

THE CREATION OF FOLK CULTURES ON THE INTERNET:
A PROPOSED METHODOLOGY OF INVESTIGATION
WITH CASE STUDIES

BRUCE LIONEL MASON



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THE CREATION OF FOLK CULTURES ON THE
INTERNET: A PROPOSED METHODOLOGY OF
INVESTIGATION WITH CASE STUDIES

by

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A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate
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the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis follows in a long tradition of Folklore Studies that have focussed on the relationship between technology and folklore. In this case I examine the use of the Internet as a medium of communication which can be used to facilitate the formation, maintenance and propagation of folk groups. Consequently this thesis interrogates the potential for folklife online. To do this, I have conducted a “virtual ethnography” of an online group of fans of the English Association Football team: Middlesbrough Football Club.

The study presented here is an exercise in the examination of the methodology of virtual ethnography as much as it is an examination of the case study at hand. It is also an examination of a potential intellectual framework for a folkloristic study of culture online. Consequently this thesis assays three main tasks. Firstly it contextualises the Internet as a ‘place’ in which folklore can be studied. Secondly it assesses virtual ethnography as a methodology for the study of folklife online and, thirdly, it applies the methodology to the study of an online group.

The research draws upon the “ethnography of speaking” and applies it to online communication. It does so within a tradition of interest in orality and literacy as applied to computer-mediated communication. The football fan group was chosen as a case study to enable the investigation of a complex set of online behaviour that seemed to challenge notions of what constitutes oral and literate behaviour online. It is my contention that complex negotiations of identity and group norms are encoded in emergent communicative rules and that the resultant group’s folklife problematises many long-held notions that posit an egalitarian ethos for such groups which is grounded in the depiction of the Internet as a communications medium that lacks key communicative features.

Acknowledgements

There are many people whom I wish to acknowledge. This thesis has taken a long time and I have travelled down many fruitless paths during its gestation. During that period so many have provided me with inspiration, intellectual and emotional support that there is really no way to adequately do justice to them all. I have been fortunate in the number of people who have, perhaps, had more faith than I have had in myself. The strengths of this work would be fewer without their help. The failings in this document, however, are mine alone.

Above all I wish to acknowledge the role of my supervisor, Diane Goldstein, in helping me get this work to a stage where I can actually compose acknowledgements. We may not often see eye to eye but that is precisely why I asked for her as a supervisor in the first place. I also wish to thank my committee members, Peter Narváez and Paul Smith, for their work in helping iron out many weaknesses in earlier versions of this document.

I wish to thank Memorial University's School of Graduate Studies for their financial support of my PhD fellowship and the A. G. Hatcher fellowship, Guigné International for their award that funded the personal computer I used to collate data and The Buchan Award committee for funding to help present early findings at conferences. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Sharon and Cindy, the department's administrators, for endless help in getting files transferred, forms filled and boxes ticked. Finally, I wish to

thank Paul Atkinson and Amanda Coffey of Cardiff School of Social Sciences for support at various times when I needed to take time off from my position there to focus on the thesis.

This thesis could not have been written without the help of all those who participated in my fieldwork. To all those who bore my questions with good grace, I offer thanks. In particular I wish to acknowledge the pivotal role that Tim Lloyd, the owner of the email list that forms the focus of my research, played. He died far too young. I never met him but he answered my questions with good humour and ran a list that provided, for many of us, a link to a far-off home.

During my time working on this thesis I have benefited enormously from conversations with fellow travellers in Folklore, virtual ethnography, hypermedia ethnography and George Street. I particularly want to acknowledge Christina Barr, Robin Grant, Bella Dicks, Louise Madden and Michael Robidoux. I owe a very great debt for intellectual and logistical help to Joy Fraser, without whom this thesis would still be a collection of pixels.

In closing, I wish to dedicate this work to two remarkable women. Elaine Johnston has “worked her fingers to the bone” (un)complainingly and proof-read drafts so closely that I began to dread the requests for more chapters and the subsequent, dreadful, pink ink. I owe that woman a lifetime’s bathroom cleaning. Julie Mason—mum—has been a constant and a constant inspiration in my life. To survive what she has undergone and come back fighting each time is truly inspiring.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
List of Tables	vii
Introduction	viii
Scope of the study	x
Chapter guide	xiii
Chapter 1: Internet	1
Introduction	1
A Cultural History of the Internet	2
A World Before Cyberspace	2
The Hackers	6
The First Computer Networks	11
The Subverted Net: A Vernacular Viewpoint	18
The Hacker Thesis	19
Licking the Opposition	23
Hackers and Hippies	26
Nukes and Networks	28
Inventing Cyberspace	32
Chapter 2: Cyberspace	34
Introduction	34
Real Community	35
The Disappearing Folk	37
Virtual Community	47
Communication and Virtual Community	55
Idealism and Virtual Community	64
Place and Virtual Community	67
Summary	74
Chapter 3: Method	75
Introduction	75
The Internet and Qualitative Research	76
Studying Culture Online	79
An Ethnographic Approach	81
Virtual Ethnography	93

Virtual Principles	102
On The Way to Virtual Ethnography	107
The Ethnography of Communication	109
Case Studies	117
Chapter 4: Football	119
Introduction	119
Middlesbrough Football Club: The Not So Mighty Reds	121
The Mailies and the Boro List	126
Football Explained	130
The Ethnographer's Anorak	137
Going to the Wire	163
Summary	184
Chapter 5: Half-Time	186
Virtual Travails	186
The Visible Virtual Ethnographer	193
Summary	196
Chapter 6: Fans	197
Introduction	197
Topical Talk	198
Ian Digs a Hole	208
Bandwidth and The Sig War	216
Coda: It's the End of the List as We Know It	223
Who We Are	227
Where Do We Come From?	229
Local Rivalries	235
It's Grim up North	240
NOBBS	245
Summary	251
Coda: The Peoples' Republic of Teesside	252
Chapter 7: Talking Football	255
Introduction	255
Spelling Trouble	256
The Mystery of the Missing O and the Extra S	258
Spelling Norms	273
Playful Spellings	277
Regional Forms	280
Communicating Online—Oral or Literate?	283

Writing as Technology	285
Orality vs. Literacy	290
Computer-Mediated Communication	295
Discourse and Speech Community	306
Summary	312
Chapter 8: Conclusions	314
Introduction	314
Of Pubs and Fantasy Worlds	314
Virtual Ethnography, Really	324
Where were the Folk?	330
In Closing	335
Appendix A: Example Welcome Messages	337
Monday October 30 th , 1995	337
Monday March 4 th , 1996	341
Thursday May 9 th , 1996	344
Monday December 16th, 1996.	347
Current Welcome Message Retrieved August 16 th , 2006	350
Appendix B: Sample Glorantha Digest	354
Bibliography	366

List of Tables

Table 1 Email totals for the Boro list 1995-2002	139
Table 2 Postings summary: April 1995	144
Table 3 Postings summary: February 1996	146
Table 4 Postings summary: May 1997	148
Table 5 Postings summary: May - September 1997	150
Table 6 Low frequency posters: May - September 1997	152
Table 7 Postings summary: May 2002 - 20 days	155
Table 8 Postings summary: August - September 2002	225

Introduction

I'm so depressed¹

The Internet has been described as, among other things, an inherently playful medium (e.g. Danet, "Text as Mask"). There is, however, probably no less playful a medium than the PhD thesis and that is just one of many tensions and contradictions that riddle this work. A few years ago, I almost abandoned the whole enterprise as I became more and more disillusioned with the inevitably partial and frozen nature of the text I was trying to write in comparison to the dynamic ferment that pervaded (and still does) every element of the Internet as a technology and new cultural medium. Coming from an ethnographic perspective that valued holism and completeness in the production of authentic insight it seemed, frankly, impossible to deal with even a fraction of what was occurring in front of me. It seemed to me that my findings appeared likely to be out-dated in the short time between research and writing. Even if I could square those circles somehow, the ironies inherent in describing what appears to be a quintessentially postmodern form of unwritten activity in a very traditional, written document threatened to undercut any possibility of saying anything *important*. What I was involved in seemed to be anything but playful and I certainly I wasn't having any fun.

¹Marvin, the Paranoid Android. (From Douglas Adams's *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, of course).

The irony for me was that I had embarked upon this exercise because I was both excited by the new technology and looking forward to be able to do fieldwork with an email list that I would have happily read for pleasure anyway. I had planned, to the best of my ability, to make the research and writing of this document as enjoyable as possible. And, as every fresh, eager PhD student does, I planned to revolutionise the field. I hadn't, however, planned for "Internet years" and the contingencies of real life.

There is a saying that Internet years are somewhat like "dog years"—that one year on the Internet is the equivalent of seven 'real' years. If so, this thesis has taken a life time. What initially I had expected to be a thesis focussed around the shock and unfamiliarity of the new has now acquired an unexpected and unexpectedly useful historical dimension. Where once I had worried about the implications of doing a folklore study of brand new technology with nascent cultural norms now I find myself with a temporal depth to my work that is more familiar to those of us used to analysing the role of tradition. At some point in the last decade, the Internet became normal and we stopped talking about it. Now, it is possible to walk past a bus stop and see "www.metrobus.com" printed on the side. Fifteen years ago, that would have been so much gibberish. Adverts for "spam filters" and "pop-up blockers" no longer need explaining and if someone refers to "googling" it does not sound like a particularly bad line from a science-fiction novel. When I started my research, Google did not exist, "Windows 95" was the state of the art and the cognoscenti claimed that the Internet was going to change everything.

According to some, the Internet is the most significant technological development of the last fifty years (e.g. Barlow; Rheingold) while according to others, there hasn't even been a "computer revolution" let alone an Internet one (e.g. Hakken). Whatever the case is, there is no doubt that the Internet is an ongoing technological development with global implications. It is also the case that studies of the Internet have struggled to define what exactly it is that is being studied. Are we studying the Internet as "artefact" or cultural domain? Does the Internet represent a step on the path to transhumanism or is the development of the Internet less significant than the telegraph? Is the Internet the hardware that produces "cyberspace" or is it no more than an over-hyped telephone? Does cyberspace exist? Has cyberspace always existed? Populist discussions of the Internet tend to devolve into Manichean prophesising, and when I set out on this study I made a deliberate decision to try to avoid the wilder, wild-eyed prognostications of theorists in order to embark on what I thought folklore studies does best: to look at real people living everyday lives and performing the myriad acts of identity and creativity that constitute our lives. The only difference is, I did it online at a time when it was still a relatively contentious thing to do.

Scope of the study

Christine Hine differentiates between the study of the Internet as a carrier of culture and the study of the Internet as a product of culture (14). Although the situation is far more complex than a simple dichotomy, this characterisation provides a useful starting point in outlining how one can conduct Internet research. This thesis documents the results of an

ethnographic study which examined the creation of culture within a fairly new Internet-based email list for football fans: the “Boro List”. The intent was to observe and interact with the fans via the email list and document my experiences. In particular I was interested to determine whether it would make sense to think of the individuals involved as forming a “virtual community” (Rheingold). Were the members creating everyday culture online? How were issues of personal identity, tradition and group identity being negotiated in a communications medium which was likely to be new to the majority of the members?

I chose the list for reasons which were a mix of the personal, pragmatic and principled. Primarily, I was interested in the Boro List because I was looking for an email list that would be relatively new and therefore, I hoped, give me a chance, to see the behaviour evolve with time. Additionally, I was interested in working with an email list which seemed to show a high degree of oral behaviour. By this I am referring to the debates around orality and literacy in communications, especially those triggered by the work of Walter Ong (*Orality and Literacy*; “Writing”) who had proposed that communication via computer networks formed what he termed “secondary orality”—a new oral culture based on print. Finally, I wanted a list which appeared to be the main point of contact for its members: ideally one with a global membership. The Boro List matched all these criteria; it had started just a few months before I began my research, was full of banter, chanting, joking and talk about the club and the game, was run from Hong Kong and seemed to have quite a diverse set of members.

I had joined the football list purely for personal reasons before I started the research. I am a Middlesbrough football fan.² I was born in Middlesbrough, UK and have supported the club—albeit often distantly— for most of my life. After moving to Newfoundland to start my PhD, I spent some time trying to find a way to follow the fortunes of my club from afar and found it in the shape of the Boro List. I originally joined the list during the while I was drawing up my research proposal and it was only after a period of time looking at other options that I realised that the Boro List was an ideal match. Additionally, my membership of the list provided me with a chance to work as someone who, if not an insider, was already somewhat known to the members. I had enough of a feel of the membership to be fairly confident that they would not be unduly resistant to becoming members of the study.

My intent was to conduct a “virtual ethnography” of this group. I am using the term to refer to an ethnographic study conducted primarily or solely via the Internet. It is thus an ethnography of “the virtual” and not some type of ‘partial’ or ‘incomplete’ or ‘not quite’ ethnography. In this case I wanted to conduct the ethnography solely via virtual means so that the study would be an exercise in applying the methodology under fairly extreme conditions. For this to work it was important that the members’ main contact with each other was via the group. Clearly, the members had lives beyond the email list

²Football here is referring to the game widely known as “soccer” in Canada. Technically the game is known as “Association Football” as opposed to other variants such as Rugby Football, American Football and Australian Rules Football. Throughout this thesis I will refer to Association Football as football. If I need to refer to other codes of football I will use their full-name e.g. “American Football.”

but by focussing only on the list I hoped to put the method to the test and, to an extent, ignore the members' lives when they were not online. This, I hoped, might also generate some insight into one of the understated dilemmas facing Internet research: is the net such a radically new medium that it must be treated as a cultural domain in its own right with an *Alice Through the Looking Glass* division between the online and offline, or does it make more sense to situate our lived experiences of being online as integrated with the totality of our everyday life?

Consequently, this thesis helps address three issues. At heart it is a study of over a year spent online with football fans, sharing their experiences and documenting my insights. It is also an exercise in methodological experiment and, I hope, this modest piece of research can help ground some of the more abstract theorising about what it means to "be" online.

Chapter guide

The first chapter presents an overview of the development of the Internet that focuses on the philosophy behind its design. The original developers of the first computer network, ARPANET, which would later be transformed into the contemporary network we call the Internet, had a vision of a global network with social consequences. It is my contention that the Internet embodies certain libertarian ideologies of the role of computer networks and that although it is not, and may never have been, possible to talk of a single monolithic Internet culture there are specific ideologies that have been normalised about the Internet. These ideologies, I believe, tend to underlay 'local' online cultures on the

Internet and are also expressed within certain vernacular histories. Consequently, my aim in the first chapter is to illustrate the ways in which the developers' beliefs about computer networks were incorporated into the Net as it was developed.

Having sketched the Internet as a technology the next chapter focuses on unpacking several discussions pertaining to the Internet as a cultural form. There are three main strands, all interwoven, to this work. One strand examines the notion of community and its expression on the Internet as well as the debates centred on the Internet as medium for community. As a concept, "community" has a long and contentious history in the social sciences so it is necessary to tease apart several major, contrasting uses of the term. As a folklorist, I also find myself of necessity, examining the relationship between community and "the folk." The second strand of the chapter revolves around an analysis of the Internet as a communications medium. Many of the earliest studies of the Net portrayed it as a 'deficient' medium that generated both desirable and undesirable communicative behaviour. Although more recent work has tended to reject this deterministic analysis, the theory of the Internet as a deficient medium has, as it were, become part of the folklore of the Net and forms part of the meta-communicative knowledge of its users. The third and final strand of this chapter interrogates the notion of cyberspace and its concomitant implications of a "place" on the Internet. One of the ironies of much of the debate about cyberspace and its portrayal of the Internet as a new cultural domain is that cyberspace, as defined, does not actually exist. My purpose is, then, to examine cyberspace as a metaphor and to interrogate its

implications. The interaction between community, cyberspace and communication is rich, complex and diverse and my intent is to give some insight into these interactions. In addition, this work will underpin my analyses of the case studies presented later.

In the third chapter I present the methodology I have developed to undertake “virtual ethnographic” research. This requires me to define what exactly is meant by Internet-based research and to differentiate the various research strategies that could be chosen. Internet research is still a young technique and it is only in recent years that published accounts and theories have been suggested. Consequently, I devote some time to giving an account of the field as it currently exists. The methodology I used is derived from the work of Hymes et al. in the “ethnography of communication.” There are many reasons for this choice and I explore them in some depth. In addition I examine the work of Baym, Cherny and Danet et al. who have all applied variations of the ethnography of communication in the study of online behaviour from a folkloristic (Baym; Danet) or sociolinguistic (Cherny) perspective. A discussion of their work allows me to place my own contributions to the debate in context and shows how I intend to advance research in the field.

Chapters four to six are a discussion of the major case study in this work: a virtual ethnography of a football fans’ email list. It draws on over a year of monitoring the list as an ethnographer along with comments pertaining to my membership at times when I was a member without studying it. Chapter four provides a description of the list, its history and a discussion of the list vernacular. Through so doing I wish to present a detailed

account of what could be termed the “everyday life” of these cyber-folk. Chapter five is a short chapter that presents some reflections on the research and some pitfalls encountered. The next chapter interrogates the various methods by which the fans have created and maintained a sense of identity through a mixture of symbolic and communicative acts. These acts draw on both ‘real’ and ‘virtual’ world strategies. The chapter presents several incidents that occurred during my fieldwork and what they revealed about how the members formed a sense of themselves as a group.

The final substantive chapter investigates issues in orality and literacy on the Boro List. To facilitate this, some findings from a smaller case study of an email list for role-players is offered as a comparison. That email list— “The Glorantha Digest”— is conducted in a highly literate, scholarly manner. I had undertaken a preliminary survey of it before settling on my thesis research in order to determine whether it would make a viable case study. Although I decided to focus on the football list for the thesis, I maintained my contacts with the Glorantha Digest in order to be able to use it to illustrate a radically different approach to communication on an email list. My contention is that the differences between the oral nature of the Boro List and the literate nature of the Glorantha hide an underlying similarity and I draw upon John Swales’s formulation of the “discourse community” (*Genre Analysis*) to demonstrate this.

The thesis is finished with an analysis of the metaphors that constitute the members’ understandings of their email lists as ‘places’ for communication and how that affects the communicational norms that inform behaviour in the different online

environments. These findings are then used to reflect on the potential for future virtual ethnographic research in a contemporary environment in which, it seems, the Net has become ubiquitous.

Chapter 1: Internet

*Computers can save the world.*³

Introduction

This chapter presents a cultural history of the Internet's development. The intent is to examine the role played by those responsible for the creation and development of the Internet and the legacy that they have bequeathed, rather than the technology underpinning "The Net's"⁴ construction. I will argue that there is a body of lore, both esoteric and exoteric, about the nature and history of the Internet and its relation to the concept of "cyberspace" that has developed from the attitudes towards culture, communication and technology that were held by the Internet's creators and developers. It is my premise that much of the structure of the Internet that we take for granted today was informed by its creators' views about what the cultural implications of a global communications and information network would be.

I will first describe the most significant people and groups that contributed to the Internet's early development with occasional notes on the technology where relevant.

³Ted Nelson. From *Computer Lib*. No page numbers.

⁴"The Net" and the Internet are not interchangeable terms in this thesis. The Internet refers to a network of computers sharing a common communications protocol ("Internet Protocol" or "IP"). "The Net" is used here to refer to the totality of all computer networks; see Sproull and Faraj.

This will lead into a brief discussion of the notion of cyberspace and its relationship to the actual technology of the Internet.

A Cultural History of the Internet

This section presents an overview of the development of the Internet that focuses primarily on the personalities and imperatives that drove its construction. The information presented is gathered from several publications (Abbate; Berners-Lee; Hafner and Lyon; Levy; Quarterman; Rheingold) and will act as a foundation from which to explore some of the ramifications for contemporary beliefs about the Internet. It is my contention that there are certain “vernacular histories” of the Internet held by the elites that were responsible for shaping the Internet’s construction. I believe that these historical narratives have, in turn, shaped the subsequent development of the Internet by acting as enabling narratives that inform certain attitudes towards, beliefs about and behaviour on the Net.

A World Before Cyberspace

The various histories of the Internet’s development tend to focus on different actors but the one person who is most often placed at the crux is Joseph Licklider (“Lick”), a psychologist who specialised in acoustics.⁵ He was something of a maverick who, during his placement at Harvard University after World War II, gained a reputation as a disciple of Skinner’s behaviourist theories about intelligence. Subsequently he moved to MIT and

⁵A more detailed description of Licklider and his importance in the pre-history of the Internet can be found in Hafner and Lyon’s *Where Wizards Stay Up Late: The Origins of the Internet*.

in 1953 was put in charge of a new “human factors in psychology” group. Licklider attempted to mould the group into what would have been the world’s first cognitive science department by appointing a set of highly talented young researchers. Ultimately, MIT did not offer any of Licklider’s appointees permanent contracts and the group dispersed. Many of these researchers would, however, become important figures in the later development of computer networking.

During his work with the group, Licklider became increasingly interested in computing: an interest which became more of an obsession after a chance encounter in the 1950s with a computer programmer named Wesley Clark. At the time Clark was working on the “TX-2 computer,” a state of the art machine with a 64KB⁶ memory that could display figures on a video monitor. It appears that Licklider became fascinated with the machine and the possibilities it opened up for modelling human cognition as well as its potential for, possibly, augmenting it (Hafner and Lyon 32-34). In particular, Licklider became fascinated by the concept of connecting computers together into a network that could facilitate human-computer communication as well as providing a new medium for people to communicate with each other via the computer network (“computer-mediated communication”), thus opening up new possibilities for social interaction. To an extent, Licklider set the tone for future computer network programmers by insisting that

⁶I.e. 64 “kilobytes” of memory. A “byte” consists of 8 “bits” and each bit is a switch that can hold two values: “on” or “off”— representing the value of one or zero. Consequently, each byte has 256 different values. A kilobyte is 1024 bytes (computers work in binary and 1024 is two to the tenth power) therefore 64KB is actually 65536 bytes. At the time this was a huge amount. These days there are toaster ovens with more memory.

computer-mediated communication would be inherently democratising, as the following passage from an article he wrote in 1960 about the potential positive effects that a computer network could have on participatory democracy indicates:

The political process ... would essentially be a giant teleconference, and a campaign would be a months-long series of communications among candidates, propagandists, commentators, political action groups, and voters. The key is the self-motivating exhilaration that accompanies truly effective interaction with information through a good console and a good network to a good computer. (Qtd. in Hafner and Lyon 34)

Essentially, he believed that the exhilaration ‘inherent’ in the medium of computer-mediated communication would positively affect whatever process was mediated through it. Licklider’s use of the word “exhilaration” may seem ludicrously overstated to those of us who have become jaded by the quantity of spam, pop-ups and viruses that infest the Net but his utopian perspective has survived to the present in the writings of Internet proponents as varied as Howard Rheingold and Newt Gingrich.

The main focus of Licklider’s interest in computer networks was a process known as time-sharing. At that time, computers were hulking behemoths taking up whole rooms and weighing several tonnes, yet by current standards they were extremely expensive and very limited in what they could do.⁷ In addition, it was generally only possible for one

⁷For example, the TX-2 that so excited Licklider had a 64K memory. This means that it could store approximately 64,000 pieces of information. To put this limitation in perspective consider the amount of computer memory needed to store this thesis. The thesis is approximately 80,000 words long and requires about 400K of storage space just for the text. However it is being composed on word-processing program which means that there is a lot of hidden information in the text which the program uses to format the thesis. In total this extra information takes the thesis to around 1,200K in size. So, this thesis alone would require eighteen TX2s to store it. At the time the TX2 cost about \$3,000,000, putting my thesis at a nominal storage cost of approximately \$55,000,000. That does not take into consideration the room needed to store

user to interact with a computer at any given time. Indeed, as Levy describes in *Hackers*, the computing paradigm of the time was dominated by IBM who sought to keep programmers physically distant from the computer. Perhaps ironically, the biggest impediments to Licklider's dream of a global computer network were the computers. Consequently he believed it was necessary to develop "time sharing" methods that would allow multiple users to interactively access the same computer at the same time. Conceptually, time-sharing is a process which enables multiple users to sit at different terminals connected to the same machine and enter data while the computer shares its processing power among the users. Given that the main computer in the 1960s might cost upwards of a million dollars while a terminal that connected to it might cost just a few thousand there were obvious and immediate benefits to being able to develop functioning time-sharing computer systems. There was also, however, a long-term benefit. If a user could connect to one computer in the same room as the terminal through a simple wire then surely it would be possible to connect to remote computers through a longer wire. If time-sharing proved to be feasible then it would constitute a step towards building a functioning computer network.

the word-processing program ("Corel WordPerfect"), which comes to 325MB, nor does it include the operating system for my computer, Windows XP, which takes up about 1.1GB on my hard drive. Adding together all these requirements produces a figure of about 1.4GB needed to work on my thesis. That equates to roughly 18,000 TX2s needed to store this work which, for the record, would have cost US\$24,000,000,000.

The Hackers

At the same time as Licklider was proposing radical concepts of human-computer interaction, a separate group of programmers at MIT, the “hackers,” were exploring the limits of computer programming. Steven Levy (15-151) gives a detailed explanation of the cultural milieu in which the hackers operated so I will summarise only a few of the relevant points here. Levy’s contention is that the MIT computer hackers group of the 1950s and 1960s was, essentially, counter-cultural. At the time, computing was dominated by IBM and its philosophy of computing use. The IBM model of computing required programmers to create their programs offline and then hand them, in the form of a collection of punch cards, to a computer engineer. The engineer would then feed the cards into the computer and, later, return the results of the program. If there was a mistake the program would probably fail to run (it would “crash”) and the programmer would have to deduce the nature of the mistake using pencil and paper. This model of use is known as “batch processing” and the programming is done without needing access to a computer. Indeed, in the IBM model, the programmer is kept as far away as possible from the computer.

IBM’s model defined what could be termed the computing orthodoxy of the time and it was largely accepted by those in mainstream academia. The group of people who were to become known hackers were brilliantly unorthodox student programmers who usually ended up failing their degrees. Stereotypically, hackers did not conform to social norms of behaviour, dress or even nutrition. More importantly they rebelled against

computing orthodoxy; the hackers demanded interactive, hands-on access to computers. At this point the term *hacker* was used to refer to a computer programmer who was capable of exploiting the mechanical quirks of a computer in order to create programs that would have been impossible using conventional programming techniques. The *New Hacker's Dictionary* (Raymond) defines a hacker as “a person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities.” The pejorative view of the hacker as a malicious computer criminal is a more recent development; hackers themselves prefer to use the terms “cracker” or “phreaker” to refer to this type of computer criminal (Moschovitis et al.).

The hackers' subculture emerged at MIT under the guidance of Marvin Minsky, one of the pre-eminent researchers in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Minsky acquired control of an old TX-0 computer, the predecessor of the TX-2 which so intrigued Licklider, and placed the computer in a laboratory for use by graduate students in AI. Unlike the IBM computers, it was possible to program the TX-0 interactively and Minsky seems to have been happy to encourage growth of the hacker culture that emerged around the TX-0. The computer was booked on a hourly basis. As the hackers tended to have dropped out from MIT, they were usually limited to working on the machine during night-time hours as well as any time which “officially sanctioned” graduate students had booked but had not shown up for. Consequently there was always a group of hackers hanging around the room in the hope that some programming time might unexpectedly become available. When they could not access the computer they

could often be found in the next room working on program ideas or drinking legendary amounts of Coke from the nearby vending machine.

The atmosphere was intense. Most hackers adopted a cycle of 30 hours working followed by 12 hours sleeping, often in the room next door to avoid having to go home. There was no privacy and not much in the way of hygiene either. It was, apparently, an extremely macho culture. For hackers, the “right stuff” wasn’t derived from an ability to fly jet fighters or to excel at sports but to be the best programmer, and to be able to think straight when overdosed on caffeine having not slept in 30 hours. There appear to have been no female hackers.⁸ There were frequent loud arguments and hysterical temper tantrums interspersed with bragging from those whose programs worked. To the outsider they must have seemed an obnoxious bunch, puffed with their sense of self importance and disregard for the property of other people. Levy recounts several examples of hackers stealing university property if they needed it and no one else appeared to be using it. Regardless of their unconventional morality and behaviour, the undeniable fact is that the hackers were brilliant programmers and, from this group, a set of values emerged that Levy terms the “hacker ethic.” This ethic has had enormous implications for attitudes about computer network programming ever since. Although it never seems to have been

⁸It should be noted though that, as far as I can tell, the hackers were all white males. Perhaps not surprising in 1950s and 1960s America. As Levy’s book is something of a hagiography it is not possible to reconstruct what implicit barriers surrounded the group. For example it is unclear whether the lack of female hackers was due to the wider cultural context or was specific to the hacking group.

explicitly articulated by members of the MIT group, Levy asserts that the ethic contained the following core values:

- Access to computers should be unlimited and total;
- All information should be free;
- Mistrust authority—promote decentralisation;
- Computers can change your life for the better. (40-49)

This hacker ethic did not emerge solely from the MIT group. “Computer libertarians” such as Ted Nelson (the person who invented the term “hypertext”) and the amateur computer enthusiasts who were spread across North America and Europe certainly played a role (Moschovitis et al. 53-54). The MIT hackers, however, were fortunate enough to be at the place where the money and the technology needed to construct the Internet were about to collide. Ted Nelson, however, would become something of a guru as the Net developed (Levy 174-75).

It is unclear how aware Licklider and the hackers were of each other. Levy’s history of the hackers never mentions Licklider; similarly Hafner and Lyon’s account of the development of the Internet only obliquely references the MIT hackers. Rheingold does note that the hackers and Licklider shared the same building at MIT and claims that Licklider and Minsky met several times, implying that Licklider was familiar with the hacking group (71-73).⁹ Ironically, although the hackers and Licklider shared similar

⁹In fact, Rheingold claims that Licklider and Taylor knew about the hacker group at MIT and helped fund it in an unconventional manner (72). Certainly there was Department of Defense money in the laboratory, but Rheingold’s implication that it was used as a form of covert financing for the hacker group,

beliefs about the potential for human-computer interaction to improve society, they differed over the notion of “time-sharing.” Where Licklider saw it as a method for enabling greater access to computers, the MIT hackers saw it as diluting access. A hacker relies on total control of the computer, but a time-shared computer requires that users be restricted to what they could access in case they inadvertently interfered with each other’s programs. To the hackers, time-sharing appeared to be a Trojan horse that would insert bureaucratic controls into the access to computers. Due to Licklider’s intervention, however, MIT received the funding to develop time-sharing. When the time-sharing research group was created it was headed by several people who had encouraged the hackers so, consequently, the research team attempted to find compromises that the hackers could live with.

The hacker resistance to the bureaucratic controls essential to time-sharing massively influenced the resulting implementation. The earliest systems were decentralised and contained no provisions for privacy or security.¹⁰ Essentially, the hacker ethic was encoded into the first multi-user computer systems and from there found its way into the original computer networks and continues to influence the current-day

is unsourced and I have yet to see any independent verification for his assertion.

¹⁰One of the concerns about time-sharing was that a malicious user might attempt to “crash” the machine thus ruining any other on-going programs. Consequently it might seem that a computer would need some type of protection to stop this from happening. The hackers argued the reverse, saying that users would only try to crash the computer if it was a challenge. So the first systems had a command that any user could type, called “crash” that would, simply, crash the computer. As anyone could crash the computer it was no challenge to use the command and, thus according to the hackers, no one would bother. Levy claims that generally every new user would crash the computer once and then get bored with so doing (103-7).

Internet. The “World Wide Web Consortium,” the body that leads the development of the contemporary web, is staffed by many who have been strongly influenced by the notions of Licklider et al. and they appear to support Rheingold’s contention that the Internet “cannot be intelligently designed without paying attention to the intentions of those who designed it“ (70).

The First Computer Networks

Licklider got a chance to put his ideas into practice when he was appointed by the U.S. government’s Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) in 1962. His brief was a project to improve the usability of the computers that the military employed to aid in commanding battles. ARPA had been created in response to the successful “Sputnik” launch and was intended as a way of bringing the brightest scientists under one roof to work on computer and space-based research projects (Abbate 49-53; Hafner and Lyon 37; Levy 68; Moschovitis et al. 33-34; Rheingold 71-72). It was, however, quickly superseded by NASA and had its budget slashed accordingly. Consequently, the agency was stuck with trying to find a *raison d’être* and, having inherited several powerful computers, appears to have decided to focus on the potential benefits to be gained from computer networking. Licklider, with his research into the use of computers and his advocacy of time-sharing, must have seemed an ideal choice.

During his governance of ARPA Licklider made several alterations to its research strategy. As with his stay at MIT he quickly gathered a set of young researchers who were encouraged to undertake “blue skies” research into information processing. The

department he inherited was titled “Command and Control Research,” the one he left was the “Information Processing Techniques Office.” In addition, he was placed in charge of overseeing a series of research projects based at different centres and so became increasingly frustrated with the inability to transfer data between computers. At that time, each computer was custom built so it was necessary to translate programs developed on one machine so that they could run on a different one. As ARPA had projects running in various locations in the US, the inability of computers to inter-communicate was creating intense difficulties. Consequently, Licklider acquired an interest in finding ways to enable computers to share data. In a memo drafted six months into his appointment, he framed the difficulty of computer-to-computer communication in an unusual way:

At this extreme, the problem is essentially the one discussed by science-fiction writers: How do you get communications started among totally uncorrelated sapient beings?... It seems to me to be important ... to develop a capability for integrated network operation. (Hafner and Lyon 38)

By proposing a grand network of people and computers he was able to combine his interest in human-computer interaction with machine-machine interaction.

Licklider’s term at ARPA ended in 1964 without any concrete progress towards the implementation of a computer network, but in 1968 his protégée and successor as head of ARPA, Bob Taylor, acquired the funding to attempt the creation of a working computer network (Abbate; Hafner and Lyon). Subsequently, in 1969, ARPA successfully demonstrated the “ARPANET,” the first long-distance computer network.

The ARPANET was to become the backbone of computer network development in the U.S. for the next twenty years. The ARPANET made use of an innovative communications technique known as “packet switching” that enabled the network to keep on transmitting messages even if large parts of the system failed; a necessary consideration given that the computers needed to run the network were not particularly reliable at the time.¹¹ Briefly, the ARPANET consisted of a series of host computers (“nodes”) that were linked together by phone lines. Data was passed from node to node until it reached its destination. The key to the system is that the data is broken into small segments (“packets”) which can take different routes across the network. If one computer fails then the data packet can take an alternate route to its destination. Once all the data has arrived at its destination it is reassembled. Although packet switching was a strictly technological answer to a communications problem it has generated an underlying metaphor which has been applied to solving problems with human-to-human communication via computer networks. Many of the conventions that have emerged for computer-mediated communication are based on the idea that communication is just another form of information transfer and that techniques akin to packet switching can be applied to human communication. This is something to which I will return later.

Until the ARPANET was successfully tested, packet switching was generally thought to be too complex to be useful in a communications system (Abbate). Although a

¹¹For an in-depth description of the technological considerations underlying the development of the ARPANET see Hafner and Lyon (35-159) or Abbate (43-79).

model had been proposed by Paul Baran as a command and control system for the U.S. Defense Agency and a local computer network using packet switching had been constructed by Donald Davies at the National Physical Laboratory in Oxford, the conventional wisdom was that it wasn't tenable as a national system.¹² The successful testing of ARPANET proved that packet switching, in fact, worked extremely well. Although the test network consisted of just four nodes on the west coast of the U.S.A. (Moschovitis et al. 62), its decentralised structure meant that it became relatively easy, albeit expensive, to add new nodes into the system. The initial growth was slow (Abbate, Hafner and Lyon) but as equipment costs have dropped and computer technology became more powerful, the rate of expansion sky-rocketed.

In tandem with the development of the ARPANET, the 1970s experienced a proliferation of other networks in the U.S.A. (e.g. BITNET) as well as other countries (such as JANET—the Joint Academic NETwork in the UK). Unfortunately, because each network used its own methods of transferring data it was difficult, and in some cases impossible, to transfer data from one network to another. The decade also saw the emergence of Local Area Networks (LANs) such as Xerox's "Ethernet," which linked the computers in a local area (usually a corporation or academic institution) into a high speed network. Naturally, users wished to integrate computers in LANs with networks such as ARPANET, but the lack of any common software or approach to network design made

¹²At this time the telephone system was run by monopolies in the U.S. and U.K. (ATT and the General Post Office respectively) and neither company showed any interest in the technique (Abbate).

such connections extremely difficult. Consequently, although there was an explosion in the number and type of networks throughout the nine years following the creation of ARPANET, it quickly became apparent that some sort of system was required to facilitate inter-network data transfer. The system that was eventually devised was the “Internet Protocol,” commonly known as “IP.”

Simply put, IP is a common language which all networks can be programmed to understand. Once the structure of IP was agreed upon, each network could nominate certain “gateways” that would translate their language (“protocol”) to and from the Internet protocol. So if a user wished to send data from a computer in ARPANET to one in another network such as BITNET, then the ARPANET would send it to a relevant gateway computer which would then translate it into IP and pass it onto the BITNET gateway. The BITNET gateway would then translate the data into its own language and send it to the relevant computer. Once IP became established it became possible to speak realistically of a global “internet” of connected networks.

Meanwhile, ARPANET was struggling to keep up with the demands placed upon it. In 1975 the US military took control of ARPANET. Initially the military intended to phase out ARPANET and implement its own network (Abbate). Implementing its own network proved to be problematic and the military authorities realised that it would be useful to maintain a civilian communications network to aid in research. The result was that in 1983 the U.S. military split ARPANET into two parts: MILNET on which military-based computers were situated and a civilian version of which retained the name

ARPANET. To facilitate this, ARPANET was converted to run solely on IP. The new ARPANET became the first “native” Internet network.

The new ARPANET proved to be very popular and the 1980s saw the first significant surge in the number of connections to it. The basic equipment which ran ARPANET struggled to keep up with demands; consequently a new set of super-computers were built to provide a high-speed “backbone” for the network. In 1989, this new network was privatised, ARPANET decommissioned and the Internet, as we know it, came into being.

The evolution of the Internet throughout the 1990s was dominated by the users’ needs to retrieve information from an increasingly complicated network of computers. The original ARPANET creators had devised a program called FTP (File Transfer Protocol) which would allow users to move files between computers. This was a simple and robust system but with the exponential increase in computer numbers, users needed ways to actually find the files they wanted to retrieve. Various types of software were created to try to address this issue, such as “Archie” which was a search program that could hunt through FTP archives for particular files. A similar program named “Gopher” created hierarchical indices for all registered FTP files so that a user could hunt through the index and then download the appropriate files. The big breakthrough came with the creation of the “World Wide Web” at the CERN laboratory in Geneva in 1990 (Berners-Lee).

The Web was designed to be a non-hierarchical, associative system and featured two revolutionary innovations. First, users could run a “browsing” program that would allow them to read the documents stored as web file. Although this could already be done using Gopher, the web included commands that would format the text on the screen so that users could see, for example, italic text. This allowed the storage and retrieval of much more complicated textual documents than Gopher could manage. Secondly the web was structured non-hierarchically, which meant that users did not have to search up and down indices nor did they need to know the address of each computer. Instead, they could select “hyperlinks” and have the intended file immediately displayed on their computer. For us these days the ability to “click” on a link and “browse” the web seems so natural that it is hard to comprehend just how revolutionary this was at the time. Whereas Gopher required a reasonable amount of computer knowledge to operate, the web requires nothing more than the ability to press a mouse button. In addition to this it quickly became obvious that web pages could also display non-textual information such as images, audio files, videos and so on. Although the earliest web browsers were strictly textual (for example “Lynx”) the emergence of multimedia browsers, such as “Netscape”, and later “Internet Explorer”, rapidly changed the look of the Web.¹³

The web was the second “killer app” of the Internet age. Software developers use the term to refer to a type of application that is so popular that users will buy the relevant

¹³Technically, the web is still an information retrieval system that is analogous to FTP. Each webpage starts with “http” - a prefix that stands for hypertext transfer protocol.

hardware in order to run the application. The first “killer app” was email. Until the invention of email, the ARPANET was almost silent (Abbate, Hafner and Lyon); the network was there but very little data was being transferred. The invention of email changed that. Similarly, the web was responsible for the massive growth of the Internet throughout the 1990s. Although the web was created as a hypertextual information retrieval device, it has become a sprawling hypermedia presentation device.

The Subverted Net: A Vernacular Viewpoint

The brief overview of the technological development of the Net given above does little to explain the cultural impact of the technology. Attitudes towards the Net and beliefs about it did not arise fully formed in the 1990s, rather they have developed over time, grounded originally in small groups of those dedicated to creating the network. Writing in *Time*, Stewart Brand, the co-founder of the WELL¹⁴ claimed “We owe it all to the hippies. ... the counterculture’s scorn for centralised authority provided the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless Internet, but also the entire personal computer revolution” (54). According to Brand, “Newcomers to the Internet are often startled to discover themselves not so much in some soulless colony of technocrats as in a kind of cultural Brigadoon—a flowering remnant of the ‘60s” (54).¹⁵ Similarly, in his book *The*

¹⁴The acronym stands for “Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link”. At that time, the WELL was probably the most famous “virtual community” in the world.

¹⁵In this age where we are all too familiar with ‘spam’, ‘viruses’ and moral panics over online paedophilia, such statements may seem hopelessly naive but there was a period of intense optimism and its proponents are still active in organisations such as the Electronic Frontier Foundation (<http://eff.org>). It is also still a powerful trope. The 2004 advertising campaign by Wanadoo (one of the largest Internet Service

Virtual Community, which is probably the most widely read populist treatise on the subject, Howard Rheingold entitles his second chapter, “Daily Life in Cyberspace: How the Computerised Counterculture Built a New Kind of Place” (38). Both of these authors were among the leading popularisers of the Internet and both portrayed the Internet as fundamentally counter-cultural. Although there are sceptics (e.g. Bikerts; Stoll, *High-Tech Heretic*; *Silicon Snake Oil*) the dominant vernacular history of the Internet depicts it as the result of autochthonous, subcultural forces. I believe that this history, like any colonising narrative, is being presented and used as a method for imagining community (cf. Anderson), and that a very powerful folk history of the Internet has emerged that serves to reify and explain contemporary norms. Ironically, Rheingold worries that the lack of social scientific research into the behavioural patterns of the Internet means that “Right now, all we have on the Net is folklore” (*Virtual Community* 64) and that might not be sufficient to prevent the Net from imploding. Rheingold is clearly using the term folklore in an emic sense of a body of unscientific, probably erroneous information, yet it is the emergent folk cultural practices and attitudes that are celebrated by proponents such as Rheingold.

The Hacker Thesis

A cornerstone of the dominant history of the Net is that it was created by “hackers.” The key proponent of this theory is Steven Levy whose book, *Hackers: Heroes of the*

Providers in Europe) after it took over the UK company, “Freerve”, drew upon 1960s counter-cultural iconography to brand itself.

Computer Revolution had a huge impact on the theorising of the Internet. According to Levy, the dominant practice of computing in the early 1950s was “non-interactive” and set by huge corporations such as IBM. This culture of computing was challenged by a group of unorthodox misfits centred around the Artificial Intelligence laboratory at MIT. Levy’s intent was to demonstrate that these programmers created a computing sub-culture that first challenged the dominant ideas of IBM and other institutions and, eventually, superseded them. In his analysis, this culture grew organically and generated a set of principles that Levy termed the “hacker ethic” (outlined above: see page 9). The central tenet of this code of ethics seems to be the belief that information must be free: a deliberately ambiguous phrase. Levy implies both that there should be no monetary charge for information and that information should never be censored in any form. This has two very practical implications. Firstly, computers are envisioned as “open systems,” which is to say that all the information about how a particular computer works should be freely available and, secondly, all software written for computers should likewise be free. Such ethics are, however, regarded as untenable by corporations that are in the business of making money by selling computers. However, the MIT hackers were responsible for much of the early development in computer software and their ethics tended to be encoded into the programs they wrote and the methods of distribution.¹⁶

¹⁶This ethic can still be seen at work in the development of Linux, an operating system that can be used as an alternative to Windows, which has been created as an open source system and is given away for free.

Levy expands his history to include three “generations” of hackers. The first generation was generally seen as comprising of the hackers based at MIT in the 1950s and 1960s whose focus was on developing ever better software for computers. The next generation consisted of the “hardware” hackers of the 1960s and 1970s whose interest was in building cheap, personal computers. This hacker culture was based largely in California and Levy claims it was a counter-cultural revolution against the computer firms who were only interested in selling systems to companies. The hardware hackers believed passionately in making computers available to anyone who wanted one. This group fuelled the boom in home computing, with one of its main proponents, Steve Wozniak, achieving fame with his “Apple II” home computer. As with the MIT hackers, the second generation believed in computers that were open systems and happily created software for these computers for free. The exception to this was a young hacker by the name of Bill Gates who conceptualised the software he created as a product and gained notoriety when he demanded payment for it (Moschovitis et al. 34). Indeed, Gates seems to have created the term “software piracy” to describe what he termed ‘unauthorised’ copying of software.

The boom in home computing naturally attracted the attention of big corporations and, according to Levy, the hacker ethic became subsumed within corporate values. It is noteworthy, however, that when IBM entered the home computer market it did so with a computer that was an open system, the IBM PC and its operating system, “Microsoft DOS” was written by an ex-hacker, Bill Gates. Whereas Apple computers kept an

increasingly closed system for its computers, IBM and Microsoft made the details of the hardware and software freely available to encourage outside parties to write applications for the computer.¹⁷ The putative hacker ethic had been successfully co-opted by two companies, IBM and Microsoft, who were to become the leaders in home computing.

Levy's third generation of hackers consisted of the computer games programmers of the 1970s and 1980s who pushed the limits of what home computers could achieve in order to program increasingly complex games.¹⁸ Rheingold has extended Levy's analysis to a fourth generation of hackers who, he claims, were responsible for vastly expanding the computer networks of the 1980s (Rheingold 65-99). Rheingold's thesis is that while ARPA was responsible for building the infrastructure of the Net, it was students in colleges who expanded it in unexpected ways with developments such as "USENET" and "MUDs".¹⁹ In addition there was a huge explosions in hobbyist computer bulletin-boards, especially in the California area. Some of these bulletin boards grew to a massive size and became the heart of what Rheingold calls "virtual communities."

The hacker thesis states, simply, that just about all the most important developments in computing and computer networks came from hackers who worked in opposition to the big corporations such as IBM or, later, Microsoft. For Levy, the computer revolution marked the success of individualist hackers opposed to corporate

¹⁷Within limits, hence the various anti-trust cases that would later be leveled against Microsoft.

¹⁸This generation is not particularly relevant to my thesis.

¹⁹These are explained in more detail shortly.

concerns. Thus, the development of the Internet that we see today is perceived to have been vastly influenced by the hacker ethic: especially the famous rallying call that information must be free.

Licking the Opposition

Hafner and Lyon's account of the development of the Internet foregrounds many of the same themes as Levy's account of the computer revolution but focuses on a different core group.²⁰ Where Levy focussed on a group of counter-cultural hackers, Hafner and Lyons focus on a "mainstream" group of researchers. The authors depict these researchers as a small group of dedicated enthusiasts who opposed corporate giants such as IBM and AT&T and won. Levy's revolutionaries came from outside the system; Hafner and Lyons' came from within.

Hafner and Lyons' account centres on the researchers working at a small company called BBN (Bolt, Bernak and Lyon). The company, which was initially a research consultancy specialising in acoustics, had employed Licklider in the 1950s and branched out into computer programming—mostly due to Licklider's prompts. Subsequently BBN won the contract to develop for ARPA the first time-sharing

²⁰It is noteworthy that the authors do not cite Levy's book, although one of them, Katie Hafner, is clearly aware of his work; both Levy and Hafner are prolific authors on the Net. I can only assume that the omission is deliberate and designed to distance their work from Levy's.

computer system, TENEX.²¹ It was then, perhaps, unsurprising that BBN won the contract from ARPA to develop the first computer network.

In their account, Hafner and Lyon are constantly at pains to describe what they see as the unusual research milieu both within BBN in its early days and among those who gained responsibility for extending the computer network. The atmosphere was said to be informal, even somewhat unusual, as the following passage indicates:

‘When we got into the computer business we had the strangest people working for us,’ said [their interviewee].... He recalled being invited to a New Years’ Eve party at the home of a computer engineer around 1965. ‘It was like going to the Addams Family house, ... they were all in bare feet. The women were wearing tight-fitting clothing. I showed up with a tie on and had to take it off.’ (87)

Perhaps more important in the history of the development of the Internet was the formation of the “Network Working Group” (NWG) in 1968 (Hafner and Lyon 143). This group consisted mostly of graduate students based at the four universities proposed as the original nodes in the new network. This group’s goal was to help develop the software needed to facilitate data transmission in the network. The NWG is noteworthy because it fostered an egalitarian research milieu. Hafner and Lyon quote one of its founders as saying, “The basic ground rules were that anyone could say anything and nothing was official” (144). The first publication of the group was entitled “Request For

²¹There appears to be a lot of politics involved here. The only opposition TENEX had for the time-sharing contract was from the hacker system at MIT. Levy strongly hints that the contract was a fix (128) and paints a picture of BBN as just another corporate entity. In contrast, Hafner and Lyon depict BBN as a small company bravely opposing the big corporations.

Comments” (RFC) and to this day the basic form of dissemination of such research on the Internet is the RFC. Although Hafner and Lyon never state it explicitly, the NWG embodied the “hacker ethic”:

It was a high commission for the country’s young and exceptionally talented communication programmers.... Agreement was the *sine qua non*. This was a community of equals.... The NWG was an adhocracy of intensely creative, sleep-deprived, idiosyncratic, well-meaning computer geniuses. (145)

This sense of openness was to pervade the research culture of the computer network programmers and Hafner and Lyon give several examples of attempts by large institutions to impose “official” solutions to problems. For example, they cite one of the earliest email programs, MSG, which had been invented by a lone hacker and became the norm for email, if for no other reason than its invention of an “answer” command which lets the reader reply to the sender of an email without having to retype the sender’s address. When attempts were made to impose a new email standard which conflicted with MSG they were ignored by the users. Hafner and Lyon claimed that:

... on the ARPANET rules might get made, but they certainly didn’t prevail. Proclamations of officialness didn’t further the Net nearly so much as throwing technology out onto the Net to see what worked. And when something worked it was adopted. (205)

As with Levy’s analysis, Hafner and Lyon portrayed the Net as an entity that grew almost organically from the bottom-up and was not controlled by any institution. Thus its growth

is seen as embodying the sub-cultural attitudes of the programmers who developed it rather than those of the government bureaucracy that funded it.

It seems that the histories of the Internet have always featured a core group of heroic 'subversives' who fought the system, and won with the only significant difference being in the choice of the core group. Even Janet Abbate's book, *Inventing the Internet*, which focuses on the bureaucratic institutions behind the development of the Internet, portrays the management culture of the main company involved as distinctly unorthodox. Although the writings of Levy and Rheingold have been the most radical in their portrayal of the Net's development, all the histories share a grand, meta-narrative which depicts the Net as, to some extent, subversive.

Hackers and Hippies

Much attention has been paid to the West Coast USA "hippy" hackers. I quoted Stewart Brand earlier who stated that "We owe it all to the hippies. ... the counterculture's scorn for centralised authority provided the philosophical foundations of not only the leaderless Internet, but also the entire personal computer revolution" (54). The premise is that these groups of computing enthusiasts combined the notoriously anti-technological bias of mainstream hippy culture with a hacker ethic. Brand points out that, for example, Steve Jobs, the chairman of Apple, was one of many who invented "blue boxes" that allowed the user to make free phone calls and that the inventor of the first portable computer, Lee Felsenstein, was a new-left radical who wrote for the underground zine *The Berkeley Barb*. Levy gives an in-depth examination of this grouping, who he calls the "hardware

hackers,” in his book (153-278), but pays little attention to their role in the hippy counter-culture. In fact, with the exception of Felsenstein who pursued a radical political agenda, the hackers who Levy interviewed were resolutely apolitical. Similarly, although the founders of the Network Working Group were primarily graduate students in West Coast USA in 1968, Hafner and Lyon did not see any political dimension to their attitudes towards computer network programming. The “hacker ethic”— that information should be free and that systems should be open— reflects a belief that, simply, this provides the most efficient environment in which to program. Some hackers may have occasionally analogised society to a computer but generally hackers were interested in only one thing: their computers.

The question then is why are the hippy hackers seen as a given in the development of the Net? My suspicion is that it is part of the emergent history that is associated with Californian Internet proponents such as Stewart Brand and Howard Rheingold. The image of the hippy hacker is a powerful one with cultural resonances, and its co-option into the narrative of the counter-cultural Net adds legitimacy to the narrative. That said, there are “computer radicals,” the most famous of whom is Theodore (“Ted”) Nelson. Levy describes him as “self-described ‘innovator’ and noted curmudgeon” (11). Nelson is noted for his book *Computer Lib* which he self-published. The book is a rambling polemic about society and its use and misuse of computers, particularly the domination of computing by corporate entities: hence its title with its

obvious paralleling of “women’s lib.”²² Nelson, however, described himself as a cultural critic who focused on computers and was not a hacker.

The identification of the hippy counter-culture with the hacker culture provides an enormously powerful narrative which asserts that the Net represents the success of the hippy counter-culture. Howard Rheingold’s enormously influential book, *The Virtual Community* is the fullest articulation of this narrative. Rheingold’s thesis is that the Net is “grass-roots” technology that has escaped from institutional control. According to Rheingold the Net has been subverted and is the home of the new counter-culture.

Nukes and Networks

The most dramatic narrative of subversion concerns the relationship between the U.S. military and the Internet and, specifically, the belief that the Internet was created in response to the fear of nuclear attack. For example on November 16th, 1997 I ran a simple web search, using Alta Vista, (<http://www.altavista.com>) for documents containing the phrase “history of the Internet.” I got a list 8547 matches and inspected the first 60. Of the non-academic presentations, one by a doctor from Houston by the name of Olivier Wenker is exemplary:

The Internet began as a secret line of communication in 1969 at the U.S. Department of Defense. The Pentagon wanted a network that could be physically attacked by bombs or other disasters and still function. It was called the ARPANET (Advanced Research Projects Agency) and it was

²²The book uses a deliberately fragmentary style, mixing fonts and topics with iconoclastic truculence and a lack of page numbering. Influential literary critic George Landow describes *Computer Lib* as one of the first post-structuralist works.

designed not to have a central "hub" that could be easy to attack. It formed into a web-like fashion;(which is why we call it the World-Wide-Web)so that a base could send information to another base in several different routs. So if one rout was destroyed; the message could still get there through a different rout.²³

Although there are several inaccuracies found in this statement there are also several truths. A computer network communications system was first proposed by Paul Baran of the RAND corporation (Hafner and Lyon 52-64). RAND was concerned about the effects of a nuclear strike on the U.S. communications system and Baran believed that a distributed network of computers handling communications using "packet switching" would be able to survive massive degradation because the information could always make detours. From the period between 1960-65, Baran worked independently of Licklider to further refine his ideas but, ultimately gave up in 1965 when no one would back his plans (Abbate 20-35, Hafner and Lyon 64-68). As already mentioned, packet switching had been independently invented in the UK by Donald Davies as part of a research project designed to close the perceived "science gap" between the UK and USA (Abbate 31-35).

Although packet switching was to end up being the enabling technology for ARPANET, there was not a direct progression between the work of Baran and Davies and the implementation of it in ARPANET. It is unclear how much cognisance the ARPANET's developers had of Baran's ideas, certainly they had not been taken

²³Originally at <http://www.owenker.isholt.org/history>, this url has since disappeared and is not retrievable via the Internet archive at the Wayback Machine.

seriously by anyone in the U.S. Defense Department (Moschovitis et al. 23).²⁴ Although Baran's distributed network idea shares some similarities with ARPANET, there are fundamental differences between the different design philosophies. Baran's proposal maximised the number of links between the host computers in the system, so that no matter how many computers got destroyed there would always be a viable path between the remaining computers. The ARPANET minimised the number of links between network computers and depended on making the host computers as reliable as the technology could manage.²⁵ Both the ARPANET and the contemporary Internet features a "backbone" of high-performance computers that handle the majority of network traffic. Beyond its use of packet switching, ARPANET has very little in common with Baran's ideas and, according to Hafner and Lyon, the ARPANET's developers get very annoyed by the belief that the Internet grew out of a desire to construct a communications network that could survive nuclear attack (10).

The vernacular history of the Internet, however, strongly focuses on its putative military heritage. Howard Rheingold follows this line when he claims that the Internet "grew out of an older ... scheme for a communication, command and control network that could survive nuclear attack by having no central control" (*Virtual Community* 7). Central to this history of the Internet is the process by which the network is seen to have evolved

²⁴Janet Abbate's book, *Inventing the Internet*, investigates the various early research projects into packet switching in more depth and presents some interesting insights into the politics underlying them.

²⁵Primarily as a means for reducing costs.

from a U.S. Defense Department project into its current anarchic sprawl. Rheingold touches on this issue when he says that “A continuing theme throughout the history of computer-mediated communication is the way people adapt technologies designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different, communication needs” (7). For Rheingold, the emergence of computer networks such as the hobbyist bulletin boards that became popular from the late 1970s onwards was symptomatic of “a true grassroots use of technology” (7) rather than a centrally planned procedure. Indeed, he notes that, ironically, the distributed structure of the Internet has made it extremely hard to impose any kind of central control over the network, echoing John Gilmore’s famous statement that “The Net interprets censorship as damage and routes around it” (Qtd. in Rheingold 7). According to this vernacular history, the contemporary Internet is presented as having undergone a reversal from secretive government project to grassroots technology.

Given the identification made between the 1960s counter-culture and the hacker ethic discussed earlier, a narrative which portrays the Internet as being a subverted Defense Department project carries obvious significance. For its proponents, the Net is the embodiment of the belief that computer networks can transfer the control of information from secretive establishments to the masses. It is the hacker ethic, that information must be free, wrought in cables and keyboards. Thus we can see an attempt at grand narrative that is articulated by proponents of the Net and re-articulated by those who experience the Net in their daily lives. It states that the Net developed in spite of

corporate giants such as AT&T and IBM not because of them; that it was freed from the U.S. military to benefit everyone. It continues that on the Net we are all equal and all equally free because the Net has been freed.

Inventing Cyberspace

One of the recurring themes in computer programming culture is the fascination of the programmers with science-fiction. For example, Levy describes how Lee Felsenstien, the new-left radical and computer hacker responsible for the first portable computer, envisioned himself as the hero in a science-fiction novel. Indeed Levy differentiates between the original hacker community at MIT and an offshoot of it that emerged in the Stanford University Artificial Intelligence laboratory by claiming that while the MIT hackers were mostly influenced by “classic” science fiction authors such as Isaac Asimov, the Stanford group were more interested in the fantasy works of J.R.R. Tolkien (140). It should come as no surprise, then, that the Net has become identified with a term from a science-fiction novel: “cyberspace”. The relationship between the Internet and cyberspace is not particularly simple. The term “cyberspace” was first coined by science-fiction author William Gibson in 1984 in his novel *Neuromancer*. Gibson’s novels featured worlds containing computer networks that generated “virtual” spaces which humans could directly experience through brain implants. His books were read avidly by computer programmers working on computer networks and the notion of cyberspace was seized on as an organising metaphor for the type of experience they believed could emerge from interactions with a global computer network.

The cyberspace metaphor has allowed a crucial conceptualisation of the Internet as a space/place with specific characteristics. In particular it has encouraged the depiction of the Internet as a frontier space; Howard Rheingold's book *Virtual Communities* is subtitled *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. The American domination of the early development of the Net seems to have resulted in a wholesale plundering of Turner's frontier hypothesis (Carveth and Metz; Henry Nash Smith) in order to envision the Internet as the new frontier with brave pioneers setting out to explore it. Writing on this topic, Dave Healy claims that "the computer hacker is the spiritual descendant" of American literary heroes: "Like Huck Finn, the prototypical hacker is a young male who finds salvation in his escape from the 'civilising' influence of authority figures. His raft is his computer terminal, with which he charts a course into new and sometimes dangerous realms" (Healy 57). Of course, cyberspace, as envisioned by William Gibson and others, does not exist; even the most advanced virtual reality technology does not directly interface with the brain. However, cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination" (Gibson), as a fundamentally imagined construct and underlying metaphor, is emerging from our everyday activities and experiences of being connected to the Net. It is just one of many ironies that our primary metaphor for understanding these new experiences is the invention of a science-fiction author whose work most people who log onto the Net have probably never read.

Chapter 2: Cyberspace

*Cyberspace is a metaphor.*²⁶

Introduction

In the last chapter I outlined the development of the Internet and indicated ways in which its design was informed by its creators' beliefs in the potentially transformative effects of a global computer network. I contend that these beliefs became naturalised and embodied in the structure of the Internet as it developed. In order to expand this contention it is necessary to examine debates about communication, community and cyberspace as they pertain to the study of the Internet. The earliest advocates for a global computer network proposed that it would not just be a research aid but would have social implications for its users. Discussing Licklider's perspective, Bob Taylor (the head of ARPA when the first network was built) wrote:

'Lick was among the first to perceive the spirit of community created among users of the first time-sharing systems. ... In pointing out the community phenomena created, in part, by the sharing of resources in one time-sharing system, Lick made it easy to think about interconnecting the communities[,] the interconnection of interactive, on-line communities of people...' (Qtd. in Hauben and Hauben 97)

²⁶Shields 66.

I believe that the technocrats responsible for building the Net intended it to be a communications technology that would have an impact on the formation of community, therefore it is necessary to unpack the issue of community and to assess what kind of communication is thought to occur on the Net. In particular, what is it about the Net as a medium of communication that is thought to facilitate community building? The third leg of this particular analysis is devoted to the concept of “cyberspace” and how it has been deployed as a metaphor for our lived experience of the Internet. The term *cyberspace* postdates the Internet, being first coined in 1984, and has been adopted to provide a metaphor that enables the depiction of the Internet as a *place* and, particularly, a place for community.

