It Takes a Jerk to Make a Conversation into an Archive

Julia Bullard
University of Texas at Austin
julia.a.bullard@gmail.com

Abstract

This preliminary study examines an online community’s open censorship moderation practice, revealing a concern for the quality of the archive produced by discussion board discourse. Moderator comments in a censorship sub-forum are examined to determine the rationale behind otherwise vague published rules. Instead of motivating participation with supportive administration strategies, the strict moderation practices in the elitistjerks.com (EJ) forums intervene in conversations in ways that prioritize the intelligibility and accessibility of the archive by being a “jerk” to bad contributors.

Keywords: online communities, moderation, censorship, archives

Introduction

The relationship between an archive and a discourse is fundamental to understanding infrastructures of knowledge. The relationship is mutually constitutive: an archive supports a discourse, but, over time, a discourse produces contributions that are added to the archive. This process is highly visible in online discussion boards in which all conversation occurs through shared records (Millen, 2000). However, not all engaging and valuable conversations create intelligible and accessible archives; rather, some intervention is needed to produce a usable archive out of a community’s discourse (Hansen, 2009). I examine an online discussion community, highlighting the centrality of the quality of the archive left by ongoing discourse to shaping the practices of moderation. Interestingly this exposes a clear value in elitist, seemingly high-handed behavior that runs counter to the idea that moderators in online discussion forums are primarily concerned with motivating participation, a common assumption in the online communities literature (Kraut & Resnick, 2012).

The elitistjerks.com (EJ) discussion board is devoted to the practice of theorycrafting, in which video game players engage in rigorous experimentation and modeling of the game software’s underlying rules to support optimal in-game practices. Theorycrafting occurs predominately through discussion in third-party player forums in which players set the rules by which information is shared and organized. This paper looks at one of the major modes of control used in these sites, that of human moderation of user posts. The rules that govern submissions in this community are explicitly non-negotiable, and there are no traces of debate to examine regarding their meaning (Butler, Joyce, & Pike, 2008), but moderator comments on infractions reveal their own interpretations of otherwise terse policies. I will examine how the published infractions in EJ invoke a more substantial code of conduct than the published rules suggest, and indicate a concern for the maintenance of an intelligible and accessible archive.

The EJ moderation practices comprise a knowledge management strategy that reflects the information needs of its members. I propose that the EJ forums be regarded as a successful example of user-driven management of information, one that suggests that user-generated content can be organized effectively absent professional intervention. User-driven information management strategies are not limited to folksonomies or tagging; the moderation practices of the EJ forums demonstrate a different mode of information management in information creation.

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Related Research

While there is little research that directly addresses the effect of moderation practices on discussion boards resembling EJ, three growing bodies of knowledge suggest ways of understanding the phenomenon: e-democracy, information creation, and theorycrafting.

E-democracy and Open Censorship

The impact of moderation practices on the quality of online discussion is particularly important to the potential for e-democracy, the role that internet technologies might have in supporting information access and open communication necessary for civic engagement. E-democracy research has shown that moderation practices are a delicate but vital component to a well-designed deliberation space (Wright & Street, 2007, Wright, 2009, Coleman & Moss, 2012). Scott Wright (2009) warns that silent or “covert” moderation in particular can “create a conspiratorial atmosphere as messages are removed without explanation” (p. 237). “Open censorship” is seen as a constructive alternative in which a moderator replaces posts that have violated published rules with messages explaining the nature of the infraction (p. 236). Open censorship manages the conversation by pruning inappropriate content and creating concrete examples of published rules.

Information Management for Intelligibility and Accessibility

Moderation can also be a preemptive means of information organization for retrieval. Huvila (2011) states that the challenge of managing a wealth of user-generated information must be addressed by improving information creation and information organization. A focus on information creation can facilitate information retrieval as users-as-authors learn how to “reduce the complexity of information and its expressions” (p. 238).

Huvila (2011) emphasizes that problems of information retrieval have their roots in information creation. “If the motivation for creating information were maximum intelligibility and accessibility”, he states, “problems would hardly exist to such a degree now” (p. 240). Instead, other motivations determine the form of documents, such as the need to manage daily life, to communicate status, or to signify an accomplishment (Trace, 2007). The more narrowly a discussion forum defines its purpose as intelligibility and accessibility of information, the more of these alternative motivations will be weeded out in their moderation practices.

Theorycrafting

Theorycrafting, as the pursuit of accurate models of hidden game rules, values intelligibility and accessibility above the other information creation purposes posed by Huvila and Trace. Personal motivations are subordinate to the community goal of producing reliable and actionable knowledge. Among the information resources available to World of Warcraft players, the EJ forums’ are regarded as the most reliable, which has been attributed to their strict posting standards (Thomas, 2009, p. 40). The major theorycrafting threads of EJ, which are grouped according to in-game class, contain approximately 750 threads totally nearly 400,000 posts.

