

Managing Her Flamingo: Adolescent Chatroom Moderator Communication

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Alice thought she had never seen such a curious croquet-ground in her life; it was all ridges and furrows; the balls were live hedgehogs, the mallets live flamingoes, and the soldiers had to double themselves up and to stand on their hands and feet, to make the arches. (Carroll, 1971: p. 78)

I had been a regular chatroom participant at Chat-Time Cafe¹ for two years, when I became enmeshed in the moderator culture in January 1999 (Geertz, 1995). At that time there were close to 70 moderators, at the close of 2001 there are 22. The story of the change is symbolic of the transition in the Internet culture from the oft-used Wild West metaphor (Rheingold, 1993) to a modern business model. While the story of the change is consistent throughout the site, this paper will focus on the adolescent chatrooms and their moderators.

Chat-Time Café is a virtual Internet channel where people communicate in real time via computer. In these synchronous communication events once chat has been initiated a user can enter typed text and the message will appear, as they entered it, on the computer screens of the other participants. Chat messages appear on the screen looking much like theatrical play scripts using text to convey the messages and any physical motions that create the action. Participants have three choices for addressing messages: 1) Participants can post messages publicly, for all to see, to all the other participants logged into the rooms; 2) Messages can also be addressed to a specific participant and can be viewed by everyone who is logged in; and 3) Messages can be sent privately so that only the sender and receiver see the message.

At Chat-Time Cafe participants create online personas utilizing avatars, nicknames, colors, and/or text placement on the screen (Scheidt, 2001), using standard HTML coding, to create chatroom characters. Figure 1, shows a simulated adolescent chatroom message frame including these features.

In Figure 1, two participants have posted messages to the chatroom; the numbers on the left are the timestamp that show when the chatroom software processed the message. The message from Ashley is a system-generated message that lets other participants know they have left the chatroom. The second message is an entrance statement that I entered to begin creating the character of Sweet Girl, “Strutting her stuff and checking out the room.” Sweet Girl is using a doll avatar, color fading on the nickname (from bright blue to purple), and centered avatar and text. Any additional

messages from Sweet Girl would have appeared centered in green in place of the entrance statement.



Figure 1

All Chat-Time Cafe participants began their chatroom experiences creating a character (or several characters), allowing for the articulation of fractured identities, and joining in the discussions in one (or more) of the now close to 200 chatrooms available at the site. I was one of the regular chatroom participants beginning in 1997, when the site had close to 10 chatrooms. I became a regular in one room and got to know the people who frequented that space quiet well. I also got to know the moderators who came to assist us when there were problems in the chatroom.

Moderators are volunteers that serve the following functions: facilitate discussion in the chatrooms; act as a filter for posted material, albeit after the posting; they are experts on chatroom operations; promote/market the site to potential members; help participants use the rooms in more general terms than those required as an expert; and act as a fireman putting out flames and online attacks (Berge, 1992). Moderators move around the site as needed, responding to requests for assistance in any of the chatrooms.

Having apparently impressed some of the more senior moderators, I was asked to apply for a position in mid-1998 and after some arm-twisting actually did apply for the position in late-1998. In 1999, when my selection was finalized, the most senior moderators selected new moderators. Selection was based on written answers to several questions including “Why do you want to be a moderator,” anonymous observation of the applicant’s behavior in the chat site, and lobbying by current moderators. In 1999, it was common for new moderators to introduce themselves including the chat nickname of the establish moderator who “got me in.” These connections included online and offline friendships or romantic relationships with establish moderators, as well as family connections. In my case two established moderators lobbied for my selection.

The selection process was slow with an average of six months between application submission and acceptance. The process was so slow that many good applicants dropped out of consideration out of frustration. A lucky few waited out the process and received a cheerful “you have been selected” email and began their introduction into the moderator culture.

Moderators use three primary communication channels to build group solidarity, pass information, and gossip. In addition there is also a moderator email listserv that is used to disseminate information to the group as a whole. For daily communication two, or more, moderators may share a chatroom and talk openly or privately within that space,

two moderators may communicate between chatroom using the “tele²,” or they may communicate outside the chat site on an instant messenger program - ICQ, <<http://web.icq.com/>>, being the program of choice.

