

# Flamethrowers, Slashers and Witches: Gendered Communication in a Virtual Community

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*"Flaming," or aggressive communication in computer-mediated communication (CMC), has long been a topic of CMC research. The traditional CMC theories have, however, not been entirely satisfactory and have ignored a compelling line of research connecting flaming to a masculine communication style and Internet cyberculture. This essay studies a specific virtual community, examining the ways that it creates an anti-flaming norm to provide a more equitable space for the harassed women of the net. As such, it provides a demonstration of how qualitative work on online communities can illustrate the kinds of complex negotiation and hegemonies involved with CMC.*

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**F**laming, or the sending of virulent insults via email, is one of the first (see Kielser, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984) and most enduring (e.g., Lea et al. 1992; Thompsen, 1996) problematics in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research. Traditionally emblematic of the "standardized lore" (Steinfeld, 1990, p. 284) of CMC, that it is "'high tech' without 'high touch'" (Lin & Huff, 1990, p. 373), flaming becomes the primary symptom of CMC's pathology. The traditional theoretical discourse, that CMC does not adequately provide a sense of another person's *social presence* or the nonverbal *information richness* of face-to-face (FTF) interaction, is summarized and reviewed by Lea (1991) as the "cuelessness" model (p. 155). Experimental support for this model has been mixed, however (see Walther, Anderson & Park, 1994; and Spears & Lea, 1992 for reviews), prompting some to argue that this perspective is becoming a "theoretic antique" (Parks & Floyd, 1996, p. 93). Indeed, it is difficult to reconcile this research, much of which has been performed on zero-history groups which were heavily task-oriented, with the vigorous presence of what Rheingold (1993) calls "virtual communities" (p. 5).

Enough description and celebration of these virtual communities has taken place (e.g., Baym, 1995; Clerc, 1996; Hall, 1996; Kollock & Smith, 1996; Korenman & Wyatt, 1996) to support the emergence of three newer and competing theories of CMC, all of which include significant elements of social/group context in their explanations: *social information processing theory* (e.g. Fulk et al. 1987), *Walther's hyperpersonal perspective* (e.g., Walther, 1996), and the *SIDE Model* (e.g. Spears & Lea, 1992). In spite of their social commitments, none of these theories takes into account a fourth line of research which focuses on gender.

This perspective is explored in this paper. As with Benson's (1996) exploration of civility and community in a political bulletin board, this paper seeks to do a richer analysis of the complexities involved in the individual-social negotiations of flaming. An ethnography of a specific virtual community, the HORROR film and literature discussion listserv, is reported. This paper argues that not only are flames socially produced, but that issues of gender are inherent to that social context. It further argues that the HORROR list provides of good example of how virtual communities can create and negotiate a context which produces fewer flames and a more equitable arena for communication from both genders.

### GENDER

In spite of a rapidly increasing number of women participating in various CMC forums on the Internet (Herring, 1996a), estimates are that Internet discussion list participants are over 80 percent male (Balsamo, 1995; Lee, 1996). Gender identity and gendered language persist in this bodiless environment (Cherny, 1994; Hall, 1996; Herring, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1996c; Spender, 1995). Hall (1996) even suggests that in the absence of visible biology, CMC intensifies gendered communication styles.<sup>1</sup>

For males, this becomes the "cyberspace machismo" (Thompson, 1996, p. 306) of a hacker cyberculture committed to the disruption of developing virtual communities (Balsamo, 1995). The well-documented cases of online harassment and virtual rape (Balsamo, 1995; Beaubien, 1996; Brail, 1993; Lee, 1996; Hall, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Spender, 1995; Truong, 1993; We, 1993) are examples of the extreme end of the phenomena. Herring's (1994, 1996b) research has even shown that men often dominate and take over women-centered discussion lists. Brail (1993) describes one of the pornographic flames she received: "Why don't you get a life you on-the-rag, stuck up c-nt? Geez, you really need to f---d in the ---" This is merely one example from a literature chronicling a frontier where women are marginalized and harassed, something which the cuelessness models at best poorly explain and at worst seem to trivialize. The three newer theories, while they take into account the social, generally limit their analysis to cultures created online. They fail to take into account the impact of powerful offline forces like misogyny and anti-feminism (see Faludi, 1991), forces which do affect communicative and social behavior.

Examples like the HORROR list become especially important, then, to help understand the gender dynamics of flaming and the process of negotiating anti-flaming norms.<sup>2</sup>

### THE HORROR LIST

The HORROR list, perhaps because it is a place for a fandom often maligned (Pinedo, 1996), is a community where differences are celebrated and conflicts are discouraged. This is the opposite of a cyberculture that encourages the escalation of

flame wars to accelerate debate. This more stereotypically feminine orientation toward disagreements (see Herring, 1994, 1996b; Spender, 1995) is continually maintained through the group's interactions. For Kollock and Smith (1996), this kind of socialization is particularly difficult on the Net because it is harder to sanction, and this would seem to be especially true when a group is in the situation of rejecting the typical Internet sanction, the flame.

