Mainstream Rebels: Informalization and Regulation in a Virtual World

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. At focus are the dynamics and tensions between informal and standardized codes of conduct. We question the idea that virtual, mediated, communication differs substantially from 'real', face-to-face communication. One way to approach this tension between informality and standardization is to further investigate the relation between the virtualities achieved through electronic means, and the "real life" situation of those people creating these virtual worlds. These investigations have been made through fieldwork at Apple computer in Sweden, California, US, and France, where online and offline communication among professional software engineers and other Apple employees was studied. To grasp how computer professionals communicate while forming the basic structures of the Internet, participant observation has been made at meetings arranged by organizations involved in the process of defining and organizing the Internet, such as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), the Internet Society (ISOC) and the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

Introduction: An outlaw in cyberspace

Becoming an outlaw in cyberspace is easy. All you have to do is try to adhere to established norms for social communication. And be ignorant. Christina's first encounter with netiquette was rather dramatic and threatened to stigmatise her for the duration of her fieldwork. It was one of the first days of fieldwork at Apple Computer. She was just getting acquainted with AppleLink, the corporate worldwide telecommunications system, and with the local Intranet system. It so happened that her very first electronic message composition was a reply to one of the hardware engineers – an energetic, speedy young man in his early twenties. Jim put most of his energy on technology and for whom working at Apple was more of a lifestyle than of tedious work. Trained in a school system in which computers were largely absent from the curriculum, let alone netiquette rules, but in which the norms of letter writing were taught and inculcated as knowledge of great social and professional value. Christina replied by adhering to these norms. Her 'letter' was stylishly indented, and the style of writing was as formal as a normal letter would be. Jim's response, through the Intranet, of course, was agitated:

1.48 pm Jim

Diary

To: Christina

You are now set up in the Diary. Your password is xxx. Double-click on your name in the list on the right hand side, type in your password, and you may then enter information about yourself.

Jim

--

2.13 pm Christina

Re: Diary

To: Jim

HELLO JIM!

Thanks for your help!

I may be able to organize myself now!

Christina

--

2.19 pm Jim

Re: Diary

To: Christina

Sure. But why all these indentations?

--

2.53 pm Christina

'INDENTATIONS'

To: Jim

Hey you!

What kind of an 'aesthetic jerk' are you?

(citing George) (another Apple colleague, authors' remark)

Christina

--

2.55 pm Jim

Re: 'INDENTATIONS'

To: Christina

Stop indenting everything one centimetre.

This event, which occurred before electronic communication became widely spread and before the Web was established, taught her something important about Apple culture: the tone of voice should be informal, direct, and free from the burden of traditional corporate or stilted social style of educated middle-class society. It also taught her something about the wider culture of on-line communication. There were obviously norms and rules or codes of conduct for communicating on the Net, which were not entirely the same as those of the 'real-world'. But they were there, and before Christina could find her feet as an 'apple' in the field, as it were, she also had to learn how to navigate successfully on the Net. This meant learning the rules for Net communication.

The above example leads us astray from the idea that the virtual communicative space is one characterized by freedom from established codes of conduct and norms -- a space within which the individual is free to re-construct him or herself according to spontaneous whims and fantasies. The anecdote focuses attention on the violation of a code. The agitated reactions of the hardware engineer show that there were indeed norms and codes of conduct to be adhered to, and that had been broken in the dialogue. Pointing to such 'failures' to act properly, accentuates behaviours that may be relatively informalized or detraditionalized but which nevertheless serve to provide sustained voices of established authority. 'In practice,' as Heelas (1995:9) puts it, '– and despite the language of autonomy and choice – we are controlled by routines, rules, procedures, regulations, laws, duties, schedules, diaries, timetables and customs.'

What the growth of technology mediated communication does, however, is to problematize social relations, the ways in which these are to be established and maintained, and challenged, for that matter. It makes us reflect on what constitutes a

relation as well as what constitutes a community (cf Albrow et al 1997). It places the norms and rules by which interaction in such communities are to be governed into the limelight. The fact that technology-mediated communication is often global or transnational, emphasizes the problem of taking for granted a sharedness of rules and norms for interaction. As a newcomer on the Net, one is treading unsafe terrain.

This paper problematizes the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. The discourse of information technology raises hopes of transcending national, class, and gender differences, and of empowering individuals and groups. It is said to facilitate creative network constellations and formation of organizational communities of belonging in and across organizational, national or other boundaries. There are strong connotations of democratic ideals and egalitarianism. On the other hand, we argue, the networked world is also a highly regulated environment. There are sets of preferred values, social and professional codes of conduct that shape and restrain communication. Hence, social interaction on the Internet has a double edge to it. While it opens up possibilities for swift, informal, and potentially empowering communication, it also entails a specific kind of global structuration of ideas and practices.

