

## "I THINK OF THEM AS FRIENDS"

### *Interpersonal Relationships in the Online Community*

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People start to read online discussion groups because they are interested in the topics of discussion. When people first start reading rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s.), they are attracted primarily to the wealth of information, the diversity of perspectives, and the refreshing sophistication of the soap opera discussion. Soon, however, the group reveals itself as an interpersonally complex social world, and this becomes an important appeal in its own right. For many, fellow r.a.t.s. participants come to feel like friends. . . .

When I asked them to compare r.a.t.s. to other groups on Usenet and other networks, nearly all of my survey respondents spoke in terms of the greater friendliness of r.a.t.s., indicating how this set the group apart:

As to other newsgroups, it doesn't compare to the other technical groups that I read. Not the same camaraderie. (Erin, 1991 survey)

People interact in this group. It is like having a conversation. Other groups have more caustic discussions. The people I have met from this

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group have been really nice. It's the first group I read, and it is pleasant. (Linda, 1991 survey)

The creation of friendliness in r.a.t.s. is not a given but rather a communicative accomplishment. . . .

### ◆ *Managing Disagreement*

People in r.a.t.s. are particularly aware that their sense of friendliness is demonstrated largely through a behavior they avoid. The computer often has been accused of encouraging hostile and competitive discourse. The widely noted phenomenon of *flaming* (i.e., attacking others) has been hypothesized to result from "a lack of shared etiquette by computer culture norms or by the impersonal and text-only form of communication" (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984, p. 1130). These scholars argue that rather than being mitigated, as often is the case in face-to-face disagreements (Pomerantz, 1984), online disagreements are exaggerated. . . .

Although flaming is common online, it generally is considered bad manners. Mabry (1997) analyzed 3,000 messages collected from many forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) and found that more "tense, antagonistic, or hostile argumentative statements" tended to be accompanied by more intense conciliatory behavior. McLaughlin, Osborne, and Smith (1995), analyzing a large corpus of messages chastising others' behavior, argue that Usenet standards discourage the wanton insulting or flaming of others. Despite this, flaming remains common in many groups. The r.a.t.s. newsgroup is not one of them, and this is inseparable from its friendliness:

I find this to be one of the most friendly and chatty groups on Usenet. Flames are very uncommon, particularly compared to rec.arts.startrek and rec.arts.tv. (Laurie, 1991 survey)

Comparing [r.a.t.s.] to other newsgroups: [It is] one of the nicer ones (less flame wars for the most part). (Lisa, 1991 survey)

The group in which I find the most flame wars (thus the least friendly and supportive, in my opinion) is a local group. . . . I would put rec.arts.tv.soaps right under rec.pets.dogs for friendliness, support, warm[th], lack of flame wars (in Y&R [*The Young and the Restless*] anyway, which is the only soap I watch and read about), in general, overall enjoyment. (Teresa, 1991 survey)

This tendency to explain friendliness in terms of flaming indicates that it is easy to be friendly so long as everyone is in apparent agreement; it is in the points of disagreement that friendliness is most challenged. However, at the same time as r.a.t.s. does not want disagreement, the group is, first and foremost, in the business of maximizing interpretations, a process that inevitably leads to disagreement, especially considering how overcoded the soap operas are. Rather than considering friendliness as accomplished through behaviors that r.a.t.s. participants avoid, I look in this section to the behaviors they use to construct disagreements that attend to the ethic of friendliness.

The potential for disagreement to damage the group's sense of solidarity was enhanced in the Carter Jones discussion. This (extremely friendly) post to r.a.t.s. from Anne indicates the problem that participants faced with this story line:

You know I realize that whenever AMC [*All My Children*] does a "heated" storyline, we all get "heated" too! We all agree tho, it's all the writers faults! :-)

Man . . . I'm really p\*ssed at those writers. This is too important a topic for them to give it the cosmetic-kissy-kiss treatment.

Oh and the cosmetics dept. too :-)  
I am truly sorry to those of you that have been in an "abused" relationship. My heart goes out

to you. I am very glad that you were smart enough to get out of it. Applause!