It is instructive to look at two instances of flaming that occurred on the list during the first four months I was observing/lurking and interviewing a number of participants. There were only three flames during that entire time. Not only was there a dearth of flames on the list, but the severity of the flames was particularly low compared to other areas of the Net.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Morons on Elm Street*

This incident began with a flame sent by a new male member of the list. It seems modest in scale and vitriol, but it tapped into various hurtful stereotypes about media fans (Jenkins, 1992):

... everyone knows that anyone who wastes their time with Nightmare on Elm Street and/or/ Friday the 13th type movies has no IQ whatsoever.<sup>4</sup>

This person was censured in what Herring (1996b) defines as the "attenuated/supportive" style, "characterized by expressions of support and appreciation, and in which views are presented in a hedged fashion, often with appeals for ratification from the group" (p. 119). Yet the demands of group norm maintenance require that flames be in some way negatively addressed. A compromise between the style and the duty was seen in the first response to this message, sent by a female participant:

Well . . . I don't think you should be flamed, but . . . . To say that anyone who enjoys slashers is a moron is a gross misrepresentation of the truth and just a mean thing to say, period. Some people (like myself) have a preference for funny, campy horror. Are you willing to say I'm an intellectual lightweight for enjoying these kind of movies - as compared to whatever it is you prefer.

This message is only partially hedged with the "like myself" parenthetical and the explanation of her "preference." However, the "period" is certainly not hedged and the emphasized "I'm" is a clearly individualistic tactic, relying on this member's fame as a relatively loquacious list veteran. However, Korenman and Wyatt (1996) point out that it is this core of "public persona" participants that create the "sense of community" and pass on group norms (p. 239). Thus, this message resembles the masculine "adversarial" style, but avoids the "superior stance vis-a-vis the intended addressee(s)" (Herring, 1996b, p. 118). In fact, the invocation of personal power is used to delegitimize the flamer's own superior tone.

A number of responses highlighted the emotional hurtfulness of the flame, another tactic which brings forth the individual in such a way as to connect that person with the group. It is a call for help, as one interview respondent noted:<sup>5</sup>

I'm beginning to think that the Niceness Quotient of the Horror list began as a sort of self-defense thing . . . . A sort of the-world-vs-us attitude. Whenever

I saw some newbie make a cutting remark about someone else's preferences, someone . . . would jump right in and defend them. Over time, the entire list has developed a sense of pride in the friendly tone and anyone who's been on for a while will tend to take an active part in maintaining that tone.

If such a defense of another is expected, there is less need of an invocation of group ratification, since agreement is assumed. In interviews, many respondents suggested a kind of "desert island" metaphor, where the HORROR list was a kind of refuge for those with "battle fatigue" from flame wars on other parts of the Net. Many participants admit that horror is not their favorite genre, but they stay on because of the atmosphere and the people.

There is an additional step in the responses to the flame which also helps to cement the group norms and helps to prevent the initial poster from escalating the conflict, as can be seen in these two separate posts:

If I see the word moron again I'm gonna scream. It seems to me as if there are people on the list spoiling for a fight, and there's no need for it.

Obviously, there is a wide disparity in movie preferences here, Good! Try not to get nasty with each other when talking about it, okay?

These posts, although severe and superior in tone, seem addressed to other respondents criticizing the initial flamer. This attempt to constrain the flames is an explicit statement of a group norm (a celebration of differences). One new member commented that the responses to the flame were good in that they "did not let irrationality or impulsiveness control [the] response." It is a kind of hybrid discourse, where emotions are used to call forth group solidarity, but they are at the same time limited for the same ultimate purpose.

#### *Motives of Grammar*

In this instance a veteran female's views on a certain movie were critiqued by a new male member who analyzed every word in the post grammatically, inserting statements like "Hackneyed and pretentious" in a reprint of the post. The first of many replies was sent by another female veteran:

. . . what in the world are you doing? You can disagree with someone without being an...without being cruddy about it . . . you don't have to be snotty about how she tells us her opinions.

The ellipses of the implied word "asshole" were provided in the original post, seemingly as a show of civility and restraint. This post also explicitly challenges the "snotty" superiority that characterized the flame and the masculine agonistic style in general.

After many more such messages, the poster of the original movie review responded with a message highlighting the emotional hurt and thanking all of the people who had spoken out against the flamer. She expressed feelings of solidarity with them, saying, "I love y'all not because we always agree on everything but because of our differences."

Her strong pride in the HORROR community was an important part of her message, and after that message, a sense of wanting to rebuild after the disruption could be felt. The next message on the subject was from a female veteran, asking for clemency for the Grammarian:

I think we can all lay off [him], now, if he's still here. He has probably grasped by now that he committed a grave error in etiquette for which, if he does stay, he will be ribbed about until he's grey on top.

This almost ritualistically common move to invite the offending party back into the fold (with a lightened tone) is another key part of the ethos of the list. As one interview response put it:

When flamers are reprimanded I read the reprimands more as reminders of civility or as gentle scolding, not as anything so strong as to bring shame on most posters.