We question the idea that virtual, mediated, communication differs substantially from 'real', face-to-face communication. We argue that virtual and real communicative patterns interpenetrate each other and that virtual communication to a large extent is modeled upon face-to-face communication. Instead of building upon Manuel Castells's (1996: 358-375) division of the real and the virtual as separate units and a 'culture of real virtuality', we prefer to regard the two as integrated. Virtuality is not a 'new reality' but part of everyday life (see also Pfaffenberger 1992). Virtuality is social, and should be thought of in terms of 'social virtuality'. Following Miller and Slater (Miller and Slater, 2000:6-8) we suggest that on-line and off-line worlds penetrate each other deeply and in complex ways. Whether people are writing online or offline, there are norms, codes of conduct, and rules that shape the way people communicate. The distinction between the 'real' and the 'virtual' is thus misleading to the extent that it misses the degree to which communication on the Internet is modelled upon and embedded in communication off-line. In spite of the enchanting rhetoric of informalization in on-line communication, off-line rules tend to shape communication in cyberspace.

The paper builds on Garsten and Lerdell's research into the practices of online interaction. It draws on Garsten's earlier fieldwork at Apple computer in Sweden, California, the USA, and France, where on-line and off-line communication among professional software engineers and other Apple employees was studied (see Garsten 1994; 2001). This involved some degree of participant observation on the Net, as it were, being involved in and observing discussions mediated through information tech-nology. This virtual fieldwork by no means exhausted or dominated everyday communication. Face-to-face communication and communication mediated by other kinds of technologies was equally intense, providing a broad spectrum of social interaction. The paper also draws on Lerdell's research on professionals in organizations and networks engaged in forming the basic structures of the Internet. As part of his research, Lerdell made participant observation at a meeting of the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), an organisation that co-ordinates Internet standardising procedures. During this meeting a number of interviews with attendees were conducted. Focus was set on how the participants in the IETF activities communicate with each other as more or less spatially distant colleagues. Much of the standardising work takes place

electronically through various mailing lists, which is why studying electronic communication was an important methodological approach. We also draw upon ongoing debates about libertarianism and related issues; amongst others media debates carried out in *Wired Magazine*.

Beyond the conventional: The tyranny of informality

When entering into discussions about the different aspects of Internet communication we are operating in what Schneider (1993: 2) calls 'an enchanted milieu', characterized by libertarian ideals, a great portion of individualism and strong anti-regulation sentiments. The Internet is in this sense an example of what has been labelled 'technologies of freedom' (see Misztal 2000: 171). The rhetoric around the Internet invokes notions of a different, alternative kind of communication supposedly free from many of the normative constraints of face-to-face encounters. The enchanting power of Internet communication lies in the rhetoric of freedom, resisting domestication and escaping regulation.

The enchanted domain of the Internet, dominated as it has been by technolibertarian ideals, invites the idea that formal behaviour can be more relaxed and external constraints released. This may be described as a form of 'informalization' (Misztal, 2000: 43). The process of informalization has been captured in Elias notion of the civilizing process, which describes changes in the relation between external social constrains and individual self-constraints (Elias 1978). Following an increased division of labour, the growth of individualism, the de-conventionalization of organized practices, the effects of new media communication and the pluralization of social life in general, 'modern' societies generally puts less pressure on people to conform to the formalities of behaviour, it has been argued (Wagner 1994). By the same token, we are left with higher levels of structural insecurity as we have to work out for ourselves a variety of strategies for everyday interaction. Nowadays, the concept of informality is most frequently used in relation to forms of interaction on the Internet and in relation to forms of social life in communist and post communist societies (Misztal 2000: 171).

In Internet communication, with people being to a greater extent decontextualized from formal office roles and with formal codes of behaviour no longer corresponding to the actual relationships, informality emerges as the main code of behaviour. There has been, and still is, a fashion for informality, whereby it is openly prescribed, sometimes leading to 'the tyranny of informality' where 'being informal' is the order of the day (cf Misztal 2000:44). This was the case at Apple, where the stilted corporate code of IBM and others was explicitly rejected and a more informal, relaxed code of behaviour was encouraged. Being a Net wiz was part of what it took to be a 'real Apple'. This was something Christina had yet to learn and that was clearly communicated to her by Jim. Informality also has its implicit and taken-for-granted rules.

It is often argued that the liberation of exchange of communication from the constraints of time and space provides participants with an experience of informal and intimate interaction. Enthusiasts see the promise of a digital Utopia in an open, global forum to which anybody can contribute ideas and information in an informal way, and where democratic and virtual communities can form. The pioneering first generation of Net users, with their cyber-hippie romanticism, university campus culture, and counter-cultural impulses, left behind them for the next generation of users the informality and

self-directedness of communication, and the idea that each individual has her own voice and expects an individualized answer (Castells 1996: 357). Contributing to the atmosphere of informality is the fact that the Internet can be used for just about anything; for printing, publishing, marketing, debating, entertainment, education, exchange information and so on. Within Usenet one can join huge numbers of newsgroups or post a message at computer bulletin-board systems, participate in hosted conferences or play interactive computer games, send electronic mail or have an intimate chat within an Internet Chat zone. In Misztal's (2000: 178) words:

> **Although the Net's openness, the informality and self-directedness of this form of communication as well as its enormous complexity and formlessness, together with its continuous evolution, make it difficult to evaluate the character of the Internet and the related networks that make up the greater Net, we have enough evidence to suggest that it can offer some new opportunities for more flexible, interactive, decentralized and democratic modes of communication.**

Electronic communication has been claimed by many to differ from face-to-face encounters in a number of respects. For example, it has been described as less civil and more conflictual, less conventional, more risky, and more democratic (Misztal 2000: 183; Sproull and Kiesler 1991: 67). Not only does electronic mail broadcast organizational gossip or jokes, but also spreads organizational information, which may increase employees' commitment to corporate goals. Managers may also feel threatened by the flow of information, its lack of respect for hierarchies, and their lack of control over its content (Wellman et al 1996). The ease with which recipients may be added to a message, messages can be distributed to large crowds through distribution lists, and re-sent across organizations makes it rather unpredictable and difficult to control. Electronic communication is charged with many of the fears and hopes of alternative and complementary forms of communication. It takes place before, after, and in-between face-to-face encounters.

Technolibertarianism: The rhetoric of freedom

The world of high-tech and electronic communication brings to mind rationality, standardization and an engineered sterile kind of modernity. It is, however, a world in which flesh, blood and vivid ideas, have given places. In the words of Borsook (2000: 3), 'High-tech, like any human artefact is not culturally tasteless, odorless, colorless. It contains attitude, mind-set, philosophy; and with geeks, the attitude, mind-set, and philosophy is libertarianism, in many-blossomed efflorescence.' Libertarianism is often claimed to be the ideology of cyberspace (Kamiya 1997), and others claim that libertarianism makes up the underlying value system of most cyberpunks. In Borsook's words; 'Libertarianism is a computer-culture badge of belonging, and libertarians are the most vocal political thinkers and talkers in high tech' (2000: 7).

The term libertarianism is very vague in itself. It is often understood as a set of political and philosophical ideas, where freedom for the individual is at the centre of attention and where coercion from others – may it be other individuals or the state – should not interfere with the individual's own rights. But the term is ambiguous, and the differences between libertarianism, liberalism and neo-liberalism are hard to define. One must therefore be careful not to use the term 'libertarianism' too loosely to describe more or less unorganised, erratic or anarchic behaviour of individuals. *Wired*, being one

of the most influential magazines reporting on various aspects of the Internet, has been described as very libertarian in character (Agre 1995). *Wired*, Agre argues, is made up of 'narratives of individualism, rational progress, technological determinism, and the autonomous development of the market' (Agre 1995)[1]. As is noted by a *Wired* columnist, critics often translate libertarianism into 'anarchism, egoism, and plain selfishness and greed' (McCullagh and Singleton 1997).

Individualism is a central tenet of libertarianism. The freedom of the individual is central in discussions about how the Internet and the world at large ought to be organized. Self-government of individuals is advocated, as opposed to 'others-government' where other actors regulate the behaviour of the individual. In the Libertarian FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions), the following is said about self-government:

> **Libertarians want a win-win world of peace and plenty. And we believe that the only way to get it is through self-government... NOT others-government ('Frequently Asked Questions About Libertarianism' 1998).**

Anti-regulation is another strong notion in libertarianism. Numerous are examples of loud-voiced more or less self-appointed advocates representing the 'Internet community', claiming that the way to govern the Internet is for the authorities to stay out of the Net. One well-known example is the opposition that was organised by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, among others, against a proposed bill criminalizing 'indecent' speech on the Internet, the Communication Decency Act (CDA). Thus, in the libertarian view, the way to 'govern' the Internet is through self-government. There is almost a moralistic character to the idea, formulating what to do and what not to do, but also *how to do it*.

It should be noted here that in spite of the relative dominance of the libertarian and related technology friendly strands of thought, there are also other, more critical views. One such collection of thoughts is the neo-Luddite spectrum. Not yet an organized movement, the neo-Luddite approach contains multitudes of those who have in common an awakening from the technophilic dream and resistance to one aspect or other of the industrial monoculture (Sale 1996: 258). Drawing upon the history of often active and violent Luddite resistance to the introduction of large-scale machines into cotton trade in late 18th century Britain, neo-Luddites argue that the technologies created and disseminated by modern western societies of today are out of control and threaten the fabric of social life. The Luddites were the first victims of the Industrial revolution and the first to resist its impact. Two hundred years later, neo-Luddites resist the political agendas of late industrialization and the enslaving impact of computing technology on social and individual life. These rebels comprise environmentalists, religious movements, anti-globalization movements, and a range of other groupings. Computers are polluting in their manufacture, the neo-Luddites argue; they increase the reach and power of transnational corporations, widen the gap between the wired-up rich and the computer-illiterate poor. The neo-Luddites argue against a worldview that sees rationality as the key to human potential and technological development as the key to social progress. According to the neo-Luddites, the political nature of technology should be recognized and technologies regulated (Sale 1996: Chapter 9).