The primary users of EJ and theorycrafting data are hardcore players who engage in instrumental play, defined as the pursuit of the optimal mode of play directed at the most difficult goals in the game world (Taylor, 2006). As an example of “productive play”, theorycrafting resembles the work of engineers experimenting on tools and tuning them for greater performance (Nardi, Pearce, & Ellis, 2008), or of scientists engaging in scholarly communication (Nardi et al., 2008, Steinkuehler & Chmiel, 2006). The collaborative and rigorous nature of these tasks requires different modes of communication than usually found in discussion forums, including greater intelligibility and accessibility.
Current Study

This study will examine how the practice of open censorship transforms the discussion board into a suitable communication system for theorycrafting, and how moderator comments on infractions both educate users on proper conduct and show concern for the quality of the archive.

A close reading of open censorship traces – found in the “Banhammer” sub-forum – will answer the following questions:

- How is open censorship used to create and maintain a usable archive out of conversation?
- How can values such as information accessibility, intelligibility, and critical thinking be expressed through open censorship?

Research Design

As a pilot study to a more comprehensive analysis of the Banhammer sub-forum, I selected a 3 week section of Banhammer threads. On the EJ forum index, the Banhammer sub-forum is explained as:

“Those who A.) can't contribute; or B.) have broken shift keys; or C.) think atleast, ofcourse, noone, or lol are actual words, will eventually find themselves in here.”

Each Banhammer thread represents one moderator’s response to a single user’s post, and includes a description and assigned penalty for one or more infractions against the site’s rules. A “Forum Rules” page linked from each sub-forum gives short explanations of each rule (Forum Rules, 2010). The Banhammer subforum contains approximately 50,000 threads, the vast majority of which consisting of single posts. The three-week period between March 21, 2012 to April 11, 2012 included 69 threads.

Thread contents were first coded according to the rules broken and the severity of punishment. While the sample included infractions for nine out of the ten forum rules, moderator comments were only coded for infractions of the vaguest rules:

6. Do not post unless you have something new and worthwhile to say. [Not Worthwhile]
7. Do not beg for hand-holding. [Begging]

Moderator comments were coded in a grounded theory approach, in which labels were suggested by the text rather than matched to an external taxonomy (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). At this pilot stage of the analysis, the focus was on deriving broad concepts from the moderator’s explanations and proposing a tentative thesis as to the larger purpose of this open censorship strategy.

Analysis

Clutter

One of the moderators posting “Not Worthwhile” violations used the term “clutter” to describe the problem with offending posts, while others described similar offending posts as “useless”, “adding very little”, or content they “don’t care” about. These descriptions occurred in approximately one quarter of the threads. The idea of clutter is particularly relevant to the function of the discussion board as an intelligible, readable, accessible body of knowledge. Some sub-sections of the discussion board include a “sticky” post advising contributors to a topic thread to “read the last 5 pages to be sure the topic you had in mind hasn't recently been covered”. Clutter posts dilute the informative content of topic threads so that it is less likely that “the last 5 pages” will include recent answers to good questions, and make the experience of reading through a thread in preparation to ask a question a more tedious process, which in turn might lead fewer posters to follow this directive, which would lead to further clutter posts, ad nauseum. Clutter posts endanger the community standard that a finite amount of reading is a worthwhile investment and will answer most questions. Clutter posts can also be seen as a social dilemma phenomenon: an EJ user with a specific question can put in a minimal amount of effort and get an answer to their very specific question, or they can read through the accumulated information and deduce from general principles a specific solution, and avoid reducing the precision ratio for the next individual who conducts a search on a similar issue.
Effort & Questions: Search and Research

Half of moderator comments accuse the poster of not putting in enough effort to find relevant information before posing a question to the community. Often, this is described in terms of “doing your research”, “searching for the answer”, or “read more”. Moderators also chastise posters for not using appropriate external resources, including database websites and tools created by community members to perform calculations based on player data.

Moderators also single out questions that – while they may represent an information need appropriate for the thread – are not constructed with enough effort to be answerable. Usually this is described as “not enough” information in the question. Moderator comments describe a phenomenon similar to Taylor’s (1962, 1968) compromised information needs. The posters have access to more contextual information about their information need than they share, producing questions so general that they are either unanswerable or have the appearance of “Begging” because there is no evidence that the poster has yet put any effort into figuring out the answer for themselves. Unlike the traditional in-person reference interview, the discussion board post is not synchronous, takes longer to negotiate back to a formalized need, and takes place in public document where such an exchange would create clutter. By removing these posts, moderators pre-empt any exchanges to clarify the question, and dissuade users from asking for help before investigating on their own.