I won't say what I think of men who do it. The lowest of the low. This is just too deep a subject to even talk about on a computer. Carter is scum! But I guess John Wesley Shipp is ok :) I hope to see him a "good guy" sometime. (October 20, 1992)

Anne's comments that the group participants all get "heated" discussing a story line concerning subjects too deep "to even talk about on a computer" suggests that discussing this story line brought out emotions difficult to discuss even when in agreement. Such difficulty could only be enhanced when participants did not see eye-to-eye on the story line. Thus, the disagreements concerning this story line offer a revealing window into the discourse strategies that create and maintain friendliness in r.a.t.s.

#### MITIGATING OFFENSE

Most disagreements contained verbal components, or message features, that functioned to lessen their negative impact. Just over 40% of the disagreements used qualifiers that framed disagreements as resulting from differences in subjective opinion. Qualification leaves room for the poster to turn out to be wrong and the other right, reducing the threat to the other's position. In this example, the poster places qualifiers prior to and following the point of disagreement (the qualifications are in boldface):

Tell me, why did Brooke give Carter Jones an invite to Weirdwind, & if

She didn't **INVITE** him. They showed him at the door and the butler

**I may be wrong**, but **I thought** Brooke did invite Carter Jones. **I actually thought** he **may** be covering the event as a reporter. Seeing as how Brooke started the homeless shelter, **I would think** that would give her some say in who may attend a fund raiser. I do know she had a guest list and showed it to Carter. That's how he knew

Galen would be there. Anyway, at the door, he wasn't named as an invited guest, but he identified himself as being with Tempo magazine. (July 23, 1992)

From time to time, but not often, people apologize for disagreeing. This example demonstrates the apology:

**I'm sorry**, Anne my buddy, but I have to disagree with both you and Liz. . . . (October 19, 1992)

A few participants lessened the potential offense of their disagreements by explicitly framing their messages as nonoffensive. This technique, used four times, is when the poster explicitly keyed her activity as something other than confrontational.<sup>1</sup> In one case, this involved prefacing a contradictory assessment with "I think this is so funny." In another case, someone wrote "no offense to *Knot's Landing*" just before suggesting that *Cape Fear* had been a greater influence on the story line.

#### BUILDING AFFILIATION

As if it were not enough to actively lessen the negative force of one's words by showing respect and backing off one's claims, as these strategies do, many disagreeers articulated their disagreements in ways that actively built social alignment between the participants. For example, they frequently prefaced disagreements with partial agreements, a strategy that has been noted in face-to-face and epistolary interaction as well (Mulkay, 1985, 1986; Pomerantz, 1984). Fully 29% of the disagreements in r.a.t.s. were prefaced by partial agreements. Partial agreements generally were followed by words such as "but" and "though" or phrases such as "at the same time" that positioned what followed as disagreement. . . .

A second affiliative strategy in disagreement was the use of the other's name (used in 18% of the disagreements), as can be seen in this excerpt in which the poster

makes explicit the affiliative quality of naming with the phrase "my buddy":

I'm sorry, **Anne** my buddy, but I have to disagree with both you and **Liz**. . .

Participants also explicitly acknowledged the perspective of the other in 12% of the disagreements. . .

The single most common message feature of disagreements was elaboration, which occurred in 69% of them. . . Offering reasoning to support the writer's perspective also was more common than any of the offense mitigators or social alignment strategies.<sup>2</sup> Reasoning was given in 61% of the disagreements. . .

To summarize, instead of flaming, participants in r.a.t.s. attended to an ethic of friendliness by playing down the disagreement with qualifications, apologies, and reframings. They built social alignment with partial agreements, naming, and acknowledgments of the others' perspectives. They moved conversation rapidly away from the disagreement itself and back to the group's primary purpose of collaboratively interpreting the soap opera. It also is worth noting that there were relatively few disagreements over the story line—just under 10%—suggesting that one common disagreement strategy was to stay silent. The norms that protect interpretation seem to actively diffuse the force of disagreements and perhaps lead to their being voiced less often. . .