ICQ, a peer-to-peer instant messaging system (Niese & Mook, 2001), allows two parties to communicate nearly instantaneously. ICQ allows messages to be passed between the moderators while they are in different chatrooms and outside the official logs that are maintained by the site. ICQ was the lifeblood of moderator cultural development and enculturation from the first day a new moderator is selected.

In 1999 experienced moderators conducted training, primarily in the adolescent chat rooms. All participants use their characters as part of a figurative language performance (Bauman, 1977) that in the adolescent chat spaces is directed and framed by the moderators. Each adolescent chat space has a defined topic, though most are fairly general, including; high school and college chat; and pre-teen chat. Within these spaces specific conduct is required: there is no use of inappropriate language, discussion of “adult topics,” or posting of inappropriate pictures. While all moderators perform the functions listed previously, moderators in the adolescent rooms are focused on three primary functions: acting as a filter for posted material; acting as a fireman putting out flames and online attacks; and helping participants use the rooms. The first two functions involve “warnings” and “boots.”

Warnings are verbal actions that alert the chatroom participant that they have broken a chatroom rule. The construction of the speech act followed a simple two part format, an announcement was made that the participant was being warned and for what infraction - language, content of the discussion, avatar, etc. Moderators use an overall phrasing that shows their personal style - from simple statements like "Clean up the language," to more humorous ones “Hey...YOU know...and I know that word is one of them nasty ones that ain't allowed.... do us both a favor and not use it huh.... I got a headache and my finger is tired from hitting this boot button" the message is clearly sent that the participant has broken a rule.

If the single warning was not heeded, the next step was a boot to remove the offender from the chatroom. Boots were accomplished using a special set of buttons visible on the browser and only available to the approved moderators. In 1999 the default time for a boot was set at 30 minutes, though the timer could be set for a lesser time span. In 2000 the default time was reset to 3 minutes, and the “mute” feature was added.

The mute feature allows moderators to silence participants. When the moderator uses the mute feature, the participant remains in the chatroom and can see the publicly posted discussions, but cannot respond. The mute acts as a filter, blocking whatever the participant’s attempts to post and instead posting “attempts to speak but nothing comes out.” Figure 2 shows a simulated mute message.



(20:30:55) JUST ANOTHER DANGEROUS DAN attempts to speak but nothing comes out.

Figure2

New moderators were initially allowed to only watch, incognito, as the experienced moderators handled an adolescent chatroom. Following this initial training phase, the trainee would be introduced to the rooms as an official trainee and allowed to “warn” with an experience moderator present. However, “boots” were only handled by the experience moderator. Throughout this phase the experienced moderator would

slowly step back allowing the trainee to assume more and more of the responsibilities for the chatroom, until the trainee was granted their own “boots.” The standard training period was two months, followed by a three-month probationary period.

During training, experienced moderators and the trainees hold open but formal communication in the chatrooms, while the actual training takes place via ICQ messages. The two track nature of moderator communication takes some trainees considerable time to master. The limited and formal style of speech acts between moderators in the chatrooms is in stark contrast to the profuse and informal style used in ICQ messages. ICQ messages from the experience moderator would advise the trainee when to issue a warning if the trainee had missed it, “Let “tempting tonya” know that thongs aren’t allowed on avatars,” or ask for their reasoning on something that is a borderline problem “What do you think of the nic “taste my flavors?” ICQ also accommodates the moderators meta discourse including discussion of message structure, word choice, and message timing.

Site history and lore are passed using ICQ messages, including stories about “the big break” when a former senior moderator broke away from the site in 1998 to create their own chatsite, taking other moderators with them. The break was so complete that the name of the new chatsite, and all the moderators who split off were filtered in the computer system. Anyone typing in the words was automatically removed from the site by the system and not allowed to return for 30 minutes.