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[1] Wired itself conducted a reader survey resulting in a picture of readership, in which the label 'libertarian' alongside labels such as 'anarchist', 'conservative', and 'progressive' could be used to describe the readership (Kinney, 1995).

Despite alternative views such as those represented by the Neo-Luddites, technolibertarianism and its rhetoric of freedom has shaped communication on the Internet to a significant degree. Conversely, the rise of the Net was integral to the rise of technolibertarianism. It gave formerly isolated libertarians a place to find each other. As Borsook (2000: 216) has it, 'On the Net they found solidarity and a better land: They were not alone'.

Jargonizing it all

In the same way anti-technology movements have their local and specific historical roots, the technolibertarianism of the Net enthusiasts stems in large part from the hippie culture of west coast USA (see e g Levy 1984; Roszak 1986). It was here that a particular version of libertarianism took shape through the establishment of virtual communities of 'hackers' and 'crackers'. One of the first of many virtual communities to be established on the Internet was The Well, started by former hippies. From the 1960s and onwards, when computing – especially the networked kind of computing – spread around the departments of Computer Science at universities in North America and in Western Europe, the more advanced amongst users were named 'hackers' (Delio 2001; Saffo 1993). The term was originally a mark of respect for someone who excelled in the operation of computers and software. A hacker was conceived as a person who enjoyed exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, one who enjoyed the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations (Raymond 2000).

But since this was a new world, it was not very clear how to behave. Even if most of the early hackers had some education in computer science, far from all had been socialized into a 'computer scientist', and as the use of the Net became more widespread so did social and cultural heterogeneity. In the course of time, the term hacker began to be used to connote a person breaking into computer systems, and has given rise to both apprehension and negative reactions from governments and other public agencies and to a particular kind of romanticism expressed in popular culture.

In 'the Jargon File', the following is stated concerning 'hacker':

> **:hacker: n. [originally, someone who makes furniture with an axe] 1. A person who enjoys exploring the details of programmable systems and how to stretch their capabilities, as opposed to most users, who prefer to learn only the minimum necessary. 2. One who programs enthusiastically (even obsessively) or who enjoys programming rather than just theorizing about programming. 3. A person capable of appreciating {hack value}. 4. A person who is good at programming quickly. 5. An expert at a particular program, or one who frequently does work using it or on it; as in `a Unix hacker'. (Definitions 1 through 5 are correlated, and people who fit them congregate.) 6. An expert or enthusiast of any kind. One might be an astronomy hacker, for example. 7. One who enjoys the intellectual challenge of creatively overcoming or circumventing limitations. 8. [deprecated] A malicious meddler who tries to discover sensitive information by poking around. Hence `password hacker', `network hacker'. The correct term for this sense is {cracker} (Raymond 2000).**

The Jargon File may be described as something similar to a dictionary. It is a result of a collective effort starting out in the early 1970s at the laboratories for artificial

intelligence at MIT, Stanford University and other nodes in the computer science community, involving amongst others some of the pioneers in the creation of the ARPA network (which later evolved into the Internet). The fact that the Jargon File distinguishes between the terms 'hacker' and 'cracker' is a reflection of a minority of computer literate individuals starting to use their skills in rather dubious ways. At Apple, for example, employees and managers alike were careful never to use the term 'cracker' in relation to its software engineers. 'Hacker', however, was a commonly used term. Hackers embodied the ideals of a libertarian, informal, relaxed and democratic type of organization, in which 'power to the people' would be given through powerful computers and intelligent electronic network connections. Crackers, however, worked only for themselves, against corporate goals.

However, as heterogeneity among actors increased, so did the abuse of computers and networks; an abuse that caused concern among hackers who believed in and fought for their own Utopia. And one way of counteracting 'bad' behaviour is to formulate some rules.

The ideas and beliefs behind the more artful expressions of hacker activity have also influenced the rules regarding behaviour on the Internet, as well as the organization of Internet itself. Life on the Internet is to some extent regulated by Netiquette. The Internet itself is regulated by technical standards. We will now look further into these different kinds of regulations.

