Managing Deviant Behavior in Online Communities

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Abstract

Wherever groups of people gather, norms for appropriate behavior emerge, and some people chose to violate those norms. What is an exercise of free speech to one person, to another is disruptive, harassing, racist, or worse. For groups that communicate online, a range of technical and social mechanisms are available to help create a climate conducive to meeting the group's stated mission. How do designers of online systems decide what kind of conduct is acceptable? How are these expectations communicated to members? How can designers help prevent and manage deviant behavior? What are the implications of corporate control of content for ideals of free expression? This panel brings together experts from media theory, computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL), computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW), and online entertainment to explore current issues in this complex research area.

Keywords
Deviant behavior, norms, online communities, community standards, socio-technical systems.

ACM Classification Keywords
H.5.3 Group and Organization Interfaces

Introduction

At CHI 1994, Amy Bruckman organized a panel on "managing deviant behavior in virtual communities." Twelve years later, participation in online groups has expanded and diversified. Online communities are no longer the province primarily of academics, engineers and college students—people from all walks of life and all parts of the globe can be counted as active participants. And not surprisingly, deviant behavior has persisted. What have we learned in the last twelve years about these issues? This panel will address that question, with an emphasis on audience participation and interactive discussion of real-world examples.

A Complex Socio-Technical Design Problem

In 1994, we identified two key tradeoffs/continua in approaches to managing deviant behavior online: social versus technical approaches, and centralized versus decentralized approaches. We can now add a number of new dimensions to the analysis:

Cheap Versus Expensive: There is a growing recognition that this is fundamentally a financial question. Staff time is expensive. Any approach that takes staff time costs money. Technical solutions tend to be less expensive than social ones.

Risk Tolerant Versus Risk Averse: In some environments, it's acceptable to allow inappropriate behavior to take place, and respond when users report it. However, particularly in sites that cater to children, it may be important to make sure that inappropriate behavior doesn't happen at all. Commercial sites may also need to protect their "brand image." The degree of risk tolerance strongly shapes the plan for management of deviant behavior on a site.

Open Versus Closed: In an open system, individual freedom of expression is maximized. However, total freedom includes the freedom to be disruptive and worse. Where we have lower risk tolerance for deviant behavior or lower budget for management, openness of the system must typically be reduced as well.

Prevention Versus Management: Strategies for preventing problems or reducing their frequency are as important as ways to deal with them once they occur.

Each of the tradeoffs described above will be discussed by our panel, in the context of addressing real cases.

Format

Our session emphasizes audience participation and discussing real cases. Before the conference, we will use email to solicit stories of actual online behavior problems. Additional scenarios will be solicited at the session from the audience. At the session, after brief introductions from each of us (5 min.), we'll discuss the solicited problems. We'll select problems representing a variety of types of online environments, and types of problems. For each scenario, we'll start by asking for audience input: Have you seen situations like this? What did you do about it? Then we'll get input from the expert panel on how to handle the situation, how to redesign the site to prevent problems like this in the future, and what broader lessons we draw. We'll conclude the session with a short (3 min.) statement from each panelist commenting on the content of the discussion, and identifying key issues for future research.

Panelists

Amy Bruckman (Panelist and Moderator)
Keeping Kids Safe Online: It is an unavoidable reality
that there are people online who want to hurt kids.
Then again, there are similar people in the real world.
How much risk is acceptable for kids of what ages? How
do we teach kids to be safe users of the Internet? In
recent years, commercial sites for kids have become so
risk averse as to remove almost all interactive content.
At the same time, kids are spending more time online,
but using sites and tools not designated "for kids" (and
hence with few or no safety precautions whatsoever).
Amy will discuss issues raised by online environments
for kids.

Biography: Amy Bruckman is an Assoc. Professor in the
College of Computing at the Georgia Tech. She and her
students in the Electronic Learning Communities (ELC)
research group do research on online communities and
learning. She is the creator of online sites including
MediaMOO (a professional community for media
researchers), MOOSE Crossing (a constructionist
learning environment for kids), and The Turing Game
(an identity game, winner of Global Information
Infrastructure Awards in the Arts and Culture
category). Amy received her PhD from the MIT Media
Lab's Epistemology and Learning group in 1997.