Real Community

The notion of community has been problematic throughout the social sciences. Folklorists have been particularly troubled by the relationship between the concepts of the folk, community and folk group. The very name of our discipline presupposes the existence of the folk leading to a constant “quest for the folk” (McKay). From the earliest days in which the folk were an undifferentiated mass of singing and dancing rural peasants, to the present in which the community appears to have dissolved into post-modern, transient conglomerations of individuals, folklorists have attempted to define a folk in whom to ground the lore that we study. In 1972, exasperation with this led Dan Ben-Amos to finesse the issue by combining Alan Dundes’ notion of the folk group with a sociological understanding of the group. The folk would no longer be a coherent social

unit of some sort, rather “folk” would become a descriptor of certain types of group behaviour and individuals would be seen as members of multiple groups. Folk had moved from noun to adjective. However, as Oring memorably demonstrated, the concept of the folk group was ultimately unsatisfying. At the same time the notion of community was being destabilised, disciplinary certainties about the relationship between the folk and rural communities broke down. Ironically, however, as folklorists have become increasingly sceptical about the viability of community as an analytical tool, “community” has become increasingly politicised as a concept and “the appeal to community” increasingly deployed as a political maneuver. As Dorothy Noyes notes “...[when] applying for grants, we know we’ll do better if we can frame our project around a ‘community’” (449). That which public folklorists have learned from the process of wrestling funding from government bureaucracies, Net advocates such as Howard Rheingold have also discovered. Rheingold opens his influential book *The Virtual Community* with a quote from M. Scott Peck that reads, in part, “we know the healing effects of community.... It is our task ... to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures” (x). For Rheingold and others it is not just important that the net provides a ‘space’ for community, it is crucial. For them, it is community that will transform the Internet from an empty cyberspace into a populated virtual place.

My interest here lies in unpacking the notion of “virtual community.” Does the term make any sense? Is it possible to conceive of a community not grounded in place?

What are the effects of technology and communication on the understanding of community? If the whole world can be a “community” (or perhaps “global village” in McLuhanesque terms) does the term itself mean anything anymore? As Jan Fernback notes, “community is a term which ... is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse” (“The Individual” 39). If community does mean something then what is that thing and what is its relation to seemingly cognate terms such as ‘group’ and, of course, the folk?

In order to approach this subject I will first deal with the notions of group, community and the folk in Folklore Studies. Moving on from there I will examine the role of technology, and in particular communications technology, in mediating community. This will provide the foundation upon which an investigation of the various analyses that have been proposed for computer-mediated (“virtual”) communities can be undertaken.

The Disappearing Folk

In his 1978 article “Who Needs the Folk?”, Charles Keil stated that, “Long study of folklore and folklorists has convinced me that there never were any “folk” except in the minds of the bourgeoisie” (263). Keil’s words, though deliberately provocative, demonstrate the ambivalence many folklorists feel about their disciplinary subject. Dorson countered by claiming, somewhat confusingly, that although the folk were a mystical concept they “are real enough” (269). The presence or absence of the folk is crucial to any study of ‘folklore’ because, as Bauman notes, “The question ‘Who are the

folk?’ looms large in any consideration of the nature of folklore” (“Folklore” 33).

Without a folk, who, exactly, are we studying? This is not the place for an exegesis of the intricate history of Folklore Studies and the notion of the folk but I do wish to give an overview of the concept and its relationship to notions of community and group.²⁷

For a variety of reasons the earliest notions of ‘the folk’ placed them squarely in the country. A circular from the Brothers Grimm on collecting folklore in the early 1800s makes this clear.

... it is provincial towns rather than big cities; and villages rather than provincial towns; and among the villages, the ones which are most of all quiet and impassable, located in forests or in the mountains, it is these which are most endowed and blessed with folklore. (7)

Whether one took a romantic-nationalist perspective as espoused, primarily by continental European scholars inspired by the work of Johan Gottfried Herder in the late 1700s or the cultural evolution model associated with British anthropologists such as E. B. Tylor in the late 1800s, the folk were to be found among the rural peasantry.²⁸ The folk were conceptualised as the ancestors of earlier, pre-modern peoples, living fossils, the missing link between our primitive past and civilised present. The job of the folklorist

²⁷There are several good histories, see for example Dorson’s *The British Folklorists* and Zumwalt’s *American Folklore Scholarship*.

²⁸This subject has been extensively discussed in Folklore Studies. Wilson’s account of the relationship between romantic nationalism and folklore is probably the best overview of that subject while Ian Mackay gives a brief but penetrating description of the historical construction of the folk in his *The Quest for the Folk* (10-17). Richard Dorson has dealt at length with cultural evolutionism and Folklore in the UK around the turn on of the twentieth-century in his *British Folklorists: A History*. For a political analysis see Roger Abrahams (“Phantoms”) or Tine Damsholt’s account of changing perspectives of the folk in a Danish context.

was to collect the art and history of these exotics before they passed away, overwhelmed by the modern. This imperative is what drove the emergence of Folklore as a discipline and is what has bedeviled it ever since. The folk are the force that through a green fuse has driven our flower. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, our enterprise is predicated upon a “vanishing subject” (“Topic Drift”).²⁹

Alan Dundes illustrated the irony of this understanding of the folk when he stated “Because folk was defined primarily with respect to its supposed relationship to the civilised or elite, folklore was presumed to exist only where a civilised or elite group existed” (20). The folk were an evanescent other: neither the “innocent” pre-literate nor the civilised literate, they were the illiterate living at the margins of a literate society. The folk as popularly understood are a creation of the modern world but are not a part of it. Even when later folklorists such as Richard Dorson attempted to discover the folk in the city their work made the folk seem to be ‘in’ the present and not ‘of it, contemporaneous but not contemporary (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Topic Drift” 251).³⁰

²⁹ See also Abrahams' comments about “eleventh hour ethnography” in his article “Phantoms” (11).

³⁰ Dorson states in his article, “Is There a Folk in the City?”:

The answer to the original query, “Is there a folk in the city?” must clearly be yes. Perhaps it is best to say that there are many folk groups who ... are becoming city folk. But city folk are different from the country folk of yesteryear. (215)

Although he does not explain the difference, a short while later he writes, revealingly, “imagine how many life-times would be needed to explore the multiple folk cultures of Gary and East Chicago” (216). It seems the city was seen as heterogenous and that folk organisations existed within parts of the city. In this respect, Dorson was implicitly following the trend set by British sociological studies of city neighbourhoods that focused on local community structures within an urban setting.

Inspired by the Romanticist notion of the folk as more ‘natural’ than the urban moderns,³¹ continental European scholars became interested in the notion of the folk community, i.e. how did the folk live their lives in their remote little villages and what could it tell us about ‘modern’ life? For some, the folk community offered insights into a more natural mode of life as opposed to the technological life to be found in a city. This was particularly true of the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies, whose work on folk communities has had repercussions on our understanding of community that have spread into cyberspace.

According to Tönnies, communities, as with any construct based on social relationships, existed as acts of will, either “natural will” (*Gemeinschaft*) in which the relationships are valued for their own sake, or “rational will” (*Gesellschaft*) in which the relationships are valued for what they can obtain. Tönnies postulated that *Gemeinschaft* underlay rural or ‘folk’ communities, whereas *Gesellschaft* underlay modern, urban living and he made no secret about his preferences:

Whenever urban culture blossoms and bears fruits, *Gesellschaft* appears as its indispensable organ. The rural people know little of it. . . . In contrast to *Gemeinschaft*, *Gesellschaft* is transitory and superficial. Accordingly *Gemeinschaft* should be understood as a living organism, *Gesellschaft* as a mechanical aggregate and artifact. (35)

³¹The Grimms developed this concept of naturalness to a metaphysical level, asserting that the rationale for collecting of folklore was to elicit the *Volksgeist*, the mystically inspired collective spirit of a nation to be found only in this natural setting (McKay).

This perspective has had enormous ramifications. By equating the rural with the natural and the urban with the artificial, Tönnies implicitly associated community with a nostalgic concept of the rural idyll that was doomed to be destroyed by increasing mechanisation and the spread of the city. Tönnies intended these schema to be seen as idealised types and much of the work that was inspired by him was based on refining the typology. For example Emile Durkheim reconceptualised it as mechanical/natural opposition and Robert Redfield explicitly revised it into a “folk-urban” continuum. Redfield’s work is of particular interest because of its influence on Folklore Studies. Following Tönnies, Redfield asserted that there were no purely “urban” or “purely” folk communities, rather that each social grouping would show differing amounts of urbanity or folkness: any concept of urban folklore was oxymoronic.

Associating the folk with an organic, rural peasantry may have made a certain sense in a European context³² but a very different trajectory was emerging in North America and, especially, the USA. This trajectory originated in the concept of folklore as a form of “verbal art” and it was becoming apparent that one did not have to be a peasant to tell a joke and that folklore seemed to be just as alive in the city as in the country. These observations forced scholars to, once again, re-evaluate what was meant by the folk and led Alan Dundes to formulate his famous definition that “the term ‘folk’ can

³²It also inflicted great harm. For example, the hugely influential “Frankfurt School” was able to dismiss folklore as irrelevant in a modern society because there was no longer any peasantry. The Folk and their lore were of no more than historical interest.

refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor” (22).³³

Subsequently he added that “as new groups emerge, new folklore is created. Thus we have the folklore of surfers, motorcyclists, and computer programmers.... peasants constitute only one type of folklore” (23). This reformulation gave folklorists the green light to study whomever they liked because, in the end we are all the folk. In this perspective there was no longer any such thing as a folk community, rather we are all individuals participating in a variety of different folk groups at different times.

Dundes’s definition though has caused as many problems as it has solved. The problem is that the definition is too broad; do we really want to state that all people with brown eyes form a brown-eyed folk group? Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states the issue succinctly, “Attenuated to the point that *folk group* can refer to anyone, the notion is devoid of agency and analytic consequence, which is, of course, very consequential” (“Folklore’s Crisis” 308).³⁴ There has also been a more subtle problem for Folklore Studies: the phenomenon that Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls “topic drift.” If the folk are just “people in general”³⁵ and not a people apart, then what is the difference between Folklore Studies and Sociology or Cultural Studies or other cognate disciplines?

³³Emphasis in the original.

³⁴Emphasis in the original. Her implication here is that it is consequential because it gives our discipline a mandate to broaden, vastly, its scope of study.

³⁵The definition comes from the 10th edition of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*.

It could be argued that folklorists created the folk. This is the subtext beneath Keil's quote from earlier and is stated explicitly by Ian McKay in *The Quest of the Folk*:

Just as nationalists imagined "the nation" of which they spoke, enthusiasts of folklore imagined "the Folk" necessary for the crafts and lore that had survived to the present day.³⁶ (17)

McKay is drawing on Benedict Anderson's depiction of the nation as an "imagined community". For him, the folk, like the nation, are a cultural production mobilised by certain elites.³⁷ As Abrahams noted "[T]he discipline is full of accounts of folklorists heading into the "field" to meet "the folk" and the folk's surprise to learn that, yes indeed, they are the folk". These issues are well known among folklorists, both in the public sector and academia³⁸ so I won't belabour the point. As with most disciplines faced with the challenges of post-modern/post-colonial cultural theory, Folklore Studies has had to examine itself root and branch. The deconstruction of the folk has been a part of this examination.³⁹ As Amy Shuman writes:

³⁶A similar point is made by Tine Damsholt who, writing from an Ethnological perspective, stated:

Ethnology gave a meaning to the concept of the people by studying "the folk", and can therefore be regarded as a discursive practice, which produced the object it studied. (23)

³⁷Elites here refer to more than just academic folklorists. Cultural producers, local power groups and so on all have specific reasons to "invent" the folk.

³⁸ For a representative selection of articles demonstrating the issues that public-sector folklorists have faced see the collections edited by Baron and Spitzer, Feintuch, and Hufford.

³⁹Roger Abrahams makes a similar point when he states "Those who come from that interdisciplinary cohort known referred to as the "cultural critique" have urged on all humane disciplines the idea that we have been engaged in inventing a past," ("Phantoms" 6). He additionally notes that many folklorists had already begun to raise these issues.

What needs to be displaced is any possibility of studying “the folk” as an unmarked, natural, authentic category. The politics of the discipline have been exposed, and there is no turning back. (349)

Although Dundes’s initial description of the folk group is flawed, the concept of the folk group has provided new insights and been placed at the centre of the discipline. It is notable that the “keywords” issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* used group as one of the keywords of the discipline on a par with text and tradition. Dorothy Noyes claimed, in her essay for the special issue, that “ideas about group are the most powerful and the most dangerous in folkloristics” (“Group” 397).

Richard Bauman provided one of the key insights about the role of groups during his analysis of the roles of shared and differential identities when he asserted that “members of particular groups or social categories may exchange folklore with each other, on the basis of shared identity, or with others, on the basis of differential identity” (“Differential Identity” 38). At the same time, Dan Ben-Amos was adopting the sociological concept of the group and re-casting it in terms of interaction, leading Noyes to claim that Ben-Amos’s proposal “depended not on shared identity but on the fact of regular interaction” (“Group” 453). Researchers in the emerging field of the Ethnography of Communication took a similar perspective with their adoption of the concept of “speech communities” (e.g. Hymes, “The Ethnography of Speaking”).

Although the notion of group as it emerged from performance theory was implicitly formed around groups constituted by regular, face-to-face interaction,

folklorists soon began to investigate mediated and fan groups. Peter Narváez coined the term “para-social rhetorical community” to describe listeners to the “Chronicles of Uncle Mose” (“Folk Talk and Hard Facts: The Role of Ted Russell’s ‘Uncle Mose’ on Cbc’s ‘Fishermen’s Broadcast’”) while Camille Bacon-Smith has written extensively about female fans of “Star Trek” allowing for the possibility of folk groups in which members may never communicate directly with each other. This trajectory led Noyes to assert that:

The group—which in this context I will give the more affectively charged name of community—is an “invention” in the historical materialist world of Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983); an “imagining” in the more post-modern discursive realm of Benedict Anderson... (“Group” 466)

She continues “By declaring the community to be a product of social imaginary, I by no means intend to consign it to insignificance” (466).⁴⁰ Noyes grounds her ideas in social-network theory and the work of sociolinguists such as Lesley Milroy, claiming that the group (or community) is a label ascribed to a series of interactions and relationships.

Noyes’s decision to use ‘community’ rather than ‘group’ brings us back to the issue of the folk community.⁴¹ She refers to “traditional community” as a form of close-

⁴⁰Compare with Roger Abrahams who stated that “It has been clear in the West for some time that forms of popular culture organised around high-intensity experiences (such as festivals or marches) and around stylised and technique-driven activities (such as dancing, sky-diving, camping, sports-spectating, or collecting of any sort) create the possibilities for communities that seldom meet face-to-face,” (“Phantoms” 29).

⁴¹Her terminological shift is interesting if somewhat unexpected and puzzling in the context as she gives no explanation for it. The leap from group to community is a large one. A slightly more detailed description of Noyes’s theoretical stance may be useful. Essentially she is trying to marry ontology and epistemology. Her ontology is based on network theory which attempts to map out relationships between individuals. These relationships can be categorised in terms of frequency, strength and so on. For Noyes, communities are invented epistemological constructs that are created by individuals to label certain conglomerations of relationships. Community then is a kind of sense-making of relationships or

knit network that forms just one of a series of types of community and claims that such communities can be created in response to a “desire for tradition, [or] a closing of ranks in conditions of threat” (463). Thus a “traditional” or “folk” community is not inherently pre-modern or non-urban, rather any community can be constructed along “traditional” lines.⁴² Consequently there is no such thing as a folk-modern continuum nor are folk communities any more ‘natural’ than ‘non-folk.’ Instead, any community is performed and “...exists in its collective performances” (469).

Whether one sees community as invented, imagined, performed or otherwise constituted, the key insight is that community is created symbolically. The raw material and manner of this creation is open to investigation and it is noteworthy that although Noyes attempts to retain the ‘real’ by stating that “the face-to-face village community is a salutary reminder that is still material, that really important things like eating and reproduction still take place in common space” (473) and that “the local is not natural, the local community is not a given, but it deserves special status in the discipline all the same” (ibid) she concludes later “there is no village community” (ibid). For Noyes, the raw material of community is regular face-to-face interaction and “acting in common” (468).

connections.

⁴² Though many pre-modern communities may have been constructed along “traditional” lines due to circumstance.

An alternate approach is taken by anthropologists such as Anthony Cohen who are interested in the symbolic construction of community. For Cohen, the raw material of community is the symbol:

..the reality of community in people's experience thus inheres in their attachment or commitment to a common body of symbols. (16)

The understanding of community as symbolic is what allows us to consider a mediated community to be every bit as real as a village community.

The need, or lack of it, for physical co-presence in the creation of community has been central to the debate about computer-mediated or "virtual" communities.

Approaching this issue from a folklorist's perspective provides me with an unusual set of insights. Folklorists have become inured to treating "the field" and "the folk" as, to use Dorson's quote from earlier, simultaneously "real" and "mystical." Additionally, folklorists have often focussed on the role of tradition (however conceived of) in the construction and maintenance of community. Negotiating the paradox of folklore has been, for me, about learning to see that the folk are as real as we want them to be. Applying that awareness to the paradox of virtual community and its "reality" is a key component of my analysis.

Virtual Community

Writing in *Virtual Communities*, Howard Rheingold claimed that:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with

sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relations in cyberspace.⁴³ (5)

This depiction has set the parameters for the debate about virtual community. In particular it implicitly characterises such communities as autochthonic; these are communities that grow from the bottom up, that emerge from interactions between their members, that are, essentially, ‘natural.’ Consequently, the notion of community has emerged as a ferociously contested terrain in studies of virtual culture.

Proponents of the advantages of virtual culture have pointed to purported communal aspects of the Net while nay-sayers have claimed that the Net detracts from “real” communities.” For example, leading skeptic John Snyder claimed, in “Get Real”, that

A community is more than a bunch of people distributed in all 24 time zones, sitting in their dens and pounding away on keyboards about the latest news in alt.music.indigo-girls. That’s not a community; it’s a fan club. Newsgroups, mailing lists, chat rooms—call them what you will—the Internet’s virtual communities are not communities in almost any sense of the word. A community is people who have greater things in common than a fascination with a narrowly defined topic. (Qtd. in Mitra 55).

In contrast, Nessim Watson in his analysis of the online group “Phish.Net” states:

The term ‘virtual’ means something akin to ‘unreal’ and so the entailments of calling online communities ‘virtual’ include spreading and reinforcing a belief that what happens online is *like* a community, but isn’t *really* a community. My experience has been that people in the offline world tend

⁴³Emphasis in the original

to see online communities as virtual, but that participants in the online communities see them as quite real. (129)

The issue of online community is vital. Sociologists Wellman and Gulia ask:

Can people find community online in the Internet? Can relationships between people who never see, smell, touch or hear each other be supportive and intimate? (167)

The question is revealing for its implied assumptions. Community is associated with positive characteristics such as supportiveness and intimacy and the obstacle to the achievement of this is embodiment. Community is seen as an ideal state of life. As Raymond Williams observed “unlike all other terms of social organisation ... [community] seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term” (76). This idealisation of community is common to both proponents and skeptics of online community and needs to be examined.

The issue of community has generated problems that mirror those caused by the disappearing folk. Anthony Cohen, in the introduction to his *Symbolic Construction of Community* states:

‘Community’ is one of those words— like ‘culture’, ‘myth’, ‘ritual’, ‘symbol’— bandied around in ordinary everyday speech, apparently readily intelligible to speaker and listener, which, when imported into the discourse of social science, however, causes immense difficulty. (11)

There have certainly been plenty of attempts at making sense of community. An often cited article in the journal *Rural Sociology* by George Hillery, enumerated 95 different

definitions of the term (118) and that was in 1955. There have been, since then, several attempts at generating some sort of consensus.

As Dennis Poplin, among others, has noted, the word “community” has acquired multiple uses (3). He differentiates among the uses of community to refer to a “moral or spiritual phenomenon” (5), a social group (3) and, finally, a spatially-based social grouping such as a town or village (9). Although he notes that the first two concepts have some utility he prefers to put place at the centre of community, stating that “the community differs from other units of social organisation in that it has a firm territorial base” (26). Similarly, Crow and Allan observe that “‘community’ does not have one single meaning but many” (3). In reviewing previous work they notice that definitions of community tend to fall into three different types: communities of shared residence, shared identity or shared interest (5). Although they claim that one could conceive of communities built simultaneously around all three notions they state that this idealised notion is highly unlikely in reality. Unlike Poplin, Crow and Allan remove “place” from the centre of community and focus instead on the role of individuals in the “active creation of ‘community’” (ibid). Indeed, they take issue with any concept of the community as ‘natural’, claiming instead that any community is created as an act of will.⁴⁴

⁴⁴It should be noted that there are contemporary scholars who reject this notion. For example, Carey and Frohnen’s recent edited collection, *Community and Tradition* is subtitled, *Conservative Perspectives on the American Experience*. The authors situate community in a land-owning middle-class who perceive a sacred obligation to “love his neighbor as himself” (16). (One cannot footnote a footnote otherwise I would note that the authors very deliberately choose to avoid non-sexist language, the book is full of ‘men’ and ‘himselves.’) For the contributors, the concept of community is rooted in place and is seen

The work of Crow and Allan leads into a discussion of community as symbolic. This understanding has its clearest articulation in the works of Benedict Anderson and Anthony Cohen. Anderson's work is focussed primarily on the role of various elites in creating nation states but his depiction of nations as "imagined communities" has tended to throw light on the way in which communities themselves are fundamentally imagined. Anthony Cohen tackles the means by which communities are "imagined" head on, claiming that "[p]eople construct community symbolically, making it a resource and a repository of meaning, and a referent of identity" (118). Cohen continues to argue that the key concept of the community is the boundary and the means by which members determine who belongs and who does not. This is an insight which I will return to later in my discussion of football (soccer) fans online.

Concepts of the 'naturalness' of community still exert, however, a powerful appeal in contemporary society. Crow and Allan comment that "where community is perceived as a natural unity, community ties are at their most potent" (6). One consequence of this seems to be that community has become associated with some sort of opposition to social groupings such as the nation, state or society. Raymond Williams notes that community has been increasingly used to indicate the bypassing of social institutions in order to work "directly with the people" (76) in some sort of natural, unmediated manner. The impact of the theories of Tönnies, Redfield et al appears to be

as the necessary response to an amoral, liberal society. Of the eight authors, six self-identify as political scientists, one a historian and one a sociologist. Although I find the work objectionable and shoddy it is a good insight into the religious right's attempt to define community.

that “community” has become privileged as the ‘natural’, ‘organic’ mode of life. The ability to ascribe community-ness to a group is, therefore, an intensely desirable outcome.

This has led to what Poplin calls the “humanistic” perception of community (e.g. Brownwell; Minar and Greer; Nisbet). For example, Minar and Greer claim that community “expresses our vague yearnings for a commonality of desire, a communion with those around us, an extension of the bonds of kin and friend to all those who share a common fate with us” (ix).⁴⁵ Modern society, urban life, the nation state are all seen as alienating and unnatural and this yearning for community is seen as our response. Crucially, in this perspective, community is seen as the result of *unmediated* relationships between people: unmediated by the state, by desires for personal gain (*Gesellschaft*) or by technology. The counter-claim from net proponents is that technological mediation, in this case the Net, can lead to a creation of this humanistic *Gemeinschaft* because the nature of the mediation is liberating.

The problem in the debate about virtual community is that it has tended to centre around utopian concepts of community without questioning the actual notion of community. In a sense, the debate about virtual community has become sidetracked into a discussion of whether online groups can form the types of structures that we think communities *ought* to be. A utopian desire for ‘natural’ communities is by no means new. In his 1972 work, *The Social Construction of Communities*, Gerald Suttles conducted a

⁴⁵Quoted in Poplin (5).

classical rebuttal of the idea of the natural community (3-18). Suttles termed the belief that natural communities arose organically to fulfill universal human needs as “the folk model”⁴⁶ and claimed that it massively understated the active role of individuals and institutions in the creation and maintenance of community. One could go further and see this usage of naturalness as an ideological act that masks the invented nature of a community.

Regardless of its veracity it is the case that the concept of the natural community holds great appeal for many people. In fact, Kevin Robins makes the point that appeal of the natural community has increased in recent times as a response to globalism. Therefore it is of crucial importance to separate the community as yearned for from the community as is. Consequently I will take a similar perspective to Jan Fernback, who draws on classical sociological notions of community in an attempt to help ground the debate about virtual community (“The Individual”; “There Is a There There”). Fernback notes that debates about the nature of community such as Raymond Williams’ influential description of community in *Keywords*, have tended to focus on the entity of community rather than the processes that drive its formation. Instead, Fernback asserts that “community has both symbolic and functional definitions” (“There Is a There There” 204) and states:

⁴⁶This does of course play into the common association of “folk” with misguided. He is using the term in parallel with such constructs as “folk etymology.”

Community is both an object of study (an entity, a manifestation) *and* the communicative process of negotiation and production of a commonality of meaning, structure, culture. (205)

As a folklorist, I am interested in the performance of the process of community as much as the product that results. This performance consists of the deployment of symbols as well as the communicative acts required.

In assessing the nature of virtual communities it is therefore important to disentangle the various preconceptions about what community actually is. The three general concepts of community described above have all been mobilised in the debate about virtual community. Howard Rheingold falls into the camp of those who see computer-mediated communication as providing an outlet for the “moral” yearning for community – the utopian perspective. Some scholars, such as Nancy Baym and Lynn Cherny, take the perspective that CMC communities are simply social groups that generate an emergent sense of community. Finally, theorists such as Steve Jones and Jan Fernback claim that there really is a “there” there⁴⁷ and that cyberspace provides a new place for community development. Meanwhile, sceptics such as Clifford Stoll and Mark Slouka maintain that any possibility for online community is self-delusion at best and potentially destructive of real communities at worst – the dystopian perspective.

My intent is to examine the sense of community and place as it constituted and performed through communicative acts transmitted via the Net. To do so I will draw

⁴⁷E.g. Fernback's article “There is there there.”

upon the concept of the speech community as proposed in the ethnography of communication and examine the relationship of community to communication. Before I do so, however, I wish to give an overview of discourse about virtual community and its relationship to earlier work on the communicative features of computer-mediated communication.

Communication and Virtual Community

As previously noted, one can see a range of attitudes towards the possibility of virtual community. The current debate did not, however, spring fully formed in the 1990s. As discussed in chapter one, the engineers and computer programmers who were responsible for creating the Net were fully aware of the potential social implications of the technology. Indeed, they were encouraged by the possibilities it appeared to offer. In their seminal article for *Science and Technology* in 1968, Licklider and Taylor explicitly described groups of users of computer networks as “On-Line interactive communities” and said of them:

... they will consist of geographically separated members, sometimes grouped in small clusters and sometimes working individually. They will be communities not of common location but of *common interest*.⁴⁸ (30)

Perhaps ironically, the concept that would later become known as virtual community existed even before there was an Internet. Although the authors did, briefly, raise the

⁴⁸Emphasis in the original.

possibility of the intended Internet exaggerating social inequalities they remained determinedly optimistic:

...life will be happier for the on-line individual because the people with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity.... if the network idea should prove to do for education what a few have envisioned in hope, if not in concrete detailed plan, and if all minds should prove to be responsive, surely the boon to humankind would be beyond measure. (31)

However, once email, and later USENET, became widely available, the reverse seemed to occur. Discussion lists devolved into “flame wars”, USENET was being used to send sexually graphic images,⁴⁹ and the French experiment with a computer network (Minitel) created all manner of controversy.⁵⁰ One particularly troubling event for net proponents was the collapse of an online community named “CommuniTree” in the mid-1970s after a series of verbal attacks forced the administrators to impose unprecedented security measures (see Stone). Consequently there was an impetus to understand what exactly was ‘going wrong’ and the earliest research tended to focus, as predicted by Marshall McLuhan for any new communications medium, on the communicative features of the new medium.

Firstly, it needs to be briefly re-stated that there are many types of computer-mediated communication available via the Internet. For example, web-browsers such as

⁴⁹the Usenet group, alt.sex.binaries has a long and infamous history for its role in the dissemination of pornographic images.

⁵⁰Minitel was a cross between a computer network and video text system, created in the late 1970's. It quickly became notorious for “messageries rose” - bulletin boards based around pornography and sexual contacts (Lemos; Rheingold, *Virtual Community* 220-40).

“Firefox” and “Internet Explorer” allow users to maintain public-access home pages containing full-colour images, sounds, videos and so on in a complex multimedia format. On the other hand, basic email, until recently, was incapable of transmitting anything but the characters found on a common typewriter keyboard. Thus it would be a mistake to treat all computer-mediated communication as homogenous. However the earliest research on CMC was conducted on systems that allowed nothing more complicated than basic email, whether synchronous as in chat programs, such as IRC, or asynchronous as in email and USENET newsgroups.

The earliest significant research into the communicative features of CMC tended to assume, as noted by M. L. Markus, a technologically deterministic perspective which claimed that “social outcomes [of CMC] derive primarily from the material characteristics of [CMC] regardless of users’ intentions” (121). This research trajectory is exemplified by the extensive studies conducted at Carnegie-Mellon University from a social-psychological perspective.⁵¹ Of particular note was Sara Kiesler et al.’s report on the communicative features of the medium published in *American Psychologist* in 1984. Their analysis was that computer-mediated communication was deficient in five paralinguistic features:

⁵¹This research trajectory has continued to the present and tends to coalesce around the study of computer-networking in work environments (e.g. Star).

- Absence of regulating feedback: i.e. basic email does not allow “back channel” feedback so it is impossible, for example, to determine whether someone agrees with a statement.
 - Dramaturgical weakness: i.e. the lack of nonverbal cues while communicating.
 - Lack of status and position cues: i.e. social hierarchies are invisible in CMC.
 - Social anonymity: i.e. the person with whom you are communicating is not present in any form.
 - Computing norms and immature etiquette: specifically they were concerned that as a new form of communication, CMC did not have any established norms.
- (1125-26)

This information lack was held to encourage certain forms of behaviour. For example, Kiesler et al. claimed that the lack of social cues lead in CMC led to more egalitarian communicative behaviour, and that the lack of ability to communicate emotion, led to a perception that email is more impersonal than other forms of communication. Thus the features of the medium were seen to generate both positive social outcomes (egalitarian behaviour) as well as negative outcomes such as “flaming”.⁵² This slim report has been the foundation of research into what has been called the “cues filtered out” model of CMC (Culnan and Markus). Although their findings over-emphasise what computer-mediated communication supposedly lacks, they did articulate what has become a commonly held meta-communicative belief about the medium,

⁵²“Flaming” is a term for the posting of angry, aggressive emails.

namely that it is one which lacks “warmth” and is conducive to misunderstandings: a belief that is well articulated by one of sociolinguist, Denise Murray's informants:

All the personality and humanity that show up in letters disappear on computer screens... all the warmth and wisdom are translated into those frigid, uniform, green characters. (“Composition as Conversation” 121)

The classic example of this branch of work is Elizabeth Reid’s dissertation on Internet Relay Chat (IRC).⁵³ Her thesis was the first sustained attempt to relate communication to the formation of community via CMC. Taking a symbolic-constructivist approach to culture derived from Clifford Geertz, she claimed that IRC users constitute a community because “they are commonly faced with the problems posed by the medium’s inherent deconstruction of traditional models of social interaction which are based on physical proximity” (“Communication and Community” 398) and must therefore solve the problem communally. For Reid, the emergent community with its common culture is determined by the flaws of the medium that were delineated by Kiesler et al.

The measures which users of the IRC system have devised to meet their common problems, posed by the medium’s lack of regulating feedback and social context cues, its dramaturgical weakness, and the factor of anonymity, are the markers of their community, their common culture. (ibid.)

⁵³Although her study is an undergraduate dissertation, it has been widely cited and she has repeated her central thesis in articles published in some important collections: see for example her articles “Virtual Worlds: Culture and Imagination” and “Communication and Community on Internet Relay Chat”.

Ironically, the positive features that were being ascribed to CMC were seen as deriving from the users' attempts to overcome the deficiencies of the medium.

Reid's work was the first to explicitly combine communication, community and the use of CMC in social rather than occupational environments. However, her embrace of the deterministic cues filtered out hypothesis has implications for any ethnography of computer-mediated communication as it assumes that the communicative behaviour observed can be explained in terms of the 'failings of the medium'; rather as if one could explain spoken communication purely through the failings of speech as a medium. As Hymes has noted, however, the medium and how it is understood by its users forms just a facet of the complete picture (e.g. "Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life"). A technologically deterministic approach such as that taken by Elizabeth Reid is at best inadequate and at worst incompatible with the richer understanding required by the ethnography of communication.

The cues filtered out model has been criticised from several perspectives. Sociolinguist Lynn Cherny in her analysis of communication in a MUD (Multi-User Dimension) notes that several predicted outcomes of this theory do not stand up to investigation, especially in the areas of gender, dominance and "flaming" ("MUD" 11-19). A second criticism has been levelled by various social scientists working at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Brenda Danet, Sheizaf Rafaeli et al., who have focussed on playfulness and creativity in the medium and criticised the early CMC researchers for being "primarily interested in the instrumental rather than the expressive aspects of

[CMC]" (43). Danet makes the point that most of the tradition of analysis in the cues filtered out model has studied CMC in organisational contexts without looking at its social use ("Text as Mask"). Finally, folklorist Nancy Baym approached the study of communicative features in CMC by looking at the cultural context surrounding the communication (e.g. "The Emergence of Community"; "The Emergence of on-Line Community"; "Interpreting Soap Opera").

One response to the cues filtered out model has been to search for less deterministic models of communication and culture. After rejecting technological determinism, M. L. Markus offered two possible alternatives. The first she termed the "rational actor hypothesis", the second she termed the "emergent process model". According to Markus, "the rational actor perspective holds that impacts result not from the technology itself, but the choices individuals make about when and how to use it" (122). Markus's study of organisational use of CMC focussed on CMC users' perception of the possible negative outcomes of using the medium and the ways in which they attempted to utilise these perceived failings to their advantage. For example, she noted that managers who saw CMC as "less personal" than other forms of communication would often preferentially use it to deliver bad news (23). The rational actor perspective was also used implicitly in Denise Murray's analysis of medium switching in a corporate environment ("Context of Oral and Written Language") and explicitly by Lynn Cherny in her ethnographic analysis of communication in a MUD (*Conversation and Community*; "The Mud Register"). Although Cherny embraces the rational actor hypothesis as a way

of escaping technological determinism it is clear that the rational actor hypothesis still requires a somewhat deterministic approach. All the rational actor perspective does is to assume that CMC comes with certain features that the users manipulate.

Consequently I find the emergent process hypothesis that Markus details to be of most use. She claims that “according to this perspective, technologies and the choices of users interact with mutually causal influences” (124). This seems to me to be the most humanistic approach to the subject. As with actor-network theory, it removes the role of agency from solely the user or the technology and places it in the inter-relationship between user and technology.⁵⁴ This is essentially the approach taken by folklorist Nancy Baym in her study of a Usenet group (*Tune In*) as well as Danet et al.’s studies of playful behaviour on IRC (e.g. “Text as Mask”). As Markus states, “the emergent process perspective cautions us that the prospects for achieving socially desirable outcomes [in CMC] are dim, as long as social scientists ... cling to simple theories that attribute all social consequences directly to technology or to users” (145).

Although the technologically deterministic model has been thoroughly challenged, it has had a great impact on populist accounts the Net. In particular, the concept of CMC as a cues filtered out medium has been accepted almost uncritically. The most common perspective among populist writers tends to be a form of idealism with, on one side those who see Utopian possibilities and on the other the sceptics who foresee a

⁵⁴Actor network theory was first proposed by sociologists of scientific knowledge such as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar; see the bibliography entries for Latour and Woolgar.

dystopian “electronic nightmare” (Wicklen). Although these opinions are also found among scholarly researchers they tend to be less prevalent.⁵⁵

Among scholarly researchers of virtual communities there has been a general acceptance that some types of communities have emerged online; the debate has focused on how and why these communities have formed. I will examine two main schools of thought. One emerging from a folkloristic/sociolinguistic background focuses on the emergence of community through communication.⁵⁶ The other, more frequently published perspective tends to be associated with a post-modernist cultural theory standpoint and has focussed primarily on the issue of virtual place and embodiment.⁵⁷ To interrogate these perspectives I will first give an account of the populist debate about virtual communities as ideal communities and then describe the cultural theoretical approach that can be, very loosely, termed a postmodern analysis centred on space and embodiment.

⁵⁵Nessim Watson's article, “Why We Argue About Virtual Community” is a good example of a fairly hyperbolic academic study of online community. He concludes that “rethinking the distinction between what humans do online and offline may be a key process to the revitalisation of democracy,” (130).

⁵⁶See for example the works of Nancy Baym, Lyn Cherny and Brenda Danet.

⁵⁷There has been a movement to formalise the study of Net cultures under the rubric of “cybercultural studies.” As a the discussion of “folklore” and the “folk” indicated earlier, choosing a name tends to create as many problems as it solves. The main proponent of this is Steven Jones, the head of the “Association of Internet Researchers” who has published several anthologies.

Idealism and Virtual Community

Utopian notions of virtual communities are built on two deterministic notions. The first is a form of biological determinism that asserts that community is a natural mode of human life which is threatened by modern social structures. The second is a variety of technological determinism which asserts that the very nature of the Net as a technology generates feelings of community. This very deep-seated irony is commented upon by Howard Rheingold.

The fact that we need computer networks to recapture the sense of cooperative spirit that so many people seemed to lose when we gained all this new technology is a painful irony.... While we've been gaining new technologies, we've been losing our sense of community, in many places in the world, and in most cases the technologies have precipitated that loss. (110)

The key to this understanding is Rheingold's statement in *Virtual Community*.

Although spatial imagery and a sense of place help convey the experience of dwelling in a virtual community, biological imagery is often more important to describe the way cyberculture changes.... Think of cyberculture as a social petri dish... and virtual communities, in all their diversity, as the colonies of microorganisms that grow in petri dishes.... [they are] a social experiment that nobody planned but that is happening nevertheless.

...whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies. (5-6)

For Rheingold, and other proponents, virtual communities are the *natural* outcome of the technology.⁵⁸ John Perry Barlow, another of foremost Net proponents takes a different slant on this idea by claiming that human beings have:

... a permanent hardwired dissatisfaction they find themselves in. And a desire to adapt it to them, instead of to adapt to it. (37)

I discussed the naturalisation of community earlier in this chapter. The debate among utopians and dystopians is not about community per se, but whether or not community can exist online.⁵⁹ Both sides see community as an ideal state of life and perceive it to be threatened by modernity. The Net dystopians see virtual community as the next great threat to 'real' community. For example, leading skeptic Mark Slouka states in a dialogue with Barlow:

I think the real answer has to be in the physical world. The only choice we have is to resuscitate our failed communities ... to align ourselves with physical reality now, before it's too late.... The answer is not virtual reality. (Barlow et al. 37)

Both Howard Rheingold and Clifford Stoll start their books with anecdotes of interacting with a computer. Rheingold writes,

⁵⁸The relationship between the communitarian idealism of the hippy counter-culture and the computer radicals of 1960s West Coast America is discussed at length in Steven Levy's *Hackers*.

⁵⁹This issue is not restricted to populist writers. There is a significant body of work from a social policy perspective that interrogates issues in public policy and community building via the Net. This has been particularly marked in Canada. See for example the works of Leslie Regan Shade or Leena d'Haenens's collection, *Cyberidentities: Canadian and European Presence in Cyberspace*.

It might have looked to my daughter as if I were alone at my desk the night she caught me chortling online, but from my point of view I was in living contact with old and new friends, strangers and colleagues. (*Virtual Community 2*).

Conversely Stoll, a leading skeptic, recalls being on holiday with friends:

Fingers on the keyboard I am bathed in the cold glow of my cathode-ray tube, answering e-mail. While one guy's checking the sky through binoculars, and another's stuffing himself with popcorn, I'm tapping out a letter to a stranger across the continent.....

I see my reflection in the screen and a chill runs down my spine. Even on vacation I can't escape the computer networks.

I take a deep breath and pull the plug. (*Silicon Snake Oil I*)

In the extracts above, Rheingold and Stoll articulate completely different notions of what is real. Stoll sees a "cold" computer-terminal while his friends are outside having fun, Rheingold doesn't see the terminal at all, he sees "old and new friends."

Although less directly focussed on the concept of community the debate spills out into the potential political uses of the Net. From the days of Licklider, proponents have claimed that access to the Net will increase participatory democracy.⁶⁰ Others have asserted that it can empower activist groups (e.g. Froehling; Mele; Wood and Adams) and radical action. Alternatively, critics have pointed to the surveillance possibilities of the net, going so far as to equate it with the Panopticon.⁶¹ Here I will simply observe that the

⁶⁰Loader's anthology, *The Governance of Cyberspace* provides a good introduction to the issue as does part 4 of Porter's collection, *Internet Culture*, especially the articles by Poster and Lockard.

⁶¹This view is widespread. Wicklen's *Electronic Nightmare*, published in 1981 provides a good historical insight into fears of lack of privacy. Sherry Turkle, a Net advocate, nevertheless considers the relationship of the Net to Bentham's panopticon in light of Foucault's theories (247-51) while Ziauddin Sardar provides an Orientalist critique, claiming that:

proponents of radical activism focus on the Net's ability to construct political interest communities whereas nay-sayers focus on the Net's ability to exert centralised power and override local communities, often drawing on an analogy with the manner in which the American interstate freeway system helped destroy small rural communities.⁶²

Sociologist and leading Internet researcher Barry Wellman has labelled this debate about the nature of community on the Net as "pre-scientist and unscholarly" (169) and decried the lack of a sense of "history" (169). To be fair, this can be claimed of the debate about community in general.⁶³ It is probably the case that the "natural community" is as much a mirage online as it is offline. The debate is, however, useful because it tells us a lot about our hopes and fears of the Net.

Place and Virtual Community

The most relevant trajectory of scholarly analysis of online behaviour to my work is associated with a Cultural Studies perspective. Although it is a diverse body of work one can track an overriding interest in place, the body and, latterly, community. Cyberspace

The supposed democracy of cyberspace only hands control more effectively back to a centralized elite....

Cyberspace with its techno-Utopian ideology, is an instrument for distracting Western society from its increasing spiritual poverty, utter meaninglessness and grinding misery and inhumanity of everyday lives. ("alt.civilizations.faq" 38-39)

⁶²See, unsurprisingly, Stoll, *Silicon Snake Oil*. The phrase "Information Superhighway" has led to a certain amount of resistance; workers laid off by a communications firm printed t-shirts with the motto "Roadkill on the Information Superhighway."

⁶³For example, in their introduction to *Community and Tradition*, Carey and Frohnen claim that "our communities are disappearing as we forget what we are losing" (1) and differentiate between social interaction and "true community" (ibid).

is made for Cultural Studies. As a concept, cyberspace marries literary theory—the word was, after all, coined by a postmodern science-fiction author—and our experience of the Internet.⁶⁴ Michael Benedikt's collection, *Cyberspace: First Steps* published in 1991 is one of the most frequently cited publications in the emerging field and is oriented around articles that attempt to answer the question “can cyberspace be considered to be a new social space?” (Tomas 33).⁶⁵ The collection, however, shows no real interest in the concept of community. Once Rheingold published his *Virtual Community*, though, everything changed.⁶⁶ For all its flaws as a scholarly work, his coining of the term “virtual community”⁶⁷ captured the imagination of the media and academia.

In the introduction to his important 1995 anthology, *Cybersociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, Steven Jones foregrounds the importance of community:

Critical to the rhetoric surrounding the information highway is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community. (“Understanding Community” 11)

Jones is not uncritical of proponents of online community, stating that “The manner in which we seek to find community, empowerment and political action all embedded in our

⁶⁴This is a footnote for a subject worthy of a whole thesis. Like Folklore Studies, Cultural Studies mixes the social sciences and humanities. One thing that I suspect attracted many left-leaning cultural theorists to Gibson's “cyberpunk” novels was his dystopian depiction of late capitalism.

⁶⁵See for example the work of Benedikt; Heim; Kellog; Tomas; Wexelblat.

⁶⁶Rheingold does cite articles from Benedikt.

⁶⁷A. R. Stone refers to “Electronic virtual communities” in her 1991 article “Will the Real Please Stand Up” (111). Rheingold is the person who made it famous and cites her in his bibliography.

ability to use CMC is thereby troubling” (33). That said, his main intent is to examine the relationship between communication, place and community in online environments. For Jones, a sense of place appears to be as important as a sense of community: “Once we can surmount time and space and ‘be’ anywhere, we must choose a ‘where’ at which to be.” (32). As one of his later collaborators, Jan Fernback, was to put it, “there is a there there.”⁶⁸

Positing a sense of place in cyberspace appears to be one way to counter the argument that virtual communities may diminish diversity by allowing us to pick and choose our communities of choice. Jones quotes Doheny-Farina’s critique of virtual community in an updated version of his 1995 introduction:

A community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities. It is not something you can easily join. You can’t subscribe to a community as you subscribe to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived. It is entwined, contradictory, and involves all our senses. (“Information” 3-4)

Jones’s response is to note that in online communities, just as with offline communities, “the sense of community is palpable, yet evanescent” (4). He then proceeds to decentre place, following the likes of Edward Soja in treating space as socially produced:

CMC not only structures social relations, it is the *space* within which the relations and the tool individuals use to enter that space. Consequently it is more than the context in within which social relations occur.... (12).

⁶⁸As in Fernback’s article “There is a There There.”

Through his portrayal of space as socially constructed, Jones is able to assert that a cyberspace is just another social space with its own reality. Therefore he cautions us that “There should be no mistake about the apperceived “realness” of the reality encountered online – Internet users have strong emotional attachments to their online activities” (“Information” 5).

The irony here is that cyberspace doesn’t exist. Cyberspace is an imagined imagined place. In a dialogue with Sven Bikerts, Mark Slouka states:

... you ask the question, “Where am I when I am involved in a book?”
Well, here’s the real answer: you’re in cyberspace. (Barlow et al. 39)

According to Slouka, you do not even need to be logged on to be in cyberspace. To make sense of this it is important to understand the difference between cyberspace and virtual reality as formulated in this depiction of cyberspace. Virtual reality machines project sensory inputs to the user in order to simulate certain aspects of being in a world. For example a “VR” helmet cuts off the wearer from outside stimuli and plays sights and sounds in an immersive manner to create the sensation of actually being in another world. On the other hand, cyberspace is simply an imagined space that does not require technology to create it. Reading an email, for example, has no more to do with virtual reality than a reading a letter or talking on a telephone. On the other hand one could, theoretically, be in cyberspace while reading a letter. Cyberspace has, however, become associated with any kind of imagined space that depends to a lesser or greater amount on computer technology.

Theorists have therefore been able to posit that if cyberspace is a form of imagined space then it is an obvious home for imagined communities. Consequently the notion of the symbolic construction of community has become a key plank in the cybercultural understanding of cyberspace. So, for example, sociologist and cybercultural theorist Jan Fernback claims that “community exists in the minds of the participants; it exists because its participants define it and give it meaning” (“There Is a There There” 213).

The corollary to the idea of cyberspace as an imagined imagining is that the kinds of community which develop may not be seen as “ideal.” Jones admits that:

The Internet’s communities are imagined in two ways inimical to human communities. First they thrive on the ‘meanwhile,’ they are forged from the sense that they exist, but we rarely directly apprehend them, and we see them only out of the corner of our eye. ...

Second they are imagined as parallel, rather than serial, groupings of people, which is to say that they are not composed of people who are necessarily connected, even by interest, but are rather groupings of people headed in the same direction for a time. (17)

Whether or not Jones’s pessimism is well-founded it is the case that many, as Jan Fernback notes, have placed their hopes “for a revitalised sense of community into the unifying power ... of CMC” (“There is a There There” 206) and that “the cultural metaphors we have adopted to refer to CMC are *place centered*” (206).⁶⁹

The ability to ‘imagine place’ ties in the sociological and feminist interest in embodiment. The first use of virtual community came from a feminist perspective when

⁶⁹Emphasis in the original.

A. R. Stone applied Haraway's writing on cyborg feminism to the issue of online community ("Will the Real Body Please Stand Up").⁷⁰ Stone was interested in the ways in which these new social aggregations could be claimed to be hybrid or cyborg entities. She noted that, "Historically, body, technology, and community constitute each other" (93). Such a perspective is the diametrical opposite of those who see 'real' communities as fundamentally natural. She deals with the thorny issue of embodiment via CMC by claiming that "participants in the electronic virtual communities of cyberspace live in the borderlands of both physical and virtual culture" (93).⁷¹ This is an important characterisation as it allows for the deployment of a Foucauldian style analysis of the body as a site of resistance (e.g. McRae)⁷² and cyberspace as type of prosthetic place.

Critics such as Kevin Robins are clearly uneasy about the potential seductions of an 'embodied' cyberspace with its concomitant virtual communities. Robins, in his

⁷⁰Donna Haraway is something of a guru. An biologist who became interested in cyborg culture, her work has founded an entire field of "cyberfeminism" ("Cyborg Manifesto"; *Modest*Witness; Simians*). For an excellent overview of cyberfeminism see Kira Hall's article of the same name. Hall differentiates between Haraway's liberal feminism and a more radical version. Jenny Wolmark's collection, *Cybersexualities* reprints many classic contributions to the field.

⁷¹Nina Wakefield gives a dramatic presentation of this process in her account of fieldwork in a cybercafé. She notes that "In Netcafé, the computers function via networks of social relationships.... Put another way, the technology exceeds the boundaries of the machines. It leaks into the 'cybervibe', the interactions between cyberhosts and customers, and even the names given to other products in the café," (197).

⁷²Issues in embodiment have been a major source of theorising. A collection by Featherstone and Burrows (*Cyberspace/Cyberbodies/Cyberpunk*) includes several provocative articles. In their introduction, they offer the assertion "that the boundaries between subjects, their bodies and the 'outside world' are being radically reconfigured" implying that "the categories of the biological, the technological, the natural, the artificial and the human - are now beginning to blur," ("Cultures of Technological Embodiment" 3).

article “Cyberspace and the World We Live In” claims that “the Mythology of cyberspace is preferred over its sociology” (153) and proceeds to argue that “it is time to relocate virtual culture in the real world (the real world that virtual culturalists, seduced by their own metaphors, pronounce dead or dying)” (153). For Robins, “virtual space is being created as a domain or order, refuge, withdrawal” (152).⁷³ Robert Markley makes a similar point, claiming that:

Technology never escapes politics. The fiction of cyberspace is useful precisely to the extent that it allows its proponents to imagine an androcentric reality in which a threatening, messy or recalcitrant (and invariably feminized) nature never intrudes. (4)

The crux of the matter appears to be a notion of cyberspace as a place in which bodily transcendence can occur. N. Katherine Hayles claims, “Perhaps not since the Middle Ages has the fantasy of leaving the body behind been so widely dispersed through the population and never has it been so strongly linked with existing technologies” (183). Cyberspace is seen as the post-modern redaction of the modernist conceit of rational transcendence. Rather than evolving to some state of pure rationality we are, it is claimed, transcending to an almost teleological state of communion. Jeffrey Fisher terms this ideal, “technosophy” and asserts that it “constructs cyberspace as a postmodern version of a medieval paradise, a space of transcendence in which evil and

⁷³Robins is writing from a politically left perspective. His standpoint can be summarised as ‘the internet is a new opium for the masses.’

responsibility are left behind in a blissful conjunction with the really real” (“Postmodern Paradiso” 125).

As can be seen, the terrain of cyberspace and the body is heavily contested. On one side can be seen likes of Steven Jones and the “Association for Internet Researchers”⁷⁴ who see genuinely transformative possibilities for the Internet. On another side, cyberfeminists, of many persuasions have focussed on what cyberspace means for the body, while on a third side, skeptics such as Kevin Robins or Ziauddin Sardar see the net propagating current, iniquitous power relationships. Issues in community, space and place, and the body have been at the forefront of this debate.

Summary

In this chapter I have examined literature dealing with our understandings of the folk, community, cyberspace and virtual community. My intent has been to prepare the theoretical and methodological groundwork for the next chapter. As such I have covered a rather eclectic range of literature. In order to bring a folkloristic perspective to the subject I have endeavoured to unpack our discipline’s engagement with “the folk.” This unpacking required me to undertake a similar analysis of the evolution of the use of the term “community” in Folklore Studies and cognate disciplines. This exegesis was intended to sketch the complexities of the entangled notions of the folk, groups and community in order to ground my later discussion of the nature of virtual community.

⁷⁴<http://www.aoir.org>

Chapter 3: Method

Introduction

Writing in 2000, Mann & Stewart noted that “It is, perhaps, surprising that the suitability of the Internet for conducting research remains relatively unexplored.... There has been little systematic analysis of how the Internet might be incorporated into qualitative research practices” (*Internet Communication* 4). Although there is an emerging body of work that specifically addresses the use of the Internet in and for qualitative research, it has lagged behind the largely theoretical debate about the Internet as a cultural domain. My aim here is to outline the role of Internet-based research within the broad field of qualitative research, to assess the work done to date and, finally, to indicate how my work fits into the subject.

It is important to differentiate between the study of the Internet as medium in which cultural activity occurs and the study of Internet as a “cultural artefact” (Hine 14). The former approach has tended to focus solely on the characteristics of online behaviour⁷⁵ while the latter has been more interested in the role of the Internet in offline contexts.⁷⁶ As Christine Hine states, however, the offline cultural artefact that is the Internet is influenced by online behaviour and vice-versa (14). That said, the

⁷⁵For example the online ethnographic work of Nancy Baym, Lynn Cherny and Shelley Correll falls into this paradigm.

⁷⁶This is far less developed as an approach. See for example Wakeford, “New Media” or Newhagen “Nightly@NBC.Com”.

methodologies employed for Internet research are determined by the type of analysis the researcher is interested in conducting. My research falls into the trajectory which has examined the emergence of online cultural forms and, indeed, is among the more extreme approaches that focus purely on the “virtual” domain. This was a purely methodological decision specific to the project in hand and is not meant to imply that I see no merit in the study of Internet in a wider cultural context.

The Internet and Qualitative Research

There are many possible areas of Internet research. As Mann & Stewart write, “Internet research is not only concerned with the study of online behaviour... It is also concerned with using computer-based tools and computer-accessible populations to study human behaviour in general” (5). To this can be added the study of the Internet in broader cultural contexts. All of these domains are accessible to qualitative research methods, consequently it is important to differentiate between the various possible types of research that are often discussed as a part of ‘Internet research’. In general, four different types of research are referred to when mentioning research on the Internet.

1. *Internet-based research.* As I outlined in the previous chapter, the study of the Internet as a cultural domain in its own right has dominated the research agenda. The earliest studies analysed the use of computer networks in ‘formal’ settings while more recent work has looked at the formation of playful and ‘informal’ culture online.

2. *Computer-aided research.* There is plentiful research on the use of computer tools as aids for qualitative research that debates its strengths and weaknesses (e.g. Coffey, Atkinson and Holbrook; Dicks and Mason, "Hypermedia and Ethnography"; Lee and Fielding; Mason and Dicks) but so far there has been little sustained interest in the role of computer-assisted research techniques for Internet-based media (Dicks et al.; Wakeford). Although future developments in this field may well prove very exciting, it is not a focus of my present work.
3. *Internet-aided research.* There has also been qualitative research that has used computer networks as a convenient way of sampling populations or as a tool to aid in secondary research (e.g. Fielden). In this case computer networks such as the Internet are simply used as facilitators that give a researcher easier access to certain social groups.
4. *Internet Research.* Finally, there is an expanding literature dealing with the study of the Internet as a cultural artifact and the relation between offline and online behaviour (e.g. Hakken and Andrews; Miller and Slater; Newhagen, Cordes and Levy; Wakeford). Such an approach requires the researcher to be able to treat the Internet as a technological "text" (Hine) in order to investigate its use in local, offline contexts.

Internet-based research has dominated the field to-date. The vast majority of research has focused on what Annette Markham described as "the lived experience of

what it means to go and be online” (*Life Online* 18). Although Lori Kendall has argued that “on-line interaction cannot be divorced from the off-line social and political contexts within which participants live their daily lives” (58), researchers tended to treat online behaviour as hermetically sealed from the offline.⁷⁷ Isolating online cultures from offline cultures allows a delineation of the subject and provides for a first step towards understanding this new cultural domain. My methodology is a deliberately chosen extreme version of this type of research that is designed to explore the limits of the technique.

Researchers need to be aware, however, that purely offline or online approaches to the study of the Internet, either as cultural domain or cultural artifact, should be problematised. As Mann and Stewart discovered, “The evidence from studies that have focused on online cultures suggests that a virtual world may be seen as *either* an environment in itself *or* an extension of real life depending on the research interests of the investigator” (207). As with so many instances of cultural research, the researcher seems likely to see the Internet they expect to see. It is the case, that to quote Mann & Stewart again “Since the arrival of the Internet, there are further sites for subcultural activities and for conducting research—these are the physical sites of computer use and also the virtual locale and text-based practices of cyberspace” (196). However as Christine Hine and Miller & Slater have shown, the virtual and real worlds are

⁷⁷Christine Hine’s *Virtual Ethnography* is the first really convincing, sustained attempt to address this issue.

thoroughly interpellated in our everyday lives. It is this interpellation which presents any researcher with their greatest challenges. The Internet is experienced simultaneously in a myriad of places, yet exists nowhere in particular; one cannot point to the Internet or take a photograph of it. It is then, perhaps, ironic that just as theorists were problematising the notion of place in everyday life that a technology emerges which appears to embody this notion of 'placelessness.' Although my priority here is to explicate the issues involved in the study of cultural forms communicated via the Internet, I will return to the issue of the interpenetration of the real and the virtual and its implications for Internet research later.

Studying Culture Online

Pille Runnel claims that "it is not possible ... to talk about fieldwork as a research method in connection with the Internet as a homogenous phenomenon"(171). By this he means that no single methodology can be adopted for the study of every possible Internet-based form. As already discussed, the Internet as it is popularly understood consists of a wide variety of communicative media, some of which are incapable of carrying human communication.⁷⁸ It seems likely that although general principles of primary research will be generated, specific fieldwork techniques will vary according to the communicative choices of the group(s) under discussion. Qualitative research techniques consist of repertoire stretching from semi-structured interviews, to focus-group analysis, from surveys to ethnographies, from discourse analysis to ethnopoetic

⁷⁸ For example, household appliances such as refrigerators can be connected to the Net but human-fridge communication appears not to be a profitable area of inquiry for Internet culture.

interpretation. To an extent, the choice of methodological tool will be influenced by the media involved. A study of speech play on IRC (Danet, *Cyberpl@y*; Danet, Rudenberg and Rosenbaum) may require a methodology focused on the artistic use of typography while an analysis of web pages about a populist movement (Hine) might require a very different methodological tool chest. In addition, a contemporary online group may use a variety of Net media. Twenty years ago the communicative possibilities within the Internet were quite limited, making it relatively easy to delineate an online group and study their behaviour within that medium. The massive explosion in Internet media means, however, that participants in one online group may also host web-pages, participate in other bulletin boards, communicate with each other via a range of tools such as ICQ, IRC or online bulletin boards and may swap files, photos, jokes and so on via private email. As with real life groups, members of Net-based groups possess a rich repertoire of communicative possibilities.

Presently, it appears that any methodology is derived “on the fly.” As with most researchers who have essayed the task of carrying out online research, I have found that I often ended up inventing the methodology after the fact. The principles I have derived for my work were, as Christine Hine also discovered (*Virtual Ethnography* 63-65), developed over time. Keeping this in mind, it is possible to outline some general issues arising when it comes to the conduct of online research.

An Ethnographic Approach

As a methodology for the analysis of cultural and social forms, ethnography is used throughout a wide range of the social sciences. Originally developed by anthropologists as a means for studying 'exotic' cultures at the turn of the 1900s, ethnographic techniques have been applied to just about every conceivable type of human activity and cultural form. Although it is generally seen as a particular type of qualitative research, it suffers because, as Martyn Hammersley notes "the term 'ethnography' is not clearly defined in common usage, and there is some disagreement about what count and do not count as examples of it"(1). Outlining the various definitions and debates focussed on the what is and isn't ethnography is a thesis in its own right. That said, seeing as I am using an ethnographic method it behooves me to make my own position clear.

Camille Bacon-Smith states that "Ethnography is a data-intensive method in which the researcher studies the culture of informants where they gather in their own native habitats" (299). Hammersley presents a less concise but more comprehensive depiction, stating that as a method it refers to social research that studies behaviour in everyday contexts, gathers data from a range of sources, involves 'unstructured' activities, focuses on a single setting or group and which tends towards narrative descriptions rather than statistical analysis (1-2). Generally speaking, most descriptions of the ethnographic method specify that it is a form of relatively unstructured research conducted among small groups of people in a small number of settings over an extended period of time. In particular, ethnographic theory has emphasised the importance of the

researcher's active participation in the activities of the group under study. For example, Robert Prus claims that "ethnographers rely primarily on three sources of data: observation, participant-observation and interviews" (21) and continues by stating that "the participant-observer role allows the researcher to get infinitely closer to the lived experiences of the participants than does straight observation" (21). In the seminal work on the subject, Clifford Geertz states that "doing ethnography is establishing rapport, selecting informants, transcribing texts, taking genealogies, mapping fields, keeping a diary and so on" (6). Geertz, however, expands on this by asserting that "it is not these things ... that define the enterprise. What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Tyle, 'thick description'" (6). For Geertz, ethnography is a complex form of sense-making in which the precise methodology is largely irrelevant as long as the ethnographer is exposed to the "multiplicity of complex conceptual structures" (6) that compose even the simplest aspects of human culture.