Netiquette: the dos and don'ts of cyberspace

Interestingly, what appears as a haven for freedom seekers and rebellions is in large parts controlled by norms, rules and standards. Almost every Internet Service Provider (ISP) has some guidelines on how to behave on the Net, often under the label 'netiquette'. The largest Internet service provider in the world, America Online (AOL), provides information on proper behaviour when posting to a newsgroup ('Newsgroup Netiquette' 2001). When signing up as a user on one of the providers of 'free' e-mail, such as Microsoft Hotmail and Yahoo Mail, you are also introduced to membership rules and a certain set of codes. While the membership rules imply an agreement between you and the supplier to use the services in a civil and law-abiding manner, the set of codes, i.e. 'netiquette', is meant to facilitate and govern email communication. The term netiquette itself suggests that we have to do with something partly new, partly old. Whereas the 'Net'-part refers to the network of computers, such as the Internet, 'etiquette', on the other hand, is a:

> **system of rules and conventions that regulate social and professional behaviour. In any social unit there are accepted rules of behaviour upheld and enforced by legal codes; there are also norms of behaviour mandated by custom and enforced by group pressure ('etiquette' 2000).**

Much of the writings on netiquette can be traced to a discussion carried out in a discussion forum called the USENET. USENET News was created in 1979 as a small network consisting of a number of discussions, arranged by topic. These discussions were formed into so-called news groups, which was one of the most popular applications of the pre-web Internet. Ten years later, there were already over 11,000 news groups (see e g Hauben and Hauben 1997; Herz 1995; Platt 1997; Randall 1997). Today, the number is significantly higher.

In discussions on how to behave properly on the USENET, phenomena such as 'flaming' and 'spamming' were heavily debated. For example, an impolite posting in a newsgroup could be labelled 'inflammatory' due to its strident and ill-mannered style-- hence the notion 'flame' for this kind of behaviour. Dery (1993) defines a flame war as 'vitriolic on-line exchanges … conducted publicly, in discussion groups clustered under thematic headings on electronic bulletin boards, or—less frequently—in the form of poison pen letters sent via E-mail to private mailboxes'.

'Spamming' refers to another kind of mis-use; sending a post or e-mail to many recipients, often in order to sell something. The term 'spamming' comes from a certain variety of canned meat under the trademark of SPAM, whose claim to fame was assured in a Monty Python sketch, where the word was repeated over and over, driving people crazy (Cerf 1993; Gaffin 1999; Hauben and Hauben 1997; Naughton 1999; Zakon 1997).

So, what are the rules of the game on the Internet? Virginia Shea's book on how to use the English language in 'the digital age', *Netiquette* (1994), provides a good summary, and is often quoted when referring to 'the dos and don'ts of cyberworld'. Analogous to the Ten Commandments, ten core rules of netiquette are distinguished (Shea 1994):

Remember the human. Never forget that the person reading your mail or posting is, indeed, a person, with feelings that can be hurt.

Adhere to the same standards of behavior online that you follow in real life. Be ethical, and remember that breaking the law is bad Netiquette.

Know where you are in cyberspace. Netiquette varies from domain to domain.

Respect other people's time and bandwidth. Try not to ask stupid questions on discussion groups.

Make yourself look good online. Check grammar and spelling before you post. Know what you're talking about and make sense.

Share expert knowledge. Offer answers and help to people who ask questions on discussion.

Help keep flame wars under control.

Respect other people's privacy. Don't read other people's private email.

Don't abuse your power. The more power you have, the more important it is that you use it well.

Be forgiving of other people's mistakes. You were a network newbie once too!

Almost all 'etiquettes' build upon adaptation and pleasantness (Ribbing 1991). Some traits from 'real', face-to-face life find their way into netiquette; you ought to remember that we are all humans, and that you should behave in a similar way on the Net as you do elsewhere. Other characteristics, such as knowing in which domain on the Internet you find yourself, is more 'Net-specific'. The are also commandments that are more elitist in character, such as those appealing to sharing enlightenment with others who may be less computer literate, sharing expert knowledge, not abusing your own power, and being humble enough to forgive other people's mistakes.

In an attempt to investigate how netiquette is enforced in 'real life', we created a character named Mable Sartre-Mines whose *raison d'être* was to take part in discussions going on in a number of chat rooms devoted to computers in various ways. In a chat room on Microsoft's MSN Chat (<chat.msn.com>), the following conversation was recorded:

> *Welcome to PcHelpHere! Please enjoy your stay. We do NOT condone piracy or bot/script talk here, thanks.*
>
> Mable_SartreMines : what is bots?
>
> S£ayer :   *ZzzzZZZZZzzzZZzZzzzZZzZzZzzZZZZzzzzzzz*
>
> Mable_SartreMines : why CANT I ASK QUESTIONS ABOUT BOTS?
>
> FunBard : Mable_SartreMines , please Lower Your Caps! It is rude and considered shouting in chat. Thank You.
>
> Mable_SartreMines : Please tekk ne
>
> Mable_SartreMines : tell me
>
> Call_me_Ishmael1 : no bot talk in here
>
> *You have been kicked out of the chat room by Host FunBard: Disruptive behaviour*

We learnt two things from our chat experience. Firstly, some thin layers of netiquette are important to know when trying to chat. For example, using capital letters is one of the more blunt and common breaches of the netiquette, as evinced above. Secondly, people taking part in chats like to show that they have experience, and they like policing as well. As one can tell from the excerpt above, some sort of a bouncer, if not a chat police, simply throws you out from the conversation if you prove to be too much of a newcomer and an illiterate.