Effort & Answers: Hard Data

Effort is also an issue in answers to questions. A smaller cluster of “Not Worthwhile” Banhammer threads deal with answers that do not meet a standard of effort and quality. A representative example of this type states “Test before posting, not the other way around”. Moderator comments repeatedly call out posters who engage in speculation, who present anecdotal evidence, or who rely on gut feelings as support for their conclusions. These posts are classified as “not adding anything new or worthwhile” because they do not meet the standard of reliable information valued by the community. “Bad” answers, at best, will be part of the clutter that increases the tedium and effort required to read through a thread or reduces the precision of a search on a particular topic. At worst, they are not differentiated from conclusions based on testing and “hard data” and lead players to make bad decisions in-game. EJ, as a discussion board, does not have the “up/down” voting mechanics or reputation scores of Question & Answer sites. There are few cues about authors that signal cognitive authority, and users must judge posts on their own merit, largely relying on their presence in an EJ topic thread as a sufficient indicator of quality.

Punishment & Pruning

The difference between the rationale behind the two kinds of infractions can help explain the relationship between the rules and the severity of the punishment given. Half of the “Not Worthwhile” posts were Warnings with a 0 Points value, whereas almost all of the “Begging” infractions received a 1. Many of the “Not Worthwhile” Banhammer threads can be classified as clutter. They do represent bad habits of posters, but largely well-meaning habits – expressing appreciation for useful information or mistaking the proper thread for a particular kind of question. Those receiving 0 Points describe easy-to-fix issues, largely matters of understanding policy and etiquette. These posts are moved to the Banhammer to demonstrate the nuances of posting etiquette and to prune unnecessary posts from the topic threads.

The “Not Worthwhile” threads that do receive Infractions and a majority of “Begging” threads are more indicative of attitude and effort than etiquette. The moderator’s role is not only to remove the clutter from the flow of the original thread but to punish the poster for engaging in this type of behavior. These posts consist of “lazy” questions that ask the community to answer hyper-specific needs that are unlikely to be relevant to future users. They also include answers based on unscientific forms of evidence, such as speculation, anecdotes, and affect. This latter class of posts endanger the community by increasing the possibility that users will follow bad advice, reducing the overall reliability and reputation of EJ as an information resource.
Conclusion

This exploratory study has shown how the open censorship policy of EJ moderators has adapted a relatively unstructured discussion board system into a rigorous space for information dissemination that produces a searchable, readable, and usable archive for those users willing to put in a reasonable amount of effort. By strictly enforcing a rule against asking situation-specific questions, the moderators improve the precision of search functions within their site, and deter users who would avoid putting in the effort of conducting searches themselves.

It is telling that, despite the disadvantages, discussion boards remain a major location for theorycrafting information and activity. The collaborative writing and editing features of wikis are an obvious alternative, but an early attempt to collocate theorycrafting conclusions in a wiki-driven system was eventually abandoned in favor of maintaining the discussion-based format alone (Theorycrafting Think Tank, n.d.). A possible explanation is that forums support a conversational mode for scientific argument that is not featured in wiki systems. Theorycrafting continues to occur on a discussion board system that is familiar to the community, is highly accessible, and supports unstructured, informal contribution, but through human content moderation practices maintains the intelligibility and accessibility the community needs.

As a pilot study, this analysis was conducted on a narrow range of posts, only 69 out of over 50,000 in the sub-forum’s archive. These findings have informed an ongoing study, in which content analysis from multiple coders is being applied to a larger sample taken from a full cycle of activity in the site – between two major expansions of World of Warcraft. This larger study will be able to confirm the general concepts and priorities identified in this study, and to ask further questions. The larger sample will make possible analysis at the level of individual moderators, and whether interpretations, priorities, and policies have changed over the last 3 years of the site. It may also reveal how effective these policies have been in mentoring active contributors, or whether they merely chase off unwanted members. We must also investigate what about this community makes the elitist jerk management style work, while the literature suggests positive reinforcement and motivation.

At this stage, EJ can be understood as a successful and highly visible example of how strict moderation can adapt a seemingly ill-suited system to the particular needs of a community. For this “hardcore” leisure community, high quality, accessible information is necessary to support a high standard of play. It also supports the future “work” of theorycrafting in that moderation practices seem to support those who put in the most work – both by punishing contributors who fail to meet their standard of rigor and effort, and by disallowing questions that would take advantage of their generosity by subjecting them to ever-more specific queries.

References