Gossip about other moderators and chatroom participants were passed along the same channel, while publicly in the chatroom the moderators are the pictures of proper decorum. In 1999 when I was trained the main gossip revolved around which moderators were involved in romantic cyberspace relationships. The word was passed to new female moderators outlining which male moderators were considered Casanovas and best viewed at a distance. Male moderators received a list of which teenage girls could be expected to make passes at them in the chatrooms. Also, word would be passed that a chatroom participant was not what they seemed to be, i.e. males passing as females online, participants that were really crackers³ and would try to gain access to the new moderators computer systems, and which participants were considered problem children and to be watched at all times.

Training was a very ad hoc arrangement. Whenever a trainee had time to be online, they would find an established moderator and ask them if they were interested in helping them train. After a couple of weeks relationships formed and the training dyads solidified. In my case I primarily spent training time with two moderators⁴ - Samuel, and Gorgeous George. These two spent time teaching me the rules and how to act in a chatroom.

From Samuel I learned how to scan a line of text looking for the form of the characters that made up problem words, without taking the time to totally read the line. In a fast paced chatroom there can be in excess of 1200 chat messages posted per hour. The pace becomes too fast to both read all the messages and post the necessary replies and warnings in a timely manner. Speed is a highly prized attribute among moderators.

From Gorgeous George I learned to keep my wits and my sense of humor about me. Wit and humor are necessary when dealing with up to 30 adolescents in an anonymous environment that they see as allowing them the freedom to say anything they

want to anyone at anytime without repercussions. Having adolescents yelling at you using very vivid language was and is quiet common.

Adolescent say to Gorgeous George: What is the point of being a bitch to people you don't know anyway. I mean does it make you feel good about yourself or is this just a total power trip to you?"

Gorgeous George says to Adolescent: nahh...its only you I'm like that to...everyone else in the world loves me to death.... *chuckles*

Adolescent say to Gorgeous George: Ya right, are you fucking kidding me?

Gorgeous George says to Adolescent: well sunshine...since ya gunna be a nasty lil thing...you've now got a language warning...and if you continue down that little path to destruction...then I'm sure going to help you out the door at the end of it...and oh.... no....I wasn't kidding...I'm in the Guinness Book of records as the most loved moderator in South Eastern Tasmania...

At the completion of training the new moderators receive their boots...access to the button that allows them to boot wayward participants out of the chatroom. The graduation to full moderator status also came with the addition of a preprogrammed entrance statement that appeared each time the moderator entered a chatroom. For female moderators the statement "Enters the room wearing red laredo boots with silver tips." And for the males the statement was "Enters wearing steel toed boots." Both of these statements were markedly different from the regular participants unisex "Enters..." statement.

The trained moderators group can best be summed up as a loosely knit team of fully integrated mavericks, independent to a fault. Each with a personal goal to make their part of the Chat-Time Café universe the best place that they would like to chat. Each had their own point of view as to the proscriptions created by the rules and each maintained a different level of adherence to the rules as written, which meant that there were significant inconsistencies in how rooms were handled from one moderator to the next.

In January 2001 the definition of what was considered inappropriate changed in the adolescent chatrooms allowing more freedom for the participants. Prior to that time participants were not allowed to use words like "bitch," "slut," "asshole," or "fuck" in their messages. After the rules changed the only word from this list, still not allowed is "fuck." Limits had also been in place to restrict avatar and font sizes to specified maximums. These limitations were removed and more general statement asking that avatars and fonts not be "huge." The moderators in the chatrooms had previously curtailed flaming and fighting. After the rules change moderators were not allowed to break up fights and were told to instruct participants to utilize the computer systems technological "ignore" features so that participants could block others and would not see the posts of the participants in the argument.

The rules changes were made as a backlash to actual and proposed U.S. legislation including the Final Report of the COPA (Child Online Protection Act) Commission (10-20-2000), and Communications Decency Act (CDA) (2001). Based on the potential changing legal climate the concern was that strict moderation in the adolescent chatrooms would place the site under greater legal liability than a more relaxed hands off approach. Therefore the previous attitude of protection became one of buyer beware. An additional disclaimer was added to each chatrooms sign-in page “WARNING TO PARENTS Chat-Time Café is an adult oriented site and cannot guarantee the safety of children. Even with adult supervision this room may not be safe for children under the age of 18.”

