

Online Communities and the Ethics of Revolt

With the creation and widespread use of the Internet in the 1980s came Internet communities. They were originally started in newsgroups, message boards, and Internet forums. A regular group of members would consistently post and exchange ideas and information with one another. Relationships were formed and these communities became permanent entities, usually remaining on the sites where they were created. From time to time a community's home becomes threatened. This can occur when a site is taken down by the owners, the site becomes obsolete and is replaced by a competitor, or the community migrates to a new home for reasons like censorship or discrimination. Some of the largest online communities exist on message board sites such as GenMay.com (General Mayhem), LiveJournal.com, and 4chan.org. These members share common likes and dislikes which bring them together for general socialization. Over the span of a community's life differences can arise between the site administrators and the site community that can cause a revolt by the community against the website on which it was created.

One of the most popular social news websites on the Internet is Digg.com, which was launched on December 4, 2004 and has housed a strong Internet community since then. The purpose of Digg is to compile many user-submitted news stories and have the community either rate them up (Digg them) or rate them down (Bury them). These ratings are stored on the site and a running counter is shown to the left of the news article title. The more "Diggs" an article receives, the more popular it becomes and thus, the better exposure it gets from the website. Enough "Buries" and the article can be removed from view. The articles on any given day with

the most “Diggs” are posted on the front page in a large “Top in All Topics” section. A typical number of “Diggs” for a top article to have is anywhere between 1000 and 3500, depending on the time of day. As the news constantly updates, previous top articles are cleared from the “Top in All Topics” list rather quickly, usually in less than 18 hours. There are only a few cases of a story receiving over 30,000 Diggs. This is usually when the 900,000-registered member community of Digg shares a consensus on a topic and Diggs together. The most recent examples of this are articles pertaining to the deaths of actor Heath Ledger and comedian George Carlin, as well as the presidential victory of Barack Obama (“Popular News” 1).

Communities can easily develop on a website such as Digg because of the involvement each individual member has regarding content displayed on the site. However, because of this involvement a potential flaw is the lack of moderator control. A site like Digg runs with virtually no administration, aside from filtering porn material if it slips past the programmed protection. The community is such a part of the website that they will “Bury” all spam posts on their own because spam lowers the quality of the site they enjoy. Because the community can be involved in this form of administration, there is no reason for an administration to delete articles, since the articles the community values are being seen and the articles the community disapproves of are not. One can very easily see how the Digg community could be outraged when an article that they approve of is censored by the administration. It can be seen by community members as Digg saying, “Thanks for taking care of our site, but you can’t enjoy this information because we say so; so you won’t.”

A notable account of a community revolt on Digg occurred when the Digg administration received a cease-and-desist order on May 1, 2007 from AACCS LA (Advanced Access Content System – Los Angeles), the company that developed and provided the encryption service on nearly all Blu-Ray and HD DVD content. The order demanded that Digg take down all current and future information regarding a hexadecimal code used to break AACCS encryption. In February of 2007 a member named arnezami of the Doom9.org community, a community notorious for digital media hacking, had released a 128-bit hexadecimal number that would potentially remove the encryption on every HD DVD and Blu-Ray disc produced thus far (Dietrich 1). The code was “09 F9 11 02 9D 74 E3 5B D8 41 56 C5 63 56 88 C0,” but was commonly referred to as just “09 F9” (“09f9 1”). When the news that HD-content disc encryption had been cracked leaked outside of the media-cracking community and into the more general internet community, it quickly flooded to Digg. After mass Digg postings of the information by excited users, AACCS LA quickly delivered cease-and-desist notices to Digg. After consulting lawyers, the administration of Digg.com decided that it would be in their best interest to censor their community and delete entries submitted containing or regarding “09 F9.” After the initial “09 F9” article was removed, there were thousands of articles mass-submitted to Digg containing the encryption-breaking hexadecimal. As users noticed what was occurring, they began mass-submitting “09 F9” news articles so the censorship wouldn’t go unseen. After an entire day of conflict and 50,000+ Diggings had been issued to various “09 F9” articles, the website administration conceded to the community. Digg founder Kevin Rose released a statement pertaining to the situation:

In building and shaping the site I've always tried to stay as hands on as possible. We've always given site moderation (digging/burying) power to the community. Occasionally we step in to remove stories that violate our terms of use (eg. linking to pornography, illegal downloads, racial hate sites, etc.). So today was a difficult day for us. We had to decide whether to remove stories containing a single code based on a cease and desist declaration. We had to make a call, and in our desire to avoid a scenario where Digg would be interrupted or shut down, we decided to comply and remove the stories with the code.