Geertz, therefore, formulated ethnography as a fundamentally symbolic enterprise. For him, ethnography is defined by its mode of analysis and presentation rather than the precise methodology employed. This conception has given the process of ethnography its intellectual rationale and laid it open to sustained criticism. Some critics of ethnography have claimed that it is not "scientific enough" because so much of the enterprise rests on the interpretations of a single ethnographer. On the other hand, critical theorists claim that reality is so complex that any interpretation is inevitably biased and

that the notion of participant-observation leading to natural insights is naive at best and disingenuous at worst.⁷⁹

As with many fields in the social sciences, ethnography has entered a period of radical self-doubt. Martyn Hammersley states that it is “not far from the truth” to say that ethnography is in crisis (*Reading* 15) and continues “there is no single ethnographic paradigm or community, but a diversity of approaches claiming to be ethnographic” (15). This has led to the characterisation of ethnography as a “post-paradigmatic” methodology (e.g. Dicks and Mason, “Cyber Ethnography”) in which the old certainties have been destroyed but no new consensus has emerged.⁸⁰ Theorists such as John Dorst have expanded on this by characterising contemporary society, variously termed late-capitalist or postmodern, as so diverse and fragmented that the ‘traditional’ ethnographic endeavour is no longer viable and must be replaced by an approach he terms “post-ethnography” (*The Written Suburb*). In particular, Dorst believes that the aesthetics of postmodernism encourage endless self-documentation and self-inscription, meaning that essentially, inhabitants of post-modern, Western societies perform endless ethnographies of themselves, rendering the traditional ethnographer somewhat superfluous. Indeed, according to Dorst, even the standard ethnographic practice of traveling to a site to perform research and then returning to write the ethnographic text has become outdated

⁷⁹This attack from both side is explored in more detail by Martyn Hammersley (5-15).

⁸⁰This designation draws upon Kuhn's analysis of paradigmatic revolutions in scientific thought and extends beyond the realm of science.

(2). Although Dorst undoubtedly overstates the situation for rhetorical flourish, it is clearly the case that contemporary cultural practices offer severe challenges to the ethnographic method and the Internet is probably the prime example of this. There are, however, good reasons to see post-paradigmatic ethnography as the ideal tool for the investigation of such sites.

In her book, *Virtual Ethnography*, Christine Hine states that “The problems with an ethnographic approach to the Internet encompass both how it is to be constituted as an ethnographic object and how that object is to be authentically known” (41). These problems are ones that contemporary ethnography faces in general. The ethnographer has to surmount a double challenge of authenticity. Firstly, how does the ethnographer know that their ethnographic experiences are authentically ‘authentic’? Secondly, how can an ethnographer convince a reader of that authenticity in the ethnographic text? When it comes to the Internet though, the very existence of ‘virtual’ as a term seems antithetical to the concept of authenticity. How can one claim to have virtually authentic or authentically virtual experiences? As an ethnographic object, the Internet is as protean and placeless as the American suburb that Dorst tried to explore and as commercially produced as the Las Vegas hotel and casino that Kurt Borchard attempted to treat as an ethnographic object. My contention, however, is that not only is it possible to approach the Internet as both an ethnographic object and as a site for ethnography but that it is desirable to do so.

Christine Hine delineates three fundamental aspects to ethnography that become pertinent when the Internet is conceived of as an ethnographic site or object.

- travel to a site and face-to-face interaction with its inhabitants;
- text, technology and reflexivity;
- the making of ethnographic objects. (44)

In this respect she is applying Denzin's analysis of the "triple crisis" of ethnography: legitimation, praxis and representation (3). How can an ethnographer claim that the knowledge gathered through ethnography is legitimate, how can this activity be conducted and how can the knowledge be adequately presented?

The fundamental premise of ethnography, from Malinowski onwards, has been the need to *travel* to a site in order to conduct ethnography. The problem with the Internet is that no travel appears to be involved. One hundred years ago criticisms were leveled at "armchair anthropologists" and now, it seems, that the same criticism could be leveled at the swivel-chair ethnographers of the Net. Even if there were a place to which the ethnographer could travel online, there are certainly no "face-to-face interactions" on the Internet. The unstated premise of "traditional ethnography" is that ethnography is the study of 'natural,' un-mediated interactions of people in small groups. When assessing the relevance of ethnographies of the Internet then all three premises, travel, un-mediated interaction and a physical site, are challenged.

It has been frequently noted (e.g. Pratt) that ethnography and travel writing are very close cousins. The process of traveling to "the field" allowed the ethnographer to

undertake the role of academic outsider. This travel was held to be necessary because part of the process of ethnography required an ‘intellectual journey’ which could not be undertaken by simply sitting in an armchair and reading the accounts of others. Although this intellectual journey has become increasingly problematised, according to Van Maanen “physical displacement is a requirement“ (3). Van Maanen’s depiction of physical displacement as a methodological tool that is used to help the researcher break down their pre-existing “conceptual frameworks” (3) in order to better understand the research subject has, however, been recast as a legitimating device rather than methodological requirement. The “arrival story” seen in so many ethnographic texts (Pratt) can be depicted as a form of ethnographic rhetoric that allows the ethnographer to claim that “I really went there” (e.g. Atkinson; Hine, *Virtual Ethnography*).

Rather than portraying physical travel as an ethnographic methodology, I follow Christine Hine who writes that it “becomes a signifier of the relationship between the writer and readers of the ethnographic text and the subjects of the research” (45). It is perhaps unsurprising that ethnographies of Internet sites have featured the authors’ own version of arrival stories, whether it was in terms of becoming a member of a bulletin board for lesbians (Correll), an academic “MUD” (Cherny), or a newsgroup for daytime soap fans (Baym). Indeed, Annette Markham’s reflexive account of her Internet ethnography starts with an arrival story that makes her ‘journey’ seem arduous, long and complicated.

Going online took a long time and involved far more than turning on the computer, tapping out words on the keyboard, and pressing the send/enter button. It was like entering a strange new world where the very metaphysics defied my comprehension of how worlds should work. (23)

Although no physical travel is required to log on and connect to the Internet, ethnographers of the online require a virtual journey to the 'site.' As Hine states, "Visiting the Internet focuses on experiential rather than physical displacement" (45). It is this sense of displacement (and sometimes even disorientation) that marks the intellectual work of ethnography as well as providing the legitimating device to be used rhetorically. Physical travel, then, can be seen as just one method for achieving the sense of displacement. As always, this depends on how one sees the terminal at which one sits when connected to the Net. Do we see the terminal as Clifford Stoll did—a cold, dehumanising piece of technology that distracted him from participating in real-world activities with his friends, or do we see it as Howard Rheingold did—a window to a brave new world filled with his friends?

The necessary codicil to the idea that ethnography requires the ethnographer to travel to a site is that there must be a unitary site to visit. Traditional ethnographies have posited the field as a somewhere 'out there' in which the truth can be found. The field has been seen as being the closest analogy that the ethnographer has to the laboratory or the notion of the 'natural setting' in which observations can be made. Mann & Stewart draw on Geertz's formulation when they state that the "[f]ield is the social context and the 'local knowledge' through which experiences are made sense of" (195). Folklorists in

particular have espoused the utility of “the field” and the notion of “local context” in order to situate the folk performance within a context. As William A. Wilson claims, “More than almost any other subject, folklore must be experienced directly in actual life ... to be properly understood“ (226). Ironically it is also for this reason that folklorists have become aware that there is no unitary field “out there.” Indeed the stereotype of folklorists being anthropologists who stay at home implies the deconstruction of the field. At the end of his book *Fieldwork*, Bruce Jackson writes, in capitals, that “FIELDWORK IS NOT EVERYDAY LIFE” (279); the position of Folklore Studies is that everyday life constitutes the field.

Ethnography as it enters its 'post-paradigmatic' phase, has also become critical of the notion of the field. Post-paradigm ethnographers such as John Dorst in his analysis of an American suburb or Clifford Marcus in his 1997 overview of his work, have instead argued for the analysis of multiple sites, a project attuned to the mobility and interconnectivity of social relations rather than to the implications of fixity implied by the notion of the field (Clifford). Writings on globalisation have been particularly influential here, showing that local culture is fully implicated in, and constituted by, wider processes of political and economic changes (e.g. Featherstone). Ethnographers, it is argued, need “to place their subjects firmly in the flow of historic events” (Marcus and Fischer 44). From this perspective, the field splits into multiple sites of enquiry. James Clifford, for example, cites Susan Harding's reflections on her research into Christian Fundamentalism, which involved analysing newspaper and televisual discourse as well as

the talk of research participants (Clifford; Harding). Thus, the field no longer equates to a temporal, spatial and social unity. As Hine notes in *Virtual Ethnography*, this deconstruction of the field does introduce new levels of uncertainty into the ethnographic enterprise but, at the same time, it opens up new options that allows us to focus on cultural formations that are not bounded in one place and, as she states “is encouraging news for the ethnography of the Internet” (61).

The early ethnographic studies of the Internet (my own included) worked on a principle in which online groups became equated with a ‘virtual’ version of the field. In their analysis of the Internet as research topic, Mann & Stewart note “Since the arrival of the Internet, there are further sites for subcultural activities and for conducting research—these are the physical sites of computer use and also the virtual locale and text-based practices of cyberspace” (196). Difficulties of monitoring the physical sites meant that the focus was placed on the virtual locales and the textual practices of the online personae. This led to several issues.

In some CMC studies researchers no longer enter the physical field and disembodied participants may have no cultural markers beyond those their language reveals. But if we lose so much of the context which gives meaning to language, are CMC texts second-rate or even meaningless data? What can such data tell us about the real world, or, indeed the new field of virtual worlds? And can we consider data from disembodied participants reliable?” (Mann & Stewart 195)

Their last question was the one that was nearly always the first asked of me at conferences after I had presented my work: how can you trust someone you cannot see,

someone with whom you are not in face-to-face contact? It is a question that is grounded in the “reduced social cues” model of the Internet that had been accepted uncritically in the 1980s. Beyond that though there is the question of what exactly the “new field of virtual worlds” actually refers to. Uncritically portraying the Internet as a new “field” leads to further questions. How exactly do we conceptualise “online fieldwork”, how does one perform ethnography online? As Christine Hine asks, “can you live in an online setting? Do you have to be logged on 24 hours a day, or can you visit the setting at periodic intervals?” (*Virtual Ethnography* 21). Ethnography demands that a fieldworker becomes immersed in the field but how do you immerse yourself in something as partial and fragmentary as an email group? Even if these questions were easy to answer, the inevitable question always arose. How do you know who the subjects are when you cannot be certain that they are who they claim to be?

One solution to these dilemmas is to realise that at heart, ethnography is about participating in the experiences of the people whom you wish to study. In a “traditional ethnography” this required the fieldworker to be exposed for a period of time to an alien culture and participate in its members’ activities. An ethnography of the Internet can, therefore, treat the lived experience of the Internet as the context. Through finding and negotiating access to online groups of people, the socio-cultural context of that group and its medium of communication becomes the site. In a physical ethnography the ethnographer participates in some of the ‘real’ activities of that group. In an ethnography

of the virtual the ethnographer participates in some of the virtual activities of the group.

In both cases the ethnographer is a member of the cultural scene as an ethnographer.

This is not the only approach but it is one possible methodology. The main advantage it has is that it creates a setting and finesses the issues of offline identity. If the online setting is the context then it really does not matter if Joe@email.com is a male bodybuilder or a female librarian in “real life.”⁸¹ This is a controversial step. After all the real and virtual are not hermetically walled-off from each other and Joe@email.com may act differently depending on his or her real world surroundings. In particular this approach appears to contradict the oft-stated “holistic” nature of the ethnographic endeavour.

In his five criteria of ethnography, Alex Stewart ranks holism second only to the use participant-observation, stating that “Good ethnographic data are wide-ranging...” and that “...holism persists as a distinguishing feature of ethnography” (6). The notion that ethnography at its best is uniquely holistic, informant-led and unstructured (Hammersley 2) enabling it to transcend the narrower focus of quantitative and other forms of qualitative research runs like a substrate through the enterprise. A study which focuses on behaviour in an online group would appear to be fundamentally non-holistic; members of the group may spend less than 5-10 minutes a day, if that much, reading or

⁸¹This point is also made by Christine Hine in *Virtual Ethnography*, who writes “If the aim is to study online settings as contexts in their own right, the question of offline identities need not arise.” (22)

participating in the group. At best, an online ethnography is dealing with only fragments of the lives of the participants.

Holism is, however, inevitably an ideal rather than a practice and probably an unrealizable one at that.⁸² The practice of ethnography tends to be fragmentary and suggestive rather than holistic. Because of this, and perhaps rather ironically, the seemingly narrow focus on an online group which forms just a fragment of most of its participants' lives can allow an in-depth analysis of interactions within that group that approaches the ideal of holism far more readily than a traditional ethnography.

An alternative may be to investigate non-place-based redactions of the field. George Marcus suggests several such strategies in his article "Ethnography in/of the World System" most of which focus on following individuals, narratives, metaphors and so on through a range of contexts. This is the approach taken by Hine in her virtual ethnography of websites focussed on a murder case in which she suggests that "connections" rather than holism could underlay ethnographies of the Internet (60). She draws on the work of theorist Manuel Castells who claims that contemporary space is structured by flows of information, capital, people and so on.⁸³ Towards the end of my thesis I will discuss how this insight can be applied to my research but my main research

⁸²Early notions of the ethnographer as an omnipresent, omniscient observer who is able to perceive the entirety of the 'naturalistic' interactions of a group have long since been debunked.

⁸³E.g. *The Power of Identity*, "The Net and the Self" and, most notably, *The Rise of the Network Society*.

was done through studying an online group and using the email list as the ethnographic context.

One question that does arise was posed by Mann & Stewart who asked “Is it still possible for researchers to view cyberspace as a discrete field?” (205). It is leading question because cyberspace does not actually exist as anything but a metaphor. As Marcus states, it would be possible to conduct an ethnography of a metaphor (96) as a form of multi-sited project and trace this metaphor both offline and online. Clearly this is not what Mann & Stewart are referring to; they make the mistake of naturalising cyberspace and using it as though it and the Internet are one and the same thing. My contention is that online groups provide just one of many possible sites for post-paradigmatic ethnography. Perhaps what is most interesting about this depiction is that the earliest users of the Internet tended to be very reflective as they attempted to negotiate their understanding of what type of a ‘place’ this new ‘cyberspace’ is and how they could express their identity therein.

Virtual Ethnography

Based on the preceding discussion I intend to use the term “virtual ethnography” to refer to an ethnography of the virtual, one in which the ethnographer operates in the same cultural domain as the actors being studied. Such an ethnography may focus solely on the

online realm,⁸⁴ or on the use of the Internet in offline contexts (Miller and Slater; Wakeford) or on a combination of the two by foregrounding the interpenetration of the real and virtual (Hine). Whether one is focused on the production of the virtual as an ethnographic object or the use of the virtual as a cultural domain, a virtual ethnography is an ethnography of the virtual. Therefore it should be re-emphasised that there is nothing 'unreal,' 'partial' or 'not quite' about the virtual. Virtual ethnography treats virtuality as just another aspect of everyday life that is as 'real' as a coffee shop, conversation between friends, or a postcard. Christine Hine comments that "Virtuality also carries a connotation of 'not quite,' adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing" (65). Although, strictly speaking true, her remarks have an unfortunate implication because they imply— as she states—that virtual ethnography is, somehow, "not quite the real thing in methodologically purist terms" (65). My contention is that there never has been a methodologically pure form of ethnography and that virtual ethnography is just the latest adaption of what is an undeniably Protean methodology.

Arturo Escobar first outlined the type of ethnographic questions that could, and should, be investigated in the study of the Internet as a new medium for cultural activities when he asked,

⁸⁴In 1996 I wrote that "A virtual ethnography takes precisely the other route, that of fully immersing oneself within the matrix. Gibson described cyberspace as a "consensual hallucination"-a virtual ethnography gets at the creation and maintenance of this hallucination from the inside by foregrounding the electronic personae at the expense of the fleshy body that types at keyboard, eats, sleeps, and generates income," ("Moving toward Virtual Ethnography" 5) The article was published before the release of the movie "The Matrix" which is why I was comfortable using the term. The position was deliberately overstated for rhetorical effect.

How can these practices and domains be *studied ethnographically* in various social, regional and ethnic settings?... How, for instance, will notions of community, fieldwork, the body, nature, visibility, the subject, identity, and writing itself be transformed by new technologies? (214)

His article, published in 1994, is one of the seminal works in the field of cyber-cultural studies and has to a certain extent helped define the emerging terrain. Although the Internet is undoubtedly a transformative technology, it is important not to overstate the extent to which the Internet also creates new social forms. The Internet itself is a product of social forces and the ideologies of cultural groups. In and of itself the Internet can be seen as the technological embodiment of a cultural text.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, this identification of the type of communicative behaviour that is conducted via computer networks as a radically new state of (disembodied) existence has led many analysts to become bogged down as they try to determine what this new state of existence actually is. In many cases this new technology has acted— as McLuhan predicted of any new communications technology— as a mirror of desire in which theorists always see their predictions confirmed. It is possible for ethnographers to make the same mistake. Unlike Alex Stewart who claims that ethnography transcends theory (7-8), I do not believe that it is possible to conduct some sort of theoretically neutral ethnographic description. Indeed I would class this perception of ethnography as unbiased theory-neutral observation

⁸⁵This is an adaption of Grint and Woolgar's discussion of the metaphor of technology as text (70-71).

along with Gary Alan Fine's "Ten Lies of Ethnography."⁸⁶ Therefore, rather than engaging in an attempt to describe what exactly virtuality is and isn't, I follow Christine Hine who writes that, "The virtual ethnographer asks, not what is the Internet but when, where and how is the Internet?" (62). Virtuality, as Miller & Slater is important precisely because it is "*part of everyday life, not apart from it*"⁸⁷ (7).

Precisely because it is possible to approach the virtual ethnographically as integral to the real (and vice-versa) the ethnographer must still apply good ethnographic practice to the study. Jan Fernback makes exactly this point when stating that "Ethnographers working in cyberspace must be careful to attempt a measure of reflexivity, to separate oneself from the subjects being studied; they must develop a sense about the truthfulness and candor of their informants, just as ethnographers of the non-virtual must; and they must use a theoretically informed framework for their research, just as ethnographers have traditionally done" ("There Is a There There" 216). In addition to this, the ethnographer needs to understand the dimensions of time and space that are involved.

In their discussion of the integration of the Internet into Trinidadian society, Miller & Stewart claim that "... an ethnographic approach to the Internet is one that sees it embedded in a specific place, which it also transforms" (21). It should be clear, by

⁸⁶By this Fine is referring to conventions and tacit strategies pertaining to practice of ethnography rather than any intentional form of deceit. Probably.

⁸⁷Emphasis in original.

now, that I do not share this view, as stated. Rather, I tend to follow the likes of Marcus (“Ethnography In/of”), Dorst (*Written Suburb*) and Hine (*Virtual Ethnography*) who argue for ethnographies of diverse places and cultural forms. Although it is possible to situate a virtual ethnography in a geographic place it is not necessary. My case study was chosen, in part, to explore this issue as it consists of an online group focussed around a place.⁸⁸ In a virtual ethnography, place is not a given and, in fact, a sense of place may be an emergent property of the group(s) involved. Understanding the role or sense of place (or lack of it) is likely to be one of the dimensions of enquiry for a virtual ethnography.

Almost every description of ethnography as a method makes mention of the need for the ethnographer to spend a significant amount of time with the people to be studied. In this case I agree with Millar & Slater when they comment that “... an ethnographic approach is also one that is based on a long-term and multifaceted engagement with a social setting” (21). Basically, ethnography takes time. The problem is, as Agar notes, “It is not clear how much time would ever be enough” (196). Miller & Slater expand on their statement by writing that “We assume ethnography means a long-term involvement amongst people, through a variety of methods, such that any one aspect of their lives can be properly contextualised in others”(21). Which is to say that they believe ethnography takes as much time as is needed for the ethnographer to understand exactly what is going

⁸⁸ Initially I had planned three case studies until I realised just how infeasible that was. The eventual research consisted of one major case study, a study of the fans of a football team, with some supplementary research on a fantasy role-player list. The football fans group is focussed on fans of a team that plays in one particular place and, as it turns out, has the highest percentage of local fans of any top-flight English team while the role-players are focussed on an imaginary place - the fictional world of Glorantha. The notion of place being deployed here is, then, rather complex.

on. In this respect ethnography as research method is the ultimate “open text” because we never really do understand exactly what is going on. Time, in ethnography, is also not a given.

One of the illusions of ethnographies of virtual life is that it appears to be possible for ethnographers to do their research “after the fact”. For example, to study a newsgroup for a period of six months one could use Google’s archive of Usenet groups (<http://www.google.com>) and download all the postings from that six month period.⁸⁹

Although the data corpus is undoubtedly useful as an archival document there are aspects of the ethnographic enterprise that are missing. In particular the ethnographer lacks the temporality of “being then”. One of the rarely articulated aspects of ethnography is that the ethnographer shares the same time frame with the subjects.⁹⁰ Being then has always been crucial to ethnography but, prior to the Internet, it has never really been possible to be then but not there in any meaningful way. When doing my own research I quickly found that there was a temporal structure to the football fans’ email list. Different people tended to post at different times. Over the cycle of the football season there were times of low and high activity, times when I half-dreaded logging on to the group and times when I could hardly wait to find out what had happened overnight. Christine Hine describes

⁸⁹A tool has in fact been developed to do this. Marc Smith - who initially came to prominence as a researcher into online communities - has worked with Microsoft to create a newsgroup data mining tool named Netscan (<http://netscan.research.microsoft.com/>).

⁹⁰Lynn Cherny also makes this point in relation to her ethnography of a MUD (*Conversation and Community*). Although she could have logged all the interactions automatically and studied them later she believed that she would miss the rhythm of the conversation. The same is also true of asynchronous media such as newsgroup postings.

something similar about the study of newsgroups when she states that: “Part of following a newsgroup in real time is making sense out of the arrival of messages in the wrong order, waiting for responses to messages, and experiencing periods of high and low activity in the newsgroup” (23).

A crucial part of ethnographic online is sharing time with the subjects. Although “time-shifted” (Hine 23) information can be a useful supplement, part of the ethnographic process is a temporal journey. There are, however, unique issues with online time. One issue is the perception that time is accelerating online. If seven “Internet years” pass during the time of one ‘real year’ does this mean that we only need to spend one-seventh of the normal time conducting the ethnography?⁹¹ Is this ethnography in an accelerated time frame? Certainly, online groups appear to change membership more frequently than offline ones, and constant changes in Internet technology can lead to a disorienting feeling. Perhaps because of this, online groups appear to show an urge to “traditionalise” their activities. It appears that time is not a given, online. As with place, the handling of virtual time is an emergent factor that will also need to be related to offline time.

We can split Internet media into synchronous and asynchronous types. Synchronous media such as IRC, MUDs and chat programs (MSN Messenger et al.) are explicitly interactive and can be seen as featuring a shared now. If someone types a message it appears to all others who are presently logged into the relevant program as

⁹¹There is a semi-joking notion that “Internet years” like “dog years” pass at seven times the rate of ‘normal’ time. Thus one year offline equates to 7 years online.

soon as the user presses enter. For all practical purposes it is read at the same time as it is written. Studies of informal communication in synchronous Internet media have been popular because such communication appears to be as close to face-to-face interaction as it is possible to get online. Synchronous media are the only types of media that allow the ethnographer to be conceptually present at the moment of performance and therefore the ethnographer can share the moment of computer-mediated communication with the participants. This allows the ethnographer access to what can be seen as paralinguistic features (so-and-so is a fast typist, another person makes many typing mistakes and so on) or performance features (that person likes to pause dramatically) that would be lost if the messages were simply stored and read later. The best ethnographic studies of these media⁹² have featured researchers who were logged in simultaneously with their subjects and therefore shared their time frame.

Studies of asynchronous Internet media such as email, bulletin boards, discussion lists and newsgroups have been popular for precisely the opposite reason: the media appeared to have emergent features that had no precise correlation to face-to-face interactions. Many communicative features that emerged in the various types of asynchronous computer-mediated communication were derived to address problems in the temporal ordering of messages, particularly in newsgroup or bulletin board systems. As many studies have mentioned, because newsgroup messages tended to percolate at

⁹²For example Lynn Cherny's sociolinguistic ethnography of a MUD (*Conversation and Community; The MUD Register*), the work by Brenda Danet et al. (see the many entries in the bibliography) or Elizabeth Reid's study of IRC ("Electropolis").

different speeds around Usenet it was fairly common for messages to arrive out of order. Therefore a host of conventions were adopted when replying to a particular posting so that the context of the reply could be reconstructed if the original had not yet arrived or was old enough to have been deleted. It is my contention that the various conventions that have emerged on these types of asynchronous CMC function to create an imagined shared now. Although participants may log on and read the messages at very different times, there is a consensual 'now' for the lists. This 'now' consists of the various topics that are currently under discussion. Any reply to a topic that is considered to be over is usually prefaced by either an apology or explanation. Virtual groups that communicate via predominantly asynchronous CMC inevitably generate a very sophisticated and well-maintained consensual present and a virtual ethnography must be conducted in this context.

The preceding has focussed on Internet media that work on a one-to-one or one-to-few basis. CMC media such as web pages operate, generally, on a broadcast basis.⁹³ An ethnography of such media is harder to conceptualise in terms of temporality but, as Christine Hine found, an ethnographer needs to stay in touch with web page authors and monitor their websites constantly because the pages may change from hour to hour. In this case, doing the research at the appropriate time is the only way to collect information before it is changed by its creators.

⁹³The existence of guestbooks, online bulletin boards and so on obviously blur these boundaries.

Ethnographers are becoming more aware of the crucial role that temporality plays in virtual ethnography. Sue Barnes refers to it as “text-in-time” (190) and Christine Hine argues that “time shifted” ethnographies are likely to be inadequate (23). My contention is that ‘being then’ is fundamental to any ethnography. There is no physical displacement in most virtual ethnographies but there should be a temporal journey that is shared with the participants. This does lead to an odd question: when does a virtual ethnography end? As I will discuss later, ending my ethnography was not a simple matter and more innovative types of ethnography could, and should, blur the commonly accepted boundaries between ethnographic research and ethnographic writing (Dicks et al., *Hypermedia*). For now, as Christine Hine observes, there is no easy way to know when to end a virtual ethnography.

Virtual Principles

In her ground-breaking book, *Virtual Ethnography*, Christine Hine elucidates ten “principles” of virtual ethnography and claims with the tenth, that virtual ethnography is “an adaptive ethnography which sets out to suit itself to the conditions in which it finds itself” (65), is the fundamental principle on which all others rest. She is right to note that this is a principle upon which ethnography as a research method in general has been based. In those disciplines which have valorised ethnography, fieldwork has become as much a rite of passage for the graduate student as an intellectually coherent methodology. As Michael Agar notes, there is a long-standing tradition in disciplines such as anthropology and folklore of treating fieldwork as something that cannot be taught (2).

Every ethnography is ultimately adaptive and, as Hine herself states “There are no sets of rules to follow in order to conduct the perfect ethnography” (65). Virtual ethnographies are just as non-rule-bound as ethnographies of any other topic. From this perspective, there is no quantum difference between an ethnography of an email list and one of the Arapesh of New Guinea; the topic may differ but the fundamental principles and goals remain.

Contrary to John Dorst who asserted that the emergence of “telectronic” culture (“Tags and Burners”) invalidated contemporary ethnographic techniques, I believe that the emerging corpus of virtual ethnographies has demonstrated that the traditional principles of ethnography represent precisely the right approach to take. Whether the goal of ethnography is “thick description” (Geertz), the creation of an account (Agar) or “a way of seeing through participants’ eyes; a grounded approach that aims for a deep understanding of the cultural foundations of the group” (Hine 21), the principle has always been for ethnographers to expose themselves, often painfully, to experiences, and to introspect on what they learned. Post paradigmatic ethnography acknowledges radical doubt, realises that power relationships are often involved, is fully aware that any truth is contingent and partial and that the boundaries between field and text, ethnographer and ethnographied are as much conventional as real.

The principles of a virtual ethnography, like any ethnography, are therefore contingent. Any researcher interested in virtual ethnography will be faced with the same

lack of methodological surety that ethnographers have faced for the last century. Certain dimensions of enquiry and types of skill are likely to be suggested.

- Technological competence. A virtual ethnographer is going to need to be as competent in the relevant media as their subjects are or be prepared to learn. Annette Markham's *Life Online* is an excellent example of a reflexive account of acquiring such skills.
- Orientation toward virtuality. Whether the ethnography is primarily online, offline or a mixture of both, the ethnographer should be prepared to treat what is meant by "virtual" as contingent. At the most basic level, the ethnographer needs to have a principled idea of how offline and online behaviour may relate in the study. In addition the emergence of the concept of 'ubiquitous' computing in which various mobile devices can be connected online at any time is likely to further blur the putative online-offline divide.
- Temporal immersion. As Hine notes, any virtual ethnography is likely to be interstitial because people, on the whole, do not stay online 24 hours per day.⁹⁴ That said, a virtual ethnographer will need to spend as much time as it takes, in order to fully share the same experience of time as the participants.

⁹⁴Lynn Cherny's fieldwork in a MUD comes as close to being totally immersed as it is possible to conceive of. Essentially, she spent most of her day, including her time in writing the text, with a connection to the MUD open on her computer. However, her focus, clearly, was generally on other topics and it would not be until she heard a sound indicating a greeting that she might foreground the MUD's window.

- As with any ethnography, the means by which a virtual ethnographer establishes rapport, asks questions, and level of participation will be dictated by circumstance and the subjects as well as by the ethnographer's own desires.
- The role of reflexivity is just as important in a virtual ethnography as any 'real world' work. One of the results of the various crises in ethnography has been the reappearance of the ethnographer. Ethnographic writing has always featured an element of auto-biography. Post-paradigmatic ethnography has rejected, however, any idea of the neutral observer—the one who sees all but is never seen—by making the ethnographer just another one of the actors involved. When studying virtual groups it is tempting to have the ethnographer merge back into the background, to become a “lurker” in their own text. This is a temptation to be avoided.
- Active engagement. Alongside reflexivity as a principle is the need for the ethnographer to be overt in their dealings with the subjects. It is tempting to engage in covert surveillance in order to observe activities without having any effect on them. Covert and “drive-by-research” is both unprincipled and inadequate. As Lynn Cherny discovered, participants in frequently studied online groups have become very concerned about such unprincipled research (“The MUD Register” 47-49). Although the precise choice of ethnographic methodologies may lead to differing degrees of participation by the ethnographer,

the ethnographer needs to be clearly 'visible' to the group for both practical and ethical reasons.

- Ethical concerns in virtual ethnography are a mix of the universal and the specific. As with any ethnography, the researcher is dealing with human subjects—not with a collection of pixels—and should act accordingly. The Internet also highlights ethical issues pertaining to public and private communication. There is no hard and fast set of rules for what is considered public domain on the Internet. For example a web page is clearly a publicly published document, but what about a page with password protection? On the other hand, many posts to newsgroups were sent on the premise that they would expire, yet Google has now archived seemingly private discussions and made them publicly accessible, without the consent of the posters. One aspect to take cognisance of here, as noted by Christine Hine (23-24), is that because there is no universal agreement among Internet users as to what is and what is not sensitive material it is likely that an interrogation of this issue will give insights into the users' emergent concepts of privacy and appropriateness.⁹⁵

It should be obvious that most of the material above is a list of ethnographic truisms slightly modified to deal with specific issues emerging from computer-mediated

⁹⁵Any discussion of ethics within online research tends to be contentious. In this thesis I argue that appropriate ethical behaviour needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. For example, the Association of Internet Researchers have drawn up a set of ethical guidelines Internet research (Ess and Jones) that has been criticised by Christine Hine and others working in a European tradition for being overly relativistic (e.g. Hines, "Virtual Methods"; Jankowski and van Selm").

communication. Although virtuality has challenged the notion of a unitary site and the idea of ethnographic immersion the challenges appear, to me, to be those that are already held in common by most (maybe all) contemporary ethnographic objects. Consequently I believe that the general principles of contemporary ethnography are applicable to virtual ethnography. The devil will be in the details.

On The Way to Virtual Ethnography

My research was motivated by three overlapping interests. Firstly, I wished to assess the putative emergence of online folk groups. Although, as already discussed, the notion of the folk group is somewhat problematic I was interested in how users of the Internet might be creating everyday culture online and how issues of identity, traditionalisation and 'groupness' might be being negotiated in a communications medium which was likely to be new to the majority of its users. Secondly, I was interested in the use of language and language play in the formation of this culture. Thirdly I was interested in the methodological considerations that would arise as I tried to unpack the issues that would inevitably arise.

My methodological interests combined with my interest in online behaviour led me to take an experimental stance and focus exclusively on the online: almost as if the offline did not exist. Although peoples' lived experience of the virtual is inherently interstitial and integrated with the rest of their lives, I decided to remove that integration from the picture. By finding an online group and treating the online as the sole ethnographic context, I hypothesised that I might be able to achieve some interesting

depth (albeit with the risk of some narrowness) while at the same time, I would be pushing the idea of an ethnography of the virtual to its limit. I had reasons for suspecting that this would not be a purely mechanical exercise. My previous experience of being online—along with anecdotal descriptions—suggested that while interacting with an online group a participant's focus is often trained exclusively on the virtual. Consequently, rather than treating the online experience as marginal and interstitial, I believed it would be worthwhile treating it as the central experience.

My interest in the use of language in the medium of computer-mediated communication emerges from reasoning similar to that expressed by Lynn Cherny when she asserted that "If culture is composed of symbols and meanings (Schneider 1976) and rules for interpreting them (Geertz 1973) then a linguistic approach to the study of online culture is particularly apt" (*Conversation* 23). The earliest work in computer-mediated communication, including my own ("Smileys") centred on the emergence of new communications genres (e.g. flaming), forms (e.g. emoticons) and norms (e.g. the use of capitalisation to indicate shouting). I was particularly interested in exploring my own experience that computer-mediated communication, rather than being an information-deficient medium was actually a very rich and complex one with emergent properties that defied deterministic analyses. Consequently I decided that the most appropriate methodology would revolve around an adaption of the ethnography of communication.

As Christine Hine also discovered when creating her methodology of virtual ethnography (*Virtual Ethnography* 66), the principles I derived did not emerge fully

formed at the beginning of the project, instead they were generated as I wrestled with a far more complex project than I had originally expected. My initial idea of running three simultaneous ethnographies with different groups was quickly shown to be hopelessly naive and I ended up instead focussing primarily on one group with supplementary work done on another. I chose groups of which I was already a known member in order to minimise access issues only to discover that my sudden change in identity was confusing for me and led me to revise my methodologies.⁹⁶ As the project unfolded I found myself chafing under my self-imposed restrictions and I found that my focus gradually shifted from language to metalanguage. In sum, I experienced all of the usual repertoire of ethnographic angst that lies in wait for the unsuspecting fieldworker. That said, by sticking to the principle of focussing solely on the virtual and applying a methodology derived from the ethnography of communication I believe that I was able to create a foundation for a thick description of online culture and communication.

The Ethnography of Communication

It has become almost a cliché to observe that we do things with words (Austin). The difficulty lies in understanding what exactly we do with words and, possibly, what words

⁹⁶One additional issue here is whether or not the work I did ended up as “autoethnography.” At the time of undertaking this research I had been a member of the Boro List for less than two months. I had been a member of the Glorantha Digest and a similar list (the “RuneQuest Digest”) in the past but was not at the time. In both cases I thought of myself as someone who knew of and was known by the groups but that was as far as it went. Consequently I did not consider this to be autoethnographic. As the research continued, particularly with the Boro List, I began to revise that opinion. Although I was a recent member, the list itself was new and given the large influx of members during my research I was possibly more familiar with the list than the majority of participants. Many of the tensions in the research might have been more comfortably resolved if I had adopted an explicitly autoethnographic perspective from the outset.

do to us. Addressing this issue is one of the central goals of the “ethnography of speaking” and it is approached through the analysis of the relationship between speech, communication and culture. Through so doing the theory can be seen as reaction to the British school of sociolinguistics which tended to view speech and culture as parallel but unrelated items⁹⁷ and as a reaction against Chomsky's reformulation of the quest for linguistic universals in which he stated that the field of linguistics centred upon the “ideal speaker-hearer in a completely homogeneous speech community” (*Aspects*).

Originally conceived by Dell Hymes as an adjunct to anthropological research methods, the ethnography of speaking has been applied to a wide variety of communicative practices, from silence to writing, by a wide variety of researchers in different disciplinary orientations. At its most general, according to Richard Bauman, “The ethnography of speaking may be conceived of as research directed toward the formulation of descriptive theories of speaking as a cultural system or as part of cultural systems” (6). Although Bauman terms the approach the ethnography of *speaking*, it is more usually referred to by the more inclusive-sounding name, “the ethnography of communication”. The use of “speaking” is best seen as a method for ensuring that the prime focus of the approach is the moment of communication: the actual act.

If the linguistic focus is on the moment of communication, the ethnographic focus is the “speech community.” Muriel Saville-Troike claims that “the focus of the ethnography of communication is the *speech community*, the way communication within

⁹⁷This point is made by John Gumperz in his introduction to *Directions in Sociolinguistics*.

it is patterned and organised as systems of communicative events, and the ways in which these interact with all other systems of culture“ (*The Ethnography of Communication* 3). The speech community then should not be seen simply as the socio-cultural context of the communicative act but should also be seen as simultaneously produced by and productive of communication. Richard Bauman and Joel Sherzer further refine the description of the speech community

... in terms of the shared or mutually complementary knowledge and ability (competence) of its members for production and interpretation of socially appropriate speech. Such a community is an organization of diversity, insofar as the knowledge and ability (i.e. access to and command of resources for speaking) are differentially distributed among its members; the production and interpretation of speech are thus variable and complementary, rather than homogenous and constant throughout the community. (Introduction 6)

A speech community, then, shares common communicative codes along with the rules governing culturally appropriate communication, but individuals within that community can and do make very different uses of the culturally sanctioned repertoire.

The ethnography of communication brings a fundamentally dialogical perspective to the study of communication and culture. Instead of the Chomskian neo-Platonic depiction of performance as an inevitable degradation of competence, the ethnography of communication posits that performance is the creative act of communication with competence, at both the individual and cultural levels, as an emergent property. Consequently, close attention to communicative performance is the *sine qua non* of the approach. As Bauman and Sherzer note, “A careful focus on speaking as an instrument

for the conduct of social life brings to the fore the emergent nature of social structures”

(Introduction 8)

As I stated above, the ethnography of communication has proven to be a versatile and effective tool for the study of all manner of communicative acts. Muriel Saville-Troike and Deborah Tannen have produced fascinating accounts of silence as a communicative acts (Saville-Troike, "The Place of Silence"; Tannen, "Silence: Anything But"; Tannen and Saville-Troike). Keith Basso has outlined a possible methodology for the ethnography of writing which was utilised by Gerald Pocius in his analysis of gravestone inscriptions. Mike Baynham further extended this through his ethnography of “literacy moments” in which written documents were read aloud to non-readers. In addition the approach has proven a viable method for the study of computer-mediated communication. Brenda Danet explicitly positions her ethnographic work as similar to the ethnography of writing (*Cyberpl@y* 11) and calls her study “an ethnography of play with communicative form on the Internet” (11). Finally, both Nancy Baym and Lynn Cherny have conducted thorough ethnographies of online communication in which they specifically draw upon the theory and methodologies of the ethnography of communication. The studies by Baym and Cherny have had a massive impact on my research.

Lynn Cherny’s analysis of a MUD and Nancy Baym’s study of communicative behaviour in a USENET newsgroup, both of which were PhD dissertations, were

primarily researched in 1993/94 at a time when access to the Internet had begun to widen significantly, although the world wide web had not then become generally available.⁹⁸

Nancy Baym's analysis of the newsgroup "rec.arts.tc.soaps" ("RATS") draws upon the ethnography of speaking and Folklore theory in order to prove her central thesis that "computer-mediated groups can create social communities. They do this with language" ("Communication" 1). Baym's intent is not just to study how these communities are created but also to reflect on the more general issues arising because, as she claims "Work on computer-mediated community is also provocative because it offers a privileged lens through which to view the role of communication in the creation of identities, relationships and communities" (1).

Although Baym explicitly claims that she is focusing on language, her main tool of analysis is genre. She draws upon Bakhtin's formulation of the role of the genre in communication and applies it primarily to the analysis of subject headers in newsgroup postings. Thus the major thrust of her analysis is the performance of and competence with genre among the participants. As such, her approach is akin to Swales's description of research into discourse communities. (*Genre Analysis*)

There are some features of USENET groups that are specific to this form of CMC, the most notable of which is how they are disseminated. As discussed in chapter 1, when a message is posted to a USENET group it is circulated around USENET for about

⁹⁸Nancy Baym frequently quotes surveys showing roughly one million people online at the time of her research. In 2002 there is no verifiable number but conservative estimates place the online population at over 500 million.

7 days on average. Anyone wishing to read a USENET post simply logs onto a host computer and selects which groups to read. Baym asserts that "Usenet could be considered the late twentieth century's version of eighteenth century salon culture" ("Communication" 78) in part because of this dissemination method. Because such posts do not go directly to the email addresses of "subscribers", there is no membership list or any way to track who is or is not reading posts unless they reply. Consequently, no participants in a USENET group have any means of controlling what is posted or who reads it.

Although I wish to avoid any undue forms of technological determinism, many of Baym's findings dealing with the emergence of a sense of community are specific to this medium. As she states, "The practices and social structures of any computer-mediated discussion are as [sic] emergent, not pre-determined" (197). USENET groups provide opportunities and challenges for communication that are specific to the medium. In addition, RATS was unusual for its era in having a very high percentage of female participants compared to the norm for the time, thus some of her findings may have been the outcome of gendered communication (197).⁹⁹

Baym's work is of interest because of the detailed analysis of the performance of genres in one particular form of CMC and her ethnographic self-reflexivity. Her data was

⁹⁹One particular example of this may be the use of "emoticons" (figures such as :-) and :)) in RATS. Although common and popular there, other USENET groups refuse to allow them and there have been attempts to indicate that such emoticons may be gender markers in CMC.

gathered over the best part of a year from a group in which she was already a participant.

As Lynn Cherny states:

... before a general theory of electronic community evolution is possible, an enormous number of case studies are necessary.... The good ethnographer offers grounding detail even when theory is lacking.
(*Conversation and Community* 16)

Nancy Baym's ethnography provides an important account of one electronic community.

The high-water mark in ethnographic analysis is, however, Cherny's study of a MUD.

The central question that Lynn Cherny's ethnography addresses is, "what does language do to establish, challenge, and recreate social identities and social relationships and to frame or situate events at the societal as well as individual level?" (27). The context for her study is a MUD that she calls "ElseMOO." It is important to realise that as a medium a MUD is very different from USENET. MUDs are interactive, "real time" environments. Every user of a MUD has to either create an identity or enter as a guest. Whereas USENET posts are composed and distributed asynchronously, to be read by whomever whenever, MUD postings are evanescent, composed and lost in the moment (unless someone is actively saving them) and readable only by those who are logged into the appropriate section of the MUD. Consequently, one would expect that the emergent properties of this online community, ElseMOO, might be significantly different to those of RATS.

Cherny performs a very detailed sociolinguistic analysis of what she terms the MUD register. Through meticulous and painstaking logging of MUD communication

along with interviews and observation she is able to elicit unique linguistic and sociolinguistic behaviour. In this respect she follows the techniques of the ethnography of speaking more closely than Baym though, somewhat ironically, she equivocates between whether to describe ElseMOO as a speech community or a discourse community:

The speakers of EM¹⁰⁰ form an elective discourse community, sharing history together and with other MUD communities. They have a strong perception of EM as a speech community. (*Conversation* 147)

As she states, what started out as a linguistic analysis drifted into the realm of sociolinguistics and community studies. Her ethnographic reflexivity and comments on this journey is of particular interest to me because she deals with both place and time, key components of any ethnography, whether virtual or not. Although there has been much theorising about cyberspace as a (non)place there has to date been little reflection on what the ethnographer's place is yet, as Cherny points out, "The conventional ethnographer's authority comes from 'being there' and being able to convey that experience successfully" (305). What it means to 'be there' in cyberspace as an ethnographer is part of my interest. Both Cherny and Baym were self-declared insiders, as am I in my research and their status undoubtedly influences their sense of 'there.' Cherny however notices a crucial aspect of ethnography: it takes time. As discussed earlier, there is a misconception that studying online behaviour simply requires reading typed documents at whatever time is convenient for the researcher. My experience,

¹⁰⁰Her shortening of "ElseMOO."

however, and Cherny's as well is that "the experience of timing and the feel of the text flow importantly influence the perception of the event" (305).

The studies by Cherny and Baym focussed on very different types of computer-mediated communication. Cherny's work with the MUD featured predominantly synchronous communication while Baym's analysis of a newsgroup was centred on asynchronous media. My intent was to focus on email discussion lists. Although an email list is an asynchronous form of CMC it works quite differently from a newsgroup discussion list. Issues with messages that arrive out of order are less common and as most lists require some type of subscription it is usually possible to determine the membership at any given time. As with Baym and Cherny, my intent was to focus on one group in one medium and to put the *lived* experience of virtuality at the centre of the study.

Case Studies

The main case study in this work is a virtual ethnography of an unofficial email list for Middlesbrough Football (soccer) Club fans. My research took place over a 16 month period during which I archived over 10,000 email messages. Because I was also a member of the list both before and after the research period I have in total over 40,000 saved email messages, however my focus here is on the 10,000 or so collected during the research. A smaller case study of the roleplayer's email list ("The Glorantha Digest") is also referred to later. While the football fans study was conducted through a virtual ethnography, the information from the Glorantha Digest was collected primarily through a mixture of surveys and email interviews. The two different methodologies were chosen

to enable me to investigate the pros and cons of the different techniques as well as the subjects themselves.

The email lists themselves were selected because they appeared to show extremely different communicative behaviour to each other. The football fans' list invited the short, highly 'oral' speech-like communication while the roleplayer's list encouraged analytical, elaborate 'literate' forms of communication. My hypothesis was that these two email lists would help demonstrate that the 'oral-literate divide' that was often proposed to differentiate between speech and writing would be challenged.

My intent in both cases was to conduct the research with a high degree of reflexivity to ensure that my own experiences were a part of the research. To facilitate this I chose email lists that I was already a member of and where I was already known as a poster, albeit not a frequent one. The following chapters will present my account of my experiences and my findings.

Chapter 4: Football

We get knocked down/then we get up again/nothing's gonna keep us down.¹⁰¹

Introduction

Despite never meeting Tim, his work and time as well as his management of and contributions to this list have always been greatly appreciated. The effect of this community that he has created cannot be underestimated in how it has brought so many people together to have fun, arguments and ultimately support the Boro and the fans.

The list has turned into a virtual pub, where there are lots of regulars who make all the noise; the people who are always there but say very little and then the barman - Tim. The man everyone knows, who contributes everywhere and makes sure everything runs smoothly. I am shocked and saddened this morning as I read of his premature loss.

Please pass on my condolences to his fiancée, his family and all who knew him. (Potter)

This is certainly not the way I expected to start this section of my thesis. When I woke up this morning I was shocked to discover that Tim Lloyd, the moderator of “borofc,” the “Unofficial Middlesbrough Football Club email list,” had died unexpectedly overnight. At first, I thought the message was a bad-taste joke. After all Tim was only 33 and had been in, as far as I knew, excellent health. As I continued to read through the messages I came to realise that this was no joke.

I have been a member of the email list since early 1995, firstly as a fan of the football club, then as an ethnographer who had decided to make the email list my field of

¹⁰¹ Lyrics from the song “Tubthumping” by Chumbawumba: still a popular ‘terrace anthem.’

study and, now again, just a supporter. As I sit here on the same evening, not quite certain what to type I find myself surprised by how affected I am by Tim's death. I can say for certain that if not for Tim Lloyd it is doubtful that the "Unofficial Middlesbrough Football Club" email list would have survived its first few months and my life would have taken a different route. For now, though, my condolences to his friends and family and, as my form of thanks for what Tim built, I dedicate this chapter of my thesis to him.

This chapter is the first part of the two substantive chapters dealing exclusively with a "virtual ethnography" of the Middlesbrough Football Club email discussion list—The "Boro List." As many of the details of football and football fandom are likely to be unfamiliar to most readers I will give a brief history of Middlesbrough Football Club, known to most as "The Boro" along with a description of the region in which it is based. Also, because most readers of this are likely to be North American I will present an explanation of how the football season is organised. Following on from that I will describe the history and evolution of the email list.

The main sections of this chapter consist of a sampling of emails sent to the list along with a statistical breakdown of posting patterns. The email sample covers a short period from April to May 1995. These emails are presented to help give insight into the types of conversation and 'atmosphere' of the list as well as some of my own reactions. The period chosen was a vital one during which the club made an attempt to break into the big time. The statistical breakdown focuses on an analysis of how the postings on the list increased exponentially over a short time as well. It also analyses the ratio of posters

to non-posters (“lurkers”) and compares that to other studies. Taken together, these sections provide a bedrock of data upon which my interpretations, presented in future chapters, are grounded.

Middlesbrough Football Club: The Not So Mighty Reds

Middlesbrough is a large, industrial town on the banks of the river Tees in north-east England. It is not a glamorous place. A compact, working-class town with a population of about 120,000, its growth in the late 1800s was based on ship-building, a steel factory and, later, a huge chemical plant belonging to ICI (“Imperial Chemical Industries”). As with many northern population centres, Middlesbrough underwent rapid deindustrialisation in the 1980s that led to massive unemployment. It seemed a depressed, poverty-stricken, crime-riddled place: the river polluted by the steel works and the air polluted by ICI’s gargantuan chimney stacks. In 1986 even its football team, Middlesbrough FC, was declared bankrupt and locked out of the stadium by the bank.

Football fans in England claim that “true” fans are born supporting their local club. I was born in Saltburn-by-the-sea, a small, coastal town about 10 miles east of Middlesbrough. My mother was born just a few miles away, as was my grandfather. My grandfather worked for ICI and throughout the 1970s had a season ticket to the home matches of Middlesbrough Association Football Club, “The Boro.” So, you could say I had no choice about which football club to support. Although my parents were in the armed forces and we usually lived a long way from Middlesbrough, the area was considered to be home. I was taken to my first football matches by my grandfather in

1976 and was promptly hooked, for life. Although my interest in the sport has waxed and waned and I've rarely lived anywhere near Middlesbrough since I was a child, I cannot imagine changing my allegiance.

One key difference between North American sports and English football is to do with locality. In the North American system each team is a franchise and will move between cities if the current location is not profitable enough. This does not happen in England. Each team in England is based in a place and sinks or swims there. Middlesbrough AFC is not an organisation that can decide to move to, for example, Hull in order to make more money. Middlesbrough AFC is the football team belonging to the town of Middlesbrough. There has been a professional football team in Middlesbrough for over 100 years (Glasper). The team is rooted in the local and its fans support their team not because it is glamorous or successful but because it is their home team. They support their team through thick and thin. In the Boro's case, we support it through thin and thin; after over one hundred years of trying, the team has never once won a major trophy. It isn't easy being red.¹⁰²

There are three major professional football teams on the industrial north-east coast of England: Newcastle, Sunderland and Middlesbrough. Each team is based in the place of the same name. Newcastle and Sunderland are deadly rivals with glamorous histories and several important trophies to their name. Middlesbrough AFC has, however,

¹⁰²The club's home strip is coloured predominantly red with, in some years, a horizontal white band across the chest.

languished in relative failure. The fans of Newcastle and Sunderland hate each other with the passion that football fans reserve exclusively for their local rivals but often dismiss Middlesbrough as an outsider. In a sense, Middlesbrough is seen by supporters of the other two clubs as the third wheel, sometimes referred to as “just a small town in Yorkshire.”

A history of under-achievement reached its nadir in 1986 when the club was locked out of its own ground, Ayresome Park, and declared bankrupt (Allan and Bevington). It appeared as though Middlesbrough were about to be the first major club to go out of business since the second world war. Amazingly, though, the club survived. As a last-minute rescue package was put together by a consortium of local businesses, the team played their home matches at another local club’s stadium, trained on a neighbourhood park, paid some of their players with food hampers and sold off those they couldn’t pay. Under a new young manager, Bruce Rioch, a bunch of teenagers (who would go down in history as “Brucie’s Babies”) won two consecutive promotions to reach the top division.¹⁰³ It wasn’t, however, to be the fairytale of a team rising from the ashes. Next season the team was relegated back down to the second division and their best players bought by the top clubs. Things gradually improved though. A young, local entrepreneur and life-long Boro supporter, Steve Gibson (“Gibbo”), took sole control of the club and proceeded to make several changes.

¹⁰³Relegation and promotion, an inherent part of European football, will be explained a little later.

Although The Boro were languishing in the second tier with no money and no foreseeable chance of success, in 1994 Gibson staged a remarkable coup and signed, Bryan ("Robbo") Robson, the ex-Manchester United and England national-team captain. Robson was widely reckoned to be the best English player of his generation and was hired to be Middlesbrough's new player-manager. It was the hottest managerial take-over of the year and drew a lot of media attention. At the same time Steve Gibson invested some of his personal money to help buy new players and underwrite the loans needed to build a new, start-of-the-art stadium just outside the town centre. It seemed only inevitable that Middlesbrough would be promoted and they duly were. In the process, Robbo became the first Boro manager ever to pay over one million pounds for a single player. From seemingly nowhere Middlesbrough were looking like a club that might be going places.

The following year, as Steve Gibson invested more of his personal fortune into the club he supported, Robson made further headlines by first signing the best young player in England, Nick Barmby, for a five million pounds fee and then beating all the glamorous European clubs to sign the Brazilian superstar "Juninho" who had just been voted Brazil's player of the year. Suddenly the Boro were¹⁰⁴ trendy. Good results early in the year made the team into credible title contenders and it seemed that Robbo could do no wrong. Boro fans will tell you, though, that if it ever looks like the team may win the

¹⁰⁴On a note of grammar, in England, football teams are usually treated as though plural, hence the use of phrase such as "Middlesbrough are beating Manchester United at half time."

top division that either a world war¹⁰⁵ will break out or the team will implode. This time the team imploded, making headlines by posting the worst series of defeats in the Premiership's history and only narrowly escaped relegation at the end of the year. During all this the team had moved from crumbling Ayresome Park, the ground that after 100 years had never seen a trophy, to their brand new stadium on the north bank of the River Tees—"The Riverside."

For Middlesbrough's fans this truly was the best and worst of times. The hard-core of dedicated, long-suffering fans found that the underachieving team they loved had become the centre of media attention and, suddenly, there were a lot of new fans around. Average attendances of around 18,000 had increased to 30,000 at the new Riverside stadium. Despite the record-breaking string of defeats, in the next summer, 1996, Bryan Robson parted with £7m to bring the world-famous Italian striker, Fabrizio Ravenelli, to the Riverside, along with "Emerson," a Brazilian player with film-star hair-style, for another £4m. The under-achieving club on the bank of the River Tees had become the home of some of the best players in the world. The first game of the new season was an adrenaline packed 3-3 draw against Liverpool with Ravenelli scoring a hat-trick on his debut.¹⁰⁶ The up-coming season of the "Riverside Revolution" seemed to hold infinite promise.

¹⁰⁵Middlesbrough's 1938 team is widely acknowledged to have been one of the best of the era. In 1938 they finished third and were favourites to win the top division in the next season. Unfortunately the next season, 1939, was cancelled for obvious reasons.

¹⁰⁶I.e. he scored all three goals.

It is during this period, covering promotion to the premiership, the move to the new stadium and the signings of Juninho, Ravenelli et al. that my fieldwork with the unofficial Middlesbrough Football Club email list took place.

The Mailies and the Boro List

The “Unofficial Middlesbrough Football Email List” (“Boro List”)¹⁰⁷ was created by Al McWilliams in October 1994. McWilliams was a student at Newcastle University and used the university’s computer system to administer the list. It quickly became very popular and Newcastle University insisted that he close down the list because of its demand on their resources. At this point, a regular by the name of Tim Lloyd who lived in Hong Kong volunteered to host the list on his local server. After some initial teething problems the email list was transferred and proceeded to grow by leaps and bounds.

As the welcome messages written by Tim Lloyd shows, the mailing list was, at least initially, oriented towards Middlesbrough fans living abroad. In the first one, he claims “[m]ost of the people on this list are from, or around Middlesbrough, this list helps us keep in touch with like minded people”.¹⁰⁸ An analysis of email addresses of members during my fieldwork showed that the majority of subscribers who could be identified, were living in the UK, though very few were identifiable as living in the Teesside area.

¹⁰⁷There has never actually been a unique name for the email list, “Boro List” is simply the name the email is stored under on my system. Consequently it will be referred to as such throughout this document.

¹⁰⁸See the appendices.

Analysis of more recent membership lists provided by the Boro List owner¹⁰⁹ showed that UK-based Internet addresses formed by far the largest minority although, again, only four email addresses could be specifically identified as indicating someone who lived in the Teesside region. The email list was, therefore, predominantly for fans of the club who were not living in the area of the club. This orientation continues to this day as the following quote from the current welcome message indicates.

You have to remember this list is meant to be fun as well as informative, but you can only go so far with the fun. At the end of the day the list is here to make sure exiles around the world and within the UK get hold of good information about the Boro. (Muzyka)

However, as I came to realise, although the members were dispersed around the globe, nearly all of them had some sort of tie to the region that predated their support of the football club.

I first encountered the list in February 1995. I had recently moved to Canada to start my PhD and posted an email on Usenet (rec.sports.soccer) looking for other Boro fans, not as researcher, simply as a fan. Unsurprisingly, there are not many Middlesbrough fans in Newfoundland. I was directed to the Boro List and quickly signed up. Shortly afterwards, I realised that the list would be an ideal case study for the PhD thesis I had in mind. Although I have saved some messages from March 1995, I only started systematically observing it in April.

¹⁰⁹Personal correspondence, April 2002.

The list has gone through several changes over time. After its transfer to Tim Lloyd it stayed on his server until it eventually outgrew that. Following some debate it was moved to a commercial web-based system called “Topica” in May 2000.¹¹⁰ The members of the list grew dissatisfied with the standard of service, however, and a decision was taken to move the list over to “Yahoo Groups” in May 2001.¹¹¹ This version of the list was thrown into chaos just a few weeks later when Tim died. Eventually, one of the regular participants volunteered to moderate a new list on Yahoo Groups which would be dedicated to the memory of Tim Lloyd.

The period of my fieldwork stretches from April 1995 to the end of August 1996. During this time, Boro List was a private, members-only list and all subscribers had to be manually approved by Tim Lloyd. Consequently, all emails from Boro List sent in that period have been treated as private communication unless specifically stated to the contrary. Although various experimental and personal archives were created by some of the members, there was never a communal attempt to build one, therefore there is no complete public record that I am aware of. Conversely, all messages posted to “Yahoo Groups” since May 2001 are part of the public domain. With Tim’s death, the archive

¹¹⁰<http://www.topica.com>. The entry for the Boro List group is still available at <http://www.topica.com/lists/borofc/> but nothing there is accessible anymore.

¹¹¹There are in fact two yahoo groups. Originally it was titled Borofc and can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/borofc/>. After Tim’s death a new group had to be formed as there was apparently no way to transfer ownership so the new group was named “Boroml” (Boro mailing list) and can be found at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/boroml/>.

that used to exist on Topica for the period May 2000 to April 2001 has become inaccessible.

It should also be stated that Boro List has no relationship to Middlesbrough Football Club nor any official status with it; indeed the club is allegedly wary of the mailing list. At one point in 1996 a rumour swept the list and the general soccer newsgroup on Usenet (rec.sport.soccer) that one of Middlesbrough Football Club's staff members was sleeping with a player's wife.¹¹² When these rumours started appearing in the print media later, many of the members of Boro List began to suspect that journalists were joining the list under false identities in order to uncover juicy gossip about the club.

As is often the case when a vociferous fan group exists with a forum in which they can express their feelings, the relationship between the fans and the object of their fandom (in this case the football club) can be fraught (Jenkins). The "mailies"¹¹³—the members of the email list—are no different and are often quick to criticise the club. Although Middlesbrough Football Club has never officially recognised the email list there is plenty of evidence that the club's officials are fully aware of the list's existence. At least initially, some within the club seem to have regarded the list as more of a threat

¹¹²Sex, sleaze and soccer stories are phenomenally popular in the UK. It is a rare Sunday that one of the weekly tabloid newspapers doesn't break a story of infidelity, 3-in-a-bed romps or footballers and strippers.

¹¹³Although no one term has ever been widely used, "mailies" is the most frequently used name that list member use for themselves. For the sake of convenience I will use that term when referring to list members.

and a potential source for destabilising rumours.¹¹⁴ Some bridges were built in the summer of 1996 with the advent of “EuroNet96.” Held at the same time as the European cup, EuroNet96 was a knock-out competition held between members of email lists for several top league teams. To everyone’s surprise the Middlesbrough fans, who called themselves “The Cellnetters”, rank outsiders who had never met each other before, won the competition and were presented with the trophy. Ironically, the first trophy to be won in the Riverside Revolution was won by the fans who presented it to Middlesbrough’s manager, Bryan Robson, shortly after the tournament.

Football Explained

The mailies share a deep and complex understanding of the football system in England. Many readers, however, will need a foundation course because the English football system is complex and quite different from the general sporting structure found in North America.