### ♦ *Ritualized Space for Friendliness*

#### TANGENTS

To this point, I have considered how the ethic of friendliness is attended to throughout the messages discussing the soap opera. Although sticking to the topic of the soap opera has obvious benefits for a group organized to discuss soaps, it does pose some problems for friendship, which rarely (if ever)

is so topically constrained. Talking only about soaps impedes the group's ability to become a bunch of friends. During the early years of r.a.t.s., when the amount of message traffic was more manageable, participants handled this by simply digressing, a practice that generally was tolerated. However, in the fall of 1991, when traffic began to expand dramatically, people who barely had time to read the posts pertaining to the soap operas began to voice irritation with having to weed through messages that did not even relate to the soaps. Someone proposed that the convention of marking a subject line with "TAN" (for tangent) used in other Usenet newsgroups be imported, a suggestion that was adopted almost simultaneously and with little further discussion.<sup>3</sup>

TANs can cover any number of topics. They often begin with the soap opera and then turn personal:

I like how story threads on the soap bring out story threads in people's lives that they then share on RATS (for example, stuff about children and pets in the various TANs). It's mostly light and fun. Even when it gets serious, it's still engaging. (Doreen, 1993 survey)

In other cases, the TANs share personal news. This post from one poster about another is typical:

Hi everybody—Just wanted to let you know that Cindy Dold and the BH [better half] have a new little baby boy! . . . Congratulations to Cindy and Norman, and welcome Charles! (October 16, 1992)

A post like this one is likely to result in a flurry of congratulatory e-mail for Cindy:

When something big happens (wedding, birth) that's made known to the Net, we do send each other e-mail. It's nice to get it, too. (Jane, 1991 survey)

The big "somethings" that people share in TANs are not always as happy as weddings

or births, but the group provides social support through darker times as well. One longtime poster's surprise birth announcement told us that she had lost the baby to sudden infant death syndrome within days of her birth. When she shared her tragedy with the group in a post inspiring in its grace and strength, I was not the only one in tears. Many of us were deeply moved<sup>4</sup>:

I like the personal tone of this news-group with people (mainly women) freely giving support and expressing care for one another. Recently, for example, Lisa's personal tragedy has touched my life most profoundly. (Doreen, 1993 survey)

Many people responded to Lisa, and it mattered to her:

I had really looked forward to telling everyone about my baby and getting their surprised and pleased reactions, for example, and it helped to know so many people cared when she died. :(Lisa, 1993 survey)

As another participant puts it, "We've developed a kind of family, and when good things and bad things happen, there's a lot of support out there on the Net" (Judy, 1993 survey).

Although I did not ask specifically about TANs, many people who responded to my survey explicitly pointed out their important role in personalizing the r.a.t.s. environment: "I also like the AMC TANs because it gives you a chance to get to know the poster and then people who post don't seem like faceless people on the other side of the country, they seem like a real person!" (Kelly, 1991 survey). Another participant's comment on the TAN offers a good sampling of the topics:

I find the subjects brought up as tangents almost as interesting as the soaps . . . for example, the cross section of r.a.t.s. who are cat lovers, Star Trekkers, etc. Some

of us have shared our birthdays, our taste in beer, and our butt size. . . . We know who has read GWTW [*Gone With the Wind*]. . . . We know who has PMS [premenstrual syndrome]. (Debbie, 1991 survey)

As the mentions of "butt size" and "PMS" suggest, the tangents often are used as a forum for discussing issues of particular concern to women including experiences with violence against women, worst dates, and whether or not to change names when marrying. Less gender-bound topics might include how early participants put up their Christmas trees, other television shows, and notorious court cases. TANs offer participants a space in which to broaden their discussion and, when it is called for, to provide one another with social support. The marking and maintenance of this space can be seen as an institutional acknowledgment of the group's commitment to friendliness. At the same time, the indication that the post is tangential in the subject line lets those participants who are not interested in the group's social dimension to avoid these broader interactions.