The rules change set off a series of major realignments within the moderator group. At the time the changes were announced several moderators resigned in protest, arguing that the changes made the chatroom unfriendly places. Factions developed within the remaining moderators, solidifying one day and dissolving the next as new points of departure were found between the various views. By the middle of 2001, 20 moderators remained.

A new moderator trainee group was selected in May 2001. The primary tools for moderators’ selection remained intact, although only lobbying from the five senior moderators was considered. This change streamlined the selection process shortening the lag time between application and selection to four months.

As with previous trainee groups, the 2001 group quickly introduced themselves to the existing moderators and developed their list of ICQ numbers. However unlike previous trainee groups the five senior moderators and the Executive Senior Moderator handled all new moderator training. This change was made to better facilitate consistency and to create more bonded relationships between the senior moderators and the trainees, unfortunately this goal was not realized.

New trainees were anxious to fulfill their required training time but often could not find a designated trainer online when the trainee was available. Therefore the trainees would follow an established moderator as they performed their duties, watching and learning how they handled the chatroom, but not issuing warnings, as they would have had an official trainer been present. This consistent contact created dyadic clandestine pairings between established moderators and the new trainees. Rather than establishing better bonds between trainees and senior moderators, this change instead added a third communication track to the former two-track communication stream, which undercut the senior moderators role in training. With the new communication three-tier communication stream, moderator trainees communicated in the rooms with their trainers, via ICQ to the same trainers, and simultaneously communicated via ICQ with established moderators who were not allowed to function as trainers. During these clandestine communications, trainees compared notes with the established moderator discussing how situations they were facing in their training session compared to those shared by the pair during unofficial training. This third-tier created a new meta discourse that was not shared with the official trainers.

With the limited access to the official trainers, training time increased from two to three months. In an attempt to increase the quality of moderation at the chat site, a final test for new moderators was implemented. Trainees were required to pass an examination with the Executive Senior Moderator prior to completion of their training, a

gateway to receiving their boots. Due to multiple interruptions, in one case the test itself took four hours and consisted of roughly 50 questions. Each member of the trainee group passed the test and was awarded their boots.

In the light of the rules and organizational changes of 2001 the structure of inter-moderator group communication has changed significantly. Prior to 2001 the moderator listserv was an active part of each persons daily life. Insights, jokes, personal news, and information were passed from individual moderator to the group. Rarely a day went by when the list members received less then five emails. After the changes of 2001 the moderator listserv is rarely used and most often emails are sent from the administrative personnel to the moderator group, with only seven emails having been sent to the group from October 1 - November 30, 2001.

ICQ usage patterns have changed as well; previously most moderator's contact lists included all of the site moderator's access codes. After the organizational changes contact lists were restructured and contacts deleted so that only those codes the moderator considered valuable contacts within the moderator community remain. It has become unusual to find a moderator with a complete set of access codes for all 22 moderators.

The changes seen at Chat-Time Café in the three years since I joined the moderator group have taken a fast growing Internet company from it's early steps through it's development as a mature company reacting to changing business environments. While the changes outlined continue to position the company that is Chat-Time Café to succeed as an economic enterprise, it is difficult to acknowledge that the lose of the independent spirit that infused early days of the Internet is required as the company moves forward. The band of free spirits that made up the moderator group, who viewed themselves as independent arbiters of the new Internet communication forums that are chatrooms, are gone. Replacing them is a new team of individuals whose impact on the participant's chatroom experience is still in a formative state, however painful, the changes in moderator practice and culture discussed in this paper are a required part of the maturing of the company that is Chat-Time Café and the solidification of the business position in an increasingly more difficult Internet market.

Endnotes

1. The name of the actual Internet site used for this study has been changed.
2. The “tele,” a shortened version of telegraph, feature of the chatroom interface allows messages to be sent from one chatroom to another. The tele message, when it is received, appears in the regular chatroom frame and is addressed as a private message to the recipient. In practice it is similar to an instant messaging program
3. A cracker is a person who uses low-level hacking skills to break into a computer system without authorization. Often their purpose is to do damage to the computer system by destroy files, steal credit card numbers, and planting viruses, etc. (2000a)
4. All chat nicknames have been changed to protect the individual’s privacy.

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