In total there are 92 professional football teams registered in England. They play in four different “divisions” (also referred to as “leagues”). The top 20 teams play in the top division, called “The Premiership.” The remaining 72 teams are split into three leagues, known en-masse as “The Nationwide Leagues”, and called the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd

¹¹⁴Tracing the links between members of the list and various supporters’ organisations is complex to say the least. Talking with various mailies who claimed to have contacts has led me to believe that during the period of my fieldwork the email list was viewed with some trepidation by the club’s public relations office.

divisions.¹¹⁵ Each season every team plays each other team in their division twice—once at home and once away. At the end of the year the bottom three teams in each division are usually “relegated” to the division below and the top three teams in the division are “promoted” to the division above. The winners of the Premiership earn the right to be called English champions for the year. Winners of the other division, plus second and third places, generally, get promoted.¹¹⁶ Although, therefore, winning the title of your division is each team’s goal, fans in general are happy to gain promotion by any means. On the other hand, relegation is always a shattering blow to any team, not just due to hurt pride but because the amount of income that teams earn depends on the division in which they play. A team in the Premiership stands to earn over twenty times as much as one in the 1st division.¹¹⁷ Much of the drama of the football season consists of watching the desperate dogfight at the end of the season among those teams threatened by relegation.

At the time of the fieldwork, Middlesbrough were in the first division (i.e. the second tier league), having been relegated two seasons before. Bryan Robson had been appointed manager with the aim of getting Middlesbrough into the Premiership at his first attempt. A massive amount of money rested on this because Steve Gibson had

¹¹⁵This frankly confusing terminology is due to the Byzantine political structures to be found in English professional football. The nomenclature was changed again in 2004. Now the 1st Division is termed “The Championship” and the 2nd and 3rd divisions have been renamed the 1st and 2nd divisions respectively. I will not use this revised nomenclature here though.

¹¹⁶The precise details as to which positions gain promotion in any given season vary.

¹¹⁷Relegation from the Premiership to the 1st division is currently reckoned to cost a team in excess of £15 million even after bridging payments.

started financing a new 30,000 all-seater stadium to replace the old stadium, Ayresome Park, that only held 18,000. If Middlesbrough got into the Premiership then the extra money would finance the stadium and the extra crowds would generate more revenue. If they didn't, the consequences would be severe, with Middlesbrough potentially facing huge bills for what could be a half-empty stadium. To further complicate matters, because the football season was being restructured that year only the winner of the 1st division would be automatically promoted; the next four teams had to face a play-off system to see which one got promoted. Essentially, Robson, Gibson and The Boro had one shot at the big time.

My fieldwork proper began in April 1995, approximately 6 weeks before the end of the season. The Boro had been doing well but not quite well enough. For a while they had led the division but they had slipped back a little and automatic promotion was looking less and less likely. In order to win the division and thereby qualify for automatic promotion, the football team not only had to win most of their remaining matches, they had to hope that their main rivals would make a mistake. As usual, the team had its fans on tenterhooks.

Virtually Red

There were many factors motivating my interest in studying the mailies ethnographically. At the most general level I had been debating whether I should try to find a group I was unfamiliar with and enter it as a stranger or whether I should use a group of which I was already a member. I had previously experienced using the Internet to conduct research

with groups I did not already know of in a study of “filk” (science-fiction folk song) singers online. Although the results had been enlightening I became convinced that I did not want to recreate the ethnographic stereotype of travel to a foreign country. Folklorist fieldworkers have often done their best work when dealing with their own traditions and although the ‘insider vs outsider’ dichotomy in fieldwork can be overly simplistic, I felt that I would be dealing with so many, seemingly, new conventions that I would be best served working with people with whom I already shared at least some common knowledge.

At the same time, I was interested in debates about orality in computer-mediated communication¹¹⁸ and was looking to find a case study that could challenge the deterministic perspectives that seemed to dominate the field. Consequently I wanted to find a group that seemed to blur boundaries between oral and literate communication. I knew that I was interested in email list behaviour and, having recently become aware of Lynn Cherny’s study of a MUD (“The Mud Register”) and Nancy Baym’s study of a newsgroup (“Interpreting”) I felt that an email list would provide an interesting case study that could be compared and contrasted. Finally, I believed that a group based on an asynchronous medium would be challenging to work with ethnographically because of the lack of immediate interaction. In the midst of gradually refining my ideas of what I wanted I had tracked down and joined the Middlesbrough mailing list so that I could keep in better touch with ‘my’ football team. Like any good folklorist, I kept my emails

¹¹⁸See bibliography entries for Goody, Ong and Tannen.

on the basis that they might be interesting one day. At some point I realised I had already made the decision to study the group. It was an email list, the messages tended to be short, emotive and 'oral' and at the time the list was still fairly new so norms were in the process of emerging.

Once I decided that I wanted to study this list and had spent some time mulling over the consequences several other factors slipped into place. I was also a member of a much older email list based around a favourite hobby ("The Glorantha Digest") which promoted itself as a very literate style of communication. I suspected that I could draw upon useful contrasts between the two. In addition, much of the study of CMC groups had focused on groups who were highly competent in the medium and often interested in the medium for its own sake. The Middlesbrough fans seemed less interested in the fine details of computer-mediated communication than in the goings-on of their team. I suspected then that the mailies would be interested in naturalising the medium rather than discussing it and that was a process I was interested in. Finally, by choosing fans of a football team I could push the idea of a hermetically-sealed virtual ethnography to its limits because everything to do with the team happens offline and is focused on a specific geographical place.

When I committed to the study of the Boro List I was faced with changing my identity in the group. I had posted a few times to the list and introduced myself. Consequently I was known as that 'gadgie'¹¹⁹ from Canada. I had now to get permission

¹¹⁹Slang from the Middlesbrough area meaning, roughly, "guy."

to work ethnographically and then let the group know. I contacted Tim Lloyd, the list owner, by email and explained what I wanted to do and why. I suggested that if he was willing, I would post a message to the group and invite objections. His response was that he was willing to go along with it as long as it didn't have much impact (email) on the list or lead to "off-topic" discussions. Based on that I sent an email, explained what I intended and invited people with concerns to email me directly rather than to the list. The response was positive. At the time there were just over 100 members of the list,¹²⁰ no one raised any concerns and I had a few offers of help as well as interest in the final results. I promised to make my findings about the group accessible to the list in general.

Changing my relationship with the group was mechanically fairly simple. I used my email program to give me a "sub-title" and added a signature to my messages to the group that would remind them of who I was. Over time, however, I realised that my interaction with the group changed significantly. Now that I was 'officially' an ethnographer I was conscious of Tim's injunction about not going off-topic. The list was a list about football after all, not about my research project. Also, I found that several of mailies had commented that they thought I had chosen the list because I could observe "without having an impact" and that therefore email was "perfect" for this type of work. My theoretical understanding of what an ethnographer is and does was quite different to their expectations and I found myself gradually posting only messages that reminded people of my work and not contributing to general discussions that I would otherwise

¹²⁰Personal communication from Tim Lloyd.

have done for fear of causing the email list to stray off-topic. There is a certain irony that “post-paradigm” ethnography works very hard to give voice to the subjects in order to challenge the authority of the ethnographer’s voice when, as I studied the mailies, I found it was my voice that was gradually quieted.

I found that my ethnographic relationship with the email list evolved in an unexpected manner. The expectations of the mailies, especially the list-owner, meant that the work became primarily observational. I had never been a “lurker” in an email group before and I found that attempting to identify myself as a constant presence without participating in the general communication caused me to experience a type of participation that I had never had to deal with before. I also found myself experimenting with different forms of fieldnotes about the group. I wanted to track my own experiences and reactions to the unfolding events. I quickly found out that this was far more demanding than I expected and I had to scale back my work with the other email list just so I could keep up to date with the Boro List. During my time studying it, the Boro List trebled in size (from just over 100 to over 300 registered members) and the number of emails per month increased by around 600%. Although I had expected growth, this explosion caught me unaware.

The most difficult decision became deciding to stop. Initially I had been interested in challenging the boundary between research and writing by making it an interactive process. After all, I was going to be typing my thesis on the same piece of technology that I accessed the Internet with, so why “leave” the field in order to come

“home” and write. My initial attempts at this were disastrous. There was a constant stream of new information opening up before me, constantly challenging my ideas, providing new insights and suggesting new avenues of exploration. My attempts at writing became a constant round of revision with no sign of progress. Reluctantly I decided that although I would remain a member I would “officially” stop being an ethnographer. For this reason, the fieldwork I am concentrating here spans April 1995 to August 1997, consisting of one whole season and two summers during possibly one of the most dramatic periods in the history of Middlesbrough AFC.

The Ethnographer's Anorak

Football fans have adopted a somewhat derogatory name for someone interested in the statistics of the game— an “Anorak”. Ethnographers, like football fans, tend to find statistics interesting but not necessarily capable of capturing the whole picture. That said, there is some basic statistical information that can provide a useful background to understanding the evolution of the mailing list.

It is not possible to give a completely accurate picture of the number of unique messages posted to the email list over any given period time. During the period 1995-1996 the list was prone to outages with messages disappearing and also occasional incidences of duplication where each message would repeat multiple times. For example, many of the messages from December 12th 1995 to January 12th 1996 took at least a month to circulate with some appearing on the list up to a year after posting and the list owner had to delete many queued messages and update the email distribution software. A

similar situation occurred in October 1996 and, in both cases, it was noticeable that once the list re-established itself there was a massive increase in posting. Although I have endeavoured to weed out duplicated messages there is no definitive source for lost messages so the statistics here are by no means completely accurate.

My fieldwork period spanned April 1995 to August 1996. I continued, however, saving all the messages I received until September 1999 as, at the time, I was unsure whether to continue my fieldwork and retained them on a precautionary principle. Although I am not performing any in-depth qualitative analysis of any emails sent after August 1996, they are useful in helping identify certain quantitative trends. There were two periods (January to April 1997 and March to June 1999) when technical problems caused me to lose all or most of the messages that I had saved, hence the gaps in the table 1.

After September 1999 I decided to unsubscribe from the list in order to give myself some distance. I was notified in May 2000 that the list had been moved on to a commercial email groups host called "Topica" only to be moved again during May 2001 to "Yahoo Groups." I do not have access to any of the emails sent from the period October 1999 to April 2001 but the email totals from May 2001 onwards have been taken from the list's statistics that are available online.¹²¹ To increase readability, I have broken the messages down into monthly totals but this has no emic justification as months do not mark any natural boundaries in when posters send email.

¹²¹<http://groups.yahoo.com/groups/boroml>.

	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2001	2002
Jan	No data	469	No data	2155	1466	No data	2025
Feb		824		1664	1123		1430
Mar		838		2089	No data		1097
Apr		178		740			1616
May	397	737	2311	1788		983	842
Jun	337	565	1223	1216		1833	676
Jul	406	824	1305	950	1504	921	1487
Aug	419	1115	No data	1650	2206	1225	
Sep	524	946	1134	1977	2105	1127	
Oct	505	461	1512	1771	No data	916	
Nov	349	1795	1823	1024		825	
Dec	72	1482	1440	1645		1142	

Table 1: Email totals for the Boro list 1995-2002

As would be expected there was a huge increase in the number of messages posted to the Boro List over time. It is noticeable though that the main increase appears to have happened from 1995 to early 1998 with the average number of messages holding pretty steady or even declining since then. There are several factors that seem to have affected this increase and subsequent plateau.

Increase in membership. At the end of April 1995 when I started fieldwork, there were 108 members.¹²² By September 1995 that had increased to over 150,¹²³ and that had grown to 235 by December 1995: more than doubling over an eight month period. The membership continued to increase and a query on December 1996 showed 323 members. Since then the increase has leveled off. On May 2nd, 2001 there were 322 listed members and on August 1st, 2002 there were 314. This increase in numbers appears to mirror the general expansion of the Internet over the period, especially in the UK where home-access to the Internet lagged a few years behind North America. More recently the number of members seems to have stabilised at around 300-320.

- *Seasonal factors.* The UK football season runs from early August to early May. There is generally a surge of people subscribing to the list just before the season starts and, similarly, people tend to unsubscribe at the end of the season for the summer. The beginning of the season also tends to generate more postings while the team's involvement in end-of-season activities (promotion, relegation, cup finals and so on) also generates more postings. Consequently there tends to be a cyclical pattern in the number of emails.
- *Unique occurrences.* At its peak in May 1997, the Boro List had over 400 members¹²⁴ but there was a massive turnover in list membership. This can be

¹²²Personal communication from Tim Lloyd.

¹²³Database query on September 11, 1995 showed 153 members.

¹²⁴Database query on May 4th 1997 showed 407 members. There appeared to be several duplicates however.

explained because May 1997 was probably the most dramatic month in the football club's history. The club were relegated from the premier league due to being deducted 3 points after refusing to play in a match earlier in the year. At the same, the club reached the F. A. Cup final for the first time only to concede the fastest goal in the cup's history and to eventually lose the game. Other surges occurred in August 1996 when Fabrizio Ravanelli and Emerson were signed and in January 1998 when the list broke out into a furious argument about the merits of Bryan Robson as a manager.

- *General expansion.* Since early 2000 there has been an explosion of football discussion web sites such as "Rivals.net". Currently every major football club along with all football coverage web-sites have associated discussion boards. The Boro List is now just one option among many for fans to discuss the club. When I joined in 1995 it was the only active online forum.

To put these totals into perspective, even during a quiet period, such as July 2002, the list generates over 20 emails a day and peak times may see triple that number.

Keeping up to date with the discussion clearly requires a significant amount of commitment. I suspect, though so far evidence is only anecdotal, that this message frequency falls within a range that marks a 'healthy' list. When the number of messages per day falls below around 10, members seem impelled to post messages to check that the list is still working or asking why it is so quiet. On the other hand, if the message frequency rises above 60 per day (especially if a high percentage of those messages are

“off topic”) then posters start to complain or unsubscribe.¹²⁵ An interesting comparison here can be drawn with Nancy Baym’s analysis of newsgroup postings. Over a period of 10 months, the newsgroup she monitored generated 32,253 messages which equate to around 3250 or over 100 per day.¹²⁶ The newsgroup, however, used subject headers to break itself into 11 subgroups with the most popular subgroup generating 8,665 posts over the period which breaks down to an average of 30 messages per day (87). Of all the email groups to which I have belonged, the Boro List is by far the busiest but has never yet reached a sustained level of posting that could persuade the mailies to try and divide the list into sub-lists.¹²⁷

One matter of interest in email lists is the ratio of posters to “lurkers”—participants who do not post. Trying to identify the number of lurkers in any online group is never easy. There is a general belief that between 90-99% of any group are likely to be lurkers (Nonnecke and Preece 123) though generating precise statistics is problematic. In her study of a newsgroup, Nancy Baym estimated that an absolute minimum of 87% of the participants were lurkers and she postulated that this was a conservative estimate (“Communication” 81). One advantage of working with an email

¹²⁵The debate about Bryan Robson that flared up in January 1998 and then again a few weeks later in March seems to have been responsible for the first significant, permanent decrease in membership. (Information based on database queries).

¹²⁶For some interesting related data about Usenet postings circa 1993 see Sproull and Faraj’s analysis of postings to 6 Usenet groups (42-44).

¹²⁷Vesik’s similar analysis of posting behaviour in an email list shows similar patterns (74). There is a seasonal rhythm of high and low posting periods and a general increase in the number of emails posted in a year from 330 in 1996 to 2872 in 2002 although the number of postings per year has been roughly stable from 1998-2002 at around 2700 emails per annum.

list that requires its members to subscribe is that it is possible to track more accurately the percentage of posters to lurkers. During my fieldwork I did my best to keep track of the number of members at a given time so that I could assess what percentage seemed to be posting.

A related issue concerns the breakdown of the total number of messages posted by individuals. Are email lists egalitarian free-for-alls with posters all contributing more or less equally or are posters stratified in their amount of posting? Nancy Baym's analysis of a newsgroup revealed that nearly 50% of all messages were posted by just 3% of the participants ("Communication" 81-82).¹²⁸ This domination of the discussion by just a small number of participants has been frequently noticed¹²⁹ and can be referred to in shorthand as the "80/20 rule," i.e. in most cases about 80% of the messages in an email discussion list or newsgroup are generated by about 20% of the participants. It is possible to examine the ratio of posters to lurkers and the 80/20 rule with respect to the Boro List. Table 2, below, shows the breakdown of the number posts by posters for April 1995, the first month in which I carried out research.

¹²⁸An analogy can be drawn with these members and folklorists' concepts of star informants. There are some differences though. A star informant may not be the most active member of a community but still be the informant who provides a rich collection of traditional material for a collector. Similarly, the most frequent posters to an email list may be very reluctant informants.

¹²⁹See, for example, the bibliography entries for Nancy Baym, Lynn Cherny, and Shelley Correll.

Number of Posts - April 1995	Number of Posters making this number of posts	Total Posts (Number of posters times number of posts)	%age
1	13	13	7.3%
2	8	16	16.3%
3	4	12	23.0%
4	4	16	32.0%
5	1	5	34.8%
6	3	18	44.9%
7	1	7	48.9%
8	1	8	53.4%
9	1	9	58.4%
10	1	10	64.0%
11	1	11	70.2%
12	1	12	77.0%
13	1	13	84.3%
14	2	28	100.0%
Total	42	178	

Table 2: Postings summary for April 1995

The membership total in mid-April was 103, so approximately 40% of the members posted at least one message during April.¹³⁰ Of these, eight posters were responsible for 51% of all messages posted which is to say that 8 members posted 8 or more emails each. Although it is clear that more people “lurk” than post and that most of the messages are posted by less than 10% of the total membership, these numbers, at first glance, seem

¹³⁰Of course membership totals were constantly increasing at this point. I have used the mid April total as possible median point for the membership during April. It is likely that there were fewer members at the beginning of April and more at the end.

quite different from the received wisdom. The ratio of lurkers to posters seems low: 59% lurkers, 41% posters as compared to the supposed standard of over 90% lurkers. Also the spread of messages is relatively equal with the top 20% of posters posting just 50% of the messages, significantly less than the 80/20 rule would predict. Examining some statistics from later periods of the list reveals, however, quite different patterns.

During February 1996 the list population averaged roughly 250. As Table 3, below, shows the ratio of posters to lurkers remains at around 50/50 with a total of 126 different posters in that time. Of the postings, 80% of them were produced by 46 different posters (posting 5 or more messages throughout the period) which is to say that roughly 80% of the posting were produced by 37% of the posters. This is still quite different from the 80/20 prediction however. It is noticeable though that the February 1996¹³¹ total of 800 postings¹³² is an increase of nearly 550% on April 1995 yet the population increase is only approximately 150%. Clearly the increase in messages is not generated purely by the increase in membership.

¹³¹To make the tables a little easier to read I have combined information on some rows.

¹³²There is a discontinuity between the total reported in table 1 (824) and the total given here (800). This is due to a mix of factors. Several messages no longer have any obvious identification and some are automatic messages generated by the list software. This table only contains emails that I was positively able to identify as being from a unique individual.

Posts	Posters	Total	Total%
1	36	36	4.5%
2 to 3	34	82	14.8%
4 to 6	19	90	26.0%
7 to 8	10	74	35.3%
9 to 11	8	81	45.4%
12 to 13	6	74	54.6%
14	1	14	56.4%
15	2	30	60.1%
16	1	16	62.1%
18	1	18	64.4%
23	1	23	67.3%
24	2	48	73.3%
27	1	27	76.6%
30	1	30	80.4%
41	1	41	85.5%
51	1	51	91.9%
65	1	65	100.0%
Totals	126	800	

Table 3: Postings summary for February 1996

What became obvious while I was doing my fieldwork— and which seems to be borne out by these statistics— is that the increase in email was largely driven by the most frequent posters posting more often. In April 1995, the top 10% of posters (the top 5) produced 36% of all messages posted, while in February 1996, the top 10% (13 posters producing 14 or more messages) produced 45.4% of all messages. This pattern of

increasing domination by a posting “elite” can be seen also a year later in May 1997 (See table 4 p.147).

In May 1997, a record month for postings at the time, there were 243 different posters out of an estimate of somewhere around 500 members over the month.¹³³ The top 10% of posters (24 or more messages) produced 48% of the messages with the exceptionally high posters averaging 3-4 emails per day to the list with two members posting over 100 emails each.

¹³³There was a huge turn-over in membership due to the controversial nature of the team's relegation. A lot of people, estimated at nearly 100 subscribed for just a day or two to try to find out extra information.

Posts	Posters	Total	Total%
1	71	71	3.2%
2-4	69	199	12.2%
5-7	23	134	18.2%
8-10	17	151	25.0%
11-14	18	221	35.0%
15-18	10	165	42.4%
19-20	9	176	50.4%
21-22	2	43	52.3%
24	5	120	57.7%
26-27	2	53	60.1%
29-30	3	88	64.1%
33	2	66	67.0%
35-38	4	146	73.6%
43	2	86	77.5%
45	1	45	79.5%
63	1	63	82.4%
76	1	76	85.8%
80	1	80	89.4%
117	1	117	94.7%

Table 4: Postings summary for May 1997

All of these examples show a higher ratio of posters to lurkers than is commonly assumed. Although lurkers have always been a majority they have rarely exceeded more than 70% of the population. Also, although the list does not seem to fit the 80/20 guideline I decided to test if this was an anomaly derived from a fairly small sample. So I decided to analyse a larger sample running from the period May 1st, 1997 to September

30th 1997. The results are summarised in table 5 below. As can be seen, the basic breakdown holds firm; the top 10% of posters contribute just over 50% of all messages. A slightly different perspective is given if we analyse how frequently the most frequent posters sent email. In May 1997, 12 of the 243 people who posted, sent over 30 emails, i.e. roughly 5% of the non-lurkers posted at least 1 email per day. In the longer duration sample over 122 days only 10 of the 378 different posters sent over 100 emails, i.e. less than 3% of the posting population averaged around 1 or more emails per day. Given that after May, the list returned to a more normal frequency, the May figures show that the busiest period was marked by the frequent posters posting more frequently. Essentially, list traffic was not dependent primarily on how many different members posted but by how often the most frequent contributors sent emails. According to statistics the posting patterns are dominated by a relatively small number of individuals.

Posts	Posters	Total	Total%
1	80	80	1.2%
2 to 5	110	356	6.8%
6 to 9	47	354	12.3%
10	5	50	13.0%
11 to 14	28	343	18.4%
15-18	18	295	22.9%
19-22	14	284	27.3%
23-26	6	142	29.5%
27-30	11	312	34.4%
31-40	18	626	44.1%
41-50	8	368	49.8%
51-60	8	451	56.8%
61-70	7	472	64.1%
71-80	5	367	69.8%
81-90	3	264	73.9%
91-100	1	99	75.5%
101 - 200	7	958	90.3%
200 - 300	1	274	94.6%
300+	1	349	100.0%
Total	378	6444	

Table 5: Postings summary: May to September 1997

Another notable result is that in the time period there were over 378 different posters. A small number of these may be posters who changed their email address but my estimate of the total number of different individuals who were subscribed at some point in this period is in the area of 550-600 at most. This implies that somewhere around two-

thirds of the members posted an email during the period. I was astonished by this because it implies that a clear majority of list members were not lurkers in the classic sense of being members who read without posting. During my fieldwork, my impression had been that a very small number of different people posted but according to these statistics, most of the list had posted an email at some point.

This result suggested to me that it is necessary, in the context of this list, to redefine the category of a lurker and to consider that the complete lurker, i.e. some one who never posts, is actually far less common than generally assumed but that there may be a large minority who almost never post. For example, table 5 shows that 190 of the list members who sent an email sent 5 or fewer messages over the 122 days I analysed. The actual breakdown is shown in table 6 below. From this table we can see that nearly half of those 190 members posted just once. Of those who posted just twice, 31 (82%) of them had posted both of their messages either in the same topic or on the same day. This also held true for most of those who had posted just three times (24 of them) and most of those who had posted four times (12 of the 20). For people who had posted five times, only a minority (4 of the 22) had posted all of their messages in the same topic or around about the same time. Taking this together, it seems reasonable to postulate that around about 120 of the posters (approximately one-third of the total number of posters) only ever made one 'intervention' into the list. In this list then the boundary between completely lurking (never posting) and just an occasional post is fairly porous.

Posts	Posters	Total	Percentage
1	80	80	1.24%
2	38	76	2.42%
3	30	90	3.82%
4	20	80	5.06%
5	22	110	6.77%

Table 6: Low frequency posters: May - September 1997

There is also a potentially misleading statistic pertaining to low frequency posters. The statistics for May 1997 show 71 members who posted just once while the statistics for the period May 1997 to September 1997 show just 80 people who posted once. At first glance this might seem to hint that only 9 people posted just once from June to September which seems rather odd. This is not the case. Over any 30 day period there are usually around 60 people who post just once; clearly if a member averages one post per month then they would show up as a singleton poster in most samples lasting around 30 days. Looking back over the other tables it can be seen that over any 30 day period that there is a fairly constant figure of 28-30% of the posters who post just one message. If the time period of the sample is extended then the percentage figure of people who post just once compared the other posters reduces to just over 20%.¹³⁴ It seems likely that maybe 10% of the posting population could be described as very low frequency posters who post

¹³⁴This figure is probably too high. For example many different email addresses may belong to the same person who has changed their email address. Sometimes it is possible to notice that this is the same person based on their signature or similarity in their addresses.

no more than once per month. Although there clearly is a lurking population consisting of members who do not post no matter what, this is a relatively small minority compared to normal assumptions. There is, however, a large group of those who post so infrequently that they seem to generate no sense of presence on the list. This may explain my impressionistic belief that only a fairly small number of different mailies posted. As a very crude approximation it seems that the list can be divided into thirds: true lurkers, very infrequent posters and those who post more than once per month.

I stated above that one reason for the higher than expected participation may be because the list requires subscription. One way to test this is to look at posting patterns after the list migrated to Yahoo Groups. Yahoo allows users to automatically subscribe and browse the list on the world wide web without any need to email a moderator.

Table 7, below, shows postings to the Boro List over a 20 day period in May 2002. This was a fairly quiet month with no major arguments or crises for the club. The membership total was 317 when I sampled it.¹³⁵ As can be seen, only about 25% of the membership posted: a much lower percentage than during the subscription list period. For example in May 1997, the standard ratio of the top 10% of all posters contributing 40-50% of the messages appears still to be the case.

Clearly the shorter time period means that some of the very infrequent posters may not have posted. It is very noticeable that there is a massive quantitative difference between those posting 3 or less messages and those posting more than 3. A close

¹³⁵The maximum membership I noticed was 320 and the minimum 316.

inspection of the emails showed me that 52 in total, all bar 4 of them had posted their emails in the same subject thread, i.e. had only contributed to one topic. I suspect that the higher ratio of lurkers to posters in this sample may be caused by a mixture of influences. The time period was shorter than other samples and consequently some of the very low frequency posters would be missing but even factoring that into consideration some possible explanations would include:

- The Yahoo Groups interface may make it easier to lurk as it can be read on the web.
- The relative quietness of the period may have meant that very low frequency posters may have not been motivated to post.
- There may also have been an evolution of list norms that discourage very low frequency posters.

I was able to check the influence of the Yahoo Groups interface on 9th August 2002 when the list maintainer sent me a membership breakdown. On that date there were 314 members of whom, when I checked the members' subscription options, 102 (just under one-third) read the list either on the web or in a digest form as opposed to having individual emails posted to them.¹³⁶ I recognised two very frequent posters among them but the majority were addresses that were not familiar. When I cross-checked this list against those who had posted in May 1997, I found only 14 people in total who had

¹³⁶ A digest form is a way to read all the messages from the same day in a single email rather than having the individual messages appear immediately after posting.

posted, implying that nearly 90% of those who did not receive individual emails were acting as lurkers. This implies to me that some of those 102 members may have been more inclined to post if they received emails directly. Of the approximately 200 or so members who receive list emails directly the ratio of lurkers, to very infrequent posters to posters seems approximately the same as it was when the list was available via subscription early.

Posts	Posters	Total	Percentage
1	28	28	5.3%
2	11	22	9.4%
3	13	39	16.8%
4	2	8	18.3%
5	4	20	22.0%
6	3	18	25.4%
7	1	7	26.7%
8	2	16	29.8%
9	6	54	39.9%
10	3	30	45.6%
14	4	56	56.1%
16	1	16	59.1%
17	2	34	65.5%
18	1	18	68.9%
21	1	21	72.9%
22	2	44	81.2%
25	1	25	85.9%
37	1	37	92.8%
38	1	38	100.0%
Total	87	531	

Table 7: Postings summary May 2002 - 20 days

The inferences drawn from the statistics presented are suggestive rather than conclusive. Compared to studies of other online groups, the Boro List has a high participation rate—especially in its early years. It may prove useful to think in terms of category of poster. In her corpus of 32,000 Usenet postings spanning 10 months, Baym divides posters into three types: “very light” posters who posted just one message, “light posters” who posted 2-99 times and “heavy” posters who posted over 100 times (“Communication” 82). All of these are compared to lurkers, people who post no messages at all. The Boro List seems to break down into lurkers, “singletons” (people who have posted either just once or only in one topic during the whole of their membership), “very low frequency” posters (people posting on average less than once per month), “irregulars” (people who post more than once per month but no more than once per week), “regulars” (those who post on an almost-daily basis) and the “hardcore” (those who post on average at least daily and form about the top 10% of posters by frequency).

Singletons can be represented as lurkers who have posted at some point. Compared to previous studies the boundary between lurker and poster seems more porous in this list. The boundary, however, between very infrequent posters and irregulars does seem more solid. During my fieldwork I have never seen someone start off as a very infrequent poster and then gradually become more regular. On the other hand, more regular posters will vary in just how regularly they post depending on the topics under discussion. The boundary in this list does not seem to be between posters

and non-posters but between 'regular' posters and irregular posters. It is the regular posters who lead the discussions, form the rules and whose interactions seem to dominate the lived experience of what it means to be a member of the Boro List. In addition, over time, according to the statistic it has been the increase in frequency of posting by regular posters that has driven the expansion in the list.

This depiction appears, also, to fit the notion of what Chris Anderson has termed the "Long Tail". Anderson applies a rule of economics called "Pareto's principle" to a variety of web phenomena and notes that most appear to follow the 80/20 rule mentioned earlier. However, Anderson notes that the "20" represents a "long tail" that provides more value than the "head." Clay Shirky applies this to an analysis of "blog" popularity.

A persistent theme among people writing about the social aspects of weblogging is to note (and usually lament) the rise of an A-list, a small set of webloggers who account for a majority of the traffic in the weblog world. This complaint follows a common pattern we've seen with MUDs, BBSes, and online communities like Echo and the WELL. A new social system starts, and seems delightfully free of the elitism and cliquishness of the existing systems. Then, as the new system grows, problems of scale set in. Not everyone can participate in every conversation. Not everyone gets to be heard. Some core group seems more connected than the rest of us, and so on. ("Power Laws")

According to Shirky, when people have freedom to choose from a diverse set of options, there will always be a small number of successful products chosen and a "long tail" of the rest. When applied to an online group such as the Boro List, it seems that there is a "head" of star posters and a long tail of those who post just occasionally. In this respect, posting patterns seem likely to reflect and be reflected by the status of their posters.

This statistical analysis, basic though it is, revealed patterns that I had not expected and certainly challenged some of the assumptions that I had settled into during my fieldwork. Although the regular posters, whom I had come to recognise from being a list member did dominate the discussions there was a far greater degree of participation and far fewer lurkers than I noticed at the time. One of the few bonuses of the lengthy writing process for this document has been that I have been able to draw on a much greater time frame for the statistics. Initially I had been loathe to take the time necessary to do this analysis as it seemed unlikely to tell me anything I did not already know. Instead it opened my eyes to all those emails from irregular posters that I had tended to skim over as I concentrated on emails from those I had come to know as the main actors in my research.

For the rest of this chapter, having just presented a lengthy series of numbers, I will present something of a feel for how the email list was received by me. To do this I will first give a lengthy description of a single email to this list in order to help explain the various shared referents. Then I present something of a narrative that is told through a sampling of emails that will cover the period of April-May 1995 when the climax of the Boro's attempt to gain promotion to the Premiership unfolded. At this point the list had been in existence for not long over a year. The emails will be presented in a courier font and interspersed with explanatory text that will place the emails in context. Not every email received is placed here, just a sampling. All identifying material has been removed

but consistent pseudonyms for posters have been adopted so that it should become obvious which posts belong to which members.

Here We Go

It's Monday morning, April 3rd, 1995. I have just logged on at university for my first chance to read my email since the weekend. Middlesbrough played an important match on Saturday against one of our top promotion rivals—West Bromwich Albion. I know we won and I'm keen to read what the mailies have to say.¹³⁷ One of the first ones that I come across is from Bill¹³⁸, a member whom I already consider to be one of the most vocal participants. It reads:

From: "Bill Peterson" <BP564@uni.ac.uk>
 Subject: Magic!
 Date: Sun, 2 Apr 1995
 God that was bloody magic!
 As I said to stew just after Mooro scored the third goal....I just cannot understand how some people dont like football. 1st half was bloody awful. We could have been well out of it if not for KING VIV!..Honestly..a fucking blinding performance...Easily my man of the match. Uwe was class..he puts so much work into a game and just collapsed when the whistle went. Fjortoft looked sharp and holds the ball up well. A massive boro turnout ensured a class day out...even if stew was late meeting me at the station.

Very nearly managed to get a good kicking after the game. Following Stew's directions back to the station I ended up fuck knows where and was walking about 3 yards behind a couple of boro blokes who got jumped by some Baggies wankers. Fortunately I managed to change direction and head off to the station without getting a twatting.....perhaps I should have gone to their aid but I value my life and was not hanging around. Anyway....some humans showed me the correct way and my journey proceeded without hassle. Still happy as a happy thing in happytown. I love the Boro.

Get yer tix in for Notts Co on the 15th and we'll do it all again!

¹³⁷As my field notes had made clear and as I still remember well, when the Boro lost I dreaded reading the email to the extent that I would sometimes procrastinate until I could face the despair.

¹³⁸A pseudonym.

ps .That OG was a beauty. Saw the goals on central news and the boro turnout behind the goal was HUGE! Bout time I saw another boro away win. As i was saying to the lads I'm a bit of a jinx, with my 1st away win coming in my 15th away trip (Newcastle on Box day).

Bring that duffle coat this time stew.

Bill.EIO factor 10.

I have produced the whole email verbatim in a courier font between two lines.¹³⁹

After even a brief reading, it should be obvious that this is a complex email relying on a great deal of shared knowledge between author and readers. I wish to take some time to 'decode' this email as it is an excellent example of a posting that draws on many shared cultural referents and communicative conventions.

In this email, Bill is addressing Boro fans who have gone to the lengths of subscribing to a members only email list and consequently he assumes competence in how to read email as well as a shared cultural knowledge of football, football fandom and Middlesbrough Football Club. His use of language, nick-naming, football songs and superstitions are rooted throughly in what I came to understand as the Boro List vernacular. It is this vernacular that I will argue helps create a sense of identity among this group of people. For the reader of this document a guide to this email can help indicate the extent of some of the shared knowledge within this group.

- Mooro: Alan Moore—a player for the Boro.

¹³⁹Throughout this thesis, I have represented email postings in a courier font and preserved the original spelling, line-breaks and formatting (where possible) as a way of preserving the form of the email. In cases where I have used several whole emails in short succession, the message is set off between horizontal lines to help distinguish it from the running text. The font has been rendered at a smaller than usual font size in order to help preserve the original line breaks as otherwise lines would frequently be too long to fit onto the page.

- KING VIV: Viv Anderson, assistant manager and player (defender) for the Boro.
- Uwe: Uwe Fuchs, German striker signed on loan by Robson. The pronunciation of his last name allied to his level of aggression when playing made him a favourite of the fans.
- Fjortoft: Jan-Aage Fjortoft. A recent signing for the Boro. Also a striker.
- “jumped by some Baggies wankers.” The “Baggies” is a nickname for fans of West Bromwich Albion Football Club. Middlesbrough were playing away so Bill is on ‘enemy’ territory and narrowly escapes being ambushed and getting a “twatting.”
- “...some humans showed me the correct way.” A common insult among football fans is to refer to opposing fans as “sub-humans,” “neanderthals” or “knuckle draggers.” Bill does this through implication here.
- “Still happy as a happy thing in happytown.” Bill is using an absurdist language style that was popular in British comedy shows of the time such as “Blackadder.” In this case he is drawing on a wider, English, cultural vernacular.
- “Get yer tix in...” This became a popular phrase for a while that was derived from the phrase “get yer tits out for the lads.” “Tix” is a shortening of “tickets” so Bill is simply urging people to buy tickets for the next game. “Get yer tits out...” had become a “laddish” catch-phrase popularised by “Sid the Sexist” a Northern working-class character in a comic named “Viz.” The partial rhyme of tix/tits gave the phrase some currency for a couple of years around this time.

- “That OG was a beauty.” An OG is an ‘own goal’ i.e. one that someone scores against their own team by mistake.
- “...the boro turnout behind the goal was HUGE!” For fans their own performance is part of the story of the game. Bill is, to say the least, pleased that a lot of Boro fans travelled to the game.
- “I’m a bit of a jinx.” Football fans generate a rich body of superstitions and superstitious behaviour.¹⁴⁰ The notion of jinxes and jinxing is widespread. Bill indicates that he believes he brings bad luck when he goes to Boro’s away games.
- The duffel coat appears to be an in-joke directed specifically at his friend “Stew.” This indicates that Bill conceives of himself communicating with several people at once. “Duffel coats” is analogous here to “anoraks” in its use as a reference to a football “geek.”
- “EIO factor 10.” “EIO” (pronounced “ee-aye-oh”) refers to a popular chant among football fans that is sung to celebrate being ahead in the game and/or victory. “Factor 10” is derived from the show Star Trek (as in “warp factor 10”).

The email is longer than the average email to the list, although it is about the same length as normal for an email describing attendance at a match. To provide a more detailed impression of the vernacular, I will present a selection of emails from the period spanning April 1995 to May 1995. This was the crucial last few weeks of the season that would

¹⁴⁰I am deliberately using the term superstition here as most fans have a very playful attitude towards this behaviour. One recurring topic on the Boro List is for members to email examples of their superstitions to the list.

determine whether or not Middlesbrough were promoted. It not feasible to present every email sent so I have presented a sample dealing solely with the team's attempt to win promotion. Normally there are also several emails each day pertaining to a whole slew of topics more or less tangentially related to the football team. At this time, there were still some messages that were somewhat "off topic" but because of the tension surrounding this period the list was far more focussed than normal on the football being played.

The selection could perhaps be best seen as a type of dramatic reconstruction. Some of them are ones that struck me at the time as interesting, some are ones that I only really noticed when reading back over the posts and some are representative of many dealing with a similar subject at a particular time. This is the only place in this thesis where I can devote some space to let the members' emails be experienced in the context of other emails rather than being used as examples to illustrate points that I wish to make. Here, the emails are presented, as already stated, in a courier font and are set off with horizontal lines. My commentary, where relevant, is based on notes I took at the time mixed with occasional retrospective comments and is interspersed between emails in this document's normal font.

Going to the Wire

The situation was, to say the least, tense. On Wednesday April 5th the Boro were playing Oldham in an evening match. It was a match we needed to win and which we were expected to win comfortably as Oldham were struggling. As usual, things did not go to plan.

From: David Cousins <D.F.Cousins@uni.ac.uk>
Subject: Bastards!

Andy Ritchie, what a bastard, I hate him!!!

For those who dont know the result...

Oldham 1 BORO 0 - Andy Ritchie that bald headed twat got the
winner for Oldham with fifteen seconds left!

Shit, that let everyone back into it know, bollocks!

Especially as Bolton won 1-0 at Swindon.

I'm in a state of depression now...

Thursday, 6 Apr 1995 and the state of depression continued for the next couple of days
with various mailies commenting on how they felt.

From: "E. Hughes" <eh72@uni.ac.uk>
Subject: come on you boro beauties

This title race is just a nightmare. My door has a big hole in it now cos
i threw my keys very hard at it when the radio5 team announced the final
score.

Twats! (Sorry I didnt mean that cos they are ok). I'm waffling cos im
toonervous to face up to the fact that this will go down to the wire in a
tense type way.

Why does they game I love cause so much misery in my life?

AAAAAAAAAWWWWWWWWWAAAAAAAAAYYYYYYYYYYY !!!!!!!!!!!

On Saturday April 8th however the Boro were playing Stoke City, another mid-table team
that were were expected to beat. Winning this game could put us back on track and as
usual, given the time zone difference, I spent my lunchtime by my computer checking my
email to see what was happening. The list was maddeningly quiet due to some sort of
Internet congestion and it was not until later that afternoon that I got a sudden burst of
emails, including:

From: FEL8GHT3@vms1.uni.ac.uk
Subject: Yeeeeeeesssss!!!!

2-1 to the lads !!

Apparently it was a close games (Radio 5). Here's what I picked up from the report at full time.

Boro scored first off a Hignett free-kick, which was knocked down by Vickers and put in by Pearson.

Stoke equalised thanks to Paul Peskithinggummebob.

We got the winner late on, Moore ran from the half way line, did a one-two with Fjortoft and scored.

Oh yes, the Stoke goal was due to a Vickers mistake.

Anyway, Tranmere and Bolton won, boooo!
but, Wolves drew and Reading and Sheffield United lost, hooorayyy!

Monday, 10th April and during the day reaction to the weekend's match rolled in to my inbox.

From: "Jon D." <jd3mxk@fawltty.acs.uni.ac.uk>
Subject: A completely different week

Try to beat that for 3 and bit days of an emotional rollercoaster.

Cummon the 'Boro, the title is almost ours!!!!

Jon

From: "E. Hughes" <eh72@uni.ac.uk>
Subject: Mr Davidsons jitters

.... When that Stoke final report came through on 5live I just sank to my knees in relief. I hate radio football ..it's so tense

From: Tim Lloyd
Subject: Re: Mr Davidsons jitters

>5live I just sank to my knees in relief. I hate radio football >..it's so tense

Don't I know it !!! and I've had to listen to it for 18 bloody years, mind you the memories of the Everton Cup games still stick in my head!

I was praying like fuch on Sat (and I'm a bloody atheist) Christ knows what the people next door thought when I started jumping about shouting

"fucking yes" over and over at midnight (time difference). I know I scared the shit out of my cat !

It's Tuesday April 11th and one of Middlesbrough's main rivals, Bolton, were due to play Luton. If Bolton performed poorly we would be back in pole position to win the division. The only thing worse than waiting for your own team's result is being at the mercy of another team.

From: Ben Gent <ben@gent.demon.co.uk>
Subject: Gerr in Luton

Luton held Bolton to a 0-0 draw!!! Great news!
This means they're now 3 pts behind with a game in hand. Another thing is that they haven't scored ny more goals.

They play Tranmere on friday night, so i reckon the result we want most is a 0-0 draw. That would leve us 2 pts ahead of Bolton, 3 ahead of Tranmere, everyone having played the same ammount of games.

The game at Notts Co gets even more cruical a 4-0 victory would put us in a great position....follow that by a 4-0 victory against Sheff U and we'll have a foot in the premier league (until we get hamered by both teams - this is the Boro we're talking about!)
Current positions:-

	P	F	PTS
BORO	41	61	75

Bolton	40	62	72
Tranmere	40	63	71
Wolves	39	65	68

As can be seen in the previous email, the mailies were starting to produce more and more complicated "what if" posts that attempted to analyse the various permutations. The following email from the day after shows this tendency at its most complex.

From: "Mikey" <M56211s@basil.acs.bolton.ac.uk>
Subject: My view on last night's good result!

Endsleigh League Division One 1994-95
League Table as at 11 April 1995

HOME

AWAY

Club	P	W	D	L	F	A	W	D	L	F	A	Pts	GF
MIDDLESBROUGH	41	14	3	4	38	17	8	6	6	23	18	75	61

Bolton W	40	14	5	1	40	12	5	7	7	21	25	72	61
Tranmere R	40	16	2	1	48	19	5	6	10	15	25	71	63
Wolves	39	14	4	3	36	16	6	4	8	29	33	67	65

So it can be seen that last night's 0-0 draw with Luton did Bolton no much luck at all. Their next game is against Tranmere (away) on Good Friday and I can't see them, unless Tranmere play really shite, getting a victory there and only a point at most. This scenario, a point for both sides will benefit BORO loads since if we, as expected, beat bottom of the table Notts County the table will look like this:

BORO	Played 42	Games left 4	Points 78	Max on offer 90
Bolton	41	5	73	88
Tranmere	41	5	72	87

Basically, it's gonna be between us, Bolton and Tranmere. A draw in the Tranmere-Bolton game on Good Friday and a victory against County at Meadow Lane for us will turn up the heat on those two.

The title is there for us to take, and win in style if we do the right things right ... ie win all our remaining games.

Cummon BORO ... we can DO it!

Mikey

A similar email was also posted the next day after another of our promotion rivals,

"Wolves," played Derby County Football Club.

From: Brian
Subject: Wolves

Wolves drew 3-3 tonight at Derby....they were 3-1 down but got an injury time equaliser. Bloody typical, all the other teams seem to be getting last minute goals to save them points. Still it leaves them 6 points behind with only one game in hand, shame about them scoring 3 goals though.

BORO	41	61	75
Bolton	40	62	72
Tranmere	40	63	71
Wolves	40	68	69

Thats the situation, its getting better all the time

The situation was that we were top but had played a game more than our main rivals.

Consequently if the other teams won their games then we could still fail to win the

division. The key match was the upcoming one on Friday April 14th between the second and third placed teams: Tranmere Rovers and Bolton. One mailie posted the various possible implications depending on the result the afternoon before the match.

From: Kev
Subject: Tranmere v Bolton

These two teams play each other tonight so heres what I hope will happen in order of preference:

1. A 0-0 draw would leave give us a two point cushion over Bolton with the same amount of games played
 2. A Tranmere win would leave us one point clear of them and three points ahead of Bolton
 3. A postponement or abandonment would be nice especially if we win tomorrow which would leave us six points clear although they both would have two matches in hand But then we already have the points and the pressure is on them to get them
 4. Bolton win = nightmare They will go top on goals scored
-

I was beginning to realise that at this point I was becoming wrapped up in the tension myself. Although I had been following the email list as and when I logged on for other reasons now I had fallen into the habit of logging on to find out what had been posted and blocking off time to stay online and monitor it. I was following what was transpiring in a way that in retrospect was quite obsessive. That day I waited in my office until I read a result. Despite being hungry and tired, I didn't want to leave as I had no Internet access at home. Eventually the result came in.

From: Brian
Subject: We're still top

Final score:-
Tranmere 1 Bolton 0
Nevin

This means:-

	P	F	Pts
BORO	41	61	75

Tranmere	41	64	74
Bolton	41	62	72
Wolves	40	68	69
Reading	41	48	66

So now Wolves are a bigger threat than Bolton, having scored more goals. They've also got two *fairly* easy games coming up.

Playing at Tranmere in the last game is looing even more tricky

From: Bill

Subject: Tranmere win

Tranmere 1 Bolton 0 (Pat Nevin in the first half)

A close match, which basically leaves the situation very tight at the top. It's between us , Tranmere and Bolton I reckon. We mustn't shit ourselves.

Come on Boro, oh please, you've got to get a result at bottom of the table Notts County.

It was safe to go home. On the next day, Saturday April 15th, saw had yet another vital match. We were due to play Nottingham County, another struggling team with nothing to play for. Surely an easy win. I was back in front of my computer by lunchtime anxiously watching for emails. With not long left and no results being posted the following suddenly appeared.

From: Tim

Subject: FUCK

SHIT SHIT SHIT

1-0 down 15 minutes to go..... sod it... they've fucked up again. Devon White. Where oh where is Fuchs and Fjortoft !!!!!

By now I was wound up as tight as anyone watching the match and was emotionally myself preparing to deal with the team failing to get promoted. I was certainly not being very effective at persuading myself that it did not really matter in terms of my research whether we succeeded or not. After many years of only very distantly following my team

the constant exposure to the list seemed to have intensified my emotional connection to the team in a way I had not felt for a long time. I decided that I needed to go for a walk around the university campus and get something to eat for lunch so that I wouldn't have to sit in front of the computer getting depressed by myself. After all, as many long-suffering Boro fans will say, "Same old Boro, always let you down." When I returned about 30 minutes later there was more email. Luckily the subject lines seemed positive.

From: Tim
Subject: YES YES YES

You FUCHING BEAUTY !!!!!

Yes we pulled the goal back 5 mins to go... 1-1 (Fuchs)

From: Tim
Subject: Final Result..... (drum roll)

Notts 1 Boro 1
 Wolves Lost !!!!! (3-2)
 Sheffield U and Reading both drew !

Well they still screwed up as that now lets Tranmere in.... they could go one point up... Bolton would still be a point behind if all won the games in hand.
 Christ it looks like it could well be decided at Tranmere on the last day....

Monday's games are going to be so important.....

It's Sunday, 16th April 1995 and there are plenty of relieved postings but most of the mailies appear to be feeling as tense as I am.

From: Kev
Subject: Re: Sun

> In todays Sun, its got an interview with A Miller. It asks him his
 > predictions for all the top four teams for the remaining games of the
 > season and the Sun's 'state-of-the-art' (sic)¹⁴¹ computer does the same.

¹⁴¹"Sic" inserted by original poster.

> this is what it came up with
 >
 Don't you hate state of the art computer programs
 That same program that Ben was on about also says the mackems are staying
 up
 Some paper in scouse land probaly has a program which says Tranmere will
 go up
 Derby have probably got one which says they will win the league due to
 points being deducted from the top teams

I really, really couldn't say if we are going up now
 Last week I was sure the title was ours
 Now it looks like its between us Crapmere and Bolton
 If we win tommorrow and Bolton and Tranmere lose then it will be ours
 again

Monday 17th, April and the games are coming thick and fast. We are due to play Sheffield
 United. Anything less than a win would give the other teams a good chance to overtake
 us. It's Easter Monday and I get to spend another lunchtime wishing I didn't have to sit
 in front of my computer waiting for news. This time however I vow to sit through it and
 not wimp out as I did on Saturday. The first news is good.

From: Ronnie
Subject: YES YES YES

1-0 and its Fjortoft's first. FUCHIN' YEEESSSSSS. Thats eased my nerves so
 much :)

Good news is, however, quickly followed by bad.

From: Todd
Subject: Bugger!

Fuchs off. Does that mean he misses Luton and/or Tranmere?

Another late winner for Bolton. fucking Mackems.

All the results were going our way as well, before that, especially with
 the 5-0 pasting that Derby gave Tranmere. Had we won, we'd be four points
 up on Bolton, covering their game in hand. Now it's only two. Out of our
 hands, even if we win the last three (which we pretty much have to now)

Provisional table...

P1	Pts	GS
----	-----	----

I HATE WOLVES, TRANMERE, BOLTON, SUNDERLAND, GRAHAM TAYLOR AND DUNCAN WOOD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Aaaaahhh thats much better :-)

Later on that same day he spends some time generating a more informative post as yet more permutations are shared with the list members.

From: Ronnie

Subject: Re: The remain matchs

> Here they are:
 > April
 > Sat 22 Barnsley - Away
 > Sun 30 Luton - Home
 > May
 > Sun 7 Tranmere - Away
 >
 > Mon 29 Div 1 Play-off final Wembley
 >

Don't even think about the playoffs! We'll do it..... !NOT! :-(

Friday April 21st two of Middlesbrough's rivals, Tranmere and Bolton, were playing.

Victory for either of them would cause them to overtake the Boro. I decided to go out with friends in the early evening so that I could take my mind off the results.¹⁴² I fully expected to wake up on Saturday morning and read some very depressed emails. As with most of the list, I found myself dreading the results rather than eagerly looking forward to them. The next morning I tried to put off going to check my email until the Boro are due to play but I find I have to know and I'm in my office on a Saturday morning by 8am having slogged through Newfoundland's April snow. I find myself wondering if I ought to 'have a life.' This time, however, all the news was good.

From: Munro

¹⁴²I did wonder about the impact of doing this in terms of methods but figured that in any ethnography you have to have time off and I was beginning to get seriously stressed.

Subject: Ya Beauty!!

Yes!! Tonights Results:

Tranmere 0 - 2 Southend
Reading 2 - 1 Bolton

Table to follow.....

From: Kev

Subject: YYYYYEEEESSSS!!!

Two results from tonight

Tranmere 0 - 2 Southend
Reading 2 - 1 Bolton

Brilliant results

Reading's winner came 3 minutes before time which makes a change for Bolton to be on the end of a late goal

League table:

	Pld	GS	Pts	Maximum Pts
Boro	43	63	77	86
Bolton	43	64	75	84
Tranmere	43	64	74	83
Reading	44	54	73	79
Wolves	42	72	72	84
Barnsley	42	58	67	79

Two very good results indeed

A win at Barnsley tomorrow would obviously be class

A draw would mean we are definitely in the play-offs

Boro fans all over the world rejoice

From: Ronnie

Subject: Tonights Results (Beauty!!!)

TRANMERE LOSE 0-2 YEEEESSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!!

Bolton and Reading are still playing and its 1-1 which would be OK if it finished at that (Beware the curse of the 91st min goal)

So if it stays like this the top of the table is....

	P	W	D	L	GF	Pts
Boro	43	22	11	10	63	77
Bolton	43	21	13	9	64	76
Tran	43	22	8	13	64	74

Looks like Tranmere are out of it but Bolton are still breathing down our necks. Hang on..... !!!!*%\$!"\$%

OOOOOOOOOHHHHH YEEEESSSSSS!!!!!! READING HAVE JUST SCORED!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

OK Revised table.....

Boro	43	22	11	10	63	77
Bolton	43	21	12	10	64	75
Tranm'r	43	22	8	13	64	74

Phwoarr Exciting or what!?!?!?!?! I've just nearly had a heart attack :-)

Well I'm gonna send this off now, I just hope Bolton don't get another one.

From: Brian

Subject: Re: Tonights Results (Beauty!!!)

On Fri, 21 Apr 1995, Ronnie wrote:

> Looks like Tranmere are out of it but Bolton are still breathing

Dont EVER say this sort of thing. If they are within 3 pts of us on the last game, they've still got a chance. Just for people who have followed the Boro for a few years dont say it anyway...i know whats likely to happen.

I think its gonna be tough tomorrow whatever
!!!!!!!

but, common the lads,

There I was, Saturday April 22nd, killing a little time while waiting for the match to start.

We were due to play Barnsley. A victory would keep us top and ensure that at least we would qualify for the play-offs for the second promotion place. The match was broadcast on British radio but I had no way of listening to it while in Canada, so, once again, I spent the best part of two hours sitting in front of the computer waiting for updates. Time crawled until.

From: Rob

Subject: Fjortoft!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Nowthen.....YESYESYESYESYESYESYES
Fjortoft has just scored!

The updates then dried up, I know several people are trying to meet on IRC and the rest are listening to the radio and I feel oddly cut off. Eventually some updates come through but they are out of order due to one of those obscure network blockages. The first email makes it clear that something bad has happened but doesn't, to my frustration, tell me the result..

From: Tim
Subject: Damn

Well for once we got the commentary on the radio !!

Sounds like it was awful conditions, bit of a bugger although it does put us three points clear, which is slightly better than being only two :-)

I didn't get to hear how they scored their goal, although it sounds like they might have had a dodgy penalty.

Wolves were drawing 2-2 when I last heard :)

It transpired that we had drawn, meaning that we dropped yet more points and it seemed as though the good news from Friday night has been frittered away. It turned out, however, the our rivals have not done that well either.

From: Todd
Subject: Another draw...

Six points dropped in the past three games... is it good enough? I dunno.

At least Wolves only drew, since Sheff Utd got a last-minute equaliser. Three points clear now, with only Bolton really to challenge us. I think. Luton is going to be crucial, but I expect it to go to Tranmere...

For most of the next week, email problems affected the list leading to non-delivery for most people, myself included for a period of 2 days. Apparently it didn't help that many people were posting queries to the list which weren't getting delivered and simply adding

to the backlog.¹⁴³ Eventually Tim managed to clear the backlog and by the time the weekend arrived things were working again.

From: Bill

Subject: Re: Hello?

On Thu, 27 Apr 1995, Henry wrote:

> At 15:40 4/27/1995 +0100, Bill wrote:

> >

> >Anybody out there?

> >

> Yes, Bill, there are lots of us out here. I'm replying to you from Fort
> Saskatchewan, Alberta, Canada. Where is your home town?

>

Thank god it's working again, we can't afford any more mishaps at this stage of the season.

From: Kev

Subject: i'm trying to do some work here

Do you realise how impossible it is to do a computer assignment when everybody e-mails the boro list

I do a little bit of work

A new message appears

I reply to it

do a little bit of work

a new messages appears

.....

...

etc

STOP IT

LEAVE ME IN PEACE

Everyone assumes that he is only joking as we're happy to have the list back. As

Saturday, 29th April starts yet more summaries and permutations are posted.

From: Brian

Subject: Re: Hello?

Henry,

We play Tranmere next Sunday, the last game of the season! Its really a make or break game. I dont know if you've seen a table, but it looks something like this. Each team plays 46 games

¹⁴³Personal communication from Tim Lloyd.

	P	F	Points
BORO	44	63	78
Bolton	43	63	75
Tranmere	43	63	74
Wolves	43	78	73
Reading	44	54	72

Only the top team gets promoted so teh Tranmere game is vital. Everyone wants to be there as if we win its likely that we'll go up as champions!

We weren't playing but our rivals were so I was keen to read the results.

From: Brian
Subject: Latest

Oldahm 2 - Bolton 1 !!!!

Grimsby 0 - Wolves 0

From: Tim
Subject: YES !!!!!!! :-)

Bolton are losing 3-1 to Oldham with ten minutes to go
And Wolves are being held 0-0 :) :)

Tim

As it transpired, the poor performances by our rivals gave Middlesbrough a great chance to open up a lead at the top of the table if we won and Tranmere lost their match. We were due to play against Luton on Monday at our home ground— Ayresome Park. This would also be the last ever match to be played at the old stadium. The interest was such that one of the mailies posted frequent updates while listening to a radio commentary in the UK. This was an activity that was normally frowned on as generally updates were only posted when something major happened, such as a goal being scored. In this case the mailie did his best to post a running commentary.

From: Ronnie
Subject: report 1
Date: Mon, 24 Apr 1995

Great start from boro, first Fjortoft picks it up on half way and volleys it over to the left wing for Alan Moore, but he slipped :(Then Hendrie was brought down in the box, but nothing was given.

Dwight Marshall just got through on goal, but Derek Whyte got back.

Luton keeper clears off the line from Hendrie

Free kick from Clayton Blackmore... but its saved.

From: Ronnie
Subject: OOOOOOOO!!!!!!

PENALTY TO BORO!!!!!!!!!!

NEIL COX!!!! saved :(KAK

rebound cleared.

DEREK WHYTE THROUGH, but Robson puts it over the bar.

so its still 0-0 but I don't know how.

David Preece just had a near miss for Luton.

Fjortoft has a shot on the turn but the 18 yr old Luton keeper saves it easily.

From: Ronnie
Subject: report 2

HENDRIEEEEEEEEEEEEEE 1-0 BORO!!!!!! Lovely looping deflected shot after two scrappy clearances by Luton

YEEEEAAAAAASSSSSSSSSSSS!!!!!!

Fjortoft over the top from 5 yards!!!

we are cooking now :))))))

From: Ronnie
Subject: DAMN

Luton equalize 1-1 now, west brom are now 2-0 up though

From: Ronnie
Hendrie scores 2-1 boror

West brom now 4-1 up :))))))

From: Tim
Subject: FUCKING YES

We've done it !!!! 2-1 to the lads

Thanks Ronnie for being in IRC and the updates !!

Tranny got hammered 5-1 !!!!!!!

We have won. I surprised myself by shouting "Yes!" out loud to my computer when I read Tim's last email. It's almost the perfect story—the last ever match to be played at a stadium which had been home to the team for over 70 years has taken us to the brink of the Premiership. However the list still has problems and not everyone is aware of what is happening as the following email from Canada shows:

Subject: RE: Is it possible.....

Is this mailbox still working?

I havn't had any messages for days! What's happening?
I want to sing and shout about our victory.

Sob, sob,

Luc

P.S. Going up, going up, going up!!!

This was a bad time for the list to encounter more problems as it seems as though all the mailies want to contribute something. One of the most dramatic matches in Middlesbrough's history, the last ever match to be played at Ayresome park had just ended with a 2-1 victory to the Boro and promotion was possibly just one match away. It was still possible that we could lose and fail to be promoted but for now the list was a mixture of tension, excitement and sorrow at leaving behind Ayresome Park. Football fans are as prone as anyone to sentimentality—perhaps even more so than most.

From: Bill

Subject: Re: Back to earth...

> Big thanks to Karl and Andrew for chauffering myself and Brian to

> Middlesbrough for the weekend. Lads, I owe you several,
>

Same from me as well, cheers lads.

It was one of the best matches I've ever been to. Got in the ground before 2pm to see the parade of former players which was very emotional, Tony Mowbray was crying as he walked by the Holgate. The match itself had everything (including Luton equaliser!) but by the end we really should have tied it up convincingly, Hendrie clean through 3 times, Fjortoft headed wide of an open goal and Pollock and Robbo (and Cox of course) missed glorious chances. At least we won, the end was brilliant as well, with the lap of honour to say bye to Ayresome. I reckon Uwe will be leaving after he gave what looked like a goodbye throwing his shirt into the Holgate and waving solemnly as he jogged off. After most people had gone I asked a steward if I could touch the Ayresome turf for the first and last time and I went into the Holgate goal to kiss the pitch. Marvellous.

I'll miss you Ayresome.
Bring on the Riverside.

Next match Bolton v Stoke

The season was almost over and on Wednesday, 3rd May and Bolton are due to play Stoke in their penultimate game of the season. Bolton are the only team still capable of overtaking the Boro and winning the league. If Bolton won we would have to wait one more game and hope that we could beat Tranmere in the last game of the season. If Bolton lost, the Boro would win the league there and then. The list was quiet and I tried to keep myself occupied by doing some writing on the computer and only checking my email every 60 seconds or so until:

From: "The Dancin Diva - Sean B. Matthews"
Subject: 1 - 0 to Stoke!!!!!!!

Stoke have scored from a penalty!!!!!!

We are about to win the fucking league!!!!!!

This poster has typed too soon however and his next email is more worrying.