Catalina Danis
A Business Perspective: Most employers feel a
responsibility to safeguard the workplace environment.
The public nature of expression available through the
Internet causes apprehension to some employers. Many
worry that employees will "misbehave" and create
difficult situations that will jeopardize the company's
relationship with their employees, business partners

and clients. As a result, some employers are reluctant
to deploy social technologies to their employees. Can a
business deploy online communities without undue
concern that its employees will violate its standards of
behavior? Catalina will relay her experiences from a set
of behavior problems that emerged on a site for IBM
interns, and in a three-day, company-wide discussion
forum with 50,000 participants.

Biography: Catalina Danis is a researcher in the Social
Computing Group at IBM's TJ Watson Research Center
in Hawthorne, NY. She studies people's work practices
and designs applications based on IBM's advanced
technology to support them. She has been working in
the area of collaboration and social computing since
2000, where she has studied small work groups,
enterprise organizations, loosely organized Internet-
based groups and adversarial collaboration. Catalina
holds a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology from the
University of Chicago.

Cliff Lampe
Categories of Misbehavior: Slashdot, a news and
discussion community, has had long experience with
user misbehavior. Some forms of misbehavior on
Slashdot are relatively harmless, while others are
devastating to the operation of the site. Typically,
misbehavior that focuses on deception or classic trolling
cause minor disruption, and can in fact be valued by
some members of the community. Misbehavior that
uses technological tools to disrupt the community by
flooding messages or affecting the interface can be
more destructive. Cliff will discuss how some theories,
focusing on economics, may be used to understand the
different types of misbehavior that occur on the site.

Biography: Cliff Lampe is an Asst. Professor in the department of Telecommunications, Information Studies and Media at Michigan State University. His research interests include the use of rating systems in online conversations, how online interactions are translated into offline activity, and online user misbehavior. Besides working with Slashdot, Cliff has studied online communities such as Everything2, Newstrust, and Facebook. Cliff received his doctorate from the University of Michigan's School of Information.

Janet Sternberg
A Media Theory Perspective: Managing deviant behavior online turns out to be not so different from offline, a view stemming from the conviction that life online and offline forms a continuum. Beyond remediation of deviant behavior in online environments, prevention is equally important. The usual question asked about deviant behavior is why do people misbehave; however, the more revealing question is why people do NOT misbehave. A useful answer comes from sociologist Erving Goffman, who identified our desire to "fit in" and behave appropriately, even when among strangers, as a fundamental imperative in almost all social situations. One way to reduce deviant behavior, therefore, is to promote civil behavior: to encourage people to want to "fit in" so they will be less inclined to misbehave.

Biography: Janet Sternberg earned her doctorate in media ecology with Neil Postman at
New York University, with a dissertation entitled
Misbehavior in Cyber Places: The Regulation of Online Conduct in Virtual Communities on the Internet (2001), inspired by her experiences on Internet Relay Chat (IRC). As IRC channel operator as well as server operator, she managed groups on the international DALnet IRC network (1994-2000); in addition, she directed and hosted JazzIRC live chat sessions with major artists at the Blue Note jazz club in New York (1995-98). Currently, Janet is Asst. Professor and Assoc. Chair of the Dept. of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University.

Chris Waldron
Millions of Users, No Support Staff:
CartoonNetwork.com has a U.S. audience of more than seven million unique users a month. Support for the site is handled by two to three staff, who devote only part time to the task. Because we offer our products for free, there is no budget for support. This means that we must design around potential problem areas. If there is even a possibility that someone can use a feature to harass another user, we must either eliminate that feature or redesign it. Chris will provide examples of design decisions made to eliminate deviant behavior as well as examples of deviant behavior that have emerged despite those designs.

Biography: Chris Waldron has been developing web applications since 1994, when he began teaching writing in the Networked Writing Environment at the University of Florida. Most recently, he's been directing the technical group at Cartoon Network New Media. He has lead many web projects including a few redesigns of www.cartoonnetwork.com; the creation of Cartoon Orbit, an online trading card community for kids; the Emmy-nominated Operation: B.E.S.T., a large gaming activity based on the hit show Codename: Kids Next Door; and a Friendster-like social network application for AdultSwim.com