively, in this chapter. Metacommunication uncovers what participants' subjectively expect from one another in a given context.

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The following chapter will first outline some pivotal concepts of this topic, that is, the notion of online community, the notion of community norm(s), and the notion of metacommunication. On this basis, the chapter will address two aspects of metacommunication in online communities. It will first investigate how users in online communities are instructed to "behave" correctly in order to become a fully accepted member of a community. It will therefore look at texts such as the FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) or the so-called netiquette (network etiquette) both of which are texts provided by owners and operators of newsgroups and mailinglists aiming to regulate interactions in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Then, it will focus on the metacommunicative behavior in the ongoing interactions of particular communities. How do community members address issues of norm violations and communicative offenses? Thus, various forms and functions of metacommunicative strategies will be identified.

The argument in this chapter will be restricted to self-organizing communities such as mailinglists (ML), and discussion forums on the World Wide Web, which will be referred to as online forums (OF), and newsgroups (NG), and exclude such services as chats, online games, e-learning environments or commercial environments because they follow other rules. Examples provided in this chapter are collected from English and German newsgroups and mailinglists[1].

BACKGROUND

The Notion of Online Community

What constitutes an online community has been treated extensively and controversially in various studies of CMC. The term stems from Rheingold's legendary work "The Virtual Community" where he presented an account of WELL, an early online community (Rheingold, 1993; see also Porter, 2004; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). This chapter will follow Baym's (2003) definition of online communities: she proposed that online communities are most adequately described as communities of practice, a term introduced by the anthropologists Lave and Wenger (1991) that refers to communities that are structured around a common activity. The common activity of online communities that focus on leisure activities, hobbies, or fandom is the exchange regarding the common interest (Porter, 2004). Online communities that are part of an e-learning environment or a work team, however, evolve around a common task.

The common activity of leisure-oriented online communities, such as the mailinglists, newsgroups and online forums investigated in this chapter, can be characterized by Rheingold's principles of the "collective goods" (Rheingold, 1993, p. 13, see also Kollock & Smith, 1996), which consists of (Rheingold, 1993, p. 13, quoting Smith, 1992):

- knowledge capital, that is, the exchanging of ideas and discussion of matters related to the common interest;
- social network capital, that is, the knowledge that there is somebody "out there" who is interested in one's ideas and thoughts and may be ready to provide support when needed; and
- communion, that is, friendly and satisfying interaction among members.

For the material presented in this chapter, those three aspects would translate as follows: The knowledge capital is the discussion of wines/Startrek, the social network capital is the knowledge and certainty that there are people in this particular group who are interested in the same topic and are ready to provide any advice on topic related matters, and the communion would be the harmonious discussion, the good feeling one has when having a relaxed chat or lively discussion about a common interest.

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