From: "The Dancin Diva - Sean B. Matthews"
Subject: Update

Tranny 1-0 up against Wolves.....

Sorry about the ealier language!

Oh no!!!!

Stoke 1 Bolton 1..... Mcginley... Oh shit! and they're down to 10 men.

At this point Stoke City had their goal-keeper sent off and were forced to play the rest of the game with one man less than Bolton. It seemed inconceivable that Bolton could fail to win. The inconceivable, however, happened. Bolton could only draw and we were promoted to the Premiership. The email list celebrated.

From: Kris

Subject: YESSSFUCKINGYESSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

CHAMPIONS FUCKING YES etc like a hundred others have probably posted tonight.

I am now pissed after going straight down the Park after the final whistle.

Afterwards we went for a nostalgic walk round ayresome - lots of pissed people around warwick street. I kissed the gates, i walked down the back alleybehind the north stand and was basically stupidly sentimetal. Now for Tranmere - that is going to be one fucking party - Boro will get the trophypresented there won;'t they ?

Thatll mean that that scouse bastard aldritch will have to clap boro when weget the trophy. YESFUCKINGYESSSSSSSSSS :))))

From: Ronnie

Subject: Over the moon

An hour after full time and I'm still chuffed as bastards!!!
I've just cracked open a 36 pack with my dad and I think I'll
be up quite a long time tonight :-)

BTW Can anyone PLEASE send me all of todays and yesterdays mail as I lost it all. Thanks to anyone who does this.

Ron

From: ***@*** (Trevor)

Subject: UUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!!!!!!!

I presume the HK net is now melting down.

From: Todd

Subject: YEEEESSSS!!!!

We're up! The horns are tooting on Acklam Road, and everyone's driving to Ayresome. It's meant to be packed out for a reserve game... I'm off to celebrate... yesss!

Todd

It's Thursday, 4th May 1995, the day after and the fans can start to look forward as well as reflect on the past few days. Some of the emails are deliberately hyperbolic. One poster sending an email titled "Pessimist" dreams of a perfect season next year.

From: Neil

Subject: Pessimist

I make a rule of never singing songs like Going Up and all that until it is definite
So

Up the boro
The boro's going up
The boro's going up
to stay

How about first game of the season at home to the Geordies
A sell out crowd at the Riverside (still prefer Erimus) sees Boro win four nil and go straight to the top of the Prem where they stay for the rest of the season

About this time last year just after Lennie had left my dad told me that someone he knew at Boro had said Robbo was coming to Ayresome
My reply: "We don't want that dirty, fouling, whinging twat" Oh well
Sorry Robbo you are a born winner
Might see some of you at Tranny

Neil's email was typical of the many that I received. Tim, meanwhile, used his ability as list owner to indulge in a little Schadenfreude.

From: Tim

Subject: HMMMMM

Most interesting... I've just had a spate of people unsubscribing from the list..... I wonder why (Bolton/Tranmere fans perhaps) :-)

Tim

On Sunday May 7th, the Boro played their final game of the season, away to Tranmere.

The result was now irrelevant so it was a chance for the fans to relax and enjoy the day.

Unless of course we lost.

From: Ronnie
Subject: BJOLOX

Tranmere have scored.... 1-0

Fortunately we soon equalised.

From: Ronnie
Subject: Yeees

Tranmere defender heads past his keeper and Fjortoft scores from 1 yard
(1-1)

The score stayed the same. No more goals were scored and full time was reached. The
season was over.

From: Ronnie
Subject: Full Time

1-1

Thats it then.... No more footy for 3 months :-(

Ron

Summary

The preceding emails give an insight into the experience of what it means to be a member of the Boro List. As stated, in some respects the period was atypical as there was a much greater focus on the football than is normal due to tension surrounding the season's denouement. That said, everything about my fieldwork period was unusual due to the circumstances surrounding the club. Additionally, for the email list everything was, essentially, being experienced for the first time.

Later I will broaden the scope of this investigation to examine the means by which the mailies create a sense of identity and express it online through negotiation over certain boundary conditions to do with the email list: appropriate content and regional identity. Although, as can be seen the everyday life of the list is dominated by the offline activities of Middlesbrough AFC and the football season calendar, it is my contention, that the Boro List vernacular which has developed has done so through language use and the emergence of norms that centre on “ways of speaking”. The resulting grammar of virtuality that is specific to the list shows interesting contrasts to many of the putative “global” CMC norms claimed to exist online. As the statistics I reported earlier in this chapter indicate, the Boro List shows structural features that appear at variance to the commonly accepted norms. I believe that the mailies’ emergent conception of the type of conversational setting that the Boro List is can help explain some of the factors that may be at work here.

In the next chapter, however, I will briefly pause to reflect upon some of the incidents that occurred during my fieldwork and examine some of the decisions I made. Some in retrospect appear to have worked well, others less so.

Chapter 5: Half-Time

*"It's a game of two halves"*¹⁴⁴

Virtual Travails

Although Goffman has proposed that a good ethnographer must be willing to look like a 'horse's ass'¹⁴⁵ this is easier said than done.... Being candid becomes a situated choice that is forever linked with how the candor is likely to affect one's reputation as a scholar. (Fine, "Ten Lies of Ethnography" 282-83)

Gary Alan Fine describes the handling of ethnographic candour—full disclosure—as one of the ten 'moral dilemmas' that an ethnographer faces. At one extreme we are presented (or are not presented, to be precise) with the invisible ethnographer who sees everything but never appears in their own ethnography while at the other extreme is the usually post-modern ethnographer "over glorifying the self in a report that none but one's relatives might choose to read" (282). As Fine implies, candour is a risky business because there is no such thing as the perfect ethnography and the more you disclose, the more you create hostages to fortune. In a PhD thesis, which is, after all, a test of the author's abilities, the risk is intensified if one includes the ethnographic "out-takes." Yet, as I quoted Jan

¹⁴⁴Football commentating cliché.

¹⁴⁵Goffman, "On Field Work" (128).

Fernback earlier, reflexivity and candour are essential to any ethnography and possibly more so for a virtual ethnography with its potential for deceit, both of and by the ethnographer. All fieldwork is littered with mistakes, misjudgements, misfortune, missed opportunities and unsolved mysteries and mine was no different.

Here I wish to spend a little detailing some of the problems I faced and ways in which I dealt, successfully or not, with them. The chapter's title is a reference to interval in a football match between the two halves of the match. The fifteen minute break is called "half-time" and it is a long standing tradition to have some sort of entertainment on the pitch during it while the fans queue for the toilets, a pie, a smoke or all three. The format of the two fieldwork chapters means this smaller chapter fits quite neatly in between the two halves and can be quite readily ignored by those more interested in the football. The chapter is not, however, insignificant nor is it merely place-filler. I believe that a reflexive commentary of some of my encounters with the 'field' will provide concrete examples that will help inform my later comments about the methodological issues arising.

As I recounted earlier, I started the ethnography proper in April 1995, having been a member of the list for several weeks previously. My initial idea was that I would remain as an ethnographer until such time as I completed the written thesis. I intended to learn HTML so that I could put sections of the thesis on a web-page with a password so that the mailing list members could read it and offer their insights. As the differentiation between fieldwork and 'writing up' the ethnography seemed largely to be an artifact of

physical travel to a site, this appeared to be an interesting experiment in blurring boundaries. For a variety of reasons, however, this intention proved to be infeasible to implement.

At the most basic level, I found the fieldwork element to be far more demanding than I expected when it was combined with my normal academic requirements. I was a member of several email lists that dealt with a wide range of Internet cultural issues alongside my research with the football fans and the role-players. During October 1996, I was away for ten days at an academic conference and returned to find that I had received over 1500 new emails in my absence.¹⁴⁶ I made a note in my journal in November 1996 that read, in part, “perhaps going to the field and leaving everything behind is more useful than I thought.”¹⁴⁷

Changes in computing technology over the period of the fieldwork also had a significant impact on my research and caused some unexpected difficulties. I originally subscribed to the list using an email program named Pine which ran from the university’s Unix server. I did not own a computer of my own and accessed the university network from a computer lab. In January 1997 I invested in my own computer thanks to a fellowship¹⁴⁸ that I had been awarded and converted my email over to Netscape Messenger. Although the program proved not to be as reliable as Pine, it did allow a

¹⁴⁶1533 to be precise. I made a note of it because I was appalled. It took me a week to catch up.

¹⁴⁷ November 6, 1996.

¹⁴⁸The Guigné International Folklore and Technology award.

more sophisticated analysis of email and enabled me to store my email on my own hard drive. At this time I was perpetually exceeding my university network quota and the network administrators were probably rather tired of my seemingly endless requests for more disk storage. Finally, having all my email on my hard drive allowed me to copy and paste it between programs far more easily. So I migrated all of my email from Pine to Netscape.

Everything seemed to go smoothly but what I did not know was that something to do with the way Netscape formatted my address started to cause my emails to certain email list software to “bounce” (not get distributed).¹⁴⁹ I did not realise this because I had set up my membership so that I wouldn’t get an acknowledgment from the list software when I sent an email and, as I kept copies of my own messages, I had also requested that any messages I sent should not be delivered to me so that I wouldn’t end up with two copies of everything I sent. At the time I was so busy with work that my interactions with the email list were limited to periodic reminders and updates. There seemed little reason to expect responses due to the owner’s request that any correspondence about my project be kept off the list so I was not surprised when I didn’t receive any. It was not until several months later that I discovered that my emails had not been distributed and, as far as anyone, knew, I had finished my project and left.

During the period from January to August 1997 I had intended to write the main body of the thesis but personal issues intervened. From May to early July I had to be

¹⁴⁹To this day I still do not know what happened.

away from my computer for a long time and reset my email program to store incoming email on my university account and sent an email to the list letting them know that I would be still be collecting email for archiving but would not be online much. Of course, I did not know that the mail never got sent anyway because of the bouncing issue. In August, with my funding about to run out and not being able to stay in Canada, I was offered a research position at Cardiff University in the UK. By now I was stuck with the conundrum about what to do with my fieldwork as well as all the usual problems that would be created by writing a thesis while working full time in a different country. In addition I had to migrate my email again because Cardiff University used Pegasus and forbade the use of Netscape as an email program on the university network for security issues. So all my email was bundled up, saved onto a collection of disks and then copied as text files on to the new computer system as the version of Pegasus was not able to import the netscape folders system I had created.

Once I had my new system set up in Cardiff I re-subscribed to the mailing list and sent around a slightly modified version of the usual reminder. I was, to say the least, surprised to get a lot of responses from people who claimed they had never heard of me. Although one poster was suspicious, the responses were otherwise friendly but I was puzzled. Eventually I learned from the list moderator that the software had been rejecting my posts but now that I was on a new system it seemed to be ok. This created a whole host of dilemmas for me. As far as I could tell the mailing list had assumed that I was no longer present from sometime in January 1997. Consequently I had saved over 10,000

emails that could be seen as collected under dubious circumstances. The ethics of when email can be used in social research are contentious at best and I had made what I thought to be a sustained effort to ensure that members were always aware of me and capable of opting out of the research at any time. Given the turn-over in membership it was clear that I would have many emails in my collection that had been sent by people not aware of me and whom could no longer be contacted. Those people still actively participating on the list were, on the whole, happy for me to use the material but I was unsure and more inclined to omit material when the ethics surrounding its collection were troubling.

In addition to this discovery it quickly became obvious that it would be impossible for me to actively participate as an ethnographer in the group, work full time and write a thesis so I decided to abandon my principle of writing while conducting fieldwork. I retired from actively participating in the list but promised to keep the members up to date when I came to write about them. I remained a member of the list for my own interest and continued to archive the email for personal information and on a "just in case" basis.

There was a coda to this. In January 1998 I bought a new laptop computer and took the chance to install Netscape so that I could read my saved email in a format that would be easier to analyse statistically. Once again I migrated all my stored email into the one format. A few weeks later my computer crashed and a section of my hard disk got corrupted. Most of my files were backed-up but the Netscape email folders from January

to August 1997 were irretrievably gone and, as tends to be the case I had somehow managed to overwrite the back-up files from January to April inclusive. Although I had back-ups of May through July I had by that point decided that I should not treat anything from January 1997 onwards as fieldwork material. The lost emails became more ironic than anything else.

I have spent some time recounting these experiences to indicate that a virtual ethnography is not something that can be easily done interstitially from a swivel chair. I regard myself as highly computer literate and have an undergraduate degree that required extensive computer programming. Regardless, I still managed to enter into the 'field' with a certain naivete about the difficulties involved and managed to make mistakes and assumptions that embarrass me to this day. In many ways I made the opposite mistakes to that which has been detailed by the likes of Annette Markham (*Life Online*). Where she dwells at length on her lack of confidence at starting her virtual ethnography, I was over-confident and caused myself problems accordingly. Entering into any type of virtual ethnography will require the researcher to become proficient with the 'tools of the field' even when he or she assumes that already to be the case. This does not necessarily mean that the researcher needs programming skills but the researcher does need to become competent at using email programs, file archiving, search engines such as "Google" and so on. These skills are as essential to the virtual ethnographer as the tape recorder and camera often is to the physical ethnographer. There is a definite need across the range of

disciplines in which ethnography and other qualitative social research methods are used for adequate provision of training in the technical skills.

The Visible Virtual Ethnographer

My inadvertent disappearance notwithstanding, I had entered into the project knowing that it would be difficult to remain ‘visible’ but unobtrusive to the group. Before I started the research I had already sent emails to the group and, using the categories outlined in the previous chapter, would have been known as an irregular poster. This required me to change my status in some manner which would be consistent with the owner’s injunction to minimise the impact of my research on the mailing list. One technique I adopted, as outlined above, was to post a message on a monthly basis reminding participants about the study. To complement this I modified my “signature” file and posting name to foreground my status as an ethnographer. The email program I was using at the time, Pine, allowed me to change the “name” field of my emails so that any emails from me would be addressed from “The Virtual Ethnographer.”¹⁵⁰ The name was chosen because it was descriptive of what I was doing but also unusual enough that it, should, stand out. In addition to this I added that name to my signature file so that any email from me would have it attached. I also added in my ‘real world’ contact information, including my home phone as can be seen in the following examples.¹⁵¹

¹⁵⁰The university email program later removed that ability due to the ease of abusing it.

¹⁵¹Adding my home phone number is not something I would do now due to the increased incidence of programs that can trawl email groups extracting information for marketing purposes.

Example: excerpt of email from me to borolist showing “from” line.

Date: Wed, 31 May 1995 10:10:30 -0230
 From: The Virtual Ethnographer <bmason@morgan.ucs.mun.ca>
 Subject: You are being watched

Example: showing my signature file from 1995.

```

-----00000000-----
Bruce Mason - The Virtual Ethnographer
Folklore Dept., M.U.N., St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada.
Day ph. (709) 737 8477/2166
home ph. (709) 576 3110
bmason@plato.ucs.mun.ca      or      bmason@ganymede.cs.mun.ca
-----00000000-----

```

It is hard to know how effective this procedure was but it was notable that I encountered no suspicion about me that was communicated to me either directly or indirectly. This could have been due to the members being less aware of the potential abuses of email in 1995 or it may be that my openness scotched any such issues before they arose. Alternately, it may be that my interaction was minimal enough that most of the members ‘forgot’ about me while I wasn’t posting. This was a possibility that did not occur to me at the time but did exercise me when I started to write the thesis. Although while conducting the research I certainly felt like a part of the group it is the case, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, that I found myself posting less and less frequently for a variety of reasons. Two incidents reassured me that I was seen as a member of the list, by regulars at least: one of which occurred during the research and one long afterwards.

The first incident occurred when I discovered that I had accidentally disappeared for several months. After I had sent what I thought was a routine reminder only to

discover that my emails had not been circulating, I received several emails from regulars asking about the progress of the work as shown in the following example.

Monday October 27, 1997 7:52 AM
Subject: Re: Voyeurism and the Boro
Hiya Bruce,

I'd like to know more - how is the study coming along? Any preliminary findings?

Are we all a bunch of saddos? :)

--

Neil Smith
<http://www.nsmith.demon.co.uk/mfc.htm>
Boro forever!!!!!!!

This email and similar ones helped to indicate to me that my status was widely known among the regulars. Secondly, an unexpected coda occurred in the summer of 2002 long after I had finished the research. I had made a post on the email list updating the list members on my progress (or lack thereof). At that time, a popular live thread was "List Oldies" which was a discussion about who had been on the list for a long time. Not long after my post, I learned that not only was I an "Oldie" but that anyone who remembered me counted as one too.

From: Jim Fincham
Date: Thu, 22 Aug 2002
Subject: Re: [boro] List Oldies

>Hi oldies everywhere!
>What makes an oldie then?

Anyone who thought "Blimey, I remember him" when Bruce the virtual ethnographer posted here a couple of days ago?

Jim.

Somewhat to my surprise, several years after my research had ended, there were still list members who remembered me and my "tag line".

Summary

This chapter has presented some glimpses into the practicalities involved in conducting online fieldwork and some of the pitfalls. There is a commitment of time, energy and emotion required for online ethnographic work that is, if different, as demanding as that required for 'traditional' ethnographic work. In addition, there are requirements for technological competence and skills that have not been widely recognised. This can be both daunting for an uncertain fieldworker or dangerous for an overconfident fieldworker. Having taken time to outline some personal anecdotes here, the next chapter will focus on issues surrounding the performance, creation and maintenance of group identity.

Chapter 6: Fans

*Erimus!*¹⁵²

Introduction

In chapter four, I laid out the history, structure and some of the posting features that I had observed about the email list. In this chapter I will focus on what I believe to be key communicative behaviour on the list as it pertains to a sense of both personal and group identity. To do this I will examine two main subjects. Firstly I will undertake an investigation of the role of “topic” in the email list. The notion of topic is widespread throughout CMC groups and seems to have become almost ‘naturalised’ as a convention; I have yet to encounter any kind of online discussion forum in which topic is not used. Topic is generally regarded as synonymous with subject matter, “message content” as Hymes terms it (“Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life”), but as I will show in this chapter, it has become far more subtle and far more important than a simple set of rules of *what* the fans can talk about. Secondly I will discuss some of the debates centred on regional and fan-based identities. It is easy to assume that one’s identity as a fan is a ‘given’ but a series of unusual circumstances and regional histories has made

¹⁵²Latin motto of Middlesbrough town which has been adopted by the football fans group “The Peoples’ Republic Of Teesside.” It translates as “we shall overcome.”

issues about identity for members of Middlesbrough Football Club fandom rather complex. This chapter, therefore, covers *what* the fans talk about and *who* they think they are.

Topical Talk

First and foremost the Boro email list is a forum for discussion about Middlesbrough Football Club. As the excerpts from chapter four showed, the list is full of conversation about matches, the players, speculation about new signings, gossip about the club, despair at bad results and joy at good ones. Following standard Internet terminology, the “topic” of the list is Middlesbrough Football Club and the vast majority of messages sent to the list stay “on topic.” As well as this general use, topic is also used to refer to the content of a specific email to the list; therefore any given post could be judged to be either “on topic” or “off topic”. As a long time participant in several different email lists, including the Boro List, I was so familiar with the idea of topic that it took me a long time to realise that the handling of topic on the Boro List was an emergent mixture of the local participants and what could be seen as global Internet conventions, usually referred to as “netiquette”.

Topic creation and enforcement was a key subject of investigation into the nature of CMC among early researchers where topic enforcement was seen as a technique for facilitating conversation at a time when the technology was unreliable (e.g. Kiesler et al.). Mechanically, the invention of the “subject heading” and the ability to automatically add the prefix “Re:” to indicate that an email is a “REply” to a certain subject allows

users to quickly identify emails that belong to message and reply dyads.¹⁵³ Given that, especially in the early days of the Internet, it was not uncommon for messages to arrive out of sync then the proper use of topics can help the reader reconstruct who said what to whom and when.¹⁵⁴ In order for this to work, however, the content of any single email needs to stay relevant to the subject under discussion otherwise “topic drift” can occur and subject lines may no longer be an adequate guide to what is being discussed.

On a more general level, if the majority of the discussion within a list is about “off-topic” subjects then it is possible that a whole list could drift off topic, possibly leading to its demise.¹⁵⁵ Topic drift has become a widely discussed phenomenon even to the extent of being utilised by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as a metaphor to describe the current state of Folklore Studies (“Topic Drift”). It should be realised, however, that topic enforcement is not a given in all online groups. For example, as Shelley Correll

¹⁵³“Re” has been used in multiple ways for non-virtual correspondence, e.g. as in “regarding” or in “reference to” and it is possible to interpret subject headers that initiate email conversations in that way, however I did not find any examples of such usage in the corpus. All the major contemporary email programs that I know (Gmail, Outlook, Mozilla Thunderbird, Eudora and Groupwise) routinely attach a “re:” prefix to any subjects that are “replied” to.

¹⁵⁴There is an interesting analogy between email lists and the technique of “packet switching” which is used to pass data around the Internet (see discussion in chapter 1). When information is passed around via the Internet it is broken into small packets, each with an identifying header, and is not reassembled until each packet arrives at the destination computer. The use of subject headers and the prefix “re:” works in a similar way to allow the reader to reassemble the “topic” when it is read. Given that email discussion list technology was created by network programmers used to working in a packet-switching environment it seems likely that they, implicitly, drew upon the model of packet-switching when it came to trying to derive conventions for successful CMC.

¹⁵⁵Something to realise is that in my experience the majority of email discussion lists tend not to last for too long. I am not aware of any concrete statistics but perusing the newsgroup archive on Google reveals the presence of many defunct groups and my personal email folders show that I receive no email on the majority of email lists to which I am subscribed.

showed in her study of an online bulletin board created for lesbians, the sexual orientation of the women was its defining factor but the conversations were not limited to discussions pertaining to their lifestyle. Consequently, the handling of topic should be seen as emergent within a given online group and the factors involved are likely to be a mixture of the idiosyncratic as well as the broader conventions found throughout other cybercultures.

The definition of topic on the Boro List has been a contested area and it has been my experience that the differentiation of “on topic” from “off topic” has been somewhat amorphous. The leading figure in the definition of what is, and is not, on-topic, was the list administrator, Tim Lloyd. As list administrator Tim had the ability to unsubscribe anyone who broke the list norms and took to referring to his actions, tongue-in-cheek, as the actions of the “hand of god.” In addition to being able to ‘punish’ inappropriate communicative behaviour, Tim was able to use the list software to set the rules governing topic. In the subscription information that was received by anyone who joined the Boro List, Tim emphasised three points about the list’s topic. All emails should have their topic clearly identified, should be about football and all replies should stay on topic as this excerpt (retrieved December 20th, 1996) shows.

Subject Headings

Try to make sure you select a clear heading for what you are discussing, it makes life a lot easier for those that have to selectively read the messages that pass through the list.

Please try to keep the subject about football as much as possible, although I do allow a lot of lee way to allow people to discuss the area in general, but please don't stray to far...

Replying To Messages

Subject headings again..... Make sure that if you go off an a tangent change the subject heading !! There is no point having a subject heading such as "Ravanelli puts six past Newcastle" when you're talking about Juninho going fly fishing.

It is clear, however, that the phrase "I do allow a lot of lee way" leaves a lot of room for interpretation. There is no principled way of creating statistics that could adequately enumerate on-topic versus off-topic messages as many of them would fall into the "lee way" area. Certainly the vast majority of emails I received were either explicitly on-topic or fell into the grey area of being tangentially related to the subject area. On an everyday basis my mailbox was filled with comments about the team and matches, speculations about new signings or debates about the team's tactics and so on. There were very few messages that were notably off-topic. I would less than one percent of messages that I received during my fieldwork could be seen as off-topic. It was not uncommon, however, for a subject which was originally on topic to 'drift' off topic and become more tangential if a particular exchange lasted for several replies. Those moments when topic became contested provide a fascinating insight into how the list negotiated its identity.

The notion of topic in itself can be seen as a sociolinguistic variable in CMC groups. To return to Hymes's definition of "speech community" as one that in part shares a common set of rules for the "way of speaking" ("Models" 58) then clearly the Boro List is focussed around a certain set of conversational topics. In his outline of the components required for sociolinguistic analysis of speech behaviour, Hymes states that message

content “enters analysis first of all perhaps as a question of *topic*” (60, italics in original). Hymes’ comments are based around the need for participants to be able to understand the topic based on the content. CMC groups, such as the Boro List, have, however, defined themselves based on topic thus there is an expectation that any communicative event will be assessed as to whether or not it is “on topic.”

The chief enforcer of topic was, naturally, Tim Lloyd. If he believed that a thread was becoming off topic he would usually intercede with an email and use “ADMIN” in the subject line to indicate that he was posting in his role as list administrator. For example, one subject started during the ‘off season’¹⁵⁶ in 1995 was called “likes and dislikes.” It became a very popular thread but had no relevance to the list’s topic, even initially, and eventually Tim posted.

From: Tim Lloyd
Subject: ADMIN : Like's & Dislikes - Please Read

Ok I think this likes/dislikes thing is starting to get WAY out of hand, and needs to be better organized.

Whoever started it [can't remember myself] can you please get people to Email you directly and then post just the results to the list. These sort of threads are an enormous waste of bandwidth.

So please, in future if you are thinking of starting similar threads then please do it on the basis of getting people to Email you direct.
Thanks

Tim

Tim Lloyd - Middlesbrough Football Club Mailing List Administrator

The discussion promptly ceased.

¹⁵⁶The off-season is the period from mid-May to early August when there are no competitive matches played in the English league.

Tim's role in setting the rules for the list was crucial. Although other members might occasionally attempt to enforce topic, the results often led only to further arguments. For example, one member posted a request that the discussion of certain subjects should be stopped only to draw the following reply from a poster using the name of "headcheese."¹⁵⁷ First headcheese quoted a part of the original post (using the convention of "[snip]" to indicate that he had left part out) and then included his response.

From: "Headcheese"
 Subject: Re: I have an idea!!!!!!
 Date: Fri, 20 Sep 1996

```
-----
> From: George Vine
> Okay could I please ask a request. It may be impossible I know but it
may just
> work.
>
> Could we please have a full week on the list without the following
phrases
> mentioned :-
[snip]
> Boring, boring, boring, boring, boring.
>
> I hope I make a point here because this subject is really doing my head
in.
```

Well don't fucking read it then. Who died and made you list administrator?

Although many of the earlier writings on computer-mediated communication claimed that it tended to erase status differences, it is clear from attempts to enforce topic that Tim had a unique status due to his role. Consequently, much of the understanding of what

¹⁵⁷The sobriquet, "headcheese", was in fact a nickname generated specially for the posting to disguise the identity of the poster. Later, another list member complained about the practice of using a pseudonym in this way. This use of pseudonyms on the list was extremely rare.

was on topic as well as the reasons for enforcing topic were generated by Tim and he drew upon his experiences in other CMC environments as well as his personal beliefs about the nature of the medium to justify his actions. Tim had been online for several years before he became involved with the Boro List. He had been active in a network called FIDOnet, one of the commercial networks that later merged fully with the Internet, was a regular participant in USEnet groups such as rec.sports.soccer and, finally, was also a computer programmer and computer graphics designer. It is particularly noteworthy that Tim was strongly anti-Microsoft and its software. His web design work was done with an Apple Macintosh and flagged as such on his web page. Finally, as the web developed during its early years, Tim was a strong voice protesting against the attempts at creating commercial football web sites.

In many ways Tim espoused a view of computer networks that derived from those who initially developed the networks. He saw computer networks as a resource that could allow new connections in society (after all, he ran a Middlesbrough FC email list from Hong Kong, about as far away from Teesside as it is possible to get on the planet), believed passionately in the concept that “information must be free” and blamed Microsoft for its commercialisation of software. As with many who grew up with Internet access in the late 1980s and early 1990s he saw CMC as an egalitarian but ‘deficient’ medium and had seen the way in which email groups could explode into furious flame wars over very little (personal communication). Consequently, when Tim took over running the Boro List, he used his experiences to guide the way in which he set the tone

for the list. This can be clearly seen in a post about excessive signatures in email he sent to the list.

...When I was on Fidonet we had a rule in one of the areas I was in whereby you could post a large sig on ONE of the messages, but all the others you had to remove it. So if you post a single message go ahead use the sig.... but if you do three or four put it on the first one only.... By the way I'm *not* trying to lay down any rules or anything for this mailing list, I'm just trying to get people to be more considerate to other users.

I suppose my feelings on this are carried over from my days on Fido where you HAD to follow rules. All because any messages being sent were being paid for out of the sysops pockets as it was they who had to pick up the message packets - Quite often with a long distance call.¹⁵⁸

Although he explicitly states that he is “*not*¹⁵⁹ trying to lay down any rules” this was a clear statement about list “netiquette” that had the force of a set of rules. It is also noteworthy that Tim draws upon the fact that there is a monetary cost to email and that a long signature may end up costing someone money.

In many ways the list culture as created by Tim Lloyd can be seen as almost ‘traditional’ when it comes to CMC groups. As with the early network programmers he saw the Internet as a precious resource to be husbanded. As the list administrator he was constantly exposed to the technological problems that he kept hidden from the members. When the software was malfunctioning he could receive upwards of 300 error messages a day and he would spend hours each week sorting out problems (personal communication). The use and enforcement of the notion of topic might appear to be antithetical to the development of any notion of community because it is, after all, an

¹⁵⁸From a posting in June 1995.

¹⁵⁹The use of asterixes is a long-standing email convention that shows emphasis.

attempt to prevent any type of conversation that is not oriented around one subject whereas a community can be portrayed as an organisation of diversity. My impression from my time on the list is quite the reverse; the enforcement of topic and the rationale for its enforcement helped create a sense of identity.

Although explicit attempts by other members to enforce topic often met resistance as in the example above, members of the list were often quite successful in enforcing topic when they utilised the notion of “bandwidth”. Many of the list members were from outside North America¹⁶⁰ and, therefore, generally had to pay by the minute for Internet access, which could prove quite expensive. For the majority of the list members, participating in the Boro List was not just a commitment of time but also one of money. In general, bandwidth was seen by Internet users as a limited resource, for the list members bandwidth was also associated with money—another limited resource. This can be seen when in one case, after a member posted a lengthy piece of “ASCII art”¹⁶¹ he drew the following response from one of the most frequent posters.

¹⁶⁰Precise statistics about the nationality of members are impossible to derive solely from email addresses.

¹⁶¹ASCII art consists of pictures created using just the letters and symbols available on a computer keyboard.

On Tue, 30 May 1995, Arthur Lewis¹⁶² wrote:

I've received a message from Univ Coll university which seems to have nothing to do with football even though it is headed "Best forward ever seen". In fact it doesn't seem to have anything to do with anything except perhaps it's a student joke.

Fair enough but Uni students (and my daughter's one) don't directly pay their connection and phone bills. I do, so a little consideration might be appropriate.
Please.

Arthur

The original poster was one of the frequent posters at the time and apologized shortly after being chastised.

Date: Tue, 30 May 1995 06:30:51 -0230
From: Bill Scourfield <bill.scourfield@place.university.ac.uk>
Subject: Re: University Name

Yes, I sent it, sorry to anyone else who didn't want it and had to pay for it, it's got about as much to do with football as all that Winnie the Pooh stuff.
I hold my hands up and apologise, and assure you I won't forward any more crappy e-mails (except the stuff I write myself!)
Bill

It is noteworthy that this occurred in late May 1995 during the off-season period when there was no football being played. During that time there was a big increase in jokes and all manner of "off topic" postings which eventually drew a significant number of complaints. Although Tim could, and did, intervene, I noticed that the frequent posters were also helping to set the ground rules by generally responding to on-topic posts but ignoring or complaining about off-topic posts. I discovered as well that several of the frequent posters would email the poster privately to point out topic transgressions,

¹⁶²During my fieldwork, Arthur was the third most active member on the list.

something in which Tim was also involved.¹⁶³ This was the first summer that the list had a significant number of members, having been originally formed in June 1994, so for the members, negotiating what was on-topic was a new task. In the case of “headcheese” the annoyance seems to have been based on the fact that the topic under discussion was about the football and therefore, technically, “on topic.” In the latter case the ASCII art (a type of animated dancing cow) was very clearly off topic and also took a long time to download over a standard modem of the time.

Ian Digs a Hole

Although Tim’s role in keeping the list on-topic was crucial, the other members learned how to enforce topic through more indirect means. A classic example of this occurred when a regular poster by the name of Ian Sheward suddenly started to post jokes to the list. During the first few months that I had been a member of the list it was very rare for anyone to simply forward an email that they had found funny or interesting. As the membership increased, however, new forms of behaviour started to occur and one example of this was email forwarding. Ian was one of the leading figures in this trend but when he sent two sexist jokes in a row the regulars started to complain. After the second joke, “Chemical symbol for Women”, one regular sent the following email which, rather than explicitly complaining about the joke being off-topic, took a different tack.

From: Joe Symmonds
Date: Fri, 1 Sep 95 10:36:10 BST
Subject: Re: Chemical symbol for Women

¹⁶³Private correspondence from list members.

In reply to Ian Sheward...Chemical symbol for Women...

Ian...don't you like women or something?...I get the feeling you probably prefer boys...?
Cheers

Joe

Responding to an off-topic joke with an implied attack¹⁶⁴ would seem to be a poor way to enforce topic but it does make it very clear that the poster disapproves. There were several other complaints from regular posters but perhaps the most interesting was a female "lurker" who responded to the first joke "Beer v Men" with a classic folkloric counter.

From: "H.J.Madden" <H.Madden@university.ac.uk>
Date: Fri, 1 Sep 1995 11:50:54 +0100
Subject: Beer v Men

> Date: Fri, 1 Sep 95 09:50:39 +0100

> Something to think about

>

> >

***** >

> 27 Reasons Why Beer is Better Than Woman

> > -----

Oh please.....

1 reason why beer is better than men

1) It doesn't come up with puerile crap like this.

Helen

P.S. Before you start, I've never worn a pair of dungarees in me life, I don't have short hair and me name isn't Millie Tant :).¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁴It should be noted that although I have never seen homosexuality used directly as a slur on the list, it has frequently been used pejoratively in more indirect ways as in the present case.

¹⁶⁵The name comes from the magazine *Viz* in which "Millie Tant" is the name given to a character who is a parody of a student, lesbian feminist.

Another list regular, in a different subject, continued the complaints.

From: "R. Davidson" <r.davidson1@physics.university.ac.uk>

....Ian, you do realise we have them 'Women' things on this list mate?, I'm no old fart but I get pissed off when the southerners down here start to get personal and make jokes about my accent etc, so I think I can understand how some of our female list members might be feeling after your recent emails.

This is a football related list mate, and I'm sure ALL the members just want read it without someone having a go (I do realise it was just a joke?).

Although his email references the topic "football related list" his main complaint is that the joke would upset other, female, list members. This was clearly a view that was shared by other list members and a side-effect of Helen's email was that she generated a lot of supportive emails. She was a first time poster and, at this point, there had been very few posts by female fans. One member commented on this

From: Dan Markham

Subject: Re: Beer v Men

In-Reply-To: <840217679A6@Howden.uni.ac.uk>

....

Nice one Helen. But why must it take something like this to bring the girls out of hiding. I assume you are a Boro fan and not just subscribed to this list simply because you're from Middlesbrough. Let's have some more FFF's (female footy fans) putting their ore in. There must be more lurking out there. Or this list is in danger of becoming like the Redcar Workingmens Club bar - full of male chauvanists who don't allow any women in. (Sorry dad).

Similarly, another member wrote.

From: Michael.English@sap-ag.de (Michael English)

Subject: Re:Beer v Men

right on sister!

this has nothing to do with the purpose of our mailing list ie. all things Boro/Teesside oriented, as well as being old and cliched!
Michael

Due, at least in part to this friendly reception,¹⁶⁶ Helen went on to become a regular poster for the period of my research and beyond. Her responses to the supportive emails showed someone who was extremely competent both in CMC and the culture of the group as the following two excerpts illustrate. In the first email she explains why she had never previously posted while, in the second, she demonstrates that she is fully aware of the rules concerning topic.

From: "H.J.Madden" <H.Madden@sheffield.ac.uk>
 Date: Fri, 1 Sep 1995 14:49:58 +0100
 Subject: Re: Beer v Men

> Nice one Helen.

Thank you! And thanks for the other messages of support I've had too! I half expected to get flamed for writing what I did, but Ian's message really wound me up. If it had actually been funny I wouldn't have minded.

...

>But why must it take something like this to bring the
 > girls out of hiding. I assume you are a Boro fan and not just
 > subscribed to this list simply because you're from Middlesbrough.
 I've only been on here a few weeks and I don't feel knowledgeable enough yet to stick my oar in! I *am* a Boro fan and originate from there - I went to matches with my dad in the late '60's (I was very young!) when John Hickton (it *was* Hickton, wasn't it?) was playing. Somewhere I still have my football rattle which my dad painted in red and white and wrote all the teams names on it! I must try and find it next time I'm up there.

From: "H.J.Madden" <H.Madden@Sheffield.ac.uk>
 Date: Fri, 1 Sep 1995 14:57:14 +0100
 Subject: YES!

> Fluff...yeah of course, but like somebody pointed out, there are
 > females who use this site and all that kind of stuff is so bloody old hat..
 >can't somebody come up with something a little more original than that
 >sort of crap!

¹⁶⁶ Although these replies can be read as quite patronising, I believe that they do represent a sincere attempt to make Helen feel comfortable.

>If you must use this mailing list to tell jokes try and make them relevant...I
 > for one don't want to be having to even spend time checking my mail
 >and finding garbage like that...so you can forget your "tongue in cheek"
 >crap mate...it's 1995...wake up and smell the roses...

>Cheers

>Ian

I know, I know. I'm breaking all the rules here - it's off topic, I'm including *all* of the original message, (although it stands being said twice anyway) etc etc.... but.....

GIVE THIS MAN A KNIGHTHOOD!!! NOW!!!!!!

Thank you.

Helen

The responses to Helen's email illustrate the need that the list members felt to keep the number of posts and posters increasing. In the early days of the list, before I joined, when there were less than 30 members of the list, the main posters would often deliberately post emails just to keep up the number of messages regardless of how topical the messages were.¹⁶⁷ Given the concern about topic I have discussed at length this may seem counter-intuitive but it does illustrate that topic enforcement is actually a balancing act. There has to be enough messages arriving to keep the list feeling 'alive' without having so many that the list is swamped.

Helen's intervention also illustrates a rarely articulated concern that the members had about their identity as a male-dominated clique. Football fandom in the UK is

¹⁶⁷Information from personal emails.

predominantly a male pastime and, at the time of my research, the Internet appeared to be populated by, mostly, men.¹⁶⁸

Although Helen's emails were broadly welcomed, it only took a couple of days before explicit requests to stay "on topic" began to emerge. In a topic called "Mackems",¹⁶⁹ one poster included the following.¹⁷⁰

From: "R. Davidson" <r.davidson1@physics.university.ac.uk>
Subject: RE: Mackems

Nowthen!

...
I'm with Helen, (btw where's your predictions?) to be honest I didn't read much as it seemed boring, we've had much funnier things on this list. Shall we drop this issue now people, (Iant lets not have another BORO/celtic type thing dragging on for weeks).

Cheers, Rob.

The request to drop the subject did not, however, work. Ian felt the need to justify himself. First he sent an email with a minor apology and attached a set of "dumb men" jokes.

From: "Ian Sheward"
Subject: Re:Beer v Men

Helen (and other females on the list).

(a) It was a joke !?!?!

(b) So far I've been sexist and gay ! I just thought it was quite funny !!

(c) Here's one that takes the piss out of men !?!?! (just to prove I'm just your 'average' Boro fan)

¹⁶⁸The demographics of Internet use have changed massively since then.

¹⁶⁹Slang for a person from Sunderland, home of a nearby football team seen as a local rival.

¹⁷⁰The cryptic "where's your predictions" refers to the "MADBASTARD" predictions game that the mailies had started. It is an indirect request for her to join the game.

(d) apologies for any offence - as I say, it was a joke !!!
 what's the world's thinnest book in the world?
 What men know about women.

How many men does it take to screw in a lightbulb?
 One...Men will screw anything.¹⁷¹

When that strategy did not immediately work, he tried again.

From: "Ian Sheward"
 Subject: Re: Beer v Men

All,

In case my initial apology didn't get through, here's another ... I'm sorry !!!!

Honest, it was meant as a joke and I'm not a complete sexist b*%#&d. I just thought it was quite funny. Anyway, I've been told off lots now, so it won't happen again !?!!

Having said that as Stuart (male, straight, but also open to non-sexual female interjection) says, at least we got some women involved (not quite in the best way, but heh, I've already apologised for that !!!)

Here, he makes the apology very obvious but also claims that his post has had an inadvertently positive side-effect of getting "some women involved." Although in fact it was just one woman who became involved—Helen—his post indicates the perception among regular posters of how important it is to expand the number of contributors as well as broadening the membership beyond the male inner circle. His strategy did not work particularly well and led to Tim Lloyd intervening. Lloyd frequently referred to his actions as "the hand of god" and uses that image here. As with many posts, he encourages Helen to keep contributing.

From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: Re: Beer v Men

>> Nice one Helen.

¹⁷¹The rest of the jokes have been omitted for brevity.

>
 >Thank you! And thanks for the other messages of support I've had
 >too! I half expected to get flamed for writing what I did, but
 No chances of that.... the hand of god works swiftly in here to squash
 trouble makers :-)

The only problem is that the hand of god is seven hours ahead of UK time
 so stuff can sometimes get delayed in being seen to :) - just think a
 massive flame war could be going on whilst I'm kipping, and I'd get up in
 the morning to find everyone hates each others guts !!

Do keep on posting though, it's always nice to have new people posting on
 a regular basis.¹⁷²

The topic continued for the rest of the day, dominating the conversation and, eventually,
 other regulars attempted to squash the subject by starting a new subject title "Let's talk
 footie...".

From: "Willis, Simon" <Simon.Willis@company.co.uk>
 Subject: Let's talk footie....

Is this what we've got to look forward to during these forthcoming long
 winter weeks without a match. All we've had is a load of old sexist drivel
 and endless messages about word wrap.

LET'S TALK FOOTIE.....

This was seconded by Rob Davidson who had complained previously.

From: "R. Davidson"
 Subject: RE: Let's talk footie....

Nowthen!

You said it mate!.
 Cheers, Rob.
 ps Has it stopped yet?..¹⁷³

¹⁷²Rest of email deleted for brevity.

¹⁷³In its own right this postscript is a fascinating piece of online communicative behaviour. The question is rhetorical, the writer knows perfectly well what is being written but he chooses to publicly 'ignore' the conversation. He addresses the comment directly to the writer to whom he is replying but, obviously, expects it to be read by everyone else. Conceptually, it is a private comment intended to be overheard in a public 'place'. Consequently it reveals a complex understanding and use of the communicative properties of the setting.

The contretemps over Ian's sexist jokes illustrated several dynamics. The list was only just over a year old and was undergoing a huge expansion in members partly due to the general increase in Internet access and partly due to the raised profile of the football team. Although Ian's posts were criticised for being sexist, possibly an unexpected criticism from male football fans, the main criticism was that they were off topic.

Throughout the argument, not one poster publicly defended Ian, indicating the seriousness of his breach of group norms. In many ways this debate helped to define the group and its shared norms. Perhaps most importantly it demonstrated that the members were acquiring the competence to resolve differences without threatening group solidarity. Aside from some grumbling, no one got involved in a flame war and no one left the group in a public manner. This was not the first argument that the list had undergone but it was the first to explicitly address 'speech' behaviour. Two months prior to this the list had experienced "The Sig War".

Bandwidth and The Sig War

Throughout June 1995 the list broke out in a series of arguments about the appropriateness of signature files, usually referred to simply as "Sigs" and a set of issues centred on the concept of netiquette. Several of the regular posters complained about email signatures that "took up a lot of bandwidth" while others, such as Tim Lloyd complained about the habit of quoting old messages in their entirety. As with the arguments about "topic" just discussed, this debate can be seen as the result of the list

members trying to articulate the emergent norms of the Boro List. Following the lead that had been given by Tim, the notion of “bandwidth” was frequently mobilised.

“Sigs” had become popular throughout the Internet in the 1980s and had been portrayed by researchers (e.g. Kiesler et al.) as responses to what was seen as the deindividuating effect of the medium. The problem became, however, deciding what was appropriate for a signature. Longer signatures required more bandwidth and, even into the 1990s, bandwidth was seen as a precious resource that was not to be squandered.

This general understanding of bandwidth was carried through to the Boro List by Tim Lloyd and in June 1995 he started a subject entitled “*Please Read*” which called, in part, for members to edit replies rather than just attaching all of the original message. One fairly new frequent poster, Chris, who had received some complaints about his signature and who appeared to believe that Tim’s post was aimed at him, responded to Tim’s request with the following message.

From: "C.G.Kershaw"
Subject: Re: *PLEASE READ*

> Time for something to be said....
> Can we *ALL* please try and edit down the messages and
> just quote the relevent parts.

> Remember EDIT your messages !!!! (oh and don't go to the other extreme
and
> not quote... then people won't know what you're on about).
>
> Thanks
>
> Tim

Hows that?

```

!====!    !== ==!    !====!    !==!    !====!
!==" ""    !== ==!    !==!==!    !==!    !==" ""
!==!       !====!    !====!"    !==!    !====!
!==!       !=="==!    !=!"!=!    !==!    ""!"==!
!====!     !== ==!    !=! !=!    !==!    !====!
""""""""   "" "" ""   "" "" ""   "" ""   """"""""

```

Chris Kershaw

This added further fuel to the argument because his message consisted of just two words “Hows that?” and a lengthy Sig along with several lines of quoted message—although not all of the original. In another topic—“sigs”—Chris also fought back against people who were claiming that his signature was too long by referencing some longer Sigs belonging to other posters. This led to the following response from Tim. One thing to note about Tim’s response is that he practices what he preaches: he only quotes a part of Ian’s message and keeps his personal Sig to less than 4 lines.

From: Tim Lloyd
Subject: Re: sigs

>How can anyone complain about the size of my sig when you get ones
>like this. Remember mine is really only 3 lines long, but "Chris" is
>a bit big.

Ah but how often do we see the other sig.... not often... you mail a damn sight more !

Just because someone else uses a massive sig is no excuse for using one yourself... there will always be people who will go mad with sigs.... hey there is no law on it..... but you'll only piss people off with a large sig - you don't mind seeing it once, but after seeing it ten times in a row it starts to annoy.

When I was on Fidonet we had a rule in one of the areas I was in whereby you could post a large sig on ONE of the messages, but all the others you had to remove it. So if you post a single message go ahead use the sig.... but if you do three or four put it on the first one only....

By the way I'm *not* trying to lay down any rules or anything for this mailing list, I'm just trying to get people to be more considerate to other users.

I suppose my feelings on this are carried over from my days on Fido where you HAD to follow rules. All because any messages being sent were being

payed for out of the sysops pockets as it was they who had to pick up the message packets - Quite often with a long distance call.

When I came to the net I noticed basically how lazy people were with things like editing messages.... huge sigs and the like, people get like that when they don't have to pay for the service.

Oh and you're sig is WAY more than three lines !! Let me count for you....

```
>1          !=====!    !== ==!    !=====!    !==!    !=====!174
>2          !==! " " "    !== ==!    !==!==!    !==!    !==! " " "
>3          !==!          !=====!    !===== "    !==!    !=====!
>4          !==!          !=="==!    !=" " !="!    !==!    " " " !==!
>5          !=====!    !== ==!    !=" !="!    !==!    !=====!
>6          " " " " " " "    " " " " " " "    " " " " " " "
>7                      Chris
>8                      [email omitted]
```

As can be seen, Tim describes his own experiences and imports norms from other networks in order to help set the emergent norms of the Boro List. His basic contention is that users who accessed the Net for free (generally university students) tended not to realise that others might have to pay for access and thus did not use norms that were intended to keep messages concise in order to reduce costs for those who would have to pay.¹⁷⁵ Tim's email led to a significant complaint from one of the list regulars—reproduced below. Note that the poster only excerpts part of Tim's message in the reply in order to conform to the norm of conciseness. Also note that he, semi-humorously, adds some "footy content" into the email in order to keep it on topic.

From: Cal Geesink

¹⁷⁴In anonymising this exchange, I have kept the poster's first name but changed other details; this signature is as it appeared on the email list.

¹⁷⁵It is useful to recall that throughout the mid- to late 1990s that commercial Internet access was relatively rare and restricted to accounts provided by companies such as America Online. On the other hand, those who did have commercial accounts tended to have relatively slow dial-up accounts and, especially outside of North America, paid by the minute.

> When I came to the net I noticed basically how lazy people were with things
 > like editing messages,... huge sigs and the like, people get like that when
 > they don't have to pay for the service.

I think I do a pretty damn good job of editing, Tim, and I don't pay for this! Maybe it's because I'm a great guy, though. :) Then again, my .sig is 6 lines long... But I do need all that space, especially those asterisks... :) hahaha :)

Up the boro <-- footy content!

...C

```
*****
*** Cal Geesink           "I want the world, and I want it right now."
*** Company Name
*** email@company.com      Vancouver, BC, Canada.
*****
```

The Sig war continued for the best part of a week and moved into all manner of unrelated topics. It threatened to spill over into a no-holds barred "flame war." For example, one topic about a postponed match suddenly turned into argument about Sig size. In the first instance, one regular, Ian, complained about "stupidly inflated signatures eg from Vancouver and Manchester University" leading to the owner of Vancouver Sig to comment his Sig "seems to have been exactly the same length since I joined the mailing list." Tim quotes part of this argument and then tries to put a stop to the argument by telling them to take it "off list."

From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: Re: Postponement

```
>>stupidly inflated signatures eg from Vancouver and Manchester
University?
>>Thank you.
>>
>>Ian
>
>I trust that my signature is not too long for you, it seems to have been
>exactly the same length since I joined the mailing list. I have no
>intention of upgrading it YET.
```

By the way folks *IF* you have any complaints about the list PLEASE Email me directly and not to the list. I don't want a flame war to start ! If

you have complaints about fellow users, leave it to me to sort it out... that's what I'm here for (the hand of god works in weird ways when it comes to someone suddenly being unsubscribed) ;-)

The thing about sigs was brought up only a couple of weeks ago..... but if anyone really gives a damn the protocol is that a sig should be about four lines max. There is no law saying you have to follow this, but you won't win many friends by posting 10 line sigs :-)

Tim

It may seem puzzling that after a year in existence the most persistent argument and source of bad feeling was an argument about Sigs, something with no relevance to football. Its relevance was, however, to the conversational norms of the group. Tim's post did not stop the argument and it continued both in the group and in angry personal emails.¹⁷⁶ Cal took Tim's admonishment to heart and changed his sig, but he was not happy about it. As with Tim, he makes use of "smileys" in an attempt to avoid sounding too upset.

From: Cal Geesink

> The thing about sigs was brought up only a couple of weeks ago..... but
if
> anyone really gives a damn the protocol is that a sig should be about
four
> lines max. There is no law saying you have to follow this, but you won't
> win many friends by posting 10 line sigs :-)

I think this was meant for me, but I didn't want to respond when I first read it for fear of getting myself upset :) So I changed my sig. :)

...c

Cal Geesink "Worries, problems, heartache? Join the club, mate."
(Dr. Mick, "Loaded" magazine.)

Then Cal loses his temper after another post.

From: Cal Geesink

¹⁷⁶According to personal communications from some of the participants.

> Evidently so.....I see the guy at Manchester University is sticking to his
 > six-liner though :-)

Ian, can I ask what the bloody difference between a SIX and FOUR line sig costs you? Be honest here, I have my doubts that it's worth all of this whinging.

...c

```
=====
==== Cal Geesink                "Worries, problems, heartache? Join the
club, mate."                    (Dr. Mick, "Loaded" magazine.)
...
```

So Tim created a new thread called "SIGS Once and for all"

From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: SIGS Once and for all

Ok we seem to have something that might drag on and on.

Lets *ALL* please stop having a go at each other on this, I posted what is known acceptability for sigs, all that has ever been asked of anyone on this list is that people be considerate to others.

People *DO* have to pay to get their mail, and whether you think an extra line or two isn't going to make a difference is not the point. It does. You are forgetting that if all of a sudden 30 or 40 people all started posting messages with 8 line sigs.... It's NOT individual messages that make a difference it's the accumulative amount of 30 or 40 messages.

What I am not saying is that you have delete you're sigs, god forbid that I'd suggest that. Just cut them down in size a little, most mailers allows you to do two different sigs, which will allow you to keep you're normal sig, which you can use for other purposes, and you then have an alternative which you could use for the list.

Let this be the last word on the subject... if you have any further gripes about this either Email me or Email the person direct and you can do your flaming in private, don't bring it to the list.

Oh and whilst I'm doing this, the same goes for the mailing of the fixture list, Email the person direct, not the list.

Tim

It was not the last word though and the regulars would still complain about sigs they

found excessive. In this respect they helped create an emergent conversational norm.

Although sigs were not banned, anything that appeared to break the rather vague standard

would often draw mockery. For example, one poster commented on a large sig in the following way.

From: "D.W.Markham"
Subject: Re: Hi!

On Tue, 18 Jul 1995, Mike Lee wrote:

```
>
> *****
> Mike Lee (Singapore) | / * |
> Email: | | * * |
> Web Page: http://teleview.com.sg/~kclee | \ * * |
> "When the seagulls follow the trawler, | -----|
> it is because they think sardines | |
> will be thrown into the sea" | |
> -Eric Cantona | |
> ***** | *****
> | * MANCHESTER UNITED RULZ!!! *
> | *****
>
>
```

They used to say a mans car bonnet was inversely propotional to the size of his penis. I believe this saying has expanded into the electronic age and is also relevant to say a mans sig is hugely inversely proportional to the size of his penis.

The quoted sig is being commented on because of its size however it also drew annoyance because the poster is a fan of a rival club. Consequently this complaint, as well as some others, were more cutting than the norm.

Coda: It's the End of the List as We Know It

In one of the ironies of Internet-based research, as I was writing the first draft of this chapter the following email, entitled "This list is past it's [sic] sell by date", arrived from the current Boro List.

From: "Rob Jones"
Date: Tue, 20 Aug 2002 23:19:56 +0100
Subject: [boro] This list is past it's sell by date

We need to make a conscious effort to post more on here folks, otherwise this list is going to fade away. The number of posts here has dropped dramatically, despite the efforts of folk like Kevin S and Gary V to keep things moving.

Can I suggest to Cal and co that more "off-topic" stuff be allowed for a while to get things moving again (a quick visit to the vibrant FMTTM message board will make you realise that these kind of posts can be entertaining). I would hate this mailing list to simply fade away.

Rob J (or Greentonic or Goalpoacher, depending on where I am!)

The poster is concerned that after the opening game of the new season and a summer in which Middlesbrough were the fourth highest spending team in the Premiership, there were very few posts on the mailing list. Generally the start of a season is the most exciting time to be a fan and, in previous years, the mailing list had usually been very busy at this period. He compares the situation with an online Middlesbrough FC bulletin board at <http://www.FMTTM.com>.¹⁷⁷ The poster's worry is that the emphasis on staying on topic on the Boro List has created a rather dull environment and that "off-topic" chat helped create a sense of interest. The statistics on Yahoo Groups did seem to show a significant reduction in the number of messages posted in the off-season period of May-June 2002 with a resurgence in July that was mostly driven by comments about the Juninho resigning for the club and the record breaking purchase of an Italian striker named Massimo Maccarone. In early August prior to the message, though, things had seemed to have quietened. In response to the email, I decided to collect data about messages posted in a 30 day period to see if there had been any noticeable changes in posting patterns (see Table 8).

¹⁷⁷The initials stand for *Fly Me to the Moon*, a hugely successful fanzine (i.e. amateur magazine produced by fans) for Middlesbrough Football Club. FMTTM.com is a part of the "Rivals" network (www.rivals.net) which hosts bulletin boards for discussion of all the professional football clubs in England. The FMTTM board is one of the most popular club boards on the site in terms of number of posts and known for its rather unusual sense of humour and tolerance for all sorts of non-football topics.

Posts	Posters	Total	Total%
1	34	34	2.4%
2	18	36	5.0%
3	11	33	7.4%
4	5	20	8.8%
5	11	55	12.8%
6 to 10	17	141	22.9%
11 to 15	6	73	28.2%
16 to 20	12	218	43.9%
21 to 25	3	68	48.8%
26 to 30	6	168	60.9%
31 to 35	3	101	68.1%
36	1	36	70.7%
42	1	42	73.7%
56	1	56	77.8%
62	1	62	82.2%
76	1	76	87.7%
171	1	171	100.0%
Total	132	1390	

Table 8: Postings summary: August - September 2002

As can be seen from table 8, the 15 most frequent posters produced 51.2% of the total posts. This equates to approximately 50% of the group's posts were produced by around the top 10% most frequent posters; this is broadly in line with most periods in the list. One thing that seemed notable at first glance, though, was the relatively small number of people who posted irregularly (i.e. posted just 1-4 messages) compared to May 1997 (see Table 4, p. 147). In the latter case, the "irregulars" were responsible for over 12% of the total number of emails as opposed to 8.8% in August to September 2002. The

situation is slightly more complex than it seems at first glance. In May 1997, irregular members formed 58% of the total posting population. During August/September 2002 there were 132 different posters and 58% of that total equates to 76 posters. If we look at the total number of messages posted by the 76 posters who posted the least in August/September 2002, we discover that they were responsible for 163 of the 1390 messages. That is to say that the 58% least frequent posters contributed just over 11% of the total number of messages posted, implying that the irregular posters are still contributing about the same percentage of posts. The striking change in posting habits, however, is the increase in lurking. During August/September 2002 the list population averaged around 320 while in May 1997 it peaked at around 500. In a thirty day period for May 1997, over 50% of the list population posted while in a 30 day period from August-September 2002 less than 35% of the list posted. As previously discussed, this increase in the lurking population seems to be related to the Yahoo groups interface that makes lurking much easier. In summary, the statistics from the August-September 2002 appear to be fairly consistent with those from the list at its busiest with the slight drop off in number of posters being consistent since the list moved to Yahoo Groups. That said, there is a perception among some of the members that the list is no longer as interesting or lively as it used to be and some I recognise as former list members are now regular contributors to the FMTTM web site.

Perhaps ironically, the email suggesting a change in the topic rules generated a lot of discussion with most posters coming out in favour of maintaining the current level of

topic enforcement. The most frequent poster, (171 messages over a 31 day period) was the most vocal opponent of allowing more off topic posting. This person took the responsibility for copying web articles about the club to the list; he posted 3-4 such articles per day which accounts for how he can manage such a high number of postings all of which were strictly on topic.¹⁷⁸ Although the statistics show no significant changes in posting habits, it is the case that in 2002 Boro fans had a wide range of choices for online discussion of their club whereas in 1994, when the list started, it was the only forum. Concern over the list's future still emerge periodically, even as I am drafting this chapter.¹⁷⁹ How long the list will survive for is impossible to predict. It has survived the death of its administrator and has continued despite being moved from server to server. In all of this the culture created through the emergent conversational norms about topic has become its defining feature. This list is defined as much by what the members talk about as by who they are.

Who We Are

Writing in *Television Culture*, John Fiske comments on how a subcultural grouping achieves pleasure in asserting a sense of social identity in opposition to the dominant

¹⁷⁸There has been an increase over time in the number of copied and pasted articles posted on the email list. When the list started in 1994 the web was very small and almost all messages were originals. With the explosion in commercial football websites and online newspapers there is a lot more possibility for copying articles related to the Boro from these sources. A survey of messages posted from January 2002 to May 2002 showed that nearly 10% of the messages were copied and pasted this way, most of which were sent by the same person. Factoring this out, it does seem that there are fewer original messages per capita in that period than its peak in 1997.

¹⁷⁹To add to the complexity, many of the regulars on the FMTTM board have taken to complaining about the lack of football related posts on the bulletin board.

group. Although Fiske focuses on power dynamics, I think his analysis is pertinent to the ways in which Middlesbrough fans have come to derive pleasure and a sense of identity by opposing themselves to other groups, not just of other football fans but of other social and regional groups in the UK. This is not to assert that football fans in general or Middlesbrough fans in specific should be seen as forming a subculture but that to understand Middlesbrough fans as a group we need to examine inter- and intra-group dynamics within a football context. Traditionally in the UK, football fandom has been associated with working-class, predominantly white, men. There have been changes in the last fifteen years with increasing participation by the middle classes, women and ethnic minorities but football fandom is still a largely classed, gendered and raced activity.

The Boro List, however, has other features. At the time of its creation and throughout the period of my fieldwork, Internet access was dominated by white, middle-class men largely drawn from academia and the sciences. The Boro List appeared to follow this pattern. Although precise statistics are impossible and my methodology encouraged me to focus on the online individual rather than the offline person, an examination of email addresses gathered at various times during my research showed the largest minority to have “.ac.uk” domains, indicating people with Internet access provided by UK universities. Throughout the period all the main posters identified

themselves as men, with only one frequent poster who identified herself as female.¹⁸⁰ At times when posters discussed their occupations the majority appeared to work at middle-class jobs. It appears that the majority of participants in the Boro List came from the most advantaged sections of society. Middlesbrough as a place, though, is a solidly working-class area which has been frequently stereotyped as a grim, industrial, smog-laden wasteland¹⁸¹ and the team has been just as frequently derided for its failure to win any major trophies. When expressing their identity as Middlesbrough fans, then, they are faced with negative stereotypes about both the place and the club. Although the mailing list members may have been from generally advantaged sections of UK society, their self-identification is with a region and a team that are anything but advantaged. The assertion and definition of this regional self-identity became an important communicational trope within the mailing list.

Where Do We Come From?

“Where are you from” topics seem common across email groups and the Boro List is no different. Although such topics became less frequent over time they were not infrequent in the early months of my fieldwork. Such topics tended to consist of the members detailing where they live and their connections to the football club. In addition, when

¹⁸⁰Of course there may have been some who wished to hide their gender or transgress it but there is no evidence of this having happened. It has been my experience that gender play tends to occur only in online groups which have, for whatever reason, generated a culture of it.

