Definitions and Meanings of Online Lurkers

Noella Edelmann
Danube University Krems, Austria

INTRODUCTION

An overview of the definitions of lurking and shows that there is a broad range of definitions and approaches, from authors that see lurkers as a problem or an online behaviour that needs to be suppressed or changed, to those that see lurkers as active online participants. Some definitions are unclear and mix positive and negative descriptions. It is important to be aware of the different definitions and meanings that are available, and how they are used to describe behaviours and users in the online environment.

BACKGROUND

The verb "to lurk" derives from slang for "method of fraud," and means to lie in wait (as in ambush), to move furtively or to sneak, to go unnoticed, to exist unobserved or unsuspected ("Lurk", 2012a). Some synonyms for lurking are hiding, sneaking, crouching, prowling, snooping, lying in wait, slinking, skulking, concealment, moving stealthily or furtively ("Lurk", 2012b).

Lurking has always been a very popular online activity that leaves no traces (Whittaker, Terveen, Hill, & Cherny, 1998). In the context of the online environment it is often understood as reading but not contributing to the discussion in a newsgroup, electronic network or community. Many agree that lurkers often represent the largest group in the online environment, but there is little agreement on the definition of lurking, even in numerical terms: lurkers are those who "never" post (Nonnecke, Andrews, & Preece, 2006; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004), post infrequently (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2006), have not posted in recent months (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000), or have not made a contribution in the first 12 months after subscribing to a list (Stegbauer & Rausch, 2002).

It is important to state at the beginning that lurkers are not non-users. Non-users are those people who do not use any information and communication technologies, due to a lack of financial resources (Martin & Robinson, 2007), poor education or lack of skills (Livingstone, 2004), emotional reasons (such technophobia, Van Dijk, 2005), resent using it (Selwyn, 2006) or because they don't want to use the technologies. Lurkers are neither non-users nor do they represent the unconnected, those who "are out of the loop, socially and otherwise" (Sypher & Collins, 2001, p. 101). Lurkers do use technology, they do log-in and do visit sites.

Lurkers can represent over 90% of the online group, it is known that they access and login into sites, regularly reading the postings and blogs, and so their silence has made them the "silent majority" (author n.n., 2010; Nielsen, 2006; Stegbauer & Rausch, 2002).

By being silent, anonymous and not contributing visibly, lurkers are deemed to be inactive, peripheral or non-productive (Nonnecke et al., 2006; Leshed, 2005; Nonnecke & Preece, 2003, 2001), non-public participants or hard-to-involve participants (Strout, 2011; Andrews, Nonnecke, & Preece, 2003).

Katz (1998) has suggested that lurker may be users that do not participate publicly as they do not understand the language, rituals or norms of the particular community, as harmless, e.g.

(the) lurker does not participate in normal forum discourse, but he's out there...watching, reading every message. He is usually quite harmless, and more often than not his silence reflects a natural reticence rather than sinister motives. If a fight breaks out he will quietly observe to avoid revealing his position. (Reed, n.d.).

But more often than not, the term is often used to describe participants who hang around, are sinister,

annoying or selfish free-loaders who take advantage without contributing or reciprocating (Smith & Kollock, 1999), cyber-tricksters "lurking the Web and luring the gullible" (OECD, 2003 p.145).

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Negative Definitions

Lurking is often defined in terms of social loafing or free-riding. These phenomena are common to many collective action problems, and describe the tendency to avoid contributing while benefiting from others' efforts (Olson, 1971). According to Ledyard (1995), in a wide range of settings people contribute less to the public good but consume more than their fair share of common resources.

In information-sharing environments, this means that some contribute less information than others. Ostrom (1990) believes that lurkers get the benefits of belonging to the group without giving anything back or committing themselves. Ling et al. (2005) suggest that people will exert less effort on an online collective task than on a comparable individual task. Lurkers are thus "*characterised by a reluctance, or lack of readiness, to contribute*" (Cranefield, Yoong, & Huff, 2011, p. 487), and their behaviours are deemed antisocial and unacceptable. The success of the online community is often seen as dependent on active participation and contributions, enticing current members back and new ones to join, so lurkers are seen as a threat to the success of an online group and its activities:

the existence of 'lurkers' may lead to (the) group fading, as some active participants may be disheartened to continue with the discussion when they fail to get any feedback, verbal or non-verbal, from others (Cher Ping & Seng Chee, 2001, p. 58)

Lurkers as free-riders are deemed to be a problem, as their behaviour "*results in unbalanced contribution: some enthusiasts contribute while others enjoy those contributions without reciprocating and eventually enthusiasm will erode leading to the slowdown or even demise of the group or community*" (Rafaeli & Raban, 2005, p. 71). Whilst it is recognised that not everyone needs to contribute for a group to be success-

ful (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001), many communities try to prevent lurking, as it is seen as unnecessary for communication, an obstruction exhausting bandwidth, a "*scourge that prevents successful collective efforts*" (Antin & Cheshire, 2010, p. 128).

The goal of most online communities is discussion, interaction and collaboration, so there may be justification for negative definitions. But negative definitions represent only one approach to understanding online users, and they tend to dismiss lurkers as less valuable than other users (Strout, 2011).

Positive Definitions

Lurkers spend many hours online, thus may be well-informed and familiar with the issues being discussed, even if they never visibly post or reply directly. They may engage in behaviours which are not immediately visible yet still have an impact. According to Nonnecke and Preece (2000), lurkers can emphasise strongly with the issues in the online community and see themselves as part of the community without posting but by engaging in other behaviours such as reading, listening and learning. People spend many hours lurking, may know the topics of the conversation and key players of the online community well, feel that they belong to the community even though they have never visibly posted (Soroka & Rafaela, 2006; Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004).

Nonnecke et al. (2006) wonder whether visible participants (posters) really are always more engaged or engaging than lurkers? Contributive behaviour is often seen in terms of a dichotomy between those who participate and those who lurk (or "free-ride"), but such a dichotomy may be too simplistic (Antin & Cheshire, 2010). Many lurk because reading and browsing is enough (Andrews et al., 2003), and as readers they are engaging rather than trying to take advantage of others' efforts (Antin & Cheshire, 2010). Muller (2012) sees lurkers as "*social readers*," engaged in "*social reading*" (no page ref.), where reading is not a solitary, unconnected, unproductive action, but a social activity that occurs in a social context, involves other people, and contributes to the social worlds of readers, authors and organisations. Reading is understood as an activity everybody does, and Muller suggests that everybody is a lurker, as we all read before we engage in another activity. Lurkers' behaviours can also be used

Related Content

Mobile Enterprise Architecture Framework
Zongjun Liand Annette Lerine Steenkamp (2010). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/mobile-enterprise-architecture-framework/38997

Design of Health Healing Lighting in a Medical Center Based on Intelligent Lighting Control System
Yan Huangand Minmin Li (2023). *International Journal of Information Technologies and Systems Approach (pp. 1-15).*
www.irma-international.org/article/design-of-health-healing-lighting-in-a-medical-center-based-on-intelligent-lighting-control-system/331399

Visual Identity Design for Responsive Web
Sunghyun Ryoo Kangand Debra Satterfield (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition (pp. 8079-8086).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/visual-identity-design-for-responsive-web/184503

Web Navigation Systems for Information Seeking
Guangzhi Zheng (2015). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Third Edition (pp. 7693-7701).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/web-navigation-systems-for-information-seeking/112472

Board Games AI
Tad Gonsalves (2018). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Fourth Edition (pp. 144-155).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/board-games-ai/183729