### UNLURKINGS

The last of the marked genres in r.a.t.s.<sup>5</sup> also is social in nature. Unlurkings, informally marked by the use of the terms *unlurking*, *unlurk*, and *lurker* in the subject lines, are posts in which new or rare posters introduce themselves to the group. These posts usually specify the poster's name, how long the poster has been lurking in r.a.t.s., the poster's occupation, the species and names of pets (especially cats, which are taken to be a common link among AMC participants), and almost always general opinions about AMC. This unlurking is typical:

It's me again. I wanted to introduce myself. My name is Kari Barnes. I am a PhD student at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh. I have

been watching AMC for several years. At first, it was during the summers in the mid to late 70's—back when Erica was involved with Nick and her marriage to Tom (this was while I was in high school). Then I watched during my lunch hour. With the help of my faithful VCR, I have not missed an episode in about 4 years. My husband likes to watch it with me sometimes, but he is not a big fan. I like to read the updates and the posts, but I do not always have the time to read them all. My husband and I do like to know what other AMC fans think of the storylines. That's it for now. (September 29, 1992)

Unlurkings are regular but not common. Unlurkings are introductions, flagging the entry of new members into the community and providing the others with the opportunity to welcome them. Responses to unlurkings work as a welcoming committee, encouraging new or returning participants to remain active voices by letting them know that they have an interested audience:

By the way, this is my second time unlurking. The first was yesterday when I sent a test message which actually made it. I don't have time to give you any background info on me at the moment—duty and deadlines call, but I wanted to alert everyone about the opportunity to see Jenny. Enjoy!! :)

Any time you have some to tell us more about yourself, Andrea, we welcome it. (October 14, 1992)

For at least some posters, it was the welcoming responses they received to their first posts that made them into regular participants:

I stopped on r.a.t.s. to check out what was happening on AMC since I never get to watch it, and the rest is history. I was hooked. I posted, and it was great getting responses from people welcoming me to the group. I'm more interested in the Net than in the show. The members are more like friends. (Monica, 1993 survey)

Like TANs, unlurkings have become institutionalized through being labeled. That the

only two identified genres that are not informational are interpersonal indicates this group's ongoing orientation toward fostering a group environment of friendliness.

## *Dyadic Friendships* ♦

The friendly nature of r.a.t.s. is further buttressed by a private but sometimes visible world of one-on-one friendships that have formed as participants move from public discussions to e-mail. A number of people who responded to my surveys indicated that they had formed a small number of close one-on-one friendships through the group:

I have met [two] friends, and I have met others who I consider [acquaintances], having not formed much more than that. (Anne, 1991 survey)

I e-mail daily with two other r.a.t.s. participants, and I consider them both close friends. Our relationships have expanded far beyond the discussion of AMC. I consider others on the Net-at-large to be friendly acquaintances whom I would enjoy getting to know better in a personal sense. (Carrie, 1991 survey)

Friendship pairs often develop out of Usenet groups. Parks and Floyd (1996) conducted a randomized e-mail survey of Usenet posters and found that 60.7% of them had established personal relationships through Usenet. Most had moved their interactions to e-mail and in some cases met face-to-face, as these two *Days of Our Lives* (DOOL) r.a.t.s. participants explain:

I've become good friends with several people I've met on the Net. One is now my housemate; another got me into square dancing; a third loaned me a car when I visited Portland recently. I'm sending Christmas presents to one r.a.t.s.'er in New Zealand for the second

year. I do a large amount of Net-related e-mail each day. None [has] become [a lover]. Yet. B-) (John, 1991 survey)

I tell them it's a place where a group of us from all over the world sit and discuss soaps online. They look at me funny, and I try to explain, but it's not easy! I also tell them that I found all my long-lost sisters here (the Peels from *DOOL*) and that we get together all over the country. Then they REALLY look at me strangely and say "You drive to meet people that you've never met to talk about a soap opera!!" And I say "Heck yeah!" (Lynn, 1993 survey)

. . . Although these friendships often are conducted below the surface, they are referred to in the public discussion. For example, when one r.a.t.s. participant meets another from a different location, one (if not both) will post a report for the others to read. In smaller ways, posters might demonstrate a dyadic friendship by referring to another by name in one's message. Thus, these private pairs of more individualized friendships bubble up into the group's environment. . . .