¹⁸¹Various reports have placed Middlesbrough either at the bottom or close to it for average income in England (e.g. Duckworth).

new posters introduced themselves to the group they almost invariably made their relation to the area central, as in the following example from September 1995.

From: "Rory Daniels" <name@iaccess.com.au>
Subject: Hello from new subscriber.

Hi there from a new subscriber in Oz. My name is Rory Daniels (father of subscriber Phil Daniels). I lived in Billingham for 33yrs and used to drink in the Salutation Hotel before emigrating to Geelong Victoria in 1973 (Blunderland winning the F.A. Cup was the last straw after patiently waiting for Boro to make the first division). I have many vivid memories of Ayresome Park where I was a centre stand season ticket holder.

Due, however, to a fairly unusual set of circumstances the name of Middlesbrough town and area has frequently been changed as it has been placed into different regions after successive political re-organisations. Consequently there is confusion about the boundaries of the region and, at a more abstract level, where exactly in the UK it is. When I was born, the area was considered to be in the county of Cleveland. Before that it had been part of County Durham. More recently, Cleveland was abolished as a political entity and the Middlesbrough area is now known as Teesside, i.e the area around the banks of the River Tees. For a long time prior to all of this, however, Middlesbrough was considered to be in the northern tip of the county of Yorkshire and many people in the area still regard themselves as being from Yorkshire.¹⁸²

This issue has particular significance for football fans because they tend to define themselves by place and, crucially, by their opposition to local rivals. The longest

¹⁸²For example, my grandmother, who lived in Marske-by-Sea, a small town about 10 miles from Middlesbrough, refused to acknowledge the creation of Cleveland county and kept maps showing Middlesbrough to be in Yorkshire.

standing rivalries in the English football are those between fans of clubs that share a city (e.g. Manchester City and Manchester United or Liverpool and Everton) or that are based in adjacent cities (e.g. Newcastle and Sunderland) in the same general region. As noted previously, Middlesbrough fans regard Newcastle and Sunderland as their rivals while Newcastle and Sunderland fans tend to dismiss Middlesbrough as irrelevant. Indeed, Sunderland fans have taken to taunting Boro fans with the song "You're just a small town in Yorkshire." By placing Middlesbrough in Yorkshire, the Sunderland fans can claim that Middlesbrough and Sunderland are not local. This leaves Middlesbrough fans with the knotty problem of how to characterise their regional identity. Throughout my fieldwork, the issue emerged periodically as the members tried to come to some sort of consensus as to where exactly Middlesbrough was. For example, in December 1996 the following exchange occurred, in which Hugh Johnson quotes a message from a member who was born in a town on the north bank of the River Tees.¹⁸³

Date: Sat, 7 Dec 1996
 From: Hugh Johnson
 Subject: Re: Carlingnet!!!!

"Phil W.Byrne" writes
 >With regards to where we are:
 >
 >I was born in Port Grantnce in 1965, my birth certificate says County
 >Durham. It has took me 31 years to come to terms with that and I have
 >just
 >mangaed to do it. Now someone is telling me that I have to contend with
 >possibly being from Yorkshire. It's not on. I am from Teeside,
 >Middlesbrough, over the border, anything, but not Yorkshire, please.
 >
 >:) mustn't forget the politically correct smiley.

¹⁸³Note the subject line "Carlingnet!!!!". This is an example of topic drift. Originally the subject was about a new official website for English premiership teams run by the sponsors of the Premier League but the subject ended up turning into a discussion of identity.

>
>Regards,
>
>Phil.

No problem Phil. if you're from the North bank of the river You're a Teessider just like me. You're a Durham lad too just as I'm a Yorkshireman from the BORO.

:~)))) (Big smiley)

--
Hugh Johnson

Hugh's answer is to claim two identities: both a Teessider and a "Yorkshireman".¹⁸⁴ The potential sensitivity of the subject is shown by the use and reference to "smileys" by both posters. The day before, in another subject title, "leeds leeds leeds leeds", Hugh had also interjected to complain about negative stereotyping of Yorkshiremen. His interjection was then 'seconded' by a poster named John, as the following example shows.

From: John Valentine
Subject: Re: leeds leeds leeds leeds
Date: Sat, 7 Dec 1996

On Fri, 6 Dec 1996 16:32:22 +0000 Hugh Johnson wrote:
> In article
> Bill Scourfield writes
> >(Have
> >you noticed how yorkshire lads have big necks? never ceases to amaze me

> >when I'm round that neck of the woods.)
>
> Excuse me Bill.....
>
> As a proud Yorkshireman born in the fair town of Middlesbrough.....
>
> Hugh
>

DITTO

¹⁸⁴Note also that the original poster misspelled "Teesside." In the next chapter I will discuss the use of certain spelling Shibboleths when it comes to Teesside and Middlesbrough.

John Valentine

This view is, however, by no means a consensus. The two email excerpts following show posters who regard the 'connotations' of Yorkshire as being quite different from their understanding of self.¹⁸⁵

Date: Thu, 27 Jul 1995
From: Bill Scourfield
Subject: Re: Yorkshire

I don't like to think of myself as from Yorkshire, it carries too many connotations and associations with places like Barnsely. I'm just a T-T-Teessider.

Bill

Date: Thu, 27 Jul 1995
From: Michael.English@sap-ag.de
Subject: Re:Re: Yorkshire

This is a difficult one - I was born in the boro when it was in the North Riding, so to anyone I am a Yorkshireman, but ethnically a Teessider - I've never felt that we shared any of the traditional Yorkie habits, like dourness, stingyness and fondness of rugby yet I support Yorkshire cricket and hate Durham with a resolve second only to rabid anti-Mackemism. As for Cleveland, this was an aberration - what did the monkeyhangers ever have in common with us?

Still, I can't talk - I live in Hampshire now!
Cheers
Michael

What these emails and others made me aware of is that identity was being constructed in a fundamentally oppositional way, which is to say that a Teesside identity was being defined through reference to what it was not. During the period of my fieldwork there

¹⁸⁵ A brief explanation of some of the referents in the two emails. Barnsley is a town in Yorkshire which is often portrayed as a stereotypical Yorkshire place. North Riding is an earlier name for the northern part of Yorkshire. Durham is a city north of Middlesbrough. The "monkeyhangers" is a slang term for citizens of Hartlepool, a town just south of Middlesbrough which had been included in the short-lived political region of Cleveland with Middlesbrough..

was a notable lack of positive statements about what a Teesside identity was or could be. To an extent this may be a part of the emergent culture of football fandom as expressed online.

The online fans of the football club should not be seen as 'normal' fans. There are over 20,000 season ticket holders for Middlesbrough Football Club but even at the list's peak membership there were less than 500 members. Although Internet access in the UK has increased dramatically, at the time of my fieldwork it was estimated that there were less than a million people in the UK with Internet access. Remember also that the majority of the emails on the list came from a small minority of members and that some of the most frequent posters lived outside of the UK and had very little chance to physically attend matches. It is my contention that the frequent posters to this list are generally people for whom being a fan is not an 'easy' option and that therefore they have invested more emotional commitment into their identity as a fan than the 'normal' supporter. As studies of other fan groups have shown,¹⁸⁶ their identities are often constructed as a set of oppositions and the fans themselves often have troubled relationships with the producers of the object(s) of their fandom. The Boro fans on this email list showed similar patterns of behaviour. During my study I observed three main areas of opposition: the fans of local rival clubs, the 'national' media and the club management itself. In addition, a set of unusual circumstances meant that there were

¹⁸⁶E.g. Camille Bacon-Smith and John Fiske on science fiction fans, a group often seen as polar opposites to sports fans.

concerns about a new influx of Middlesbrough fans and what it meant to be a 'real' fan. I will deal with each of these areas in turn.

Local Rivalries

First and foremost the Middlesbrough fans know who the enemy is: fans of Newcastle and Sunderland football clubs, known respectively as the Magpies and the Mackems.

Some of the feeling of this comes through in a snippet from an email by one of the small number of occasional female posters who comments on the problem of supporting the England national team when it had two Newcastle players in it. After commenting about how she is "finding it hard to be pleased when [Alan] Shearer¹⁸⁷ scores," another poster, Chloe replies that these are "purely 'natural' feelings" which "shows you are a normal healthy individual."

```
Subject: Re: England v. Poland
> On Thu, 10 Oct 1996, Annie wrote:
>
> > Also, I'm finding it really hard to be pleased when Shearer scores.
> It's
> > just that after all that "Shearer's coming home" shite and Kevin
> Keegan
> > in every national tabloid telling Hoddle to "let Newcastle do the hard
> > work and let England benefit" (vomit) I just can't cheer him on :-(
> >
> > What's a girl to do?
```

```
Dont worry about these purely 'natural' feelings Annie
It just shows you are a normal healthy individual
```

Chloe

¹⁸⁷Captain of Newcastle United and, at that time, also captain of the England national team.

Similarly, when Middlesbrough played Sunderland in October 1996, there was a torrent of posting abusing or poking fun at the “Mackems.” For example Stuart, one of the leading posters to the mailing list replied to a comment about a “Mackem b*stard” being unfairly sent off by pointing out that he “deserved” it and, anyway, he is a Mackem.¹⁸⁸

From: Stuart
 Date: Sat, 5 Oct 1996 12:32:55 +0000
 Subject: Re: Crap Referees

> The most interesting bit though was a phone chat with Gordon Taylor
 > and he firmly agreed that the sendings off of Des walker and Mackem
 > B*stard Scott were a bit rough a spoilt the games.
 > Nice to know it IS being monitored up above. Let's hope they act on
 > it.

Just to set the record straight: Scott deserved to go for 2 reasons.
 1 - The 2nd tackle was bad enough to warrant a 2nd yellow.
 2 - Mackem.

Stuart

Perhaps unsurprisingly the list is full of jokes, slurs, insults and anecdotes about fans of Newcastle and Sunderland. A fairly typical example being this commonly adapted joke.

From: Edward_Mr@company.com
 Date: Thu, 8 Jun 1995
 Subject: Re: Trivia +Jokes.

The other gag that springs to mind is:
 Q What do you call a mackem in a shirt and tie ?
 A the accused

Perhaps more surprising, at least to me at the time, was the number of emails that were sent asking about the meanings of words such as “mackem.” The following answer to the question “What particular quality distinguishes a 'mackem'?” is fairly typical.

¹⁸⁸This poster is a licensed referee and will often explain the more esoteric rules of the game.

Date: Sun, 25 Jun 1995 06:42:54 -0230
 From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: Re: All fixture list

>you have it: What particular quality distinguishes a 'mackem'?
 Essentially anyone from Sunderland..... which means they don't have any
 qualities :-)

Tim

The indication here is that certain terms and uses of language that may well be widely known in the Middlesbrough locality were, during the formative time for the email list, not that well known among list members. The list thus became a resource from which information needed to be a fan could be gained.

There is, however, an asymmetry of feeling between Middlesbrough fans and the fans of Newcastle and Sunderland. As someone who had lived in the Middlesbrough area while young but moved away, it had never occurred to me that maybe the relationship between fans of the three clubs could be quite complex. My eyes were opened by a seemingly innocuous email posing the question "what do the mackems / skunks call us?"

Date: Fri, 11 Oct 1996 14:40:45 GMT
 From: Alan
 Subject: Bits and pieces
 Just following on from the mackems theme what do the mackems / skunks call us?

When reading that email, I realised that I did not know the answer myself. Everyone else seemed be ignoring the question too and it was three days until an answer arrived.

From: "Shaun Archer" <S.P.Archer@university.ac.uk>
 Date: Mon, 14 Oct 1996
 Subject: Re: Bits and pieces

> Just following on from the mackems theme what do the mackems / skunks call us

Smog monsters

I expected this to cause something of a stir or lead to more discussion but the subject was quietly dropped. This certainly puzzled me along with the fact that I didn't know the answer. It was not until I was re-reading notes that I realised that Middlesbrough fans perceive the rivalry with Sunderland to be more important than Sunderland fans do. For Sunderland, Newcastle is the 'enemy' and Middlesbrough is often not considered to be a local rival. The following email from the previous year in which one of the list members forwards an email from a Sunderland supporters' email list, makes this very clear.

Date: Thu, 11 May 1995 05:59:28
 From: Bill Scourfield <Bill.Scourfield@place.university.ac.uk>
 Subject: FW: are you watching Sunderland (fwd)

I thought I'd send a little message to our friendly neighbours (mackem bastards) via my mate who's on their mailing list, about our recent CHAMPIONSHIP WIN and got this back:

----- Forwarded message -----

This thing with M'boro is interesting (not).

Quite frankly I could not care less whether Boro go up or not. In my opinion they have never been, aren't, and will never be a local derby game for SAFC. Our local derby is against Newcastle. As far as I can see the Boro don't have a local derby (Hartlepool ?, Darlington ?) and try to create this Sunderland rivalry to get something going. For them to try and take the piss out of SAFC is pathetic. We may not be particularly impressive at the minute but for one of the least successful, fickle sets of supporters in the country to even mention the name of Sunderland is quite frankly embarrassing. I thought it was funny the other day when the Tyne Tees TV crew went to have a look at their new stadium and some mags were interviewed. When asked what they thought they said that the stadium looked good but they wouldn't fill it anyway so why bother making it 34,000 capacity. Spot on.

So I hope they enjoy themselves in the Premiership - they'll only be there to make up the numbers. They won't win anything so who cares.

To a certain extent this claim of disinterest from the Sunderland supporter is disingenuous. Sunderland fans routinely use argument to annoy Boro fans as part of their strategy for dismissing them as fans of a "small town in Yorkshire." There is, however, no doubting the deep mutual loathing of both sets of fans. The email below from a Sunderland supporter who managed to subscribe to the list runs through common insults aimed at Boro fans and the region. The area is depicted as contaminated by chemicals, the email "to" field has been changed to "Smogmonsters" and it is implied that the club is so depressed that no one wants to play for the team.

From: Peter Phillips <WN0PPL@university.ac.uk>
 To: "'Smogmonsters'" <Boro@HK.Super.NET>
 Subject: What the hell am I doing here?
 Date: Thu, 27 Jul 1995 12:49:00 -0230

To all you Boro fans out there, read the enclosed message taken from the SAFC mailing list:

>Having spent the morning in Middlesborough I have returned with a smile
 on
 >my face. Their new stadium won't be ready until Xmas despite the fact
 there
 >are thousands of people working on it day and night. apparently part of
 the
 >new pitch has turned black due to the chemicals in the soil and will have
 to
 >be relaid. This also means playing at Ayresome with a capacity in the
 region
 >of 13000. They are also pissed off about the fact no one wants to sign
 for
 >them. You just know they're going down !!

Great stuff eh!

Read it and weep you sad child molesting twats!!!!!!

By the way I AM A SUNDERLAND SUPPORTER and I will personally dismember the bastard who subscribed me to this list.

Just before I go, it's great to see all the new signings you have made in the close season.

Going Down, Going Down, Going Down, etc.

One thing that is crucial here is the insult “you sad child molesting twats!!!!” This slur is the one insult that is regarded as beyond the pale by Boro fans.¹⁸⁹ There had been various child abuse scandals in the Middlesbrough area a few years before which had gained national notoriety. The poster will have been well aware of the anger this email would cause and the fact that he is forwarding emails from the Sunderland list shows the interest in Middlesbrough on that list.

It is perhaps ironic that the most notable feature of a globally distributed email list is this sense of local identity and regional oppositions. It is not just the case of fans carrying these identities from the ‘real’ world to the virtual because, in many cases the members have only faint or historical ties to the area. Rather, I suspect, that these real world attitudes are being reinvented in this online context.

It's Grim up North

The Sunderlands fan's predictions notwithstanding, the opening months of the new season in 1996 were among the most successful in the club's history. The stadium opened on time and the club broke all of its transfer records in signing exciting international star players such as the Brazilian, Juninho. This success of the club allied with what suddenly

¹⁸⁹There are various insults or chants directed at different clubs which are considered ‘beyond the pale’ and thus, generally, only used by those intent on causing trouble. The most famous ones are the Munich air disaster chants aimed at Manchester United fans.

became a highly raised profile led to a major new adversary: the south of England, particularly the press which was seen as London-based.

As a provincial, industrial town Middlesbrough usually gets associated with the stereotype of the ignorant, unsophisticated northerner far away from the 'civilized heartland' of England. Within England there is a stereotype, based in part on economic and class factors which portrays the north of England as industrial and working class and, more recently, socially deprived due to rapid de-industrialisation. Northerners are stereotyped as dour, poverty stricken and unsophisticated. On the other hand, the south of England is depicted as being middle class, sophisticated and, (London in particular), the economic heartland of the country. For southerners, "it's grim up north" while for northerners the south is populated by "soft southern jessies." So, when Middlesbrough FC signed Junhino there was a rush of newspaper stories about how cold Middlesbrough would get and how its steaming chimneys and polluted coastlines would scare off the diminutive star from Sao Paolo's golden beaches. This led one list member to post the following on his website.

Ok so just who the fuck do these Southern journalists (now known as Southern Scum or just plain scum) think they are.
 Ever since it was announced that Juninho was coming to the Boro all we've had from the scum is WHY?
 Why us ? After all we're just a third rate shit hole club that's never won anything (well if you listen to them that's how we come across)..... well guys all I can say to that is fuck you.
 And yes I'm pissed off..... in fact you guys have pissed off everyone who comes from the area - not only have you slagged off the club, but you've also stuck the boot in about the town. Well it may not be some yuppie

suburb of London, but for hundreds of thousands of people they call it home, and we're damn fucking proud of it.

We've been through enough shit in the past..... and we've battled damn hard to get where we are today - and for a club that was nearly liquidated nine years ago I'd say we've done pretty well for ourselves. Isn't it about time some of you scum gave us a bit of praise, or is that a god given right only reserved for the big six ?

We may not win the Championship this year or win any cups, but as far as I'm concerned finishing in the top ten will be a great achievement, not bad for a team destined to go straight back down.

So to all you Guardians and Evening Standards out there, I raise my middle finger to you all.¹⁹⁰

The perception of a 'southern bias' against Middlesbrough, especially after the signing of Juninho was pervasive throughout the list and was not restricted to just newspapers. Of the 349 emails to the list that I have stored for November 1995, the following email is a good example of a complaint about BBC radio, from a thread called "Southern bias in the media".

From: noddy@augustus.ISP.co.uk
Date: Thu, 2 Nov 1995 21:58:09
Subject: Southern bias in the media.

Did you hear Trevor Brooking on BBC Radio 5 on Wed 1/11/95? He actually read out a letter of complaint from some southern arse who took issue with the Beeb having ManU v Boro as the featured commentary match last Saturday.

Brooking tried to explain that the Beeb picked the match before Juninho's work permit delays stopped him from playing, as if this was the only merit in covering the fixture. WHAT A PRAT!!! As it was, the coverage of the game was severely hampered by the Rugby League World Cup Final.

The only way this problem can be addressed is for Boro to continue to do what they are doing - turning over so-called "better" sides and FORCING the London-based media to devote more time to us.

¹⁹⁰Tim Lloyd <<http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/soapbox/uk%20papers>>. The website is no longer available. Retrieved 12 October 1997.

This was not simply Boro fan paranoia. An article in *The Guardian*, one of the leading national UK newspapers, by Harry Pearson, a respected football columnist and, as it happens, Middlesbrough fan, also noted the prejudice expressed about Middlesbrough Football Club.

There is no more enduring figure of fun for the British than a member of the lower orders with ideas above his station. A steelworker struggling to pronounce his aitches while outlining the sophistication of Scunthorpe's nightlife is guaranteed to bring the house down.

Given this fact, it is perhaps unsurprising that when the team I support, the distinctly proletarian Middlesbrough, announced they had signed the top-drawer Brazilian, Juninho, it should be the signal for much merriment in the media. (32)

Harry Pearson's article specifically foregrounds the class dimension in the media reporting that was generally expressed on a sub-textual level in postings I found on the mailing list. There was a tendency among the members to portray the club as an 'underdog' that was trying to overturn the established order and it seems to me that many of the members relished that identity.¹⁹¹

This sense of embattlement was pervasive throughout the mailing list at the time, with members frequently copying and posting the latest slurs about the area. Perhaps surprisingly to people outside of the UK or unfamiliar with the dynamics of football support in the UK there was no attempt to assert any kind of regional 'northern'

¹⁹¹This discussion can also be usefully discussed in terms of *blasons populaire*—traditionalised insults that are used to belittle members of groups other than the speaker's own. The stereotyping of national and ethnic groups in jokes, e.g. Irish jokes in the UK, "Polack" jokes in the USA and "Newfie" jokes in Canada are one such example (Welsch). Intriguingly, an unpublished PhD thesis at the University of Sheffield is explicitly approaching football chants as a form of *blason populaire*. (See <http://www.shef.ac.uk/natcect/research/phd/joanne.html>)

solidarity. After all, other northern conurbations are depicted in the same negative terms as Middlesbrough which might lead to the supposition that fans of Middlesbrough, Sunderland and Newcastle could unite in the face of a 'common enemy.' The few times that this was suggested I noticed that it was always by fans from outside of the UK and it was never accepted as a possibility by most members of the list. Indeed, throughout the period of my fieldwork it was not suggested at all and I have only occasionally seen it mentioned at other times. The one exception to this was Ian Sheward, the same person who caused a furore with his sexist jokes, who took to describing himself as a "Northern Nationalist" and sent many emails during 1998-'99 suggesting that northern fans should unite against the south. He had always been the most stridently 'anti-southern' during the fieldwork, as the email below exemplifies.

Date: Fri, 1 Sep 95
 From: "Ian Sheward"
 Subject: Re: A Bit Quiet....

Talking about the Times, what sort of a match report was that !!! All it said was that the Geordies were great, Newcastle was a wonderful place and Boro is a shithole - they even made a point of calling us 'smog monsters' !!!
 Why can't they stick to reporting on the match ???

One good thing out of it - it'll discourage any southerners from coming up to the Boro. It's bad enough living down south, but when you come home you don't want to be surrounded by them as well !

Cheers,

Ian

On the whole, list members seemed to find Ian's "rants" (his own term for them) amusing rather than serious.

NOBBS

Perhaps the most surprising development during my fieldwork, however, was the emergence of a whole new category of Middlesbrough supporter: the NOBBS. With the move to a new stadium and record-breaking new signings the average attendance at matches increased dramatically from around 18,000 at the old Ayresome stadium to a perpetually sold-out ground holding nearly 30,000 fans. These fans are, however, regarded somewhat suspiciously by the old. In just a few weeks, Middlesbrough Football Club had acquired nearly 12,000 ‘new’ fans. At first this was not a problem but, in early 1996, the football team started to lose matches frequently and eventually set a new record for the longest losing run in the Premiership. As this losing run unfolded the atmosphere on the list became fractious and the fans started to question what it meant to be a ‘true’ fan. The term NOBBS—New On the Bandwagon Boro Supporters—started to be used to refer to “glory hunters”, fans who were only interested in supporting the team while it was winning. ‘True’ fans were those who had supported the club through thick and thin. According to some, NOBBS were not vociferous enough to create a good atmosphere at matches and so the team were less inspired. Furthermore, because the ground was sold out, all matches were season ticket holders; those who could not afford a season ticket were no longer able to attend, even if they had been supporting the Boro for years. One list member, who only ever posted the one message that I knew of, wrote in February 1996:

Subject: supporters????
 Author: "J.T.Shrewsbury"
 Date: 14/02/96 14:08

This has probably been said before, but I'll say it again, the crowd are their to support their team, so why dont they het behind the boro as the attitude of a crowd can transform a teams spirit.

When several seasons ago Boro where getting 5000 attendances I was going to all of the games I could afford to. Now with the ground being S.T.H. only I can't get to see a match. How many other "true" supporters are getting locked out. Surely Boro need to reserve several thousand seats a match for non-ticket holders.

Its also sruck me that quite a lot of companies have bought season tickets, and in most cases that i know of, the ppl who go to watch are not supporters but just want to watch a good game of football. Surely if these ppl would be replaced by an enthusiastic fan the atmosphere would be ten times better and this would this not reflect in the teams performance?

Jon

Not every poster took the same view. The email above drew both support, opposition and ridicule as in the following case.

Date: Thu, 15 Feb 1996
 From: Stuart Atkins
 Subject: Re: supporters????

Yeah, I can see it now, the Gazette Headlines...

Middlesbrough Football Club would like to announce the new selection process to establish 'TRUE' supporters. All interested parties are requested to attend a 'Supporters Audition' to be staged in the South Stand on Sunday Morning. Those who provide an 'appropriate' level of noise, singing and chanting for a period of 90 minutes will be provided with the option of first refusal for each Home match day ticket. Decibel Meters will be supplied by MFC.

[section deleted]

.....Sorry Jon. I just had to share the images this message conjured up in my mind.

Stuart A

During the losing streak, this debate about 'true' versus 'fickle' fans became a running theme with somewhere around 10% of all posts either being directly about it or

referencing it in some means. Although it may seem somewhat trivial from the outside, fans use accusations of 'fickleness' against fans of other clubs as a standard form of attack. For example, supporters of successful clubs such as Manchester United are routinely accused of being 'glory hunters' and not 'true' fans. One list member did his best to articulate, in a romanticised way, what it meant to be a 'true' Boro fan.

From: Neil Smith <nsmith@globalnet.co.uk>
 Subject: Boro pride?
 Date: Thu, 15 Feb 1996 09:16:30 -0000

Had a thought last night, which some of you may find a bit perverse, but which brought some comfort to my starved soul:

One thing about being a Boro fan - we may moan about NOBBS etc, but we at least have a yardstick for measuring who the real, "cut-me-in-half-and-it-says-Boro-thru-the-middle" fans are. Imagine the following conversation:

"How long have you been a Boro fan, like?"

"Years! I was there on the terrace at Hartlepool when the gates at Ayresome park were locked by the receiver" (or "all through the Amer years", or "when Billy Ashcroft was our first choice centre forward, and every class player we produced was just sold to 'bigger' clubs."

There are so many stories of hopes dashed, agony endured, glorious battling losses and defeat snatched from the jaws of victory, that anyone who has stuck with our team through all of that can be justifiably proud that he is a real supporter, not just a glory-hunter: Boro and proud of it.

Now imagine a similar exchange between two L'pool or Man Utd fans:

"How long have you supported the reds?"

"Years! I was there through thick and thin. I was there on the terrace at Wembley when we lost the Fa cup final 3-2! I was even there in the 'dark years' when we went for two seasons without winning a cup, AND only finished 6th and 4th in the league!"

Doesn't quite have the same die-hard, "cold-wet-terrace-for-a-one-nil-defeat-against-Preston" authenticity, does it?

Now don't get me wrong - if the Boro suddenly embark on a 10 (or 20!) year spree of winning everything in sight, I'll be the last one complaining!

But (and maybe this is just me in some kind of isolated insanity, but I don't think so), I wouldn't swap places with some hot-house flower scouser or Manc (or even less so an Arsenal fan!), who knows nothing but an

absolute expectation that his team will win and thinks his season is a disaster if his team doesn't do at least the double, not for all the Tetleys in the Newport Workies club!

Because, no matter what, even in these anxious days of wondering if we'll live up to our promise, I love the BORO! (and I have the emotional scars to prove it!)

BORO FOREVER!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

N.

As can be seen, the poster regards 'true' supporting as "die-hard, "cold-wet-terrace-for-a-one-nil-defeat-against-Preston" authenticity" rather than the "hot-house flower" supporter of a successful team. As a true supporter, he "loves" his team and has "the emotional scars to prove it." This characterisation of the authentic supporter who is prepared to stand in the cold rain for years on end, despite the team's lack of success, pervaded the list although it was deployed on many sides of the argument. When responding to an email discussing the various possible explanations for why the team was playing so badly, one poster picked up on suggested option number 4 "It's the NOBBS".

Date: Mon, 19 Feb 96
From: Arthur Lewis
Subject: NOBBS view

>4. It's the NOBBS.<

Enjoyed this paragraph immensely.
I've said it before but here goes: supporting the Boro is not an esoteric cult to which people can only be admitted after trials of fire and water etc. I've been following the Boro for over forty years and I've had a season ticket for over twenty of those years. I've therefore watched them in the old Div 3 twice and stood in the cold and rain on numerous occasions as a kid in the old "Bob End" before it was covered. Nonetheless I want the Boro's support to grow to the point where every game is a complete sell-out and there's a waiting list for Season Tickets. The support won't grow and stay large if "old" supporters start to adopt a "them and us" situation and look down on the newcomers.

The debate continued and continues to this day but there are various other dimensions to it. After a galling defeat by Newcastle during which one of the Newcastle coaching team was spat at by a Middlesbrough fan many of the list members wrote in to condemn the act. One poster was infuriated by what he saw as such "politically correct" viewpoints from self-proclaimed "true fans" and emailed the following:

From: Phillip <D34061P@university.ac.uk>
 Date: Fri, 16 Feb 1996 09:33:50 +0000
 Subject: RANT RANT
 What a bunch of trendy right-on apologists populate this list. " Hey, Mr Spock!, You're great, mate." - " Thanks Capitan, so are you !! I've been a true supporter since before I was born y'know." - "Yeah! me too, that Charlie Amer - what a bastard eh ?! God, I've been going to matches for years aren't I so much BETTER than all these part-time fairweather NOBBS."
 - Wankers !!

So Terry Mac got spat on - wowee !!! " hit him on the head with a baseball bat, keegan keegan, shag his wife shag his wife with a carving knife keegan keegan" - I bet you're sitting in the crowd saying "Disgraceful!" aren't you ? if you aren't why not?? Isn't it worse ?? If you apologise, then apologise on your own whiter than white behalf and don't involve me. It's hardly a major incident, do you think it hurt the Bastard ?? Join the real world like the majority of all-weather fans and stop condemning a few not so bright supporters who wouldn't think twice, or even once about kicking off with a gang of monks. With the fear of sounding as boring as those I'm ranting about, It's society's problem not mine. If you've never been to Wembley, Notts. County, Molineaux, Shrewsbury, Stamford Bridge or Pisa, - I don't CARE - if you're at the match tomorrow, you'll do for me. I HATE GEORDIES !!!!!!! BASTARDS !!

thankyou.

For this poster all that matters is that you are at the match and that you never criticise your own fans. He deliberately repeats a couple of chants that are regarded as beyond the pale and accuses members of the list of not living in the "real world." This attitude was definitely among the minority of the posters and it drew plenty of criticism, one poster writing:

From: Neil Smith <NSmith@ISP.co.uk>
 Subject: As bad as the Geordies!?
 Date: Fri, 16 Feb 1996 11:41:13 -0000
 >- I don't CARE - if you're at the match tomorrow, you'll do
 >for me. I HATE GEORDIES !!!!!!! B***ARDS !!
 >thankyou.

Shame it's not just Geordie infiltrators that write sad stuff like this.

Like the Forrest Gump quote says:

"If you don't like it, leave - and don't let the doorknob hit you in the ass on the way out!"

It is noteworthy that the 'ranter' is associated with "Geordie infiltrators" (i.e. fan of a rival club) as a means of hinting that perhaps the poster was not who he seemed to be. Again, the debate here is centred on who is a "real" fan.

Although the 'ranter' never posted again, having been unsubscribed by Tim, the trouble deepened with people posting potentially libellous rumours about players' off-field activities and statements that various journalists and/or the club itself were 'monitoring' the list.¹⁹² For a few weeks the list became a distinctly unpleasant environment and according to Tim there was an increase in the number of people unsubscribing (personal communication). The fractious arguments about bandwidth and "sigs" in the summer felt quite petty compared to this. For the first time I found myself not wanting to log on to read the list because there seemed to be nothing but bitterness and argument.

¹⁹²At the time I was so wrapped up in all this controversy that it never occurred to me to wonder if my presence 'monitoring' the list provided a precedent that might have encouraged that train of thought.

The debate about “real” fans did not come to a conclusion. Tim made relatively few interventions and seemed content to allow it to run its course. As it turned out, after posting a record-breaking losing run the Boro turned things round and ended the season fairly respectably. As the results improved so did the tempers and the fans began to look forward more hopefully to the next season, the disagreements about “true” supporters being put aside for a while. Events, however, would transpire to make the next season possibly the most dramatic in the club’s history and its acrimonious conclusion would see many of the unresolved debates emerge again with redoubled intensity.

Summary

This chapter started with a discussion of topic and its enforcement in the mailing list. As list owner, Tim Lloyd brought a concept of topic from his earlier online activities in which topic was generally portrayed as a tool to maintain order. As an “early adopter” of the Internet, Tim saw the Internet as a valuable resource that needed to be managed and like so many early users of the Internet was a proponent of the model of CMC as an information-deficient medium.¹⁹³ The mailing list, however, was far more than just an information resource for fans about the football club and it is my contention that the concept of topic grew beyond a tool into a means of characterising “what we talked about.” The other side of this was that as the list expanded and experienced growing pains and new challenges—in 1995 every challenge the list encountered was new to its

¹⁹³I.e. the model of CMC as proposed by Kiesler et al in 1984. In many of his interventions into arguments, Tim would state that it is “hard to read intentions” in email.

members—it became important for the list members to understand who they were and what their identity was. Unprecedented changes at the football club combined with this new forum for expression led the members into a debate about what it meant to be a ‘true fan’ at the same time as providing a new forum for the discussion of what it meant to be somebody with roots in the Teesside area. These two trajectories intertwined in unusual ways. Topic began to be used as a means of group identity and attempts to change the definition of topic in later years were strongly resisted while the debates over identity remained unresolved. Both identity and topic, however, were defined through negation. Topic was only ever mentioned at times when it was breached and the fans’ identity was constantly defined through what it was not. This is not to state that the list was somehow a ‘negative’ place, rather that the members appeared to derive a certain amount of pleasure from the various oppositions.

Having looked at the “what” and “who” in this one, in the next chapter I will assess the “how” of communication. In particular I will examine the putatively ‘oral’ form of CMC that appears to be used by the members here and contrast it with a smaller case study of a different online group.

Coda: The Peoples’ Republic of Teesside

In 2002 an influential group of Boro fans associated with the “Fly Me to the Moon” fanzine and website organised in an attempt to create a new identity “The Peoples’ Republic of Teesside” or PRT. What started as a seemingly throw away comment in somewhat joking manner about creating an identity for the area that was based on a

positive affirmation about what it was rather than simply a set of negatives. This initiative proved to be very popular with a huge banner being displayed at the ground during matches, new chants being sung and a web site was created.¹⁹⁴ The identity that was claimed seemed to be a mix of pride in the industrial heritage, in particular the symbol of the transporter bridge on the River Tees, mixed with a form of pseudo 'Soviet' style artwork (e.g. through the use of a backwards 'R' in "РЯТ").¹⁹⁵

According to the online "manifesto", the aim of the PRT is to "Promote a clear, positive sense of identity of Tees Valley for the people of Teesside and provide a positive image of Teesside to non Teessiders who are looking for information about our area."¹⁹⁶ Although this manifesto was not aimed specifically at football fans it was produced entirely by the fans of the club and expressed, as far as I know, exclusively by the fans. The organisation did gain some local prominence with columns and letters in the local newspaper, *The Evening Gazette*.¹⁹⁷ However, after the initial flurry of activity it seems to have become somewhat moribund and it is unclear to me as to how long it will survive. Regardless, its very existence indicates that the same unease I experienced while researching this project about what seemed to be an exclusively negative formulation of

¹⁹⁴See <http://www.theprt.co.uk>

¹⁹⁵The notion of a "people's republic" of somewhere or other is surprisingly common. It is often associated with areas featuring left-wing political affiliations that are placed within an otherwise right-wing region ("People's Republic"). Santa Monica, famous for its role in computer libertarianism is also known as "The People's Republic of Santa Monica" ("Santa Monica").

¹⁹⁶<http://www.theprt.co.uk/Manifesto.htm>

¹⁹⁷Can be found online at <http://icteesside.co.uk>

Teesside identity appears to have been felt by others. Recent acts of political devolution in the UK allied with the proposal for a referendum on a potential “Northern Assembly”¹⁹⁸ may add to the current interest in formulations of local identity and it is possible that a new iteration of the “PRT” may occur.

¹⁹⁸The referendum failed. It is also noteworthy that the PRT website referenced above seems to have fallen into disrepair.

Chapter 7: Talking Football

Introduction

In this chapter I will focus on issues pertaining to debates around orality and literacy as they pertain to computer-mediated communication (CMC). As discussed in chapter two, much of the early scholarship into CMC focussed on determining whether CMC could be best described as oral or literate. Consequently, I intend to explore the contention that oral and literate aspects of communication should be seen as emergent properties of any CMC speech community. To do so, I will examine the 'oral' properties of communication on the Boro List and then contrast them with a different email list. The wider issue is to come to an understanding of language use in the creation and maintenance of group identity and how 'oral' versus 'literate' choices can foster this sense of identity.

The Boro List is propagated in an asynchronous, typographic medium, so maybe it should not be surprising that issues in spelling and the creative use of digital typography are as relevant as oral speech forms in creating an 'oral' mode of communication. To assess this contention, first I wish to examine some unique issues in spelling on the Boro List. Subsequent to that I will outline some 'dogs that didn't bark' during my research: in particular the lack of a dialectal register employed on the Boro List and what that says about the members' sense of the list. In the second part of the chapter, I will draw on scholarship on orality and literacy to assess how the Boro List

compares to a different email list— “The Glorantha Digest.” The Glorantha Digest is an email list for role-players who are fans of the work of Greg Stafford and his fictional world of “Glorantha”. I chose the list because it appeared to be a list that made extensive use of what could be thought of as ‘literate’ features on an oral-literate continuum¹⁹⁹ as opposed to what appeared to be the ‘oral’ nature of the Boro List. The comparison between the two lists will lead onto a discussion of the relationship between notions of a “discourse community” (Swales, *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*) and “speech community” (e.g. Hymes, “Models of the Interaction of Language and Social Life”). In the first instance I will look at orality and literacy as if they were mutually exclusive until moving to a more nuanced understanding of them as choices on a continuum.

Spelling Trouble

When trying to assess the role of language in the construction of identity and tradition in the Boro List, three main areas were of interest to me. Firstly, I had noticed the ‘oral’ nature of communication on the list without paying attention to it before I had decided to study the list. I had been used to this form of communication on football-related email lists and it seemed so ‘normal’ that it was not until I started to think about the Boro List in the light of other email lists that I realised that this might be a useful starting point for my inquiry. Secondly, shortly after I started the fieldwork, I started to encounter discussions

¹⁹⁹The term is borrowed from Tannen, see for example “Implications of the Oral/Literate Continuum” and “The Oral/Literate Continuum in Discourse” for Cross-Cultural Communication.

of spelling and, in particular, two examples of what appeared to be spelling “shibboleths” that appeared to be being used to mark identity. I had long been aware of the tendency for criticisms of spelling to create ‘flame wars’ on other email lists but it took me a while to realise how anomalous it must seem for spelling to be important in a list that I had come to think of as ‘oral’. Finally, I became aware of something that was missing: the use of regional dialect and other forms of play with spelling. Although I did encounter the occasional example of dialect realised through spelling conventions, I found that the majority of examples of what could be thought of as regional dialect centred on names and seemed on the whole to be used only in marked contexts rather than forming the norm. Similarly, unlike other studies of CMC groups which had emphasised the playful use of spelling and typography,²⁰⁰ the Boro List appeared to use spelling in far more instrumental ways.

Taking the above into consideration, the Boro List provides an interesting example of how orality can be realised in asynchronous computer-mediated communication through the use of spelling. I will illustrate how this relationship is constructed on the Boro List through an examination of postings that used spelling as a marker or performance of identity. In particular, I will examine two relatively common spelling mistakes that tend to be made by people who are not from the Teesside region: the misspelling of Middlesbrough as ‘Middlesborough’ and the misspelling of Teesside as ‘Teesside’.

²⁰⁰See for example, the entries for Brenda Danet in the bibliography.

The Mystery of the Missing O and the Extra S

In the email below which arrived not long after I had started research with the list (May 17th, 1995), the poster has copied and pasted to the Boro List an excerpt from an email to a different football team's (Southampton Football Club) discussion list.

From: "Joe Thomson" <jthomson@NETWORK.ISP.COM>²⁰¹
 Subject: Mere speculation (I hope)
 Date: Wed, 17 May 1995

This snippet apparently from Southampton FC dist list²⁰²...

>
 > I hear on the grapevine that MiddlesBorough are interested in Benali.
 > How much do we reckon hes worth in todays market??/
 >
 (Note spelling error by ignorant Southern git)

To clarify, in the posting above, the sender (Joe Thomson) first states "This snippet apparently from Southampton FC dist list..." and then quotes the two lines without giving their source. He then writes, in parenthesis, "(Note spelling error by ignorant Southern git)". What Joe is referring to is a common misspelling of Middlesbrough with an extra 'O'. The proper spelling of the town is not well known outside of Middlesbrough and using the correct spelling seems to have become a signifier of identity for the posters. Throughout my fieldwork and long afterward, comments about the misspelling of Middlesbrough in some context or other have occurred.

²⁰¹ All email addresses are pseudonymised.

²⁰² The reference is to a Southampton Football Club email list. Southampton is a port city on the south coast of the UK, about as far south from Middlesbrough as you can get and still find a major football club.

As should be obvious through reading earlier excerpts, spelling on the Boro List can be erratic at the best of times yet is very rarely commented upon. The exception to this concerns misspellings of Middlesbrough and Teesside.²⁰³ For example, the following email shows one regular poster, Derek, scolding a new member of the list, Joseph, for misspelling both Middlesbrough and Teesside in the same email.

Date: Wed, 21 Jun 1995 15:32:09
 From: <Derek31@noruni.ac.uk>
 Subject: Re: Life with or without JC

On Wed, 21 Jun 1995, Joseph wrote:

> How many Teesiders are on the 'Tic list?²⁰⁴

Look Joseph, I don't know where the River Tee is but it certainly aint near the River Tees. And MiddlesBorough aint got a 'o' between the 'b' and the 'r'.

Derek.

This hostile reaction to Joseph's posting provides an interesting case study in what happens when a new poster fails to observe the list's norms. Joseph had joined the list a few days before (Friday June 16th) because of rumours about a player from another

²⁰³Heated arguments that break out when one person criticises another's spelling - "Spelling Flame Wars" - were well known throughout USENET during the 1980s and 1990s. In the USENET FAQ presented later (298), Chuq Von Rospach specifically notes the harmful nature of spelling flames. I collected no examples of these type of spelling flames on the Boro List.

²⁰⁴"Tic" is a shortening of Celtic—the football club.

club potentially being sold to Middlesbrough.²⁰⁵ His initial email ("THE BORO MIDFIELD") had been fairly innocuous, reading, in part,

Date: Fri, 16 Jun 1995 17:18:55
Subject: THE BORO MIDFIELD

As a Celtic fan, and having just re-subscribed²⁰⁶ to your list, it's nice to see that it's as rampant with transfer rumours as ours is.

...

We're all shitting ourselves at Celtic that JC himself (John Collins) may be going to Boro. Even Tony Mowbray has inferred it on a number of occasions.

The prices I've heard are stlg2M which, on rejection, was upped to stlg2.25M (both of which are bloody insulting by the way, since he is rated in Scotland at stlg4-5M - and would be considered the steal of the century at anything less).

It was not uncommon for posters to present themselves as fans of other clubs but still friendly to Middlesbrough and there is a certain tradition of friendly links between Boro and Celtic due to the number of players who had played for both clubs.²⁰⁷ However, unfortunately for Joseph, there happened to be a Boro fan who was lurking on the Celtic list. That fan forwarded to the Boro List one of Joseph's postings on the Celtic list that was far from complimentary about Boro fans.

Unbelievably, few Geordies seem to have even heard of John Collins, let alone rate him.

One guy, who seems to know his onions, suggests that if Robson had bid

²⁰⁵The club referred to is "Celtic", a Scottish club based in Glasgow and playing, therefore, in the Scottish league. The player referred to is John Collins - a "midfielder". It is a common contention among English football fans that the Scottish clubs are far weaker than the English equivalents with the possible exception of the two Glasgow teams: Celtic and Rangers. Consequently, there is some debate about the relative strengths of Celtic and Middlesbrough FC.

²⁰⁶Although he refers to 're-subscribing' there are no records of any posts from him that are earlier than this one unless they predate my joining of the list.

²⁰⁷Tony Mowbray, referred to in the email, is one of the Boro's most famous contemporary players and is an example of one who played for both the Boro and Celtic.

stlg2.5M at the off, Collins would now be in Teesside, and he is pretty pissed that it looks like the more gregarious Hoddle at Chelsea is gonna get him for stlg2.5M. (Forwarded posting June 19)

In that email Joseph makes the mistake of referring to Middlesbrough supporters as “Geordies”²⁰⁸ and misspells Teesside as “Teeside”. Although one list member does try to offer a conciliatory response, stating, that “Knowing some of the nutters from our area, you shouldn't say Geordies when referring to us” (June 21st, 1995) the rest of the posted responses were similar to the more hostile example from Bill, below.

From: 23wms@mmu.ac.uk
Date: Tue, 20 Jun 1995 16:09:24
Subject: Re: JC

To Joseph
Yes, amazing. Thanks for taking your time to look at the Boro mail list and thanks ever so much for calling us Geordies and next time I'm up in Edinburgh I'll go and watch Celtic²⁰⁹, just as when you are in Newcastle you can come and watch us play.

Yours,
In no way offended.
Bill.

In light of the various angry responses, Joseph tried to return things to an even keel by asking about the cross-over between fans of Celtic and the Boro but his spelling mistakes only made it worse:

To: celtic@celticlist²¹⁰
Date: Wed, 21 Jun 1995 15:29:14
Subject: Life with or without JC
Cc: boro@borolist

²⁰⁸As explained in the previous chapter, “Geordie” is a slang term for people from the city of Newcastle some 50 miles to the north of Middlesbrough.

²⁰⁹Celtic Football Club play in Glasgow, Scotland's biggest city. By pretending to think that Celtic play in Edinburgh, the poster (Bill) is implying that Joseph's confusion between Newcastle and Middlesbrough is as egregious as Bill's deliberate mistake.

²¹⁰Note that Joseph has sent this posting to both the Celtic football list and the Boro List.

Hey UP!

Something strange going on here.

How many other Celts are subscribing to the Boro list?
and
How many Teesiders are on the 'Tic list?

Am I not alone in my schizophreniform psychosis?²¹¹

His attempt at a light tone did not work and his misspelling of Teesside, for the second time in a row, led to the response which started this section in which Derek fumes "I don't know where the River Tee is but it certainly aint near the River Tees" (June 21st, 1995). Consequently, Joseph tried again the next day in an email titled "Bloody hell, you're a touchy bunch."

From: Joseph
Date: Thu, 22 Jun 1995
Subject: Bloody hell, you're a touchy bunch.

Ok, OK, I apologise for being a pleb.

I now know that Geordies are restricted geographically to Newcastle.

I also apologise for mis-spelling Middlesbrough.
The Numpty,
Joe.

Joseph's apology was not accepted and from this point on, his posts were ignored.

In total, he sent four more emails to the Boro List during the next five days before he stopped posting.²¹²

²¹¹As a side note, at the time of posting, Joseph was a qualified neurologist teaching at a major British university.

²¹²For a period of around ten days several members of the Boro List joined the Celtic list, and vice-versa - leading to some confusion as conversations were cross-posted or conversations posted on one were referred to on the other. This eventually led Tim to send a message asking people to stop this practice and stay focussed on Middlesbrough FC. I also joined the Celtic list but did not save any messages posted to it as I didn't feel that I had permission to do so. I did note, however, that Joseph remained a very frequent poster to the Celtic list for at least two weeks after he stopped posting to the Boro List.

Joseph's case can be seen as an example of a spelling shibboleth being used to exclude a poster by identifying him as an outsider. As can be seen, Joseph made several mistakes, of which the misspelling was just one, but his misspelling provided a useful stick with which to beat him, as it were, because it provided evidence of his status as an outsider. Naturally, not everyone who misspells Middlesbrough or Teesside is viewed as an outsider, rather the misspelling can be used as a signifier of belonging under certain circumstances.

As I stated earlier, there were two misspellings that caused comment on the list: "Middlesborough" for "Middlesbrough" and "Teeside" for "Teesside". Although there might be other potential misspellings of the words, it was only the missing 'o' or the extra 's' that appeared to be used as signifiers of belonging. According to my saved messages, these two misspellings had occurred a number of times without me noticing and had passed without comment. The "Middlesborough" misspelling occurred five times during the first month of my fieldwork (April 1995) until a comment by Tim Lloyd on May 1st. The "Teeside" misspelling turned up three times during that same period.

It was, in fact, the comment by Tim Lloyd, reproduced below, that first sensitised me to the issue. Responding to an email from a new member, Tim pointed out the spelling mistake and teased the poster about it:

From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: Re: Drinks before the match
 Date: Mon, 1 May 1995

>Oi! What about me lads? I'm in Cambridge, Ontario...pity me...I live
 >in the Bob Rae state!!! Not for long though!!!:)
 >

Statistics and Misspellings

Throughout the fieldwork period (April 1995 to August 1996 inclusive) I collected 9299 different emails. Searching through that corpus revealed that the word form “Middlesborough” appeared as an incorrect spelling of “Middlesbrough” 57 times in 49 different emails i.e. roughly half of one percent of the total number of emails sent featured the misspelling. To see if there had been any change in the frequency of the misspelling over the fieldwork period, I divided the data chronologically:

1. 1995 (April to December): total posts 3187, number of misspellings 41 in 35 different emails, frequency of occurrence of emails containing the misspelling—1.1%;
2. 1996 (January to August): total posts 6112, number of misspellings 16 in 14 different emails, frequency of occurrence of emails containing the misspelling—0.23%.

As can be seen, the frequency of the misspelling decreased notably from 1995 to 1996. To check if this was an anomaly I ran a raw text search through the unprocessed data I have for the period September 1996 to November 1998. I have 33392 saved emails from that period and a search revealed 111 instances of the word form “Middlesborough” in 95 emails— a frequency of occurrence of 0.29%.

These results for the frequency of the misspelling of Teesside as “Teesside” appear to be broadly similar.

- 1995: 30 misspellings in 27 different emails.

- 1996: 31 misspellings in 26 different emails. Note that two of the misspelling were auto text in a signature and 5 of them were a misspelled subject line that no one corrected.

For a comparison, I also checked to see how frequently the proper spelling “Middlesbrough” occurred. This was relatively complicated as it required me to filter out any instances of the proper spelling that was generated automatically by email delivery headers. For example, if someone had an account at “middlesbrough.gov.uk” then the correct spelling would be included multiple times in the delivery information. Similarly, some posters had signatures with the word in, most notably the list maintainer and I did not want that text to be included. By the time I had filtered out those results, I discovered that the proper spelling occurred 776 times in 1995 and 872 times during 1996.²¹⁴ There was a decrease in frequency in the use of the word but one that was nowhere as marked as the decline of the misspelling. As a final comparison, I ran a search of the mailing list on “Yahoo Groups” just before the final draft of this chapter. As of Thursday September 7th, 2006 at 8:30PM GMT+1 hour, there had been 66,697 messages posted to the group since June 25th, 2001. A simple word search revealed 79 instances of the misspelled version “Middlesborough” in that time and 105 instances of the “Teeside” misspelling. There was no way to search for the correct spellings as they were too frequent for the

²¹⁴This is a slightly surprising result as the frequency of use of the word “Middlesbrough” has also decreased somewhat for no discernible reason.

search engine.²¹⁵ As can be seen, the frequency of occurrence of the misspelling has diminished over time.

Seeing that the frequency of occurrence had reduced during the fieldwork period, I checked each email in which the “Middlesborough” misspelling had occurred in order to examine the context. I was able to group the misspellings into four main categories:

1. deliberate misspellings;
2. accidental misspellings in original text;
3. misspelling copied or quoted without comment;
4. comments on the misspelling in which the misspelling was quoted.

Middlesbrough was occasionally deliberately misspelled for effect. This was the least common occurrence, happening in four different emails. For example, in the case below, one poster imagines how a “southern journalist” might feel about being forced to travel to Middlesbrough to cover a story about the football club

Date: Fri, 8 Sep 1995 10:32:55
 From: J.Tomk@ironop.ac.uk>
 Subject: Re:Gaurdian Article

...
 I get the feeling from this report that Cherie, London Journos, had fought tooth and nail with her editor about this assignment.
 "Oh God, Middlesborough (cos that's how they all spell it, it must be how they say it), not bloody Middlesborough. Christ, It'll take a bloody week"...

The second least common occurrence was when a poster accidentally misspelled Middlesbrough. This happened in 10 different emails; occasionally more than once in the same email. In most of the cases, the posters who misspelled the word had an email

²¹⁵Yahoo refuses to display the results of any search returning over 5000 matches.

address indicating that they lived outside of the UK. In the remainder of the cases, the poster was an 'outsider' who was posting to the list. Joseph, mentioned above, was an example of this as was the Sunderland fan quoted in the previous chapter (see page 239) who had joined the list purely in order to post an offensive email.

Comments about misspellings varied from hostile responses to mild teasing. This happened 14 times in all. In some cases, the misspelling had happened on the list, in other cases an external source (e.g. a match report) would be copied to the list with the misspelling flagged.

The most common occurrence, though, was when misspelling was copied or quoted without comment. This happened in 21 different emails.

It was particularly noteworthy to compare the Middlesbrough misspellings from 1995 to 1996.

Category	#emails - 1995	#emails - 1996
Deliberate misspelling	1	3
Accidental misspelling	9	1
Copied or quoted without comment	12	9
Comment on a misspelling	13	1

I infer from this that, after the flurry of comments about the misspellings, the list members got much better at avoiding the misspelling themselves. On the other hand, the fact that a fair number of uncommented misspellings continued to exist indicates that it is only when it becomes important to flag the misspelling, for some reason, that controversy

arises. For example, after the signing of the star Brazilian player—Juninho—at the end of 1995, the list members started to become very hostile towards what they termed the “southern press.”²¹⁶ In a thread called “Esquire Article,” the list members complained about an article covering the area in the magazine *Esquire*:

From: "Mik James" <Mijames@noruni.ac.uk>
 Date: Thu, 21 Mar 1996 15:36:32 GMT0BST
 Subject: Re: Esquire article

> To begin with the writer refers to somewhere Teeside, which I suppose is
 > somewhere on the banks of the river Tee. Don't know about you lot but
 > this
 > makes me irrationally angry. Though at least he has managed to spell
 > Middlesbrough right.

Didn't you know that in the parallel universe of journalism, there is
 a town called Middlesborough on the banks of the Tee.

In this case, Mik quotes a portion of the email and expands on it. Even though the journalist does spell Middlesbrough correctly, Mik complains darkly about a “parallel universe of journalism.” Similarly, a list member who was spending some time in France conflated the ongoing complaints about the misspelled Middlesbrough t-shirts with perceived journalistic incompetence when he wrote, tongue-in-cheek:

From: "Smiffy" <smif@isp-dtv.fr>
 Date: Thu, 7 Mar 96 11:44:11 GMT
 Subject: MiddlesBorough
 If Middlesbrough reclaimed its 'o' back them stoopid t-shirts with
 Middlesborough written on a brick wall might start selling...
 And all southern newspapers would be able to spell it correctly!

Two final examples demonstrate the ways in which the misspelling comment was used. The first, from October 1995, is part of a discussion of comments about Middlesbrough Football Club on a usenet list (rec.sport.soccer). In this case, the misspellings are thought

²¹⁶See the discussion in the previous chapter.

to indicate that the misspellers are the ultimate in football outsiders—Americans. In the second case, one of the regulars, Kris, sends an irate message to a new poster who had just joined. The new poster was from Singapore and his signature (which also features in the debate about appropriateness of signature files on page 223) indicated that he was a Manchester United fan as well as a 'new' Boro fan. What really upset Kris, though, was the misspelling of Middlesbrough in the signature.

From: S.Armstrong@gov.uk
 Date: Thu, 12 Oct 1995 17:21:55 +0100
 Subject: Re:Re: Middlesborough gets Juninho (fwd)

Also they cannot spell Middlesbrough correct (hasn't got 2 o's) AND brazil was spelt bra'S'il.

I agree a lot of americans have not much clue of anything outside their country. (more concerned with OJ simpson) When I was there people thought I was scottish,irish or australian, when I told them Middlesbrough is about 100 miles from scotland they replied: So that is where your scottish twang comes from.

The original email read, in part, "Hi! I'm new to this list! I'm a Manchester United-cum-Middlesborough fan living in Singapore" (July 18th, 1995). It drew the follow response from one of the regulars.

From: "Kris" <kris@mot.com>
 Date: Tue, 18 Jul 1995 22:09:58 -0230
 Subject: Re: Scum supporter

So he's a Man U supporter from Singapore. How many matches has he been to? Why does he support Man U, is he a glory hunter. No of cause not his pet pigeons' girl friend was from Manchester.

And now he claims to be a BORO fan aswell, I have absolutley nothing against Man U, and respect them as a great footballing side, apart from that French SH!T of course, him and the millions of people that claim to go to every home match and all the other B@!!OX they talk. Look pal if you're going to support a team let me give you a bit of friendly advice:

SPELL THE F U (| < ! N G NAME RIGHT.²¹⁷

Right, now we've got the FAQs out the way, welcome to the list Mike. I'm sure you'll abide by the rules and I hope you'll enjoy your stay.

1992

Kris.

As the example above shows, it was possible to use spelling shibboleths as something akin to an induction. In that case it was clear from the various responses that the poster was not really welcome. Other new posters had an easier time of it though. For example, the email with which I began this section— Tim Lloyd's response to a misspelling by a recent member— demonstrates that misspelling with no other mistakes did not always lead to hostility. In that case, as noted, Tim responded with humour rather than anger.

> Maple Leafs, Blue Jays and MiddlesBorough F.C!
 ^^^^^^

Intruder Alert Intruder Alert !!! Only a non Boro person would spell
Middlesbrough wrong <g> ; -P²¹⁸

This was not Howard's first email to the list; he had recently introduced himself to the group and made it clear that he was a Canadian who, through friendship with a Middlesbrough supporter, had begun following Middlesbrough Football Club. Tim's gentle ribbing simultaneously flagged the newcomer's error and, through use of paralinguistic forms such as a smiley, indicated a certain amount of acceptance.

Joseph's case, discussed earlier, was an example of something I saw only infrequently where a new member consistently failed to obey the list's netiquette and

²¹⁷The word “fucking” has been bowdlerised by the poster - Kris - using a style that is similar to “leet speak” (Woudenberg).

²¹⁸The email is reproduced in its entirety earlier.

received a hostile enough response that he or she eventually stopped posting. Joseph's failures were not solely due to his misspellings but they were used against him as one of a series of means to position him as an outsider. On the other hand, the poster above from Canada— Howard— was quickly accepted into the group as an insider despite his misspelling.²¹⁹

As I stated earlier, the Boro List members rarely commented on spelling. Initially this was an informal norm but eventually, towards the end of my fieldwork, Tim Lloyd added an injunction into the “welcome message” that was sent to each new subscriber.

Spelling/grammar, etc - Don't go round pulling people up because of their spelling and the such, I'm sure we'd all love to have perfect English, but at the end of the day we are a very diverse group of people and some people in here don't have English as their first language.

As long as you understand what the message says then who cares if there is a few typo's. Hell I couldn't care less if it's spelt in phonetics as long as it gets the message across.²²⁰

Although there were still outbreaks of comments about the Middlesbrough and Teesside misspellings there were no complaints about any other spelling mistakes.

²¹⁹Howard went on to form the now defunct North American Boro List and become a core member of the original Boro List. Interestingly, he was one of the few early members to have no connections to Teesside. He had worked in Ontario with a colleague from Stockton, Teesside who had asked him to find some information about Middlesbrough via the Internet. In so doing, he became a fan of the club and finally travelled to Middlesbrough for his first game in 1998.

²²⁰Retrieved from majordomo@hk.super.net, Monday December 16th, 1996.

Spelling Norms

If, as it appeared, the insistence on the correct spelling of Middlesbrough and Teesside functioned as a marker of identity, it seemed to me that this might reflected in other spelling conventions. Consequently I explored whether the list used British English spelling conventions (e.g. “colour”) or American English (“color”). I realised that I had assumed that the list used British English spelling but decided to check to see if that was actually the case. I did this by running a word search for the word-forms “color” (the American spelling) and “colour” (the British spelling) in the saved messages from my fieldwork period (April 1995 to the end of August 1996). I chose color/colour as an example because it was a fairly common word that is relevant to football fans (due to interest in the colours that a team may play in) and is fairly easy to spell. In the corpus of 9,299 messages I had saved, I retrieved 99 uses of “colour” in total, 20 of which were examples of quoted or copied text. Therefore, there were 79 different uses of the word-form “colour” in text that had been created by the list members. During this period, there were only eight uses of the word form “color”. There was also one misspelling of the word as “coloures” which I counted as one of the British English spelling instances. Of the American spellings, two were quoted in forwarded jokes, two were used by one member based in Pittsburgh and one by a member in Hong Kong. The remainder were quotes in replies that were not commented on. This dominance of standard British English spelling helped confirm to me what I had come to realise through list membership, which is that the majority of members who did not live in the UK were

expatriates from the UK and that very few of the members were fans who had no connection at all to the Teesside area.

To test whether there had been any significant changes I ran a similar search on the current version of the list hosted by Yahoo Groups. I searched 11,140 messages spanning the period July 2005 to May 15, 2005. During that time I found 2 different uses of the word form “color” and 42 different uses of “colour”.²²¹ It seems that throughout all the changes that the list has undergone, the spelling has remained British English.