Emoticons: Signs of understanding

One apparent trait of on-line communication is the use of graphical signs called 'smileys', due to their grinning, smirking and smiling character. Here are some examples found in the Unofficial Smiley Dictionary in EFF's (Extended) Guide to the Internet (Gaffin and Heitkötter 1994):

> :-) **Your basic smiley. This smiley is used to inflect a sarcastic or joking statement since we can't hear voice inflection over e-mail.**
>
> ;-) **Winky smiley. User just made a flirtatious and/or sarcastic remark. More of a "don't hit me for what I just said" smiley.**
>
> :-(**Frowning smiley. User did not like that last statement or is upset or depressed about something.**
>
> :*) **User is drunk**
>
> :-)-8 **User is a Big girl.**
>
> :-{) **User has a mustache**

+-:-) User is the Pope or holds some other religious office

etc etc

These 'smileys' or 'emoticons' have gained huge popularity, diffused through e-mailing, chatting, and later on even between cellular phones in the form of short messages (SMS):

> 'Chatting to old friends and making new ones on your mobile 'phone, or on the Internet can be the best and cheapest way to make plans, have a row, start a romance or end an affair and it's discreet! But your messages can be open to misinterpretation when the person you are talking to can't see you or hear the inflection in your voice. The mood of your message is one of the hardest things to convey. "Emoticons" are a shorthand way of explaining or elaborating on your meaning. Made from punctuation marks on your keypad, they take up very little space, can be keyed in seconds and make the difference between a lasting friendship and a social disaster. …The sub-text of your words, acronyms or abbreviations will become crystal clear to anyone reading them if you punctuate your message with emoticons, whenever and wherever you feel like it.' (WAN2TLK? ltle bk of txt msgs 2000: 8-9).

Emoticons aim to convey feelings and moods in a context where they are less directly apprehended. When the human element in communication is missing, when fears and hopes of coworkers cannot be seen directly, there is an increased risk of misunderstanding and conflict. At Apple, one such incident involved a heated discussion among product managers, situated on different sides of the Atlantic. As the two, an American man and a Swedish woman, tried to resolve the conflict (which centrered around the mandate for the local Swedish office to 'localize' a particular product), things escalated. After having had to involve their respective managers in the issue, the Swedish woman flew off to California to try to sort things out, in face-to-face interaction. Eventually, the conflict was solved and the woman could fly back to Sweden.

As we have seen, it is easy to be misunderstood when expressing oneself briefly in an e-mail message or when chatting. Emoticons can help make on-line communication 'thicker', by way of offering a stylized way of 'translating' accents found in facial expressions or gestures in an interpersonal meeting, or elaborated and well formulated texts found in longer letters or books, into well-known standardized signs of understanding.

'Netizens' with influence: The case of the Internet Engineering Task Force

Quite contrary to what is often claimed, the Internet is not characterized by total anarchy or chaos, but is actually a rather organized and managed space. Management is not carried out by one single organization or a single person, but by several organizations. In parallel with the development of the Internet, a number of organizations came into existence; organizations that were set up with one particular and shared goal; standardization. The multitude of organizations and abbreviations thus developed may have contributed to the image of the Internet as something unorganized and anarchic in character.

The development of the specifications for Internet's predecessor the ARPANET, was quite informal and was based on contributions from a number of individuals rather than the result of an organized activity. The documentation of the development process was often incomplete and was rarely updated. However, since the different researchers that were involved in the development were located in different parts of the USA, a form of on-line documentation was created, the so-called Request for Comments-series (RFCs), to spread specifications and ideas among the researchers. As the Internet grew so did the standardization process, and several organizations and processes were formed. One of the acronyms that was repeated more than others, was the IETF, the Internet Engineering Task Force. In order to make some sense of how some of the basic rules for the functioning of the Net were created, David went to a meeting arranged by IETF in Memphis, USA, in 1997:

Prior to the meeting he had followed the instructions to read a certain document, the so-called *Tao of the IETF: A Guide for New Attendees of the Internet Engineering Task Force* (Malkin, 1994). This suggestion was posted on IETF's website in capital letters which, according to his humble experience on how to behave on the Net, was the same as shouting to someone. So he took it very seriously and began reading the *Tao* on the delayed flight from Stockholm to Memphis.

What he learnt from reading this document was that he was to experience something very different, and that [n]ewcomers to IETF face-to-face meetings are often in a bit of shock. They expect them to be like other standards bodies, or like computer conferences. Fortunately, the shock wears off after a day or two, and many new attendees get quite animated about how much fun they are having.