However, as the incident passed and the Grammarian was nowhere to be found, male members of the list gradually began to play up the episode as a kind of epic flame war:

[Grammarian], I bet you feel as flamed as the guy in "Ghost in the Machine" during the micro-wave scene.

. . . his flaming remains still float in cyberspace (I know, I know—nothing flames in space. Sue me!)

Although there is not, as one respondent put it, "that 'school' feeling where if you say the wrong thing you'll get the crap beat out of you"<sup>6</sup> normally on the list, these taunts seem to be a way for those members of the list more inclined toward the adversarial style to recuperate their own involvement in a more moderate virtual culture.

Some interview respondents even mentioned the story of a time years earlier on the list (I was a member then and remember it well) when there was a huge flame-fest. The list-owner began moderating the list and a number of more libertarian minded participants left "in a huff." Some time after this Grammarian incident, the current list-owner (who was female) invoked that story as a kind of warning. It seems that functionally the friendly list culture began there (when list members like "The Bilemeister" left) with a semi-apocalyptic showdown. Such an epically agonistic legend seems to help draw males who may be inclined toward the adversarial style into this kinder, gentler virtual culture.

### CONCLUSION

The responses surrounding these two flames indicate four central aspects to this list's maintenance of an anti-flaming norm: (1) restrained group-invoking admonition, (2) highlighting of emotional response, (3) overtures of forgiveness and (4) discursive connection with a larger agonistic myth. This process links different people with differently gendered communication styles into a group identity. It works well enough that what flames were seen on the list were invariably tame.

This analysis of social process has demonstrated that, against the cuelessness theories, flaming is not always simply an artifact of the medium. This supports an aspect of the Fulk, Walther and Lea & Spears perspectives. However, it also indicates that a more qualitative approach to the complexity of communicative negotiation of the individual and the group online would improve these theories' accounts. In addition, giving attention to the ways that the power relations highlighted by feminism and other critical theories operate across the electronic frontier would expand our understanding of CMC phenomena.

Working from such critical perspectives, the importance of the existence of such places as the HORROR list is underscored by someone calling herself "Doctress Neutopia" (1994), for whom "there is a war against the feminist voice occurring in Cyberspace" similar to the burnings of witches. She argues that now is a "window of opportunity" for women to take back cyberspace and create a new "social architecture" (see also Spender, 1995). On the other hand, Miller (1995) points to the problems of such repeated portrayals of women as online victims. The HORROR list might be seen as a model for changing these popular and online discourses.

What is most instructive about the HORROR list's negotiation is that concessions are made to the masculine discursive culture, but those concessions become either tokens (as in the fourth aspect) or ways of pulling the discourse back toward a larger feminine hegemony (one through three). This bears much resemblance to critical theory's account of how hegemony works (see Cloud, 1992). It is instructive to see how a vocal minority population subverted machismo and carved out a corner for their own hegemonic order.<sup>7</sup>

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> We might speculate that just as emailers use emoticons like the smiley -- :) -- to create a shared interpretive context for message receivers, they might also mobilize stereotypical gender roles both to cement decentered identities (see Turkle, 1995) and to make cueless communication more efficient. Gender's anchoring function in regards to both of these needs can be seen in the common television news hidden camera exclusive: in our intense desire to know a baby's gender before we can orient our communication (verbal and nonverbal) toward the child. Although the gender perspective here reviewed suffers from a creeping essentialism, one need not grant an essentialist assumption to make this perspective useful. Even though both males and females take on a variety of gender roles (and even identities) online (again, Turkle, 1995), this gender performance does not take place in a social vacuum. That would be the fallacy of the cuelessness model. Indeed, Butler (1990) teaches us that gender, although always performative, always has a socially real pressure and influence on behavior. This is the lesson of Althusserian interpellation, that we are ideologically positioned by socio-cultural entities. Or, as Delgado (1995) argues, by identity labels. We would add gender to Delgado's focus on the ideological power of racial labels
- <sup>2</sup> This is a small sample of the kinds of interaction exploding across the Internet, but it is one of the few cyberspace locales which has been in existence for well over ten years. As such, it provided one of the first refuges for harassed women on the Internet. This paper's aim is to demonstrate the importance of these gendered communication issues for any analysis of this particular group's interactions. As such, it may serve as an example for further research in the area.
- <sup>3</sup> Although there were many minor disagreements, I have not analyzed them as flames because, as Thompsen (1996) notes, flames are often defined contextually, and these were the

only three cases when some sort of community discussion of the flames as inappropriate arose. Discussion of the third flame was omitted from this report due to issues of redundancy and space constraints.

<sup>4</sup> All messages/posts which appear in this paper are excerpted.

<sup>5</sup> These interviews were conducted via email.

<sup>6</sup> This statement was made by the respondent in the context of all of cyberspace -- without physical contact there is little someone else can do to take revenge. But this may simply be his impression of the HORROR list, since, as elsewhere in cyberspace nasty things like mailbox floodings do occur.

<sup>7</sup> I suppose we might then call the women on the list, who were a vocal minority, successful organic intellectuals, in the Gramscian sense.

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