It should be remembered that there has never, in my experience, been a “spelling flame war” and neither have I encountered any complaints about “non-British” spellings. There has, however, been one related issue which occasionally drew comment— the use of the name “soccer” to refer to football. Soccer is a term used throughout North America to differentiate the game from “American football.” The word, “soccer”, is derived from the word “association” in the name “Association Football” and is used in areas of the world— primarily North America— where it is thought necessary to differentiate association football from other locally popular sports (“Football (Soccer) Names”). Among football fans in the UK there is a certain amount of hostility over the use of “soccer” to refer to football.

²²¹ There were a lot of duplicated results due to a debate about racism which resulted in a lot of quoting. The results above only count the original use of the word form and not its appearance in any quoted emails.

I HATE the word "soccer". AFC stands for Arsenal Football Club not Arsenal Soccer Club. Is there a single professional "soccer club" in the country, I wonder? (Boro List, June 2nd, 1995)

The contention among UK football fans is that because football is a global sport, other sports (e.g. American football, Australian football) should change their names. The word soccer was used frequently in the Boro List during my fieldwork; I found 317 instances of it in the saved emails. The majority of times it is used when referring to something that has "soccer" in its name as in the following examples

Soccer AM on Sky Sports have a competition on a Saturday morning...
(Feb 24th, 1996)

The following news item was posted on the SoccerNet site: (March 6th, 1996)

I won't get to see the highlights of the game until this Saturday, the bastards don't show the "Big League Soccer" program till a week later out here. (August 22nd, 1995)

It was also used in unmarked occasions but in each case the person using it had self-identified as American with one exception: a retired British man living in the north-east of England. On the whole, the list was fairly tolerant about the use of soccer but, occasionally, as with the misspellings of Middlesbrough and Teesside, it could be used to mark difference. In particular it was thought to connote an American identity, as this email from a Canadian indicates:

All I have to say about this "SoccerNet" thing is, it's gotta be a Yank's idea. (June 2nd, 1995)

The "SoccerNet thing" referred to was an early and highly contentious attempt to provide a commercial web portal for football information. The American company behind it had contacted various football email lists and tried to persuade their owners to set up fan-created webpages on "soccernet" but met with an almost blanket refusal.²²² During this period, the football newsgroup on USENET (rec.sports.soccer) and various football fan email lists—including the Boro List—buzzed with angry emails. As with the Middlesbrough and Teesside examples, the use of the term "soccer" drew opprobrium in part because the user had already upset the list members.

As a folklorist I've come to see these uses of spelling, particularly the shibboleths, as marking group boundaries in a way that follows Noyes's comments on the notion of group ("Group"). The shibboleths can be used when required but also, as the number of un-commented instances of the misspellings show, are only important when the members have decided that they need to assert group boundaries. My discussion in chapter 2 of Cohen's focus on the symbolic creation of community through the use of group boundaries, (*The Symbolic Construction of Community*) appears to be germane here and may also help to explain why some boundary markers were rarely used. The mailing list— at that point— was subscription only and not necessarily easy to find. It

²²²A version of soccernet eventually emerged and is now owned by the North American sports media company ESPN.

could be assumed that most people on the list were fellow insiders and that there were relatively few dealings with outsiders. Consequently, there was less need to perform identity through the use of eye dialect. When outsiders did post, spelling and speech forms suddenly became important. It is noticeable that the very successful “Fly Me to the Moon”²²³ message board features a much greater level of performance of identity through the use of language but that board is open to all, and is part of a football site with boards for all fans. Therefore a large number of posts on the Middlesbrough section are from outsiders. Consequently there is a much greater need for the Boro fans on that board to perform identity.

Playful Spellings

One aspect of the spelling that it took me a long time to notice was that there was very little in the way of “play” with spelling. Researchers into computer-mediated communication had frequently noted typographical innovation in CMC such as capitalisation and smileys (e.g. Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire) and folklorists such as Brenda Danet had commented on the use of playful creativity in spelling (Danet, *Cyberpl@y*; “Text as Mask”; Danet, Rudenberg and Rosenbaum). What was quite remarkable about the Boro List, however, was the absence of playful spelling. Spelling mistakes aside, the list members stuck to standard British English spelling. Typographical conventions which had become accepted as netiquette (such as

²²³[Http://www.fmttm.com](http://www.fmttm.com). Part of the “Rivals Network”.

capitalisation for shouting and smileys to indicate humour) were also used. The members wrote in a register, with a few exceptions with which I will deal later, that could be described in short-hand as Standard Internet English. This leads to the obvious question: why?

One answer comes from the importance of the frequent posters (as identified in chapter 4) in the list. Although there appears to be a higher proportion of participation to lurking than normal, the frequent posters appear to set the norms for the list: not necessarily through explicit sanctions—as shown by the failure to enforce topic discussed last chapter—but through their communicative practice. Tim Lloyd in particular, characterised by Toby Potter as a “barman” in the opening quote to chapter 4, rarely used anything but standard English. In informal correspondence with me, Tim referred to the importance of using ‘good English’ as a common language for all the members. Although I never saw this explicitly referenced on the list, Tim, along with the other frequent posters, set the tone for the list with his use of this linguistic register.

I did see the occasional use of non-standard spelling such as “tho” for “though” but it was extremely uncommon. When there was play with spelling, it was restricted to what could be seen as football humour.²²⁴ For example, as quotes from chapter 4 show, Tim Lloyd was particularly fond of using “Fuchs” as a substitution for “fuck”. Play with language that had nothing to do with football was, for all intents and purposes, non-

²²⁴It is possible that perhaps a lack of confidence in their literacy skills rendered play with issues in spelling and grammar somewhat problematic. I doubt that is the case; it seems more likely that such play simply would not be appropriate in a conversational setting in which football fans discussed football.

existent. For example, the rise of Simple Message Services (SMS) in mobile phones in the late 1990s generated a register that has become known as “txt spk”. This register originally evolved as a terse form of written English that enabled users to type fairly lengthy messages while remaining beneath the usual limit of around 150 characters in a SMS text. It became widely used by teenagers and adolescents in media beyond SMS as a shared register that was fairly opaque to outsiders (Thurlow; Thurlow and Brown). Although some of its forms (e.g. “C U L8R”—“see you later”) became well known they never appeared on the Boro List during my fieldwork. I occasionally see instances of “txt spk” on the FMTTM bulletin board but such messages invariably draw disapproval that appears to be strikingly similar to the discourse of print media “panics” about what Thurlow terms “New media communication” (“From Statistical Panic to Moral Panic”). For all that the Boro List appears to be avowedly oral in its communicative choices, members show a distinct disdain for any non-standard orthography.

As a second example of a “dog that didn’t bark”, the list has shown no interest in “leet speak” (Woudenberg). This register, as discussed by folklorist Nathan Woudenberg, represents words through transliterating letters into graphical forms, playful misspelling or phonetic equivalents. The name is a derivation of “elite speak” and was originally derived as an argot by which hackers communicated. To give a feel for the register, Woudenberg titles his article “13375|>34|<” which is one common way of typing the words “leet speak” in leet speak. In this case the “1” is a transliteration of a letter “l”, “33” represents two backwards facing “e’s”, “7” stands in for a “t”, “5” for an “s” “>”

for a “p” and so on. Unlike txt spk, leet speak is designed to be complicated and significantly more complex than the written form of Standard English in order to ensure that only certain “elites” can understand it. As with txt spk, some of the word forms in leet speak have become ubiquitous in online communication. For example, the deliberate misspelling of “the” as “teh” and “own” as “pwn”²²⁵ occasionally appear on the FMTTM board but never appeared in the Boro List during my fieldwork and have only rarely done so since.²²⁶ Thus, the list has a laissez-faire attitude towards misspellings but no tolerance for deliberate misspellings. These two examples, indicate that the Boro List has a complex set of norms about what is acceptable orthography and grammar that are significantly more nuanced than a simple reading of the Boro List with its myriad of accidental misspellings, grammatical errors, use of capitalisation, emoticons and so on might otherwise suggest.

Regional Forms

It was surprising to me that relatively few dialectical forms seemed to be used on the list. As a way of generating a sense of shared identity it would be appear to be an obvious technique. Some posters did use regional speech but it was a personal marker. One frequent poster started the majority of his posts with the greeting “nowthen” but on

²²⁵It took me 5 minutes of fighting with my word processor before I was able to persuade it not to correct those words.

²²⁶The FMMTM board does have a language censor which prevents the use of certain terms. It is not, therefore, unusual for board members to use leet speak techniques to bypass these filters. I have recently seen “|>huc” and other derivations used to swear without being censored.

the whole there was no wide-spread usage of dialect. This is not to say that there weren't non-standard forms of speech; there were, but they were rarely based in a Teesside dialect.²²⁷ The snippet below shows the use of "nowthen" but also shows a "laddish" vernacular with use of "mate" and "crack".

Date: Mon, 31 Jul 1995 06:11:28
 From: "M. Davidson" <m.Davidson1@dept.university.ac.uk>
 Subject: Re: Complaint (fwd)

Nowthen Colin!,
 I'm with you all the way on this one mate, a bit of crack is one thing,
 but this lad is/was well out of order!.

About the only dialectal usage I encountered in my research was in the occasional reference to a "parmo". A parmo is a greasy snack which is very loosely based on the recipe for chicken or pork parmesan, hence the nickname, and is the ideal way to end a night of heavy drinking after a football match. The meal is considered by the list members to be unique to the Teesside area. In an email from the summer of 1996, one of the posters, referring to the Boro's recently signed Italian star striker—Ravanelli—asks:

Date: Fri, 16 Aug 96 10:12:24 BST
 From: "Ian Sheward" <ISheward@uk.neofen.com>
 Subject: Re: *Boro* At it again....

> Ravanelli made the call, apparently to bemoan the dearth of decent
 > Italian restaurants in Middlesbrough.

Does he not eat Parmo's then ... they're great in the Boro - I've never
 seen them in Bristol or in my short time in London !!!

There were occasional instances in the time after I finished my fieldwork of individuals attempting eye dialectal forms but there was never a list-wide adoption. The

²²⁷This is the reverse of the "Fly Me to the Moon" web-based bulletin board. That public access board shows a great deal of eye dialect rendering of Teesside dialect.

local newspaper, *The Evening Gazette* introduced a character named “Teesside Tommy” who spoke in eye dialect so it was not unknown to the posters.²²⁸ On the whole the list members used fairly standard speech forms when typing. Play with language forms was restricted to a small number of regional terms for local foods. It is interesting to note though that usage of regional terms seems to have increased dramatically recently. In my saved fieldwork I only encountered a reference to “parmos” 3 times. Conversely, in just April 2004 there were 10 references to this and that appears to be fairly common. My suspicion is that this is an unexpected effect of the “Fly Me To The Moon” Bulletin Board.²²⁹ That board features a fair amount of eye dialect and frequent use of regional dialect, though by no means is it dominated by it. Possibly this is due to the fact that the board is viewable by anyone and therefore posters feel more need to assert a sense of identity through language use. On the Boro List, where everyone is, or is at least supposed to be, a Boro fan, it seems that the members have never felt a need to perform their identity through dialectal language use. Where such language use has surfaced it has always been as personal identity markers rather than group identity markers. Although the spellings for Teesside and Middlesbrough were used frequently as boundary

²²⁸The newspaper website can be found on <http://icteesside.co.uk> and features “Teesside Tommy” as an irregular feature.

²²⁹The board can be found at <http://www.fmttm.com>. It is part of “Rivals.net”.

markers—knowledge of their proper spelling was a marker of group identity—there was never any similar use of language terms.²³⁰

Communicating Online—Oral or Literate?

What became the most notable feature of the use of language on this list to me was its ‘orality’. At first I had not noticed it simply because it seemed ‘normal’ to me. I had frequented the soccer newsgroup on Usenet (rec.sports.soccer) and had participated in other newsgroups and the tone of the list seemed unremarkable. It was not until I started a smaller case study for a paper into another email discussion list “The Glorantha Digest”²³¹ that I realised just how much email lists could vary on an oral-literate continuum. “The Glorantha Digest” is a fan-based discussion list for a fantasy world—I will describe relevant features later—which is very determinedly literate in its presentation. My experience of the Glorantha Digest caused me to look at the Boro List in a new light. In particular it persuaded me to examine it in terms of how ‘oral’ it seemed. For the remainder of this chapter I intend to outline some of the oral features of the Boro List in the light of writings about orality and literacy and what it implies for that area of scholarship. I will also discuss how the Glorantha Digest manages to utilise very

²³⁰It may also be possible to see this use of language with its strictly enforced rules as a form of “speech play.” Although the use of language was not explicitly playful nor were the rules governing it explicitly articulated, the resulting language was highly esoteric. Notions of highly ordered language use that underpin play worlds could provide an alternate frame of understanding. See Huzinga or Sherzer, *Speech Play* for further development of this analysis.

²³¹The list archives can be accessed online at <http://www.gloranthadigest.com/>

different literate communicative strategies in order to indicate some of the wide varieties of possibilities that may be available in computer-mediated communication.

Research into CMC has challenged much of the scholarship in the orality and literacy debate. My research for this thesis required me to confront the need to theorise the nature of this new medium of communication. A virtual ethnography is one that treats the electronic personae and speech communities that develop through CMC as the primary or only medium of communication as the ethnographic context. As stated in chapter three, a virtual ethnography is one that is conducted within, to use William Gibson's famous phrase, the "consensual hallucination" of "Cyberspace" (*Neuromancer*) and thus foregrounds these virtual interactions rather than treating the keyboard, surrounding room and "real world" environment as the primary context. Given that computer-mediated communication is communication between two or more people via a computer, the medium of transmission is, then, the network between the computers that allows messages to be passed from one to the other. Instances of messages passed along this medium form the communicative acts with which I am centrally concerned in this thesis.

I chose to use an expansion of Hymes's articulation of ethnographies of communication into an "ethnography of computer-mediated communication" for the purposes of this research. Such an ethnography is the main tool I used in conducting the

ethnography and can be seen as parallel to other variations on Hymes's concept.²³² For the purposes of this section, then, I wish to examine the scholarship on oral and literate communication in relation to communications theory. My intent here is to use examples from my fieldwork to examine how computer-mediated communication strategies can deploy both oral and literate characteristics dependent on the users' needs. To do so, I will assess how the Boro List makes great use of oral strategies in order to generate conversational norms while the Glorantha Digest uses very different 'literate' strategies. Ultimately what is at stake here is an issue in mentalities: does the medium of communication "restructure thought" (Ong, "Writing") or do choices in communication lead to epiphenomenal poles on a continuum (Tannen, "Spoken and Written Language")? Consequently I will sketch the major issues in scholarship in this area before returning to an assessment of the Boro List in terms of orality.

Writing as Technology

Writing in *Empire and Communication*, Harold Innis claimed that all:

...written works, including this one, have dangerous implications to the vitality of an oral tradition and to the health of a civilization, particularly if they thwart the interest of a people in culture and, following Aristotle, the cathartic effects of culture. (preface)

²³²See for example Keith Basso's programmatic essay "The Ethnography of Writing," John Szwed's "Ethnography of Literacy", or Deborah Tannen's call for ethnographies of silence ("Silence, Anything But"). These works are starting to generate case studies such as Gerald Pocius's analysis of gravestone inscriptions ("Folk Religion"), René Galindo's study of an Amish newsletter and Mike Baynham's investigation of a literacy event.

In this respect he is following a train of thought that stretches back some two and a half thousand years to Plato and his comments in *Phaedrus* about the dangers of writing. Briefly Plato uses Socrates as a mouthpiece to claim that firstly, writing is inhuman in that it pretends to a reality that exists only in the human mind, secondly; it is unresponsive, which is to say that you cannot ask a question of a text; thirdly, writing destroys memory and, by implication, other reasoning faculties and, finally, that a written text cannot debate with you.²³³ Plato's overall argument is that writing functioned to deceive readers into believing that they had learned something when all they had done was memorised the physical representation—the written text—of that knowledge. For Innis, writing was a “spatially biased” medium that encouraged “monopolies of knowledge” that allowed for the development of militaristic empires and also functioned in opposition to oral tradition. Regardless of whether one agrees with his thesis it highlights the power of communicative media and the possibilities for social and cultural changes inherent in any new media technology.²³⁴

This argument is extended by McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* to encompass the rise of printing. The invention of the Gutenberg printing press allowed for speed and

²³³This argument has become fundamental to literature on the relationship between orality and literacy. For discussion of Plato's views on orality and literacy see Havelock's *Preface to Plato*. The best summary, and the one which I draw on here, can be found in Walter Ong's article, “Writing is a Technology”.

²³⁴Consider, for example, the following comment by Jack Goody from his book *The Logic of Writing and the Organization of Society*:

This attempt leads me to shift part of the emphasis put on the means and modes of production in explaining human history to the means and modes of communication. (xi)

convenience in the copying and dissemination of written texts. McLuhan in many ways follows Innis, his mentor, in devaluing the printed text and looking to new media of oral communication, such as telephone, radio and so on, as offering a potential reinvigoration of the oral tradition and thus reintroducing a more egalitarian, human world.²³⁵ Walter Ong also foregrounds the importance of new communications media and sets up a taxonomy of 'primary' and 'secondary' orality in his hugely influential book *Orality and Literacy*. Common throughout these inquiries is the view of writing and print as technologies of communication. Consequently, as McLuhan points out, many of Plato's arguments about the dangers of writing were rehashed with the advent of print (*Gutenberg*), and are now being re-used to argue against new technologies such as the computer (see Ong, *Orality* 79–81; "Writing" 297). In this respect we can see that the emergence of the computer network as a communications medium functions to defamiliarise the written text. If, as Ong claims, writing has become so internalised that it no longer appears to be an external technology ("Writing" 294) then the advent of these new media casts new light on the act of writing. Thus, it can be claimed that the investigation of orality and literacy threatens to deconstruct the text, a point Ong makes when he claims that

...texts and anything considered by analogy as a text, can never be found to have total internal consistency. But this is not surprising if one notes that texts are not purely "natural" products, such as exhaled breath or sweat or spittle, but are technologically constructed systems.... As

²³⁵He develops this argument most thoroughly in his book *Understanding Media*.

systems they can not be self-contained. They are built by something outside them. ("Hermeneutic Forever" 9)²³⁶

Similarly Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett claims that "electronic communication broadly conceived marks the line between modern and postmodern communication" ("The Electronic Vernacular" 21).

For many, as I outlined in a previous chapter, the advent of new communications technologies that re-emphasise orality are seen as re-democratising communication. It is argued that if writing led to monopolies of communication then the anarchic, egalitarian sprawl that is the Internet will lead to new forms of information equity and vastly extend participatory democracy.

...computer-mediated communication... will do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a 'vehicle' and yet not detach us from the rest of the world. (Steven G. Jones, "Understanding Community" 11)

With the development of the Internet, and with the increasing pervasiveness of communication between networked computers, we are in the middle of the most transforming technological event since the capture of fire. (Barlow et al. 36)

²³⁶ Ong is discussing how postmodern deconstructionists are surprised by parallels to their work in orality and literacy studies. He is drawing on Gödel's famous theorem that no system can ever be self-contained. In as much as writing is a communication system then, inevitably, there are certain possibilities that are just not communicable in writing. Of course the same goes for vocalisations, as Ong says in an earlier article :

Articulated truth has no permanence. Full truth is deeper than articulation. We find it hard to recognize this obvious truth, so deeply has the fixity of the written word taken possession of our consciousness. ("Writing" 295)

Naturally there are counter views such as those of Clifford Stoll who claims that computer-mediated communication is impersonal, disembodied and lacks the warmth of face-to-face interaction (*Silicon Snake Oil*), a point also made by writer Sven Bickerts:

In living my own life, what seems most important to me is focus, a lack of distraction—an environment that engenders a sustained and growing awareness of place, and face-to-face interaction with other people.... I see this whole breaking wave, this incursion of technology, as being in so many ways designed to pull me from that center of focus. (Qtd in: Barlow, "What are we Doing Online?" 37-38).

Firstly it is not necessarily the case that computer-mediated communication will be any more democratic than print. For example, Andrew Gillespie and Kevin Robins claim that:

Contrary to popular predictions of their decentralizing impact, digital communications contribute to new and more complex forms of corporate integration, reinforcing center-periphery problems on a global scale (Gillespie and Robins 7).

To justify this, they draw on the work of Harold Innis and claim that computer-mediated communication is "inherently spatial" (9). This leads, they claim, to a domination of regional areas by a core which controls the communication network. This assertion is somewhat validated by research showing that women, ethnic minorities and lower-income groups were vastly under-represented on the Internet up to the millennium (e.g. Mele). Yet it is undoubtedly the case that computer-mediated communication can also lead to localised action and resistance, as Christopher Mele shows in his description of the way in which a female African-American residence group used computer-mediated

communication networks to resist the local government's attempt to tear down their houses and relocate them. In another context, Leslie Regan Shade describes how community-based computer networks could be used to promote a distinctively Canadian identity as long as inequalities in access can be overcome ("Computer Networking in Canada"; "Roughing It"). Certainly, CMC, as with any medium, has a bias and the invocation of the frontier mentality which seems to pervade populist writings about the Internet²³⁷ appears to lend credence to the spatial orientation of computer network communication.

Orality vs. Literacy

Inevitably scholars have attempted to determine the differences between oral and literate cultures through the study of language. This has taken place at the macro level with scholars such as Walter Ong and Jack Goody, and at the micro level with the likes of Deborah Tannen and Ron and Suzanne Scollon.²³⁸ To anticipate, the micro-analyses have been used to test various hypotheses and, generally, they have found these hypotheses wanting. The primary hypothesis has been that written text is context-free whereas spoken utterances are context-dependent. Deborah Tannen summarises the argument thus:

²³⁷For example Howard Rheingold's proselytizing book is subtitled *Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (Rheingold 1993). Similarly, Clifford Stoll's anti-Internet book, *Silicon Snake Oil*, also draws on deliberately negative images from the American frontier (Stoll 1995). Both Stoll and Rheingold are long-time Internet users.

²³⁸See the appropriate entries in the bibliography for the noted authors.

In oral tradition, it is not assumed that the expressions contain meaning in themselves, in a way that can be analysed out. Rather words are a convenient tool to signal already shared social meaning. ("Implications" 327).

She points out that in an oral tradition the phrases "I could care less" and "I couldn't care less" are functionally identical and quotes Olson's dictum that in written texts "the meaning is in the text" whereas with spoken utterances the "meaning is in the context" (ibid.).

Similarly, drawing on the work of Millman Parry and Albert Lord who determined the importance of formula in oral composition, scholars such as Ong, Goody, and Havelock contended that the formula represented a different metalinguistic awareness that was peculiarly oral (cf. Tannen, "Implications" 327). In fact, Ong appears to hold formulaic expressions as central to oral cultures:

Heavy patterning and communal fixed formulas in oral cultures serve some of the purposes of writing in chirographic cultures, but in doing so they of course determine the kind of thinking that can be done, the way experience is intellectually organized. (*Orality* 36)

For Ong, the formula serves as a repository of wisdom that can be articulated in the appropriate context.

The situation appears, however, to be more complex than a simple oral versus literate culture dichotomy. For example, in his analysis of Yoruba ritual language, F. Niyi Akinnaso discovered that

the distinction between ordinary social communication and ritual language in nonliterate societies is as important as that between oral and written language in any discussion of language evolution, especially in accounting for lexical and syntactico-semantic complexities. (27)

Instead, he claims that particular registers of language evolve according to “situationally specialised topics or communicative activities” (25). Ron and Suzanne Scollon problematise the oral-literate dichotomy in a similar manner in their fieldwork with Athabaskans at Fort Chipewyan (*Linguistic Convergence*). They claim that it is the degree of interaction between the participants that determines how much use is made of the immediate context, thus one can think of the participants employing various communicative strategies that are situationally defined, some of which may appear ‘literate’ and others ‘oral.’

The preceding conclusion is precisely that taken by the sociolinguist Deborah Tannen. She has specialised in close linguistic analyses of spoken and written texts in attempt to tease out the features of orality and literacy. Her opinion is that “...many features that have been associated exclusively with literacy are rhetorical strategies found in spoken discourse” (“Myth” 37). Furthermore, she asserts that the emphasis placed on different strategies varies by culture. For example she describes an experiment in which she asked a number of Americans and a number of Greeks to describe a series of pictures. Tannen discovered that the “Greeks told ‘better stories’” whereas the Americans tended to include as many details as possible. (“Oral and Literate” 4). Her hypothesis is that the Americans treated the exercise as one of rote memorisation, minimising interpersonal

involvement, whereas the Greeks treated it as an exercise in recreating a story. Essentially the American subjects treated the pictures as a decontextualised text and used many “literate” strategies in description but the Greeks attempted to do precisely the opposite and contextualise the pictures. Drawing on other examples, Tannen notes that most studies of “oral” language use has been among American Blacks and been tied into poor results in literacy tests (13).²³⁹ Also, where comparative studies of oral texts and spoken utterances have been conducted the material chosen has often biased the results. In fact, in the research she has done she notes that “the speakers whose strategies are somehow more ‘oral’ are nonetheless highly literate people” (13). Consequently she proposes that we should replace the oral-literate divide with a continuum and states that

...both oral and literate strategies can be seen in spoken discourse. Understanding this, let us not think of orality and literacy as an absolute split, and let us not fall into the trap of thinking of literacy, or written discourse as decontextualised. Finally, the examples presented of conversational style make it clear that it is possible to be both highly oral and highly literate. Thus, let us not be lured into calling some folks oral and others literate. (“Myth” 47-8)

Using this concept as a tool, Tannen is able to show how individual speakers can vary their communicative strategies for different effects and that therefore

²³⁹ Most work in this field has drawn on Basil Bernstein's notions of restricted and elaborated codes. Bernstein claimed that certain ethnic and class-based groups spoke in a “restricted” code that hampered abstract thought, thus hindering these groups in social development (*Class, Codes and Social Control*). This analysis inspired attempts to teach members of these groups an “elaborated code” (i.e. “proper”) dialect of English in order to facilitate upward social mobility. Although Bernstein's research is controversial (See for example, Postman, *The Politics of Reading*) it is still widely applied.

The difference between features of language which distinguish discourse types reflects not only—and not mainly—spoken vs. written mode, but rather genre and related register, growing out of communicative goals and content. (“Oral and Literate” 18).

Such findings mirror Hymes's description of the relationships between speakers, listeners, goals and contexts (e.g. “Models”) and implicitly challenges the fixed relationship between communication and medium first proposed by Innis and then elaborated by McLuhan, Ong and others.

Consequently, it seems useful to apply ethnographic methodology to the study of communicative events and to treat variations in language use and choice of medium as a rule-governed activity. Although Hymes's original focus was the ethnography of speech and speech events (“The Ethnography of Speaking”), he later broadened his theory to consist of the whole of the communicative act and its various possibilities (see “Models”). Thus an ethnography of speaking can be seen as a communicative ethnography that focuses on speech and one can elaborate to include ethnographies of writing (Basso; Galindo), literacy (Baynham; Heath; Pocius; Szwed), silence (Tannen and Saville-Troike, *Perspectives*) and, in this present case, ethnographies of computer-mediated communication.

There are other bodies of scholarship that critique orality and literacy dichotomies, such as the work done in the field of ethnopoeitics by Dennis Tedlock (*The Spoken Word*) and Dell Hymes (*In Vain I Tried to Tell You*) which have investigated Native-American narratives and discovered poetic structures within oral forms that

appear remarkably literate. Also notable is John Miles Foley's work which attempts to unify Hymes's theories of the ethnography of communication with Oral Formulaic theory. For example, writing in the *The Singer of Tales*, Foley asserts that:

...the old model of Great Divide between orality and literacy has given way in most quarters.... One of the preconditions for this shift from a model of contrasts to one of a spectra has been the exposure of writing and literacy as complex technologies.... (79)

Foley's intent is to apply phenomenological model of the reading process to both oral performances and written texts in order to create a unified field and he has subsequently expanded the topic to investigate the relationship between oral tradition and CMC. ("Oral Tradition and the Internet").

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication further problematises simplistic oral and literate dichotomies. It should be recalled that there are many types of computer-mediated communication available via the Internet. The web, for example, can transmit full-colour images, sounds, videos and so on in a complex multi-media format. On the other hand, until the late 1990s, basic email could transmit nothing but the characters found on a common typewriter keyboard. Thus it would be a mistake to treat all computer-mediated communication as homogenous. During my fieldwork with the Boro List, the members were restricted to plain text emails and could not include attachments in their emails. Therefore my comments about the members' use of the medium need to be understood in

the light of the technical capabilities of this medium. Other research projects need to assess the use of oral vs. literate features in media with different capabilities.

Perhaps the most important work about computer-mediated communication in the last decade has been Kiesler et al.'s report on the communicative features of the medium. Their analysis was, essentially, that computer-mediated communication is deficient in paralinguistic features and they presented five areas in which this was the case (1125-26).²⁴⁰ This information lack was held to encourage certain forms of behaviour: for example they claimed that email lacked social cues leading to more egalitarian communicative behaviour, and that the computer screen lacked the ability to communicate emotion, leading to a perception that email is more impersonal than other forms of communication. This slim report engendered a huge field of research which focussed primarily on social-psychological analyses of behaviour in computer-mediated communication within organisations. Although many of their findings are questionable they are also highly influential and articulated what was a commonly held meta-communicative belief about the medium, namely that it lacks 'warmth' and is conducive to misunderstandings. For example, during a heated argument on the Boro List about whether a joke was racist, Tim Lloyd posted:

The one thing the British are good at is laughing at ourselves, there is very rarely malice in any of it. The hardest thing though is getting that across in

²⁴⁰This is explained in greater detail in chapter two.

writing, where it can easily be misunderstood. Smiley's only go so far in trying to show the tone of the message. (April 25th, 1996)

The core of his argument is that a certain type of communicative behaviour which he has associated with Britishness is hard to convey via CMC. He does point out the use of "smileys" but also notes their limitations.

This perception of CMC as a deficient medium is what informed Tim's interventions into the Boro List when communication became an issue. He was proficient in "netiquette" as it existed at that time and used it extensively. For example, Chuq von Rospach's seminal document "Primer on How to Work With the USENET Community" dealt with the problems of conveying humour when lacking inflection and "language" in a way that directly informed Tim's understanding of the issue:

Primer on How to Work With the USENET Community²⁴¹
Chuq Von Rospach

Be Careful with Humor and Sarcasm

Without the voice inflections and body language of personal communications, it is easy for a remark meant to be funny to be misinterpreted. Subtle humor tends to get lost, so take steps to make sure that people realize you are trying to be funny. The net has developed a symbol called the smiley face. It looks like ":-)" and points out sections of articles with humorous intent. No matter how broad the humor or satire, it is safer to remind people that you are being funny.

Summary of Things to Remember

Never forget that the person on the other side is human
Be Careful What You Say About Others
Be brief
Your postings reflect upon you; be proud of them
Use descriptive titles

²⁴¹This was retrieved in 1997 from a recurring posting. There are many versions of this document online. The most stable URL is <http://www.faqs.org/faqs/usenet/primer/part1/>.

Think about your audience
 Be careful with humor and sarcasm
 Please rotate material with questionable content
 Mark or rotate answers or spoilers
 Spelling flames considered harmful

The Boro List members did not “play” with spelling or typography but they did adopt practises that were considered to form part of netiquette and understood violations of them. For example, the use of capitalisation is generally held to indicate shouting. In the following reply to a message on the Boro List one of the regulars (Bill) comments on a new member’s use of capitalisation by ‘shouting’ back.

From: bill.scourfield@place.university.ac.uk
 Sate: Thu, 23 Mar 1995 12:09:15
 Subject: Re: ei ei eio (fwd)

> YEAH MATE I WAS AT THAT ONE AS WELL..CLASS PERFORMANCE, ESPECIALLY THE
 GOALS
 > FROM WILLIE AND JOHNNIE!...WHEN THAT 95TH MINUTER WENT IN I THOUGHT SHIT
 CANT
 > BELIEVE IT BUT TO SEE THE REF RULE IT OUT FOR NO REASON WAS GREAT. SUCH
 A GOOD
 > DAY I DIDNT REALLY CARE THAT SHEFF UTD HAD WON TO SEND US DOWN.
 >

HOW COME YOU ALWAYS WRITE IN CAPITALS? - IT'S LIKE YOU'RE ALWAYS SHOUTING

A quick flurry of emails revealed that the original poster was new to email in general and was not aware that he could use lower case.

An alternative way to approach the communicative features of computer-mediated communication is to examine what it contains rather than what it lacks. Seana Kozar has demonstrated how Chinese Internet users have taken advantage of the ability to mix keyboard art (i.e. pictures made from combinations of letters) with text in producing Christmas cards, Sandra Katzman has suggested that “smileys” form an instance of

“quirky rebuses”, while Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has shown how users can play with email programs to produce recursive messages (“The Electronic Vernacular”). Indeed this concept of playfulness seems to have become a central concern for contemporary researchers. Thus Danet, Rudenberg & Rosenberg claim that “[f]our interrelated, basic features of computers and computer-mediated communications foster playfulness: ephemerality, speed, interactivity, and freedom from the tyranny of materials” (44). Therefore, they assert, while earlier researchers were “concerned primarily with the instrumental, rather than the expressive aspects of communication” (42), current work is focussing on the possibilities for play and performance via the Internet for, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes “playful uses of the medium may be even more revealing than strictly practical applications” (“The Electronic Vernacular” 22). It may well be the case that the standard conception of communicative features in CMC arising from a need to combat the lack of information is insufficient and that a creative playfulness with language is just as important.

Danet, Rudenberg & Rosenberg also note that “Linguistic features previously associated with oral communication are strikingly in evidence in this new form of writing” (46). For example, Denise Murray, who studied the use of email among office workers, noted that email was generally informal, not structured into sentences, and often very context dependent—features usually associated with orality (e.g. *Conversation for Action*). Simeon Yates, in his linguistic analysis of a corpus of texts from a computer conferencing system noted that they contained an unpredictable mixture of “literate” and

“oral” features (“Oral and Written”). Taking such observations in stock, Danet notes that the different forms of computer-mediated communication vary between more “speech-like” forms and more “writing-like” forms (*Cyberpl@y* 16). Danet posits that whether the mode chosen is synchronous or asynchronous has a major impact on just how “speech-like” or “writing-like” the mode is (16). The Boro List was propagated purely synchronously in plain text yet it seems to me that it is experienced as “speech-like.”

One way to demonstrate this is through the application of Ong's oral psychodynamics to CMC. In *Orality and Literacy*, Walter Ong gives a list of the psychodynamic features of orality and indicates how they differ from literate forms. Investigating just three of them helps indicate the ‘oral’ nature of the Boro List.

Additive Nature of Oral Utterances.

"Oral utterances are additive" (37). By this Ong claims that oral utterances tend to use the conjunction "and" rather than subordinating conjunctions to produce additive lists. The nature of most email is that it is very easy to add texts together with copy and paste functions. The work of Simeon Yates has tended to show, in addition, that simple conjunctions are more prevalent in email than in writing, but possibly less so than in speech. The following example demonstrates various "oral" features in its composition, use of simple conjunctions, dialect, context dependency and various paralinguistic features, such as the liberal use of capitalisation for shouting, repeated exclamation marks, and repeats of words to indicate chanting.

Thu, 4 May 1995 12:42:24
From: Mitch <MJ657@unimid.ac.uk>

Subject: !!!!!!!!!!!!!

I'm not gonna even try to represent how I feel now in text cos it is not possible.

FANTASTIC...I'm still stunned.(and hungover)

Nightmare last night. Listened to the first half on the radio and then went to the pub. Watched it on text until 89 minutes when the group I was with decided we were moving on. Was a bag of nerves until midnight when I was put out of my misery by a group of pissed Boro.

To all those people that I have banned from singing Going Up throughout the season.....Sing yer hearts out for the lads!

Middlesbrough F.C. Division 1 Champions 1994/95. We love you.

Happiness.....YYYYYYYEEEEEEESSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!! EIOEIOEIOEIO!!!

Now tranmere.

Steveget back to me ..we'll meet at Notts Station and take it from there. Will meet as many of you others at the ground at about 1/1.30...OK. All you boys going in the Tranny end..try to meet us as well.

I wish this bloody hangover would go away. Right now it feels like Chris Eubank and Nigel Benn are staging their latest rematch in my head.

Championi Championi AWAY AWAY AWAY!

It's beautiful to be Boro.

It needs to be re-emphasised that the type is not being manipulated to be playful but to capture oral features and speech forms. The "EIOEIO" section is a form of "virtual chanting" as with "Championi." The switching between addressing the list, chanting, addressing an individual shows extremely complex and skilled manipulation of the register. It is, however, not a simple attempt to 'recreate' speech in CMC because there is no way in which this message could be simply spoken, chanted or sung outloud.

Aggregative

"Oral utterances are aggregative" (38). If an oral culture must memorise its knowledge then it makes sense to cluster various concepts together leading to time-honoured clichés such as "the sturdy oak" and "brave soldier." A literate culture, he argues, is able to analytically deconstruct these aggregations. Such formulaic language certainly occurs on the mailing list. References to football being a "funny old game", formulaic descriptions of the referee— who is always blind, biased, "a joke" or all three— standard descriptions of the Boro's players as "heroes" while the opponents are "cheats": all of these permeate the list.

Sheffield United are a horrible, niggly, nasty team. They spent the whole match winding us all up with the added help of the ref. (April 21st, 1995)

That referee was a bloody joke! (April 25th, 1995)

I don't think we will struggle, but that shows what a funny old game football is! (October 3rd, 1995)

On the other hand, the list members are fully aware of the existence of football clichés and refer to them as such. Indeed, a common criticism of newspaper articles and match reports that the list members perceived to be biased against Middlesbrough was that they were likely to be riddled with clichés due to "lazy journalism."

Did they actually bother to write new articles or just recycle the clichés applied to Juno's arrival? (August 6th, 1996)

Sit tight, watch this space, hold on to your hats, cliché cliché, etc. (January 29th, 1996)

What's the old cliché? "....the score really didn't reflect the run of play."
(February 6th, 1996)

Agonistically Toned

"Agonistically toned" (43). As has previously been noted, CMC has been frequently stereotyped as lacking in information that can easily lead to misunderstandings and angry exchanges. According to Ong, verbal dueling is an important part of an oral culture and it certainly appears to be an important part of communication on the Internet, so much so that an emic term "flaming" has been coined to describe angry exchanges. Is there, then, an argument that this prevalence of flaming is more a part of the way of life that has developed on the Internet in general? For example, one popular activity is to post insulting messages to a mailing list anonymously in a kind of verbal assault.²⁴² I saw versions of this occur on the Boro List several times when supporters of rival football teams managed to subscribe to the list purely in order to post insults. The example from Peter Philips in the previous chapter is one such case. Another came from a Newcastle supporter.

Date: Wed, 08 Nov 95 19:17:17
From: <cmstudent@tees.ac.uk>
Subject: SAD BUGGERS!

²⁴²There are various forms of this activity which are grouped under the general term of "trolling."

I have now unsubscribed from this list, as you are all a pack of sad men, who go around bugging each other. I support the toon army, who will win the treble this year, and Middlesbrough will win sod all!
 Middlesbrough Are Shite!
 Middlesbrough Are Shite!
 Middlesbrough Are Shite!

The usual response to this messages was for list members to post insulting messages back to the list: a procedure which may not have had any obvious effect but, symbolically, showed them 'defending' themselves. For example, after an insulting post about Juninho in which an outsider posted, "I'M SICK OF ALL THIS CRAP ABOUT JUNINIHO , HE'S OVER RATED AND FIDDLES WITH KIDS",²⁴³ various list members responded.

Subject: Re: Juninho overrated hahahaha
 Date: Wed, 8 Nov 1995 15:17:25 -0800 (PST)
 From: Kris

> I'M SICK OF ALL THIS CRAP ABOUT JUNINIHO , HE'S OVER RATED AND
 FIDDLES
 > WITH KIDS.

Ask Leeds United and the England squad how overrated he is. Do I sense a touch of jealousy?

While another member tried a different tack:

Date: Wed, 8 Nov 1995 18:32:07 GMT
 Subject: Re:
 From: Gary <Gary@netropolis.net>
 At 04:06 PM 11/8/95, you wrote:

>
 >
 > I'M SICK OF ALL THIS CRAP ABOUT JUNINIHO , HE'S OVER RATED AND
 FIDDLES
 > WITH KIDS.
 >

I'm sick of kids fiddling with Daddy's comp-comp machine again.
 Go outdoors and play, Junior.

²⁴³November 8th, 1995. Capitals in original.

Although this kind of behaviour was relatively infrequent, the annoyance the messages caused was significant and tended to disrupt the list. Tim intervened several times and asked the members to let him deal with it. Something he managed to do quite successfully.

Date: Thu, 9 Nov 1995 09:34:39 +0800
 From: Tim Lloyd
 Subject: Re: SAD BUGGERS!

>I have now unsucribed from this list, as you are all a pack of sad men,
 >****

Ignore this individual..... I've Emailed his Postmaster....

Tim

A week later, the person was forced to apologise by the authorities at his university.

Date: Thu, 16 Nov 1995 12:26:46 GMT0BST
 Subject: Apology - sad buggers
 From: "Michael" <MLJ32@tees.ac.uk>

Dear Members Of The Boro Mailing List

I wish to apologise for the offensive and inflammatory message that I posted to the boro mailing list, under someone elses e-mail address (****).
 There was no excuse for this, and I now totally regret what I have done.

Your Sincerely,

Michael Jevons

Even when the list is running smoothly it is not an environment for the faint-hearted.

Passionate arguments break out, especially if the team is playing badly, furious quarrels erupt and even the good natured banter can be very cutting. Whether this is a feature of the medium or a reflection of the agreed norms of the kind of communicative behaviour prevalent through football fandom is the issue. These three examples of how certain

'oral' features can be seen as common on the Boro List do show, though, that even in this pure typographic medium, issues in orality and literacy are problematised by computer-mediated communication.

Discourse and Speech Community

The examples from the Boro List above helped review certain issues arising from an inquiry into the relationship between orality and literacy. I argued that reductionist dichotomies do not withstand scrutiny and used some examples from the list to illustrate this point in reference to work of Deborah Tannen and others. I think it is more appropriate to assert that users possess degrees of communicative competence and that they make choices as to how to communicate (cf. Hymes 1962, 1972). Certain constellations of these choices tend to be associated with formal, 'literate' communication and other with more informal, 'oral' communication. The postings on email can display a great degree of literacy when so required. To help illustrate this point and provide a counter point to the Boro List, I will use the "Glorantha Digest" email list.

The Glorantha Digest is an email list for fans of Greg Stafford's fictional world of "Glorantha." Stafford is a mythologist, part-time shaman and, until recently, full-time game designer who helped set up the Californian games company "Chaosium Inc." He initially created Glorantha as a way to stave off boredom during lectures at university and then started to use it as a testing ground for his theories of mythology. In this respect he follows in the tradition of authors such as J. R. R. Tolkien and M. A. R. Barker who both

created worlds in order to explore their interests in philology and mythology.²⁴⁴ After the success of “Dungeons & Dragons”, Stafford set up a company to produce a rival role-playing game based on Glorantha. The unique selling point would be that whereas Dungeons & Dragons used generic fantasy stereotypes with no background, the players of Stafford’s game could play characters set in the world of Glorantha. The game so produced was called RuneQuest and, for a while, threatened to overtake Dungeons & Dragons in popularity. A series of misjudgements, however, meant that the game collapsed in popularity and effectively went out of print in the mid-1990s.²⁴⁵

During the 1990s, The Glorantha Digest became the main forum for fans of the game and the world to continue sharing ideas, stories and so on about the background. The messages to this list were sent out as a “digest” each time it accumulated over 20K in messages or 24 hours had elapsed—whichever came first. Each copy of the Digest comes with posting rules at the beginning.²⁴⁶

1. Do not include large sections of a message in your reply. Especially not to add "Yeah, I agree" or "No, I disagree." Or be excoriated. If someone writes something good and you want to say "good show" please do. But don't include the whole message you praise.
2. Use an appropriate Subject line.
3. Learn the art of paraphrasing: Don't just quote and comment on a point-by-point basis.

²⁴⁴Tolkien is famous for his epic novel *The Lord of the Rings*. Barker, a retired professor of South Asian studies, is less well known but his fictional world of Tékumel was one of the first worlds to be presented in a role playing game. For an overview of the relationships between these two authors, see Fine’s study of teenage roleplayers (*Shared Worlds* 123-52).

²⁴⁵The history of RuneQuest is long and complex. A reasonable online summary can be found at <http://www.maranci.net/rqpast.htm>.

²⁴⁶See Appendix D for an example of a complete Glorantha Digest.

4. No anonymous posting, please. Don't say something unless you're ready to stand by it.²⁴⁷

As can be seen, the announced etiquette for this list is fairly similar to Tim Lloyd's welcome message on the Boro List (Appendix A). Both lists stress the importance of staying on topic, identifying the topic and avoiding copying and pasting lengthy replies. Whereas Tim's list, however, is easy going in terms of compositional norms, the Glorantha Digest favours a more scholarly style. For example, the following excerpt is fairly emblematic of the type of posting that appears on the Digest.

From: roleplayer23@delphi.com
Date: Tue, 05 Dec 1995 11:01:23 -0500 (EST)
Subject: The Moral Equivalent of War

Martin Crim and David Dunham are touching upon one of the basic problems of human interaction, best expressed by William James in that wonderful phrase "the moral equivalent of war." Liberal politicians are always trying to invoke that moral equivalent, because they imagine, at the least, that it would bring the kind of solidarity and all-for-oneness that they are looking for. The problem is that there is NO moral equivalent of war. Now role-players, like liberals, are looking for something non-violent that will engage their players as fully as the risk of life and limb. My guess is that the quest is equally futile.

The difference in writing style between this and the emails on the Boro List is marked. There is a use of capitals but they are used for emphasis rather than to depict the oral feature of shouting. The argument is structured around literary norms, punctuation is careful, the style is scholarly. After my initial survey of the members of this list, I asked one of the respondents— a regular contributor to the list— what he thought were the "unwritten" rules for posting an item to the digest and received the following response:

²⁴⁷From Volume 1 Number 227, retrieved Monday 27th March 1995. An online archive of the Glorantha Digest and its predecessor, "The RuneQuest Digest," can be found online at <http://www.gloranthadigest.com/>.

Unwritten standards:

Yes a tough question.

One you must know your material thoroughly.
 two materials should be presented in a logical & organized format.
 three Format, spelling, and grammar errors must be edited out before submission.
 four Excesses should be avoided, conservatism in structure & format using what has gone before as a rule. (Garlick, March 1995)

Where the Boro List is spontaneous, somewhat chaotic, free and easy with spelling and grammar, the Digest is orderly and meticulous.²⁴⁸ The members of the Digest were, according to my survey, generally in their 30s, highly-educated, working professionals.²⁴⁹ Most of them had played RuneQuest when it was first published in 1980 and stuck with the game and its setting since then. It seemed to me that they shared a passion for this world that was every bit as deep and involved as the Boro List members. Like the Boro List members, the members of the Digest were scattered across the globe and, at that time, the Glorantha Digest was their main forum in which they could share their passion with like-minded individuals. As with the Boro List, the focus of the Digest was a specific place but in this case, the place, Glorantha was a fiction.

Unlike the Boro List, most of the contributors to the Glorantha Digest received it, as the name implies, as a digest. This format made instant replies almost impossible because there would always be a lag between posting your email and the next digest being disseminated. A few of the community leaders did receive the emails individually

²⁴⁸Ironically, the post above is far from grammatical.

²⁴⁹For example, one member was lecturer in anthropology, another a professor of classics. No-one who replied to my survey was younger than 20. This is quite a contrast to the stereotypical teenage male player of "Dungeons & Dragons."

but most were happy to use it as a digest. This format implied to me that the members of the Glorantha Digest might be profitably thought of as what Swales refers to as a “discourse community.”

Swales adopted the notion of the discourse community as a tool for understanding how far flung groups of people created a sense of cohesion through the circulation of printed documents. Broadly, Swales proposed that a group might be thought of as forming a discourse community if they met the following conditions. (*Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*)

1. Communality of interest.
2. Had mechanisms for intercommunication between members.
3. Provided information and feedback to members.
4. Developed genre-specific discoursal expectations.
5. Possessed or tended to generate an in-group, specialised lexicon.
6. Had a critical mass of members with specialist information. (24-27)

Swales was interested in English language teaching groups but the characterisation is useful for the study of online groups. The Glorantha Digest promoted itself as a resource which enabled Glorantha fans to maintain their understanding of Glorantha when there was no more material in print and even the creator, Greg Stafford, seemed to have lost interest. The eventual result was a resurgence of the world through fan-led initiatives that re-inspired Greg Stafford and led to new international conventions, new games and

publications.²⁵⁰ The Glorantha Digest appears to have played a pivotal role in this revival; its major contributors being those who ran the conventions, set up new publications companies for Gloranthan material— “The Reaching Moon Megacorp”— and authored new material with Greg Stafford.

In his analysis of discourse communities, Swales differentiates between “sociolinguistic” communities and “sociorhetorical” communities and it his concept of the sociorhetorical community that, I believe, illustrates the relationship between The Boro List and The Glorantha Digest. According to Swales:

“In a sociolinguistic speech community, the communicative needs of the *group*, such as socialisation or group solidarity, tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discorsal characteristics. The primary determinants of linguistic behaviour are social. However, in a sociorhetorical discourse community, the primary determinants of linguistic behaviour are functional, since a discourse community consists of a group of people who link up in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity, even if the latter should consequently occur.” (24)

Although the Boro List and Glorantha Digest are almost polar opposites when it comes to the use of oral and literate features, they can both be seen as sociorhetorical. Neither were

²⁵⁰Stafford published his only work of fiction, *King of Sartar*, and dedicated it to David Hall - the fan who had probably done most to rekindle his interest. In addition, a new company that was partly financed by fans was formed—“Issaries Inc.”—which produced two new role-playing games set in Glorantha: *Hero Wars* and then *HeroQuest*. (Laws and Stafford) See <http://www.glorantha.com> for further information.

created in order to help construct a group or sense of community, rather they were created to allow the members to pursue an interest which they would pursue regardless.²⁵¹

Understanding the Boro List as a sociorhetorical discourse community helps explain the relative lack of playfulness with language and typography; the use of the medium is functional and the use of language and metalanguage is directed towards achieving the desired ends. Any sense of group or communal cohesion that might arise in such a group is likely to be emergent and unplanned. If so, then in such a group, it could be expected that the folk traditions which might evolve would do so in a non-self-aware fashion.

Summary

In this chapter I have assessed the Boro List in terms of oral and literate communicative strategies. In particular I have looked at spelling and the use of language as performing identity. The irony, for me, was that I had expected this list to show extensive use of regional ‘speech’ online and reveal a deep sense of playfulness with the medium. At the time of the fieldwork, the majority of the members accessed the net through work or education, implying that they were likely to be more highly educated than the average fan so I had assumed they were fully capable of manipulating the medium. It came as a surprise to me when I finally realised that there was very little play with language in the manner reported by the likes of Danet et al. It was the realisation that, appearances

²⁵¹ This is a similar line of argument to Narváez in “Folk Talk” who refers to such groups as “rhetorical communities”.

notwithstanding, there was quite a serious use of language on the list that persuaded me to revisit issues in orality and literacy and to re-examine a very different list— The Glorantha Digest— in the light of the Boro List.

The Boro List and Glorantha Digest share a similarity that is best summed up through the use of Swales's concept of a "sociorhetorical" community— one which is based around common interest rather than one which is formed specifically to create a community. In the next chapter, the conclusion, I will expand on this point and its implications for the future study of such groups.

Chapter 8: Conclusions

Introduction

In this final chapter I wish to tie together the various threads that have run throughout this thesis. There are three specific areas I will investigate. The first is to elucidate the metaphors that it seems to me the members of the Boro List have drawn upon to characterise their list. This will lead on to two other issues. The first is a series of reflections on the use of virtual ethnography in this study and how it might be used in future work. The second, and final, section of this chapter examines the influence of Folklore Studies on this research.

Of Pubs and Fantasy Worlds

In the previous chapter, I stated that it was possible to unify two email lists with very different orientations towards orality and literacy through the concept of the “discourse community”. Both lists were created to perform a function which is useful for a group of people with a certain shared interest for whom communication via the Internet was the most viable option. The Glorantha Digest allowed people to discuss the fantasy world of Glorantha and became especially useful when printed materials dried up. The Boro List provided a forum for Boro fans around the world to share information about the team and matches. In both cases, the sense of group identity emerged from the interactions of the members; it was not pre-planned. Clearly the members of both groups already had

identities as fans; one question is would they gain an additional sense of identity as group members as well as fans?

One way of understanding emergent identity is to discern how the group characterises the list as a conversational setting at the level of metaphor. In the same way that Lakoff and Johnson refer to the use of metaphors as a method of encoding knowledge, it is possible to try to deconstruct the metaphors that underlie the communicative norms of the group. When it came to the Boro List, two methods proved useful. One was to pay attention to meta-comments about the list and the other was to look at the genres of postings.

I started chapter four with the reproduction of an email about the unexpected death of the list's maintainer— Tim Lloyd— from one of the list's regulars. In it, Toby writes:

The list has turned into a virtual pub, where there are lots of regulars who make all the noise; the people who are always there but say very little and then the barman - Tim. The man everyone knows, who contributes everywhere and makes sure everything runs smoothly. (Potter)

Throughout my fieldwork, I had been aware that there was an association of the talk on the list with the kind of talk that would be thought of as appropriate to a pub. What was interesting to me was that this was purely tacit knowledge; it was not raised on the list nor were any new members explicitly told to behave as if this was the case by regulars. Somehow, then, this understanding arose without being acknowledged.

One potential avenue of enquiry is the “Welcome message” that was sent out to each new subscriber when he or she subscribed. This message would be a new member’s first contact with the list. In it, Tim outlined practical information and the rules of the list. The early versions of these were rather technical, dealing with issues such as asking for “receipts” of posting. Over time, though, they changed. In October 1995, as the list hit a phase of massive expansion, Tim created an “Etiquette” section. A portion of it is repeated below.²⁵²

ETIQUETTE

In the early days of the list just about anything went, and it didn't really matter, unfortunately the list has now grown to the size where a certain amount of etiquette ****HAS TO BE OBSERVED**** If you continue to ignore the following rules you will be removed from the list

Tim then proceeded to list four rules which can be summarised as:

1. Do not extensively quote other messages.
2. Keep “sigs” short.
3. Do not ask for receipts for your email.
4. Leave list administration to Tim.

With the continued growth of the list and after several arguments, Tim revised the welcome list. He removed some confusing rules about “receipts”, moved the fourth item on “administration” up a place and then added the following as the new fourth and final item:

²⁵² See Appendix A for this message in full and for some other examples “Welcome Messages”.

Think of the list as being in the same room as all of these people.... say in a pub, don't say anything that you wouldn't say to someone's face.... it's all too easy to have a dig at someone when you can't see them.

Take this one step further..... think of it as though your mother is stood next to you!²⁵³

This change remained in the welcome message up until a final change in December 1996 when it was removed.²⁵⁴ This analogy was, therefore, only explicitly foregrounded for about six months. This was a crucial period of the list's development and also a time when Tim was being very active in "administering" the list. Although he never actually used the "talking in the pub" analogy explicitly in postings to the list he did occasionally send private emails to people he thought were being over-aggressive in postings where he reminded people that there were people on "the other side of the computer".²⁵⁵

It seems that any metaphors which formed the members' understanding of the list as a communicational setting were rarely explicitly stated but the metaphor of the list as a pub does show tangentially. In May 1995, several members started experimenting with Internet Relay Chat (IRC).²⁵⁶ They had discovered the IRC "football channel" which allowed them to log on and communicate synchronously with other football fans. This

²⁵³Retrieved March 4th, 1996. The whole message can be found in Appendix A.

²⁵⁴The current "welcome to the list message" is a minor alteration to the December 1996 version and can be found on yahoo groups, <http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/boroml/files/> with the name "intro.txt".

²⁵⁵From private correspondence. I had asked Tim how he handled aggressive postings. His reply was that he had rarely done it but when he had to he "usually just tell them to cool it" and to "remember that there is another person on the other side of the computer."

²⁵⁶IRC is explained at more length in the first chapter. It is still in use though it is not very common.

led to an immediate attempt to set up a sub-section of that channel named “#boro” where they could focus purely on Middlesbrough FC. This became relatively popular with some of the most technologically competent members (IRC can be complex to use) and several of them started to use the sub-section named “#footballbar”. The intent of that subsection was to allow football fans to discuss “off topic” subjects as if they were in pub. There was talk, from time to time, after I finished my fieldwork, of setting up a “Boro Boozer” on IRC but I do not know what became of it.

The understanding of the list as a communicational setting akin to a pub may also lie behind the name given to the list members’ prediction game. This game awarded members points for correctly predicting the result of the next game that the Boro were due to play. It was called the “M.A.D.B.A.S.T.A.R.D. League”, the acronym standing for “Middlesbrough And District Beer And Small Tipplers And Retarded Dogs league.”²⁵⁷ The acronym is, as can be seen, rather forced but as with many discussions on the list, it picks up on the association of alcohol and football fandom.

The M.A.D.B.A.S.T.A.R.D. League game also points toward the main means in which the pub metaphor appears to be manifest: topic and genre choices. In chapter six I laid out the various tensions between what was considered to be ‘on’ and ‘off’ topic for the list. As Tim Lloyd makes clear in the welcome messages to the list, “the core of the messages must still be about football”²⁵⁸. Indeed the vast majority of messages sent to the

²⁵⁷This game is still going strong using roughly the same rules on the contemporary list.

²⁵⁸Retrieved October 30th, 1995. See Appendix C for a sample of welcome messages.

list were about football. They consisted of personal experience narratives about games seen, gossip about players and teams, requests for information, forwardings of news reports and so on. There were, however, a significant number of messages which were only distantly related to football. Such things as jokes, discussion of major news issues and threads discussing superstitions, trivia and all manner of ephemera. This penumbra was often referred to as “fluff” by Tim Lloyd as in this example he sent after a new member posted a large piece of ASCII art based on the *Lion King* movie to the list:

Remember folks we are here to discuss the Boro not post pretty pictures. I have allowed a fair amount of flexibility in the past but as the list grows in size I have to start clamping down on the fluff. (February 29th, 1996)

The “fluff” however, consisted of precisely the kind of conversation that might be heard in a pub among football fans and therein lay the tension between what was understood as “topic” among list members. In his discussion of discourse community formation, Swales notes that such communities are “recognized by the specific genres that they employ, which include both speech events and written text types,” (*Genre Analysis vii*) and that communicative genres are emergent, dynamic properties of a group. This is an insight shared by Nancy Baym in her analysis of newsgroup communication, who follows Bakhtin in asserting that the newsgroup members use genre to create context. (“Communication” 55-56) The Boro List members never explicitly identified genres, nor would that be expected, but they did differentiate between messages that were “fluff” and those that were not, though the boundary between these categories were

contested. What was noticeable was that there was unacceptable fluff and, conversely, acceptable fluff. As discussed in the last chapter, topic defined by the subject matter but it seems to me that the acceptability of off-topic messages was largely derived from genre. Postings which fit the generic conventions of what might be acceptable to football fans in the social setting of a pub were largely accepted.²⁵⁹ So for example the following posting— from a regular— mixes comments about the Sunderland hooligan (see chapter 5) with an announcement and a personal experience narrative about riding a motorbike on the Yorkshire Moors.

Date: Thu, 27 Jul 1995 06:02:48 -0230
 From: <t.jenkins1@oxford.ac.uk>
 Subject: My Anniversary

It's my 10th wedding anniversary today!.

Tonight will be spent having a candlelite dinner for two (well three really, as young Shaun at 8 weeks likes to see what's going on) in our dinning room.

I liked the description of the ride home sent in by Robert, I used to spend a bit of time riding (GT 750 Suzuki) around the chop yat? or gate area on the way to Helmsley then on to Scarborough and back via the moor road...Ah memories.

I read with interest the rantings of the s/land maniac, We really have got them upset!, I've tried sending him/it a little note, but my postmaster has just bounced it.

Cheers, Tom.

²⁵⁹One of the ironies about the metaphor of "pub talk" is that the list appears to be heavily policed in terms of topic. Whereas "pub talk" might be considered to allow a free reign for discussion, the Boro List is fairly intolerant of "off-topic" talk. I believe the tension is resolved through the constant metaphor of Tim as the "barman." In a pub the barman also keeps order. In the Boro List, order is understood to be grounded in conversational behaviour. In the same way that a barman might dispel a rowdy customer who is causing disruption, Tim would act to intervene in any conversational behaviour that might cause disruption. Although the list was heavily policed by Tim, most members would be familiar with a pub also being a policed space.

This message received 4 replies in total with no sign of disapproval while the various subjects (Sunderland fan and driving in the local area) also continued in other threads. It is important to note, however, that threads could become unacceptable. For example, “player poker” was a topic that became very popular for a short while. In the thread (see example below), members ‘bet’ sightings of drunken footballers against each other.²⁶⁰ The playful combination of alcohol, football and gambling meant that for two days it dominated the list, leading Tim to stamp down on it. In this case, something that started off as acceptable became unacceptable due to it becoming too popular.

Date: Thu, 3 Oct 1996 08:29:40 +0100
 From: LarryPri@ntu.ac.uk (Larry)
 Subject: Re: Most piss*d Boro player - ever

>any one meet my gary Gill and raise the bet ?

I'll see your Gary Gill, and raise you a Brian Laws, Colin Cooper, Gary Hamilton and Bernie. ALL in the Linthorpe BEFORE us STRAIGHT AFTER a night match!

Next hand at Player Poker please.....

Player Poker is an example of a borderline case where the content was, generally, about football (in this case the drinking habits of footballers) but its frequency meant it became problematic. After Tim requested it be stopped, player poker became understood as a topic that only emerged out of boredom due to the lack of football being played.