Another topic in the *Tao* dealt with how the attendees were supposed to be dressed. It read:

> '**Since attendees must wear their name tags, they must also wear shirts or blouses. Pants or skirts are also highly recommended.**'

Well, that sounded reasonable. Reading on he also understood that he would not make very much use of the suits that he had brought. 'There are those in the IETF who refuse to wear anything other than suits. Fortunately, they are well known (for other reasons) so they are forgiven this particular idiosyncrasy.' And since he was not known at all, even if he liked to see some similarities between himself and the typical 'IETFer', who was 'fiercely independent', he never unpacked his suits… Not wearing a suit paradoxically meant that he was breaching another suggestion in the *Tao*, since you would do wise in not expecting an IETFer to follow orders. The rest of the document concerned more technical matters, and he did not understand all that much of it all, nor did it interest him to any great extent. But he was not too concerned about this lack of understanding and interest on his part, since he was informed that '[t]ao is sometimes translated "the way," but according to Taoist philosophy the true meaning of the word cannot be expressed in words.'

OK, so he was up for something shocking, fun and to some extent also unintelligible – and to top it off, it would all take place in Memphis, Tennessee. Besides the location being associated with no less than two 'kings' (Elvis and Martin Luther), he had heard that the blues scene was supposed to be really cool. He had to admit that he was quite excited about the whole idea of it. It did not begin very promising, however. He was welcomed by what looked like the mother of all thunderstorms. So, after being in the air

or in various airports for about 24 hours, the weather had made sure that he had not got any rest at all before entering the conference venue, the most famous hotel in all Memphis; the 'Peabody', 'the South's Grand Hotel'.

Prior to the actual opening of the meeting, the IETF arranged a so-called 'newcomers' orientation' on-site for those attendees who took part for the very first time in the activities. The number of first timers was 400, which made up 30% of the total number of attendees.

The meeting was arranged by the secretariat of the IETF, and one of its officers opened it by telling us new-comers that an IETF-meeting was a 'very informal session', and that we would 'have no idea what the next week will be like. We will keep this very informal.' Furthermore, we were once again reminded that the IETF was very different compared to other standard bodies, and that he took for granted that we all had read the *Tao*, since it 'captures the flavour of the IETF; it's informal, we try to put humour in it as often as we can', besides being chaotic and hectic. Furthermore, we were to find 'the hallway conversation very informative', much more so than the actual meetings. We were also recommended not to ask any questions if we did not know what we were talking about, since the whole process was under a fierce time pressure. At the same time we were told how to get ourselves informed; and if we disagreed with what was proposed or discussed, we were not to complain but to prove it wrong and suggest another solution. This was all in the way of the IETF credo:

We reject kings, presidents and voting

We believe in rough consensus and running code.

If someone disagrees with an approach, the way to prove it is to write the code and demonstrate it, as opposed to just saying 'I don't like this approach'.

So, did David find the meetings fun, chaotic, hectic and down-to-business? Well, as far as he could judge the whole event was quite different from how standardization goes on in the much more formal International Organization for Standardization (ISO) (cf Tamm Hallström 2000). He had fun at the social event that was a 'Blues Brothers Party', followed by a night out in Memphis's blues district. The meetings were quite chaotic – certainly so to an outsider – and not much more than the technical matters were discussed. Even at the social event when the attention of all the attendees were focused on the daily march of the ducks arranged by the Peabody, one of the attendees compared the marching of birds into a water fountain to the routing of Internet traffic. The meeting was very informal when it came to dress code and the not-so-polite way the attendees approached each other. The latter was quite problematic for some of the newcomers (if not outsiders). A delegation from the People's Republic of China, all dressed in suits, were listened to when they complained about a certain suggestion, but upright ignored by the more well spoken and dominating attendees.

A lasting impression of this meeting (and of other meetings David has attended over the years arranged by other Internet-related organizations) is that the process of standardizing the Internet may look very informal and open. However, for those who may want to influence the process, there are high informal barriers to entry.

The alleged openness is a claim that not everyone agrees with. On the contrary, when it comes to decision making the IETF-process has been criticised for being less open than the process in more formal standardisation bodies, due to the lack of voting rules. The

opaque decision making process in the IETF also makes it unclear who really has the decision making power.

* * *

As the Internet itself grew, so did the number of participants in the standardization process. Many new participants began to visit at the IETF-meetings--people with different backgrounds, who had no prior experience of the ARPANET, and might not have the same level of knowledge as the ARPANET-pioneers. Some of the people participating in the work of the IETF felt that the rules of the IETF as well as the rules of the Internet as such, ought to be formulated. This eventually led to the publication of an RFC called *Netiquette Guidelines* (Hambridge 1995).

In the past, the population of people using the Internet had "grown up" with the Internet, were technically minded, and understood the nature of the transport and the protocols. Today, the community of Internet users includes people who are new to the environment. These "Newbies" are unfamiliar with the culture and don't need to know about transport and protocols. In order to bring these new users into the Internet culture quickly, this Guide offers a minimum set of behaviors which organizations and individuals may take and adapt for their own use.

Here, we find similarities to Shea's book in the view that the more experienced users ought to assist newer ones, but it is much more detailed and more like a handbook than a description of proper behaviour. IETF's *Netiquette Guidelines* also makes a distinction between 'one-to-one communication' such as mail and talk; and 'one-to-many communications', such as the World Wide Web, mailing lists, and MUDs[2]. It is implied that one-to-one communication differs in character from one-to-many communication[3].

