

Codes of Ethics in Virtual Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The development of the World Wide Web has created new opportunities for interpersonal interaction. The Internet allows one-to-one (e-mail), one-to-many (Web sites, e-mail lists) or many-to-many (*online discussion forums*) interaction, which represent a unique feature in comparison with traditional communication channels (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996). On the other hand, the Internet has specific characteristics, such as:

- **Interactivity:** The Internet offers multiple possibilities of interactive communication, acting not only as an interface, but also as a communication agent (allowing a direct interaction between individuals and software applications)
- **Transparency:** The information published online can be accessed and viewed by any Internet user, unless this information is specifically protected
- **Memory:** The Web is a channel not only for transmitting information, but also for storing information—in other words, the information published on the Web remains in the memory of the network until it is erased.

These characteristics permit the development of online or virtual communities—groups of people with similar interests who communicate on the Web in a regular manner (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Goldsborough, 1999a, 1999b; Gordon, 2000). Many studies deal with the ethics of research in Cyberspace and Virtual Communities (Bakardjieva, Feenberg, & Goldie, 2004), but very few publications relate with the *Codes of Ethics* used in Public Discussion Forums (Belilos, 1998; Johnson, 1997). Other specialists have analyzed specific categories or uses of online discussion forums, such as online learning (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003; DeSanctis, Fayard, Roach, & Jiang, 2003) or the creation of professional communities of practice (Bickart & Schindler, 2001; Kling, McKim & King, 2003; Millen, Fontaine, & Muller, 2002), and in this context, have also discussed briefly the importance of netiquette and forum monitoring (Fauske & Wade, 2003, 2004). The difference between these online communities and public discussion forums is the degree of control exercised on the functioning and purpose of the forum by a specific individual or organization. This article

attempts to investigate, analyze and present the main patterns of the codes/rules of ethics used in the public discussion forums, otherwise known as Newsgroups, and their influence on the profile and functioning of the community.

THE ORGANIZATION OF DISCUSSION FORUMS

The discussion forum is a Web-based application that functions as a worldwide bulletin board (Fox & Roberts, 1999). Each discussion forum has a specific topic, or a series of related topics, and there are literally thousands of newsgroups available on the Internet, covering virtually any issue (Preece, 2001; Rheingold, 2000).

Typically, online discussion forums use a three-tiered structure (Bielen, 1997):

1. **Forums:** Focus on individual topic areas, such as classifieds or current news
2. **Threads:** Created by end users to narrow a discussion to a particular topic, such as a car someone is looking to buy or a comment on a previously posted message. A thread opens a new topic of conversation. Once the topic is created, anyone can continue the ongoing conversation.
3. **Messages:** Individual topic postings. A message is often a reply to someone else's message, or users can post a message to initiate a conversation (thread).

An interested person can access the messages transmitted by other members of the discussion forum, post messages on the same discussion forum or start a new thread of discussion. Usually, in order to post a message or start a new thread, participants are asked to register first; however, many discussion forums are totally transparent, since anyone (members or visitors) can access the archived messages and read them.

Most discussion forums are monitored by people (monitors and administrators) and/or software applications (e.g., programs that automatically censor specific words from the posted messages). The monitors are usually volunteers that have a good knowledge of and interest in the topics discussed (Preece, 2000).

CODES OF ETHICS IN DISCUSSION FORUMS

Ethical rules of discussion forums are usually displayed in two formats:

1. **Explicit Codes of Ethics:** These are presented under titles such as Terms of Use, Guidelines, Forum Rules, Terms and Conditions, Web Site User Agreement or Forum Policy. Very often, the ethical rules are just a topic among other legal disclaimers and definitions; in other cases they are a stand-alone text that does not include any other legal information. The link to these guidelines is easily identifiable, as the members of the discussion forum are expected to read them before engaging in online interaction.
2. **Implicit Ethical Rules:** In this case, no clear indication is provided regarding the ethical rules that have to be respected by forum members; however, indirect references are made in the frequently asked questions (FAQ) section regarding the possibility of censoring members' messages by replacing specific words with a string of "*." In other sites, the ethical rules are limited to a general principle or "Golden Rule," such as "We should do unto others as we would have them do unto us," from which the members can derive the desirable rules of ethical behavior.

When a site hosts multiple discussion forums (e.g., Google Groups), the ethical guidelines officially published by the site usually have a standardized style that might not properly apply to every group active on the site. Also, the site may indicate that it does not monitor the content of specific postings. Sometimes, members of a particular group attempt to create and enforce a specific ethical code for their group, in order to fill in this organizational gap. The attempt is seldom successful, since the member initiating this action does not have any official, recognized authority. The reactions of fellow members to such an initiative are very diverse, ranging from constructive dialogue to ironic criticism.

THE CONTENT OF ETHICAL CODES FOR DISCUSSION FORUMS

The ethical rules used in discussion forums usually fall into one of five general categories:

1. Rules that concern the good technical functioning of the forum. Since the discussion forum is sup-

posed to be an open (and in most cases, free) board for expressing and exchanging ideas and opinions, some members might have the tendency to abuse it. To counter this tendency, participants are forbidden from:

- a. Posting multiple messages
- b. Inserting in their message long quotes from previous posts of other members, or entire articles downloaded from the Web—as a rule, the member is expected to edit the text, providing only the relevant quotes or an abstract; and if absolutely necessary, providing a hyperlink to the article of interest
- c. Inserting pictures or sound files in their messages
- d. Posting files that are corrupted or contain viruses

All these actions occupy substantial computer memory, and slow down or damage the general functioning of the discussion forum.

2. Rules concerning the content of the posted message. Members should not include in their post:
 - a. Content that is not relevant for the subject of the discussion forum (crossposting)
 - b. Defamatory, obscene or unlawful material
 - c. Information that infringes patent, trademark, copyright or trade secret rights
 - d. Advertisements or commercial offers, other than those accepted by the group (since some discussion forums have a commercial purpose)
 - e. Questionnaires, surveys, contests, pyramid schemes or chain letters, other than those accepted by the group (since some discussion forums have a data collection purpose)
3. Rules concerning the purpose of use. The members must not use the site to:
 - a. Defame, abuse, harass, stalk or threaten other members of the same group
 - b. Encourage hatred or discrimination of racial nature
 - c. Practice flaming or trolling
 - d. Engage in flame wars with fellow members
 - e. Excessively criticize the opinion of other participants (although some sites do not include this advice for restraint)
 - f. Advertise products
 - g. Conduct surveys
4. Rules pertaining to personal identification issues. The members should not:
 - a. Refrain from providing all the information required for their identification within the discussion forum

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