Friendliness in r.a.t.s. is just one example of the general tendency of ongoing computer-mediated groups to develop behavioral norms. Some online norms span wide groupings of CMC users. For example, Myers (1987a) writes, "There is widespread acknowledgment of a national BBS [bulletin board system] community—with both positive and negative norms of behavior" (p. 264). . . . Users continually reinforce the norms of their groups by creating structural and social sanctions against those who abuse the groups' systems of meaning (Mnookin, 1996; E. M. Reid, 1991). Groups have differing norms about sanctioning themselves. Smith, McLaughlin, and Osborne (1997) found considerable variation across groups in the tone of reproaches for *netiquette* violations. In r.a.t.s., not surprisingly, violators are given what one respondent calls "gentle reminders."

Face-to-face experience and the medium are two influences on the norms that come to be important in organizing practice in r.a.t.s. and, I would suggest, in other computer-mediated groups. Two other important influences on emergent norms in online groups are the characteristics of the participants and the purpose of the group's interaction. . . . At this point, it is illustrative to consider how the fact that most participants are women may influence the group's adherence to an ethic of friendliness.

Usenet, like most CMC, is populated by many more men than women, a fact that stems in part from men's greater access to the medium. Because men have greater access, computer-mediated groups, including Usenet, are likely to exhibit male styles of communication, so that even when women have access, they might not be comfortable or interested in participating. Ebben (1993), Herring (1994, 1996), Selfe and Meyer (1991), and Sutton (1994) are among those who have shown that many of the gender inequities of face-to-face interaction are perpetuated online, where women speak less, are less likely to have their topics pursued, and are seen as dominating when they gain any voice at all.

Savicki, Lingenfelter, and Kelley (1996) found, in a large random sampling from many Usenet groups, that the gender balance of newsgroups has a modest correlation with language patterns within them (although they stress that there clearly were many other factors at play). Groups with more men used slightly more fact-oriented language and calls for actions, whereas those with fewer men were more likely to self-disclose and try to prevent or reduce tension. Herring (1994, 1996) describes an online female style she calls *supportive/attenuated*, which "idealizes harmonious interpersonal interaction" (Herring, 1996, p. 137). In this style, "views are presented in a hedged fashion, often with appeals for ratification from the group" (p. 119). Herring's description matches well the disagreement styles of r.a.t.s. participants, suggesting that the

language practices in this group likely are influenced by participant gender. Given the concerns about gender inequities online, it is notable that r.a.t.s. is not only a place in which female language styles prevail but also a place in which there is considerable self-disclosure and support on the very types of female issues that provoke flame wars (if raised at all) in so many other groups.

The fact that so many women would come to this group in the first place stems from the gendered nature of the form around which they rally. Many aspects of the normative structure of r.a.t.s. come right back to the soap opera. Interpreting soaps is, after all, the group's primary purpose. It is hard to underestimate the influence of this purpose on the normative structures of r.a.t.s. For example, if one looks to the disagreements and compares the disagreements over interpretations to those over facts, one finds that all of the message features that lessen the threat of a disagreement and enhance friendliness are more likely to occur in disagreements over interpretations. . . . Disagreements over facts—what did or did not occur—challenge the participant's memories on truly minor issues. Disagreements on interpretations challenge the others' socioemotional standards and reasoning, a far greater threat. Loading such disagreements with protective wording demonstrates the group's orientation toward making it safe to voice interpretations.

One would not necessarily need safety to voice interpretations, but soaps . . . rely on their audiences to interpret them through reference to their own feelings and relationships. The discussion they stimulate often is quite personal. . . . There is a good deal of private and sometimes painful self-disclosure in the course of interpreting the soap opera. The richness that those disclosures provide is necessary for the soap's fullest collaborative interpretations. Thus, the group is invested in supporting these disclosures. This helps to explain how this group developed its social support function. That

social support has grown into tangents indicates the seriousness with which the personal is honored in r.a.t.s. as well as the pleasure that shared personalizing offers. . . .

## Notes ♦

1. In using the term *keying*, I draw on Goffman (1974).
2. Reasoning and elaboration often were difficult to differentiate. For coding purposes, *reasoning* was defined as something that fit into the sentence form "I disagree because \_\_\_\_." More important than the division of examples into one category or the other is that they serve similar functions in the group's disagreement practices.
3. This is a nice example of how interactive and easy the creation of ongoing group traditions can be.
4. Indeed, 5 years later, knowing that she has since had two healthy children, I still get choked up writing this.

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