Furthermore, it is interesting to note the similarities and differences between IETF's Netiquette Guidelines and the so called 'hacker ethic' (Levy 1984). Levy means that there is among hackers a common philosophy which stems from the computer itself: 'It was a philosophy of sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost--to improve the machines, and to improve the world.' He further states that this ethic is seldom codified, which would differ from much that we have seen. As one famous hacker says: 'Freedom of speech!…That's the whole basis for the hacker ethic. If you don't understand that, you've got no business here' (Levy 1984; Platt 1997).

As stated in the beginning, we argue that the on- and offline worlds are tightly interrelated. In the IETF case, this tension becomes evident when comparing the discussions on the electronic mailing lists to the meetings that are arranged as often as three times a year. It is quite easy to be very upfront – if not plain rude – towards your 'colleagues' on the mailing lists. But it is not at all that easy to maintain that position when meeting face-to-face. This tension between on-line and off-line behaviour is most probably one important reason why it is so vital to arrange face-to-face meetings, in

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[2] The Web refers to the graphics-intensive environment made up of zillions of so-called home pages filled with hyper-text. A mailing list is an ongoing email discussion on a particular topic, a MUD – Multi-User Dungeon/Domain/Dimension – is a virtual space on the Internet where users can interact socially.
[3] See e g Calhoun (1992) for a sociological analysis of the implications of increased indirect social relationships.

order to keep the on-line discussions fruitful and not destroyed (or hampered by) by off-the-point debates or time consuming flame wars.

Concluding comments: Socially embedded virtuality (or, what's so informal, anyway?)

In this paper, we have aimed at problematizing the relation between informalization and regulation with respect to work related social interaction on the Internet. We have suggested that while the discourse of information technology promises freedom from normative constraints of face-to-face interaction, the networked world is also a highly regulated environment. There are sets of preferred values, social and professional codes of conduct, which shape and restrain communication. Hence, while social interaction on the Internet opens up possibilities for swift, informal, and potentially empowering communication, it also entails a specific kind of global structuration of ideas and practices. We may expect more explicit forms of regulation and standardization of conduct of to merge with increased organizational complexity and globalization (Brunsson, Jacobsson and associates 2000).

The reaction that Christina encountered when trying to communicate on the Intranet at Apple Computer clearly signalled the presence of rules and norms of communication. She was urged to be less formal, less stilted, yet to adhere to certain normative expectations she did not yet know. Furthermore, this remark was presented in an agitated tone of voice. At a meeting of a standardisation body that was drawing up the basic structures for the Internet, David saw that the more formal attendees – such as representatives from other parts of the world than North America – were more or less neglected since they were too formal, too business like and too conservative in their manners. Also, less experienced and more formal participants were told many times over by more established attendees to read the *Tao* and behave accordingly.

These two experiences highlight an interesting paradox on and around the Internet. Not only is it possible to see the often-claimed and fought for informality as indeed very formal in character, if you do not know what is considered 'informal' in this domain. Even more conspicuous is the high number of self-appointed monitors, or police officers, that you meet when trying to communicate on the Internet as such, not to mention when you get yourself involved in trying to influence – or merely just discuss – the rules of the Net:

> **Although much hyperbole maintains that everyone in cyberspace is equal, a study of online community reveals that this is not the case. …. The traditional form of regulation in cyberspace has been through an informal set of customary laws. Online transactions have been policed through the consensual actions of users accessing and interacting in cyberspace (Dodge and Kitchin 2001: 79).**

It is clear that these monitors, or police forces, are not appointed by anyone and that they are not acting on a mission from anyone other than themselves and their equals. The question that comes into mind is why so many 'netizens' feel they have the right to police over others? And who are these people requesting others to behave according to their rules?

The particular ways in which communication on the Internet is regulated speaks to the cultural, social, financial and political bias of the Internet. Communication patterns on the Net do not only reflect a particularly libertarian ideology, but a Western, middle-class way of life, including some and excluding others:

> Contrary to what academics, themselves members of the new global elite, tend to believe, the Internet and Web are not for anyone and unlikely ever to become open to universal use. Even those who get access are allowed to make their choices within the frame set by the suppliers, who invite them 'to spend time and money choosing between and in the numerous packages they offer (Bauman, 1998: 53).

According to Wellman et al (1996: 216), the average user of the Net is 'largely politically conservative, white man, often single, English-speaking, affluent, residing in North America, professional, manager or student'. Although trends suggest an increasing participation of women, non-English speakers and people of lower socio-economic status, the dominance of a certain socio-economic and political category has had a great impact on netiquette rules. The do's and don'ts of cyberspace are to a large extent set up by the very same category that dominates communication on the Net. The wired neighbourhood or 'the third place', as the Internet is sometimes called, is a neighbourhood with particular cultural preferences, norms, and expectations. What at first hand looks quite informal, sub-cultural and too some extent even rebellious, appears at closer scrutiny much more mainstream.

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