There is so little to talk about that we have drifted into talking about the stories that the press are talking about because there is nothing else to talk

²⁶⁰The topic started on October 2nd, 1996 and lasted for 2 days before Tim Lloyd intervened. During that time it generated 43 postings.

about. If you see what I mean. That and a minor diversion of the player poker which was a laugh but ran its course. (Posting, October 4th, 1996)

Ironically, the game of player poker became part of the group's set of references; whenever a thread it was thought to be getting off-topic and continuing for a long while it would be tagged as being like player poker to indicate that a thread had turned into fluff. For example, there is a posting from May 21st, 2003 in which one poster asks "When are we scheduled to move on to Newboulds pies and Parmos?" about a long thread which has gone badly off topic and is answered "After a couple of games of player poker."²⁶¹

The complicating factor when it comes to thinking of the Boro List as a "virtual pub" is Tim's belief that "too much" fluff was dangerous. In one of the versions of his welcome message he states:

I've had many a person leave this list because they can't handle the volume of mail, which is a shame because if there was less fluff on the list they'd more than likely still be with us. Just remember it's Boro fans desperate for good info on the club that end up losing out.... (see Appendix A: December 16th)

The role of the list organiser in creating and enforcing a metaphor for the list is crucial. For example, the original owner of the Glorantha Digest responded to my question about whether or not he felt that the Digest was "part of a community" in the following way

>Did you feel whilst running it that it was part of a community or was it more a case of circulating information.
It was more than just circulation. It's almost like a lot of people standing on small islands in a fast flowing river: Rarely do people

²⁶¹Posting on Yahoo Groups (<http://sports.groups.yahoo.com/group/boroml/messages/24640>)

actually meet face to face, but they can shout across the river and get themselves heard everywhere.

A community of a sort, but not like any outside the Net.

One of the consequences of the medium that we use, and for which I invented the above metaphor, is that people are aware that others will not be prone to get off their island to smack you in the face. Or, in normal conversation, just wink an eyebrow, which is normally more than enough to indicate disapproval on where the discussion is heading.

Thanks to the Usenet FAQs, I was made aware of the differences that apply to electronic communication at a very early stage. That, and the fact that I've had read-only access to usenet for some time allowed me to observe these phenomena.

All of this made me decide to implement the daily digest format, with just the right balance between turn-around time and rest in between. (Personal email, February 21st, 1995)

This metaphor helps explain the choice of format for the Digest and an understanding of it as a document in which interactions are delayed. Although it was perfectly possible to run that email list in the same manner as the Boro List with posts being circulated immediately, the creator has chosen to delay replies and to send them bundled together in a digest.

Etiquette on the Boro List is based around the metaphor of people talking “face to face” and the worry that too much “fluff” is a negative. The impression created is of a loud, sometimes disorderly room in which most of the ‘talk’ is about the Boro— though sometimes some other topic dominates— and in which most of the people are Boro fans. Grammar, spelling and so on are not important but if you get some key spellings wrong you may well be seen as an outsider. On the other hand, the Glorantha Digest is self-consciously literary. There is a metaphor of the Digest as a circulating document which people read at their leisure and respond to with careful, detailed compositions. In both

cases it is the metaphor that informs choices of communicational norms. Though the metaphor is rarely, if ever, explicitly discussed, it forms part of the tacit knowledge of the members of each list and enables them to communicate competently.

Virtual Ethnography, Really

The research that informs this thesis was an exercise in ethnography with a mailing list. As I stated in chapter three, the intent was to approach the study purely through computer-mediated communication (CMC). The issues that arises are whether this was a viable strategy for this case in particular and what are the implications for the study of online behaviour. The notion of applying ethnography or, at least, ethnographic methods to the study of online behaviour has become increasingly mainstream²⁶² without necessarily creating a consensus about what it means to do so. In the meantime, the Internet has morphed. Usenet has become a fringe interest and email groups have tended to integrate with the web portals through providers such as Yahoo and Google. HTML became the standard format for most email programs allowing colourful text and embedded images until hackers learned how to exploit the weaknesses. “Web 2.0” websites such as Wikipedia, Flickr, YouTube, MySpace²⁶³ and a host of others became mainstream and are in the process of changing how we interact with the net. Broadband connections became the norm, computers continued to increase in power and

²⁶²Most notable has been the work of Nancy Baym, Annette Markham, Christine Hine and Lynn Cherny.

²⁶³Wikipedia—http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page, “Flickr”—<http://www.flickr.com/>, “YouTube”—<http://www.youtube.com/index>, “MySpace”—<http://www.myspace.com/>.

sophistication and other devices such as “third generation” cell phones allowed us to browse the web or conduct email on a phone while “Voice over Internet Protocol” phones allowed us to use the Internet to make phone calls.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s it was possible to think of the Internet as a communications medium that was separate from the “offline” world. Cyberspace could be seen as a world apart; the matrix was something strange and new. Since the turn of the millennium, technological convergences have worked to make the Internet ubiquitous and, frankly, mundane. During the 1980s and 1990s it was possible to conceive of studies that focussed purely on online behaviour, to conduct studies that would be hermetic virtual ethnographies. If that was the case then, is it still the case now?

The study of the Boro List hinged on the fact that the members’ main point of contact with each other was the email list. Indeed without the list, many of the members would have been unable to contact each other. Although the list was created as a means for people to keep in contact with news about the team, it quickly became a way for them to keep in contact with each other. When I first joined the list it was the quickest, most extensive forum for news about Middlesbrough FC. Now, between the myriad of football and football club websites, text alert services, news websites and so on there is never anything on the Boro List about the football club that I do not already know. Despite this, the Boro List is still healthy and active. As of August 9th 2006 there were 309 members and though there are some signs of a decrease in the number of emails being posted there

was still an average of just under 1,000 emails per month for the first seven months of the year. Clearly there continues to be a compelling reason to belong.

At the time I conducted my research it was possible to focus exclusively on the list. By so doing I was able to finesse issues of the relationships between online and offline identities. Although members had lives away from the list and sometimes those lives intruded onto the list, the list itself was a forum that was largely disconnected from the issues of the 'outside world' that didn't pertain to Middlesbrough Football Club. The deliberate irony in my choice of group was that the focus of the group was a specific place (Middlesbrough) and activity (association football) that could only exist in the "offline" world. It became increasingly clear to me as I conducted my research that I needed to know "offline" information. That someone was a student who accessed the net from university, or was a lawyer with a connection at home, or lived in Australia or Canada, or who was retired or who had not learned how to turn off the "caps lock" key or was a professional referee or a journalist for the local newspaper was important. At the time I started most of the members had not met each other. Over time, some of those who lived near Middlesbrough met up at games, some list members who lived outside the country journeyed to the UK and during the first summer of my research several members formed a team which played in a charity football competition for fans of football clubs who belonged to Internet-based fan lists. Despite these issues, the vast majority of list messages were based on the premise that this list was the major point of contact for most of the members and a virtual ethnography which focussed solely on the

list enabled a close attention to detail. After all, for most of the members, the list did not generally intersect with the rest of their life. It was a resource that they sampled and, possibly contributed to, in a manner that was discrete from the rest of their lives.

The limit of this type of virtual ethnography is, simply, that it places walls between the offline and online that are, in the long run, unsupportable. It is, in some ways, a very primitive form of ethnography. In his analysis of Internet society, Bruno Latour contends that “cyberspace” is indeed a primitive environment (*We Have Never Been Modern*) so, perhaps therefore, we should expect that the methods required for its study would be, somewhat ironically, primitive. A more sophisticated method would treat the Boro List as part of a multi-sited ethnographic domain (Marcus). This is the type of approach taken by Christine Hine in her study of websites and discussion groups about the Louise Woodward affair. Hine referred to her work as an “interface” study because she wanted to foreground the means by which participants mixed their online and offline behaviour, and drew upon Swales’ concept of a “textography” (*Other Floors*) to help characterise this approach. Swales uses “textography” as a term to describe a method based on tracking the creation and dissemination of documents (“texts”) within an educational institution. He is, however, not comfortable with referring to his study as ethnographic.

The label given to the volume is *textography*, by which I mean something more than a disembodied textual or discursal analysis but something less than a full ethnographic account. ... *ethnography* is not a label I am comfortable with. For one thing, I am a discourse analyst and an applied

linguist, not a cultural anthropologist or a sociologist with an orientation toward fieldwork. (1)

Hine's approach works precisely because her participants do not share a single, common communicational forum. Although many of the main participants (e.g. website owners) knew the other main participants and occasionally contributed to each others' work, there was no over-arching sense of group. Her study, then, focussed on the flows of information in time and space and followed them where they led. In my study the Boro List has a very clearly defined identity but with time, its members' participation in other online fora has become more complex. Several members post to the online discussion group on "Fly Me to the Moon" (fmmtm.com), others have webpages, host "blogs" and so on. The reading and writing to the actual Boro List seems, now, to be just a part of the activities that the members are involved in when it comes to being an online Boro fan. A more sophisticated virtual ethnography would need to take account of this through considering the Boro List to be just one of the sites, online and offline, that its members use to follow the Boro. I would contend, however, that the Boro List maintains a privileged role in this complex set of interweaving resources available to its members because for some it remains the locus of their interactions. A contemporary virtual ethnography therefore does not need to, not should it, delimit the field of research to a single online communicative forum. In some cases, for diachronic reasons, a particular online forum might be considered to be the "home" of a group who also interact in other fora both online and offline. A virtual ethnography will need, however, to work with

participants in a wide range of media. In the same way that I argued that it makes sense to conduct ethnography in the same medium as the one the participants use to communicate, a virtual ethnography may need to be conducted in multiple media if that is how the participants communicate.

A more complex virtual ethnography also needs to engage with methods of analysing multimedia and hypertextual linking. Advances in web technology and the general increase in the “bandwidth” of connections means have allowed online discourse communities new opportunities for sharing non-textual information. For example, the current Yahoo Groups’ page for the Boro List features space for files, photos, links to other resources and so on. On August 16th, 2006 the files area of the list had some music files, humorous images and spreadsheets for fixtures. These are potential ethnographic documents in their own right (Dorst, *The Written Suburb*). Certainly, the range of communicative media exchanged by the list members means that any study is likely to have address to the polysemic nature of communication online alongside the integration of Internet technologies with other communicative media (Dicks et al.; Dicks, Soyinka and Coffey).

The upshot of this is that to refer to an ethnographic study as “virtual” is, essentially, to indicate its focus. As Internet technology becomes ubiquitous, then whatever technological boundaries existed between ‘online’ and ‘offline’ behaviour will become largely irrelevant. That said, it is likely that groups of people may still choose to symbolically constitute themselves around a certain communicative medium or set of

communicative media. Therefore a double irony emerges. On one hand, strictly virtual ethnographies of the type I assayed with the Boro List are likely to become even rarer than they are now. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly difficult to imagine an ethnography with participants who have Internet access where that ethnography does not include the 'virtual' interactions of those participants.²⁶⁴ Elements, therefore, of virtual ethnography which draw upon the lessons learned in this work and others who have worked with the methodology are likely to inform ethnographic research in general.

Where were the Folk?

What does Folklore Studies have to tell us about the Boro List? In chapter two I interrogated writings about the notion of folk group, society and community. Whether or not the members of the Boro List can be considered to form a folk group, community, something else or nothing at all is a difficult question to answer. That the members were able to draw boundaries through acts as simple as self-identifying themselves as Boro football fans and as detailed as the use of spellings is clear. Is this enough to portray the members as a group— folk or otherwise?

When it comes to folklore there is a cogent argument to afford a centrality to the socio-economic status of the people at issue. In "The Folk Society", Narváez argues that it is no coincidence that societies which are extremely rich in folklore are those that have

²⁶⁴These comments are also relevant to research into circulating electronic objects such as Ellis's analysis of the online circulation of jokes about the "9/11" attacks shortly after the events ("Making a Big Apple Crumble"). Such studies will inevitably have to 'follow the texts' where ever they go and may well be able to take advantage of virtual ethnographic methods that model the transmission of such folklore as circulating flows within multi-sited ethnographies (Marcus).

suffered intense economic deprivation and social and geographical isolation from the elites within a society. In such a society, folklore can act as a means to express identity, sometimes counter-hegemonically for a group which lacks other opportunities. Studies of Newfoundland folklore have demonstrated this more than adequately. The members of the Boro List were not economically disadvantaged and it is likely that most, if not all, were socially advantaged. At a time when computers were relatively expensive and Internet access still limited, the members were part of a socio-technical elite, though they might not recognise that as a description of themselves. It was noteworthy, however, that the list members defined themselves oppositionally: to the “southern media”, to the local rivals, and to the elite clubs in the English football league. Although Middlesbrough and the surrounding is one of the most disadvantaged areas in England, the list members themselves appear to have been relatively affluent. Thus, when portraying themselves as in opposition to the perceived socio-economic and football elites, the list members appear to be symbolically drawing on the regional social and economic status of Middlesbrough as a place.

There is always *the* question which, in its broadest version, asks “but is it folklore?” Perhaps more pertinently, what has Folklore as a discipline contributed to this research? I will not rehash the usual angst about the disappearing nature of our discipline (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Folklore’s Crisis”; “Topic Drift”), but I will say that Folklore as a discipline has trained me to pay attention to everyday creativity. In particular, it has sensitised me to not just the creativity of performance online but also the creative uses of

the medium. This is a perspective that informs Danet's study of playful interaction online (*Cyberpl@y*). Although she does not explicitly invoke that rationale; it is one that focuses on the role of creativity in folklore (Bronner). In a study of the online discussion of contemporary legends, Jan Fernback shows how folklore forms can be disseminated via CMC and become a locus of oral culture ("Legends on the Net"). In this research, I have focussed on a self-organising group of people and investigated that group (and its symbolic construction of itself as a group) as a locus from which folklore can emerge and/or be transmitted.

Folklorists have been active in engaging with the transmission of artistic forms on the Internet (e.g. Goldstein) and the ways in which traditional cultural expressions have been adopted on the Internet (e.g. Kozar). They have also investigated folk responses online to major events—such as Bill Ellis's analysis of online reactions to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre (Ellis, "Making a Big Apple Crumble"; "A Model"). Although there is still some resistance among some folklorists to engage fully with the new communications media (e.g. Dégh), on the whole Folklore Studies has offered a revealing perspective on internet culture, especially when grounded in fieldwork online.

This research has followed in a tradition of folklore enquiries about new technology and media that sees such innovations as forming productive domains for the creation and transmission of folklore. (Bausinger; Dorst, "Tags and Burners"; Smith) The focus has been on applying Hymes's articulation of the ethnography of communication to the study of behaviour online: an approach which has been used by both folklorists such

as Nancy Baym and Brenda Danet and non-folklorists such as Lynn Cherny. I have also adopted elements of the discourse-based approach first suggested by John Swales. This formulation focuses on, as it were, the “folk” element of “folklore” and the means by which members of a group communicate. What has been particularly striking has been the heterogeneity of the CMC community that forms the Boro List: something that Bauman notes is a feature of speech communities. In comparison to the “lack hypothesis” which posits that the lack of social cues in email would lead to egalitarian rules of behaviour (e.g. Kiesler, Siegel and McGuire), the Boro List shows that as with any speech community the rules about who can speak about what— who has authority to speak— are enforced.

The use of the ethnography of communication has been, largely, oriented around the members’ understandings and uses of meta-communication: specifically about what is appropriate communication. As I analysed my data, however, I became convinced by the depiction of the Boro List as forming part of a discourse community. Although rules about speech were occasionally used to help define the group, as in the examples of the misspellings of Middlesbrough and Teesside, they were generally only used when it was necessary to define an outsider. Within the communicational context of the Boro List there seemed to be little need to perform speech acts for identifying reasons as shown by the general lack of regional dialect. It could be claimed that some of the vernacular terminology expressed working-class, English male speech forms, but the majority of the list members were working professionals or students.

The analysis of the Boro List does help to bridge some of the posited differences between a discourse community and a speech community. Swales spends a lot of effort differentiating speech communities from discourse communities, claiming most notably that “in a discourse community, the communicative needs of the *goals* tend to predominate in the development and maintenance of its discoursal characteristics” (24) while, according to Swales, in a speech community it is the *needs* of the group that dominate. What he refers to as “discoursal characteristics” are broadly similar to Hymes’ rules of speaking. It is clear in Tim’s welcome messages that he is sensitive to the goals of the list. When he asserts, as quoted earlier, that too much fluff causes people to leave and “just remember it’s Boro fans desperate for good info on the club that end up losing out” (Appendix A) he is prioritising the goals of the list— the dissemination of information about Middlesbrough FC. On the other hand, his etiquette sections and his method of administering the list indicate that the successful continuance of the list is a goal in and of itself. For Tim, the needs and goals of the group are intertwined.

Above all else, the emergent communicational rules of the list function to recreate a conversational setting that would be familiar to football fans— the pub. Thus the list is oral in composition, spelling is not checked, a full range of oral simulations in text are used and the non-football conversation is a mixture of banter, jokes, prediction games and so on. On one hand, the information circulated allows the list to act as the locus for a discourse community. On the other hand, the relationships built up between members through speech and the emergent rules of speech have fostered a sense of community.

After Tim's death, a significant amount of money was raised for an appropriate charity and a great deal of support was offered to his friends and family. Even though the Boro List as a source for news has been superseded it remains an active and healthy forum for discussion. The Glorantha Digest has been similarly successful but with a vastly different set of rules about speaking that, however, also function to recreate a conversational context through metaphor.

In Closing

This study has examined an email list— the “Boro List”— through the use of a virtual ethnography. The research was done at a time when the web was still relatively new and rich text and graphics in email were almost unheard of. Within just a couple of years of the end of the research, much had changed. Consequently, the study is one which is grounded in an unusual moment towards the end of a period during which the social use of the Net was dominated by plain-text email list and USENET. By the millennium, the web had become almost synonymous with the Internet and access to the Net was becoming common.

In some respects, the communicational rules on the list were almost ‘old-fashioned’ in that they were founded on an understanding of CMC as a deficient medium and on a belief that bandwidth was a precious, expensive resource that needed to be preserved. Essentially they were based on an understanding of the Net that developed during the 1990s. This characterisation of the Net was based on the list owner's extensive experience of computer networks and, at times, it sat uneasily with an emergent metaphor

of the list as “virtual pub”. The contemporary version of the Boro List does, however, maintain these communicational norms despite the changes in technology; the norms have come to characterise the group. I suspect that research with the contemporary version of the email list would show that the list’s communicational rules have become identity markers that differentiate the style of ‘talk’ on the Boro List from other online discussion fora for Middlesbrough fans. At the time of research, the Boro List was new and expanding furiously; now the list appears to be a mature, stable forum.

As an exercise in methodology, this research helps shed some light on the limits, potential and difficulties of virtual ethnography. Learning how to take the virtual realm as seriously as the ‘real world’ is a challenge. Learning how to conduct virtual ethnographies that are conducted across the variety of Internet-based media available in contemporary society is even more challenging. My hope is that this thesis provides both a useful account of a list at a specific time in the Internet’s development and some inspiration for future studies.

Appendix A: Example Welcome Messages

This appendix presents three welcome messages from the Boro List with date of retrieval.

They are formatted exactly as they were when I retrieved them.

1. Monday October 30th, 1995
2. Monday March 4th, 1996
3. Thursday May 9th, 1996
4. Monday December 16th, 1996
5. Wednesday August 16th, 2006

The messages for December 16th, 1996 and August 16th, 2006 are after my fieldwork period but have been included for completeness. They demonstrate that there was no significant change in the list welcome message after the December 16th version.

Monday October 30th, 1995

W e l c o m e

to the

Middlesbrough Football Club

Mailing List

PLEASE KEEP THIS MESSAGE, EITHER SAVE IT OR PRINT IT OUT, THAT WAY IF YOU WANT TO UNSUBSCRIBE IN THE FUTURE YOU WILL KNOW HOW TO!!!

To Unsubscribe from this list send an Email to MajorDomo@hk.super.net with the following in the *main body of text* - NOT the "Subject:" line, in the following format -

unsubscribe Boro Emailaddress

Where Emailaddress is *your* Email address

If you wish to see the other commands supported by this list then send a blank Email to MajorDomo@hk.super.net

SENDING MAIL TO THE LIST

To send mail to the list, simply address the message to boro@hk.super.net
Your message will then be sent to the other list members.

WHAT THE LIST IS ALL ABOUT

As I'm sure you know by now this mailing list is for the discussion about Middlesbrough FC ***BUT*** there is a lot of other general chat that goes on - and as we are mainly Notherners then the language can get crude at times !! You have been warned. (Hey we swear a lot up North) ;-)

Most of the people on this list are from, or around Middlesbrough, this list helps us keep in touch with like minded people. If you don't wish to see non football threads then just skip them.

BUT and this is a BIG BUT, things must not get out of hand, the core of the messages must still be about football.

INFO YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN

Currently the mailing list has 180+ members as of the 30/10/95, this figure is quite dynamic with people coming and going all the time, expect that figure to grow somewhat when everyone has come back off their holidays and resubscribe.

Not everyone posts messages.... in fact there is only a core of about 20-30 people who post on a regular basis, the rest are lurkers (this is not an insult, this just means that those people are only interested in reading the info that is posted to the list, but don't wish to add their own points of view).

The average daily throughput of messages is somewhere around the 40-50 posts per day, this figure might go up a little once the season gets underway and there is more to talk about :-). If you feel that 40+ messages per day is a little too much for you to handle then please check out the Unsubscribing info at the top of this page (Most messages are quite short so they are small in size).

ETIQUETTE

In the early days of the list just about anything went, and it didn't really matter, unfortunately the list has now grown to the size where a certain amount of etiquette ****HAS TO BE OBSERVED**** If you continue to ignore the following rules you will be removed from the list

1) When replying PLEASE ***only*** quote enough of the relevant message to jog peoples memory -

DON'T re quote the WHOLE of the message just to add a one line or one word response. It makes your own message a lot easier to read if you don't have to wade through masses and masses of re quoted text.

When you DO quote leave at least one blank line between the quoted text and you text, again this makes your message easier to read.

** THIS IS THE MOST ABUSED RULE I EVER SEE, AND IT'S DOWN TO PEOPLE JUST BEING DOWNRIGHT LAZY - EDIT YOUR MESSAGES OR ELSE **

2) Sigs at the end of the messages - the accepted size is about four lines in length, please try to keep it close to this figure, it gets mind numbing seeing the same 20 line sig over and over ;-)

** IF YOU HAVE A LARGE SIG, USE IT ON THE FIRST MESSAGE IN A BATCH, AND THEN REMOVE IT ON THE FOLLOWING MESSAGES **

It may seem petty, but there is a lot of people on this list who have to pay for their access, and long sigs and bad quoting all add up to extra cost to some users.

3) RCPT REQUESTS - This is always a problem - can you ** PLEASE ** makes sure you turn off *ANY* form of receipt request. Sending out messages asking for confirmation of reading ends up flooding the list with loads of RCPT's, these are a waste of space and not needed. If you don't know what I'm talking about talk to someone at your site for help - it's really not difficult to figure out.

4) Admin - LEAVE this to me (Tim Lloyd), I don't want every Tom Dick & Harry posting messages to other users to do this or that, it can cause bad blood if you have other list members having a go at each other. *IF* you have a gripe or complaint about another user or a problem EMAIL ME. I will sort it out.

** PROBLEMS WITH THE LIST **

Ok this is something that pops up time and time again, and a lot of it comes through misunderstanding or not knowing how the Internet works. You have to remember that the Internet is made up of thousands and thousands of machines, all inter linked - all mail gets routed via several machines in it's journey to the final destination. All it takes is for a machine to go down to cause delay's or other problems.

The biggest problem is delayed mail or getting mail in the wrong order, this is usually caused by a system being down when the mail is being delivered - the server delivering the mail then attempts to send the mail again a few hours later and so on, until it's been delivered, (some systems will attempt up to 30 days to deliver mail)!

Servers go down for many a reason, but two main ones are maintenance OR more often than not it's that the site was just to damn busy when the mail tried to get through and the connection timed out.

What does this mean to you.... well mainly it just means delayed mail, but what I DON'T want to see, is people posting as soon as they think there is a problem. All it does is clutter up the list. If you have a problem EMAIL ME DIRECT, but just remember most problems have usually corrected themselves by the time you even realize there is a problem.

**** Bounced Messages **** - This doesn't really effect the list, but it DOES effect me, I get upwards of 100+ Bounce messages a day, all usually caused by sites going down, and other temporary problems.

But this CAN effect you in one way - **** IF **** you suddenly find you haven't received any mail for a couple of days then there is a good chance you have been removed from the list - **** I HAVE TO DO THIS **** There are times when the bounces or problems get so bad I have to remove the offending persons Email address from the list. Sometimes the problem will clear itself up, but other times they won't - and removal is the only way. All you have to do is resubscribe to the list... I'd love to do it for you, but with so many members it's just too difficult to keep track of.

If the problems persist I will contact you or your Postmaster to try and clear up the problem.

**** Boro Web Pages ****

There is also a Middlesbrough FC WWW page run by Ben Gent containing all sorts of up-to-date info and pictures! Its URL is:-

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/~d3fher/boro/boindx.html>

I have also set up a Web site to compliment the Main Boro pages, Ben and myself run them in tandem to make sure the most up-to-date info is always available to the fans.

You can reach my site at the following URL :

<http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/boro.html>

Please note this is a very busy site, so it's best to try and connect at around 8pm UK time - you can try earlier, but you might end up with a timed out connection when trying to get on.

If you have any difficulty accessing this or don't know how to, don't hesitate to ask for help!

The web pages are always looking for contributors so if you have any info, pictures or anything else you'd really like to see, then please Email Ben at b.l.gent@dur.ac.uk or myself and we'll see about adding it in.

Cheers

Tim Lloyd

* Tim Lloyd - tlloyd@hk.super.net - PowerMac 7100/80 *
 * Middlesbrough Football Club Mailing list Administrator *
 * <http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/boro.html> *

Monday March 4th, 1996

**** MAKE SURE YOU READ THIS TEXT ****

W e l c o m e

to the

Middlesbrough Football Club

Mailing List

*PLEASE KEEP THIS MESSAGE, EITHER SAVE IT OR PRINT IT OUT, THAT WAY IF YOU WANT

TO UNSUBSCRIBE IN THE FUTURE YOU WILL KNOW HOW TO*

To Unsubscribe from this list send an Email to :

MajorDomo@hk.super.net

With the following in the *main body of text* - NOT the "Subject:" line,
in
the following format :-

unsubscribe boro Emailaddress

Where Emailaddress is *your* Email address

SENDING MAIL TO THE LIST

To send mail to the list, simply address the message to :

listname@hk.super.net

Your message will then be sent to the other list members.

Be careful when you reply, on some people's software when you hit reply it addresses the mail to owner-listname@hk.super.net, if this happens the mail will not get posted to the list. You must address it to listname@hk.super.net

WHAT THE LIST IS ALL ABOUT

As I'm sure you know this mailing list is for the discussion about Middlesbrough Football Club although I do allow a certain degree of flexibility.

As Most of the people on this list are from, or around Middlesbrough, this list helps us keep in touch with like minded people. If you don't wish to

see non football threads then just skip them.

BUT and this is a BIG BUT, things must not get out of hand, the core of the messages must still be about football - i.e. no posting of ascii artwork.

A good idea for new members is to not write anything for a couple of days, just read what's coming in over the list. That way you'll get an idea of what the list is all about.

INFO YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN

Currently the mailing list has 248 members as of the 3/3/96, this figure is quite dynamic with people coming and going all the time.

The average daily throughput of messages is somewhere around the 20-35 posts per day (although this figure tends to dip quite a lot on weekends).

ETIQUETTE

In the early days of the list just about anything went, and it didn't really matter, unfortunately the list has now grown to the size where a certain amount of etiquette ****HAS TO BE OBSERVED**** If you continue to ignore the following rules you will be removed from the list.

- 1) When replying PLEASE ***only*** quote enough of the relevant message to jog people's memory - ***DON'T*** re quote the WHOLE of the message just to add a one line or one word response. It makes your own message a lot easier to read if you don't have to wade through masses and masses of re quoted text.

When you DO quote, leave at least one blank line between the quoted text and your text, again this makes your message easier to read.

- 2) SIGS at the end of the messages - the accepted size is about four lines in length, please try to keep it close to this figure, it gets mind numbing seeing the same 20 line sig over and over ;-)

IF YOU HAVE A LARGE SIG, USE IT ON THE FIRST MESSAGE IN A BATCH, AND THEN REMOVE IT ON THE FOLLOWING MESSAGES

It may seem petty, but there is a lot of people on this list who have to pay for their access, and long sigs and bad quoting all add up to extra cost to some users.

- 3) Admin - LEAVE this to me (Tim Lloyd), I don't want every Tom Dick & Harry posting messages to other users to do this or that, it can cause bad blood if you have other list members having a go at each other. ***IF*** you have a gripe or complaint about another user or a problem, EMAIL ME. I will sort it out.

Unless it requires me to do so, then ALL my admin is done in the background, and not on the list.

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Take this one step further..... think of it as though your mother is stood next to you !

**** PROBLEMS WITH THE LIST ****

If for any reason you don't get any mail for a couple of days, there is a good chance I've removed you from the list.... usually it's because your site is causing me a lot of bounced messages - i.e. due to mail not being delivered (for whatever reason).

You can re-subscribe in the usual way or contact me direct and I'll add you back in.

**** Boro Web Pages ****

There is also a Middlesbrough FC WWW pages run by Ben Gent

<http://www.dur.ac.uk/~d3fher/Listname/boindx.html>

This site is located in the UK, so for all UK users it should be fairly zippy.

I have also set up a Web site.

You can reach my site at the following URL :

<http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/listname.html>

Cheers

Tim Lloyd

* Tim Lloyd - tlloyd@hk.super.net - PowerMac 7100/80 *
 * Middlesbrough Football Club Mailing list Administrator *
 * <http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/listname.html> *

Thursday May 9th, 1996

**** MAKE SURE YOU READ THIS TEXT ****

W e l c o m e

to the

Middlesbrough Football Club

Mailing List

PLEASE KEEP THIS MESSAGE, EITHER SAVE IT OR PRINT IT OUT, THAT WAY IF YOU WANT TO UNSUBSCRIBE IN THE FUTURE YOU WILL KNOW HOW TO

To Unsubscribe from this list send an Email to :

MajorDomo@hk.super.net

With the following in the *main body of text* - NOT the "Subject:" line,
in
the following format :-

unsubscribe boro Emailaddress

Where Emailaddress is *your* Email address

SENDING MAIL TO THE LIST

To send mail to the list, simply address the message to :

listname@hk.super.net

Your message will then be sent to the other list members.

Be careful when you reply, on some people's software when you hit reply it addresses the mail to owner-listname@hk.super.net, if this happens the mail will not get posted to the list. You must address it to listname@hk.super.net

WHAT THE LIST IS ALL ABOUT

As I'm sure you know this mailing list is for the discussion about Middlesbrough Football Club although I do allow a certain degree of flexibility.

As Most of the people on this list are from, or around Middlesbrough, this

list helps us keep in touch with like minded people. If you don't wish to see non football threads then just skip them.

BUT and this is a BIG BUT, things must not get out of hand, the core of the messages must still be about football - i.e. no posting of ascii artwork

A good idea for new members is to not write anything for a couple of days, just read what's coming in over the list. That way you'll get an idea of what the list is all about.

INFO YOU MIGHT BE INTERESTED IN

Currently the mailing list has 248 members as of the 3/3/96, this figure is quite dynamic with people coming and going all the time.

The average daily throughput of messages is somewhere around the 20-35 posts per day (although this figure tends to dip quite a lot on weekends).

ETIQUETTE

In the early days of the list just about anything went, and it didn't really matter, unfortunately the list has now grown to the size where a certain amount of etiquette ****HAS TO BE OBSERVED**** If you continue to ignore the following rules you will be removed from the list.

- 1) When replying PLEASE ***only*** quote enough of the relevant message to jog people's memory -

DON'T re quote the WHOLE of the message just to add a one line or one word response. It makes your own message a lot easier to read if you don't have to wade through masses and masses of re quoted text.

When you DO quote, leave at least one blank line between the quoted text and your text, again this makes your message easier to read.

- 2) SIGS at the end of the messages - the accepted size is about four lines in length, please try to keep it close to this figure, it gets mind numbing seeing the same 20 line sig over and over ;-)

IF YOU HAVE A LARGE SIG, USE IT ON THE FIRST MESSAGE IN A BATCH, AND THEN REMOVE IT ON THE FOLLOWING MESSAGES

It may seem petty, but there is a lot of people on this list who have to pay for their access, and long sigs and bad quoting all add up to extra cost to some users.

- 3) Admin - LEAVE this to me (Tim Lloyd), I don't want every Tom Dick & Harry posting messages to other users to do this or that, it can cause bad blood if you have other list members having a go at each other. ***IF*** you have a gripe or complaint about another user or a problem, EMAIL ME. I will sort it out.

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You can reach my site at the following URL :

<http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/listname.html>

Monday December 16th, 1996.

THE BORO MAILING LIST RULES AND REGULATIONS (Long but please read)

The Boro mailing list has been going now for quite sometime, with the current membership hovering around the 320 mark. Because of this the time has come for everyone to start paying attention to a few rules and regulations. It may seem like a load of old waffle (and most of it is), but it's a necessary evil.

You have to remember this list is meant to be fun as well as informative, but you can only go so far with the fun. At the end of the day the list is here to make sure exiles around the world and within the UK get hold of good information about the Boro.

I know for a fact that some if not all will be ignored at some point every single day, but if I don't say anything things will just get out of control.

If I was to highlight just one aspect that you must take note of with no exceptions, is that of personal attacks on fellow users of the list. Anyone doing so will be removed.

Unsubscribing

If you are going away on holiday, please please remember to unsub from the list. I get countless bounces from people with full mail boxes, it maybe no hassle for you guys, but you're not the ones getting 300+ bounce messages a day. (This is especially aimed at people on AOL & Compuserve, both these providers obviously have a small limit set on the amount of mail allowed).

The same goes for people at Uni, if you are leaving Uni it would be helpful if you unsubbed instead of bugging off and leaving me to clean up after you. Sorry to be brutal, but this happens far too often for it to be funny.

To unsub send the following message

unsubscribe boro <me@myaddress.com>

This goes into the main body of text and not the subject line, obviously make sure you insert your correct Email address.

Send the message to majordomo@hk.super.net

Problems With the List

If for any reason you suddenly stop getting mail, it's more than likely you've been removed from the list, this can be for any number of reasons. Which more than likely revolve around your particular ISP (Internet Service Provider) dumping anywhere between 1 to several hundred bounce

messages in my mailbox. What causes this..... downtime by the ISP for repairs..... links between
ISP's going down (happens a lot)..... ISP's busy , etc, etc. It's difficult to pinpoint the problem, and 90% of the time you wouldn't even know there was a problem.

So if you get Unsubbed, just resub. Unless that is I've removed you from the list for nefarious reasons.

Sending Messages

Please make sure you have your Config's set correctly

I don't want to see you're errant mailer dumping WIN.DAT files onto the list (which happens all too often).

Make sure you have the address correct, We've had many a case of people sending several copies of the same message to the list, usually because they have addressed the message to the list, and also have it CC'd to the list.

Subject Headings

Try to make sure you select a clear heading for what you are discussing, it makes life a lot easier for those that have to selectively read the messages that pass through the list.

Please try to keep the subject about football as much as possible, although I do allow a lot of lee way to allow people to discuss the area in general, but please don't stray to far...

Whilst on the subject of headings, I don't want to see any malicious rumours about players at the club. The Barmby incident on Usenet will be long remembered by the Club, and did considerable damage to our relationship with the club. (A lot of people have had to put up with a lot of shit from the club over this).

Binary files.... Don't even think about it, and in any case the majordomo software will reject any binary file above a certain limit.

Replying To Messages

Subject headings again..... Make sure that if you go off an a tangent change the subject heading !!
There is no point having a subject heading such as "Ravanelli puts six past Newcastle" when you're talking about Juninho going fly fishing.

Editing messages.... Some of you seem to have a problem with this. Firstly I understand that for some reason or another some email clients are so ancient that they seem to have lost the ability to edit the text....

When replying to a message please ONLY QUOTE THE RELEVANT TEXT. Do not repost the whole message verbatim including all the header info, only to add a single line to the end. It's messy, makes your reply hard to find, and will most likely be skipped over.

As a hint, also make sure that you leave at least a single line between the quoted text and your response, this makes your message more legible. Another hint, after every few lines of text try and fit in single line space, similar to the way I have done for this text. It makes it a damn sight easier to read. It's no fun trying to read a couple of pages of solid text. (I know this quite often doesn't follow standard paragraph practises, but who cares)....

Fluff..... Please don't send "Me to" messages to the list, on a bad day 40-50% of all messages going through this list are "Me to" messages. They are fluff, they waste every ones time, they mean zip. I know you want to show your enthusiasm to whatever you were answering, but unless you have something genuine to add to the discussion then just say it to yourself. I've had many a person leave this list because they can't handle the volume of mail, which is a shame because if there was less fluff on the list they'd more than likely still be with us. Just remember it's Boro fans desperate for good info on the club that end up losing out....

Sigs..... try to keep them to a reasonable size, four lines in size is normally more than enough.

Conduct towards other List members

Personal attacks..... If anyone starts slagging off fellow members on this list expect to be removed without warning.

It's really bad form to start slagging off someone in a public forum. Just stop to think for a second - Would you have the balls to say it to that persons face. If the answer is no then don't do it in here.

Spelling/grammar, etc - Don't go round pulling people up because of their spelling and the such, I'm sure we'd all love to have perfect English, but at the end of the day we are a very diverse group of people and some people in here don't have English as their first language.

As long as you understand what the message says then who cares if there is a few typo's. Hell I couldn't care less if it's spelt in phonetics as long as it gets the message across.

If you have ANY problems with any list members come to me, I will sort it out. Or if you chose, slag it out in private Email.

If you have any further questions then please ask.

Tim Lloyd

Boro Mailing list Administrator (for those that don't know who I am)

* Tim Lloyd - tlloyd@hk.super.net - PowerMac 7100/80 *
* Middlesbrough Football Club Mailing list Administrator *
* <http://www.hk.super.net/~tlloyd/personal/boro.html> *

Current Welcome Message Retrieved August 16th, 2006

The Boro mailing list has been going now for quite some time, with the current membership hovering around the 410 mark. Because of this, the time has come for everyone to start paying attention to a few rules and regulations. It may seem like a load of old waffle (and most of it is), but it's a necessary evil.

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If for any reason you suddenly stop getting mail, it's more than likely you've been removed from the list, this can be for any number of reasons. Which more than likely revolve around your particular ISP (Internet Service Provider) dumping anywhere between 1 to several hundred bounce messages in my mailbox. What causes this? Downtime by the ISP for repairs, links between ISP's going, ISP busy , etc, etc.

It's difficult to pinpoint the problem, and 90% of the time you wouldn't even know there was a problem. If you should suddenly stop getting mail, your best bet is to check Yahoo! to make sure you are still subscribed.

Subject Headings

Try to make sure you select a clear heading for what you are discussing, it makes life a lot easier for those that have to selectively read the messages that pass through the list.

Please try to keep the subject about football as much as possible, although I do allow a lot of lee way to allow people to discuss the area in general, but please don't stray to far.

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Signatures. Please try to keep them to a reasonable size, four lines in size is normally more than enough.

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As long as you understand what the message says then who cares if there is a few typo's. Hell, I couldn't care less if it's spelt in phonetics as long as it gets the message across.

To use this list :

To start sending messages to members of this group, simply send email to

boroml@yahoogroups.com

If you do not wish to belong to boroml, you may unsubscribe by sending an email to

boroml-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

You may also visit the Yahoo! Groups web site to modify your subscriptions:

<http://groups.yahoo.com/mygroups>

To learn more about the boroml group, please visit
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/boroml>

If you have ANY problems with any list members come to me, I will sort it out. Or if you choose, you can slag it out in private Email.

If you have any further questions then please ask.
Cory Muzyka
Boro Mailing List Administrator
boroml-admin@yahoogroups.com

Appendix B: Sample Glorantha Digest

This appendix presents an example of the Glorantha Digest. It is not in any way remarkable and was chosen for that reason. As the Glorantha Digest is freely available online in publicly accessible archives, no anonymisation has been performed. Many, if not all, of the email addresses are, however, defunct.

Glorantha Digest
227

Monday, 27 March 1995

Volume 01 : Number

RULES OF THE ROAD

1. Do not include large sections of a message in your reply. Especially not to say "Yeah, I agree." Those who do will be lynched.
2. Use an appropriate Subject line.
3. Do not engage in a point-by-point analysis or rebuttal of another person's message. It is too confusing for others to follow, qualifies as nit-picking, and it usually leads to flame wars.
4. There is no number 4.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Sandy Petersen	MAUNDERINGS
Sandy Petersen	sandy's maunderings
M GARLICK@prime.delta.edu	Glorantha Digest V1 #224
Alex Ferguson	Files, and stuff.
Kevin Rose	Carmania
Nils Weinander	Moons and other celestial bodies
Majordomo	The Tribes of the Volsaxi (fwd)

 From: Sandy Petersen <sandyp@idpentium.idsoftware.com>
 Date: Fri, 24 Mar 95 15:53:41 -0600
 Subject: Re: MAUNDERINGS

>I suspect that armor and weapons are way too common in most RQ
 >campaigns.

Eric Rowe

>I assume you mean RQ campaigns set in charlemagne's time?

See here, wiseacre. It's known that hoplite armor was a major cost for the ancient Athenians, and that only scions from wealthy families, or from families that used to be wealthy would have this stuff. And it's well-known that a suit of knightly armor cost a fortune, which is why only nobles had the stuff.

All over ancient Europe and elsewhere, armor and weapons was high-priced gear. It's not just a matter of technology. Charlemagne's ironworking technology was perfectly good, and he had all the access to iron that anyone could want. The problem is that making the armor requires a skilled professional and a great deal of time. This was the case from ancient Rome on up to the present day.

Peter Metcalfe

>Enmal Mountains? Where are they? The only major mountain ranges
>that I know of in Pamaltela are the Tarmo, Palakri and the Mari
>Mountains and beyond Jolar is the Sea of Fire (which looks flat in
>the RQII map of Glorantha.

There are four mountain ranges in Pamaltela. The Enmal mountains are south of the Nargan Desert. Further south, the ground flattens out again into the Boiling Swamp, and then south of that is the Sea of Fire. The RQ2 map of Glorantha lies.

The Enmal Mountains are the Sacred Mountains of Pamaltela. The Gods live there -- Pamalt, Aleshmara, Lodril, and so forth.

From: Sandy Petersen <sandyp@idpentium.idsoftware.com>
Date: Fri, 24 Mar 95 18:19:51 -0600
Subject: Re: sandy's maunderings

Adrian White provides us with some excellent information about what fighting at the time of the Norman Conquest was like.

>This battle also left me with a lasting impression of the shock
>effect of heavy cavalry. ..Mind you i think history shows us that a
>dense formation of infantry can withstand cavalry more or less
>indefinitely

Presumably the lance-armed knights & their steeds were genuinely trained to charge home, which would be unusual nowadays. Hans Delbruck makes an interesting point that medieval knights were not truly cavalry, in that they didn't fight en masse. Sure they banded together into large groups, but each knight fought individually, without cooperation with his fellows.

Note that after the Norman Conquest footmen more or less went out of fashion, and it's not until the Swiss re-invent the Phalanx that we see footmen beat knights again (not counting the two flukes at Agincourt and Crecy). It's a pity, because the performance of the

Saxons in 1066 indicate that they made fine infantry, able to stand up to horse better than the rabble that followed them historically.

Pam C.

>How effective were soldiers behind shield walls at defending

>themselves once the walls were broken?

Terrible. But so was everyone else. The Swiss didn't form a "Shield Wall", because they didn't carry shields, but if you broke up the unit, they were screwed. The Romans didn't usually form a shield wall, except for very specialized tactical purposes, but once more, if the line is shattered, the Romans can't fight effectively (which seems to be what happened at Teutoburgerwald). Of course, they can regroup faster than your typical phalanx.

 From: M_GARLICK@prime.delta.edu
 Date: 26 Mar 95 01:15:37 EST
 Subject: re: Glorantha Digest V1 #224

UNSUBSCRIBE M_GARLICK@PRIME.DELTA.EDU
 (will be changing mail addresses)

 From: Alex Ferguson <alex@dcg.gla.ac.uk>
 Date: Sun, 26 Mar 95 19:41:24 BST
 Subject: Files, and stuff.

SogCity (aka Mike Dawson, aka Sir Corby de la Flamme) cides Sandy on his inexactitudes about the SCA, but agrees with the gist that they're highly limited as a "simulation":

> First off, SCA fighting is pretty stylized--no elbows to the face (or
 > body to
 > body contact of any kind), no tripping, no hitting below the knee. This
 > is to
 > keep people from reaally getting injured, but they are all things I'm
 > sure
 > were used in real fights.

One might say of certain practisioners of "realistic" martial arts: I think this covers your whole act. Such restrictions are going to be less significant in armed combat, but their absence, and perhaps more so, that combatants know they needn't worry about or try to anticipate such tactics, must make a considerable difference.

> I do agree absolutely about the long weapon observations. The difficulty
 I
 > found in keeping the swordsmen away from me while trying to hit teme
 with a
 > poleaxe was the inspiration behind the RQ 3.75b "Maneuver" skill.

I've seen several attempts in games of various sorts try to represent this, with generally limited success. While the RQ strike rank system isn't wholly satisfactory, I think that the incidence of people using polearms and oversized spears in one-to-one combat should be low enough to justify sweeping the issue adroitly under the carpet. Failing which, factoring it into the weapon skill sounds like a plan.

Sandy Petersen:

> Lunar File Length

> I think that because of the monitors, the 7-man "file" is
> quite common in the Lunar army, as close to standardization as makes
> little difference.

I don't myself think this is true. Perhaps the majority of the "Pelandan" 8-man-files have been "reformed", but the Dara Happan Yelmic units are likely to show quite a bit of resistance to change. Furthermore, your earlier stipulation that some units have one monitor per two or so "files" (per 14 or 16 men, that is) suggests that these units, if monitors are the deciding factor, are indeed organised into 14 or 16 men files, even if the usual formation is half that depth.

> 7 or 14 would be easy
> enough to manage. And perhaps they can get by with 10-man files,
> since this results in two 7-man files in front, with two 3-man files
> behind, and the monitor behind that to cast spells on his two 3-man
> files. So it's not really a 10 man file, but a 10.5 man file.

Sandy and I, while discussing elementals and the like, had the thought that phalanxes were able to deploy in more open order than the norm, especially for those Oh Shit, Incoming moments. If a phalanx has time to anticipate such a situation, they may form up at about half the usual density in both ranks and files, with say about one man per two metres in either direction. If you do this, there's no point in massing in great depth either, so it may be the norm to use a three man half-file (or quarter file) in such situations, with the extra man, the monitor, behind the two mini-files of the men to which he was assigned.

Possibly they use a close order "3.5" man file on occasion, but this sounds a dodgy enough proposition that you'd only do so if you were desperate to cover a lot of width of field with the doubled frontage.

Adrian White enthuses about the idea of arranging people in regular polygons of degree six:

> A hoplite

> regiment formed in hexes with a spears length between each hex" could
have up to

> 5 or 6 times the frontage of a unit in columns of files. If depth was
required,

> they could have a second row of hexes, say 10 foot back, which would
create a

> formation with more depth and length than a Phalanx in the standard
formation.

This is a pretty gap-ridden formation, if one considers how it will

deploy the hoplites, and the relatively low density of pike-points beyond the men. I fancy I can hear the animal nomads giggling from here, in fact.

> If a lunar army was about to be attacked by a mass of pentian light cavalry,
 > the hoplites could use this extra frontage and depth to create a wall around the
 > magic units that they are protecting. The gaps between the hexes would allow
 > pelasts and light cavalry to withdraw behind the hoplites when they were
 > threatened with encirclement, but wouldn't be big enough for the pentian's to
 > get through without fighting. If any got through the first line they would be
 > trapped between two "inward" facing lines of hoplites.

This seems to suggest one line of hoplites facing out, then two facing in, then the troops being protected inside them, after pike-length gap. That would be, it strikes me, both a horrendously inefficient use of manpower, as only a third of the men are defending the outside from the cavalry charge, which would furthermore have only a single line of pikes to breach, and also a recipe for chaos inside, as converging inward-pointed hafts get tangled up.

> Of course this formation is largely defensive and immobile.

The question is why would they bother, when the phalanx formation is of proven defensive value, and relatively mobile, to boot?

The only merit I can see in the "hexes" idea is if a small group of hoplites, say up to about a half century, have to fight alone, and particularly if they're engaged out of formation. Here they would be in danger of being overrun before they could form up in close formation, even even if they manages this, would be in acute risk of being outflanked, due to a lack of unit frontage. Standing back-to-back in small groups (up to six or so, indeed) would be a plausible defensive measure under such circumstances, but this isn't the sort of fight hoplites would pick, given any decent alternatives.

Lewis says (and indeed occassionally SHOUTS):

> WRT:
 > Problems integrating Old Dara Happan Legions of 1111 men with new Lunar
 > Legions of 2450 + 1 General (optionally + 7 senior officers).

Let's first clarify that this is not the Official New Lunar Legion Size, but something that (at least) Paul Reilly and I have (independently) mooted as an amusing thing they might try, or have once tried.

> Since the Lunar Legion is composed of 7 cohorts of 350 men I would
 > suspect that this breaks down into 3 or 6 phalanx cohorts of heavy
 > infantry who who fight together. In addition to the heavy infantry
 > there might be up to 3 cohorts of Auxiliaries. In addition to

> auxiliaries there might be cavalry or SPECIALIST cohorts.

This isn't a bad idea, and fits quite well with the Lunar philosophy of Strength through Diversity. It also, for enthusiasts of the Soviet Analogy, vaguely like how the modern(ish) Red Army organised its (for example) armour battalions, by including an infantry company as well as the three tank companies.

In any case, this certainly isn't the norm, as cavalry and magic regiments are represented in Dragon Pass as separate units at the phalanx-scale level, and aren't attached to other units.

> So integration is not a problem and the new Lunar legions have the
> advantage of being self contained units with the ability to fight
> smaller scale engagements without having to rely on other troops to
> fulfill non-phalanx roles.

A problem with this model, however, is that it isn't necessarily desirable to intermingle phalanxes and other troops on this "fine" a scale. In a large scale engagement, one would probably want to deploy all the phalanxes together, and the peltasts elsewhere, so one would in any case have to disperse the mega-legion.

Sandy gives a Key Insight into the psychology of beating it:
> "What the hell am I running for?" [...] Next time I'll keep running.

On the Sedalapist catechism:

> The very start of their catechism (which is all I can go into
> here) is different from any others.

You mean the rest is Secret, or you've mis-filed it?

[Potted summary of Greg (creative, lazy, forgetful, and not anal about consistency)]

Additionally, he does also speak of liking to make people question their assumptions about Glorantha (and perhaps in general). Of course, this could be making a virtue out of what's made a necessity by other factors.

Alex.

From: Kevin Rose <vladt@interaccess.com>
Date: Sun, 26 Mar 1995 15:47:56 -0600 (CST)
Subject: Re: Carmania

Yes, I'm interested. I'm not running a game set in Carmania, but one with a bunch of uprooted Carmanians. It's actually a mutated Borderlands, featuring Count Raus. This mostly because I wanted a place that has lots of humakti and sorcerers, and is a long way away. The "Carmanian=Persian" theme is interesting, but of little use to me without lots of further data. Ancient Persia is an area I know little about, and is very low on my list of things to learn a lot about.

Anyway, this is why I was interested in the particular things I mentioned. But I would still like to hear about anyone's concept of how the place works.

Kevin

 From: niwe@ppvku.ericsson.se (Nils Weinander)
 Date: Mon, 27 Mar 95 10:29:20 +0200
 Subject: Moons and other celestial bodies

Sandy:

>Now, while the White Moon was still aboveground, it may have
 >moved through the sun's route -- in which each "day" the Sun moved in
 >a circle over the Gloranthan surface -- stopping at the four famous
 >castles -- one in Genertela, one in Luathela, one in Pamaltela, and
 >one in Vithela.

...

>If we assume that the sun's path was the equivalent to a
 >"year" (of course no time was actually passing), then this would give
 >us a possible source for the White Moon's phases.

The entire theory is compelling and makes perfect sense. I only get lost at one point: how does the six full moons per year periodicity of the Kralorelan calendar follow from this?

 Peter Metcalfe:

>BTW I have just dipped into the WWW page and for the Astronomy Treatise

What's the URL?

/Nils W

 From: Majordomo <major@hops.wharton.upenn.edu>
 Date: Mon, 27 Mar 1995 15:19:30 -0500 (EST)
 Subject: The Tribes of the Volsaxi (fwd)

For some reason or another Jeff Richard sent this message to owner-glorantha-digest instead of to the address of the list itself. Why he wanted to do this I do not know, but as I judge the article to be of interest to the list in general I am forwarding it.

Forwarded message:

> Date: Sun, 26 Mar 1995 15:02:23 +0800
 > From: RICHARJE <Jeff.Richard@metrokc.gov>
 > Subject: The Tribes of the Volsaxi

>

> I thought I had sent this last week, but apparantly it was never

> posted.
 >
 > As some of you all may know, Joerg and I have been working on
 > developing Volsaxiland and Hendrikiland, despite the valiant attempts of
 > one
 > Son of Fergus to unleash the destructive power of the Crimson Greg.
 > Eventually we intend to post our discoveries of the fascinating folk
 > south
 > of Wilmskirk. But the Son of Fergus has called our hand, so without
 > further
 > ado, here are some notes on the Volsaxi confederation circa Fire Season
 > 1617:
 >
 > The Volsaxi are a confederation of four Heortling tribes and a
 > handful
 > of independent clans led by a Warlord and his High Council. Rarely the
 > Warlord will be recognized as the King of the Volsaxi Tribe, and will
 > have
 > authority over all of the tribal Storm Voices of Volsaxiland.
 >
 > The Volsaxi spiritual center is the ancient oppidum of Whitewall,
 > sacred to Orlanth and the residence of the Volsaxi Warlord-King and his
 > household. Until about sixty years ago, Whitewall was in the hands of
 > the
 > Etori clan of the Kitori, a fierce people who claim kinship with the
 > Dark
 > Trolls of the Woods.
 >
 > The four tribes of the Volsaxi had been tributary to the Kitori or
 > the
 > Hendriki until Volsax the Liberator from the Umating clan, a companion
 > and
 > friend of the great Prince Tarkalor Trollkiller, led the tribes against
 > the
 > Kitori and behind Tarkalor's banner. After they had seized Whitewall,
 > the
 > tribal kings and chieftains clamored for a Warlord. Some suggested that
 > Tarkalor should be Warlord and King, but he rejected the honor, saying
 > that
 > Volsax was their true leader and spoke eloquently about Volsax's
 > virtues.
 > Volsax was acclaimed Warlord and King of the Volsaxi by the assembled
 > warriors in Whitewall.
 >
 > In 1617, the four tribes of the Volsaxi are:
 >
 > The Bacofi: King Gelholdt the Magnificent. One of the largest of
 > the
 > Volsaxi tribes, the Bacofi are often seen as the main rivals to the
 > Dunlaingi in terms of political preponderance. A strong tribe with many
 > subject clans, the King at Maiden's Hill (so called for the Earth spirit
 > that led Bacof to a place where he could shelter his kin from the
 > Kitori)

> has lost much of his former influence to the Volsaxi warlord at Whitewall.

>

> The Bacofi border the Troll Woods and border wars between the Bacofi

> and the Kitori have claimed many lives from both tribes. Perhaps because of

> this, the Bacofi are not as out-spoken in their hatred of the Kitori as are

> the Curtali, although chief Hrothgar Trollbane of the Agnari is a definite

> exception to that rule.

>

> The Hellerfell clan near the Troll Woods boast as a clan-elder Domnall

> the Thunderer, the High Storm Voice of Whitewall. The Frodling clan, also

> near the Troll Woods, are an Elmali clan. Their chieftain Wiglaf Flameblade,

> now an old man, swore a prime-oath to Warlord Turloch over the young King

> Gelholdt and swore personal loyalty to King Broyan after his acclamation as

> King of the Volsaxi.

>

> The Kurtali: King Egan Intamorlson. The Kurtali's fierce hatred of the

> Kitori and of the creatures of darkness is legendary throughout Volsaxiland.

> Even before the days of Volsax the Liberator, the Kurtali maintained a rough

> independence from the Kitori overlords by their sheer ferocity.

>

> The Kurtali are a "weak" tribe with 10 strong clans including the

> Rostoak, the Shea and the Thrusa. Currently the Rostoak clan holds the

> tribal hill-fort at Stagwood, which they have held since Enfrew became King.

> The King of the Kurtali is often little more than an over-chieftain and

> major Kurtali religious ceremonies are often performed at Whitewall, only a

> day or two away.

>

> The Laingali: King Broyan Pendasson. The founding tribe of the Volsaxi,

> the Laingali have long maintained a political primacy in the confederation.

> The Umating clan remains the richest and most respected clan in Volsaxiland.

> All but a very few of the Volsaxi Warlords have come from this clan, and all

> Volsaxi Kings have been Umating. Other Laingali clans include the Percevi,

> whose stockade boasts a shrine to Issaries, and the Cunobelin, whose herds

> graze the hills on the north shore of the Solthi. All in all the
 Laingali
 > boast 11 clans.
 >
 > The hill fort of Dun Laing (Laingal's Fort) is the site of the
 tribal
 > moot and the temple to the gods of the tribe. In times of war, the clans

 > seek shelter for the women, children and cattle behind its ramparts. The

 > Umating clan live beneath its walls and claim rights as the "royal" clan
 of
 > the Laingali. The Umating King at Laingal's Fort maintains strict
 control
 > over the clans of the Laingali and as the King is often the Warlord of
 the
 > Volsaxi, he usually has great resources at his beck and call.
 >
 > The Sylangi: King Audan Irminsuling. The Sylangi have the dubious
 > position of being the tribe bordering on Lunar Sartar. The tribal
 hill-fort
 > at Two Top (so called because of the hill's distinctive "saddle" shape
 is
 > well fortified. There are thirteen Sylangi clans, with the Irminsuling
 being
 > the most important, largely thanks to King Audan.
 >
 > The Irminsuling clan currently hold the tribal kingship and having
 > first gained it when Audan was acclaimed in 1603 following the defeat of
 the
 > Volsaxi Warlord Ogotorig at the hands of the Lunar Army. King Audan was
 > crucial in getting Umating chieftain Turloch Jarangson elected as
 Warlord of
 > the Volsaxi in 1605. Several years later, he cultivated the friendship
 of
 > another Umating, the powerful Storm Voice Broyan Pendasson.
 >
 > Broyan Pendasson and his Sartarite companion, the exiled Queen (and

 > powerful magician) Kallyr Starbrow persuaded Warlord Turloch to support
 King
 > Audan in raiding the Kingdom of the Kultain, a tribe allied with the
 Lunar
 > Empire. The raid was very successful and it is said that the Sylangi
 became
 > one of the wealthiest tribes of the Volsaxi as a result. King Audan
 > generously rewarded the Volsaxi who aided him and is called the Just as
 a
 > result.
 >
 > The next year, Broyan, Kallyr and another Irminsuling, the famed
 Wind
 > Lord Harvast Blueskin, persuaded the Warlord into leading the Volsaxi
 fyrd
 > against the Kultaini. The Volsaxi crushed the Kultaini, plundering and

> burning their tribal fort. To the eternal glory of the Volsaxi nation, a

> Lunar army marching to succor the Kultaini was routed and the victors

> returned home with Lunar armor and much booty.

>

> That fall, several Syangi clans moved their herds into the land

once

> occupied by the Kultaini. Some chieftains are worried about Lunar

> retaliation, but all have profited from the destruction of the Kultaini.

>

> Some intrepid Syangi bloodlines have even begun feeding their herds on

the

> land once worked by the Kultaini.

>

> Besides the four tribes, the several more-or-less independant clans

> follow the Volsaxi warbanner. These include The Night Leapers of

Dorinstead

> (although they still participate in Kurtali rituals), and the Welundings

of

> Smithstone.

>

> Some say that the Volsaxi boast a fifth tribe: the exiles from

Sartar.

> Several thousand Sartarites, many whom are skilled veterans from the

> defeated Army of Salinarg or from the Uprising of the High Council, have

> greatly strengthened the Volsaxi. Many have created clans, like the

Ollili

> Colymar or the Sons of Starkad (a clan created from many Sartarite

tribes

> and clans) while many more continue with their ancestral clan

associations

> and support various powerful Sartarite exiles in Whitewall (Kallyr

Starbrow,

> Leika Beti).

>

> The Sartarites mainly reside in or around Whitewall. Few own land

and

> most farm (in the renting sense of the word) the lands belonging to the

> Great Temple-Ring. Seeking to maintain their dignity and their status,

many

> have sworn loyalty to King Broyan as gesithmen or huscarls, or have

joined

> the Temple-Ring as temple warriors. Having no allegiance to any of the

> tribal kings, the Sartarites have greatly strengthened the hand of King

> Broyan, making him by far the most powerful Volsaxi Warlord-King in the

> confederation's history.

>

> The Warlord of Whitewall maintains four forts in Volsaxiland

besides

> the Hill-Fort of Whitewall. The first of these, Trollkiller's Tower, was

> built in the reign of Volsax and keeps a watch on the Troll Woods in

> Bacofiland. The second fort, Ortossi's Keep, is on the hills above
 Phortan's
 > Fields in Sun Dome County. In the reign of Warlord Turloch, Road's End
 was
 > reinforced and garrisoned with Volsaxi warriors from the tribes. The
 final
 > fort, Bull's Stand, is along the upper Syphon River in Laingaliland, and

 > maintains a shrine to Orlanth's chaos-fighting brother, Urox.
 >
 > Anyways, these are notes from my campaign and from Joerg's. Use
 them,
 > ause them, ignore them or comment on them.
 >
 > Yours truly,
 >
 > Jeff Richard

End of Glorantha Digest V1 #227

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