But now, after seeing hundreds of stories and reading thousands of comments, you've made it clear. You'd rather see Digg go down fighting than bow down to a bigger company. We hear you, and effective immediately we won't delete stories or comments containing the code and will deal with whatever the consequences might be.

If we lose, then what the hell, at least we died trying. (Rose 1)

The statement was generally accepted by the Digg community. The community was glad that they had been recognized for their acting out against the site, and that their efforts to stop censorship weren't futile.

The Digg 09 F9 revolt could have had several different potential outcomes. Had Digg continued to censor the users, there could have been a mass migration to a social news website that didn't censor the particular event, such as SlashDot or BoingBoing. This loss of members would have resulted in a tainted reputation for Digg and lost revenues from advertising. Also, legal ramifications from AACCS LA could have been devastating to Digg and could have greatly hindered the growth of their company. The Digg administration also had the choice of shutting down the site until the situation blew over. This choice would also have resulted in a loss of revenue and membership. In addition, users would have been found flocking to sites with better uptime during what they would consider important news.

The revolt could have had several different outcomes for the Digg community. If Digg had had to deal with legal actions from AACCS LA, the quality and growth of their website could

have noticeably suffered. Digg might have shut down if there had been a court-ordered financial settlement and they had to pay for allowing the promotion of this sensitive material. This situation would have caused the entire Digg community to find a new outlet for their user-submitted news.

Seeing both sides of this argument is easy when one is analyzing the “09 F9” incident. Initially Digg favored the future of their site over the community’s feelings. The community favored their freedom over the well-being of the site and felt so strongly that they flooded the site for a whole day so their voice would be heard. When I view this situation from an act utilitarian viewpoint, I see the community in the wrong. Digg’s obligation is to provide an outlet for user-submitted news. When the community began flooding (attacking) the website with mass duplicate posts, they were causing damage to the quality of the website. Almost all other important news stories were quickly filtered away as they weren’t receiving the magnitude of Digg’s that “09 F9” posts were getting.

During this revolt many members were complaining about censorship because they felt the numbers were “harmless.” Obviously the numbers were not harmless, since they eventually aided in the development of software that removes encryption from all HD-DVDs and BluRay discs, resulting in an unknown loss of revenue to movie production companies worldwide. However, the people who developed the software to remove this encryption did not receive their information from the Digg community. They received it originally from the Doom9.org community. Even if the “09 F9” revolt on Digg had not occurred, the encryption-cracking software would still have been created and made available. The Digg community was not

attempting to obtain any “greater good” with their unethical actions. In my opinion, they were striving for their voices to be heard just for the sole reason of being heard, to flex their proverbial e-muscles, if you will.

The Digg community achieved what they believed was their best case scenario: they were allowed to post what they desired at the risk of harm to their website and no permanent harm occurred. There really was no added good in allowing this community to post 09 F9, since this information was available on countless other sites at the same time. A potential worst-case scenario would have resulted in persistent legal action resulting in the termination of Digg, shattering their community, a large price to pay for no potential gains.

Digg was very lucky. Ultimately there was no serious legal action from AACCS LA. However, the fact that the community overthrew their creator on this specific issue is significant in displaying the power that communities can have over the sites that create them. The 09 F9 event also reveals the steps that sites must be willing to take in order to deal with communities that decide to revolt, even when it clearly isn't in the site's best interest to appease them.

Another popular breeding ground for online communities is the popular MMO video game World of Warcraft, which currently has more than 11 million subscribers worldwide. World of Warcraft was originally developed and owned by the computer game firm Blizzard Entertainment, but was acquired by Activision and became part of Vivendi Universal, a French-based media conglomerate. World of Warcraft is currently the most popular video game in the world, and has a large, diverse player base that spans the world. In order to keep 11 million players following the rules, there exists an easily accessible in-game moderation system. This

system allows Blizzard employees, known as “Game Masters” or GMs, to have the power to enforce rules and punish offending players accordingly.

LBGT (Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, Gay, and Transgender) gaming communities have openly existed on the Internet for over a decade. Currently there are large sites, such as GayGamer, that promote LBGT members playing together and socializing inside of video games that they enjoy. With 11 million members worldwide it is without a doubt that World of Warcraft is one of the more popular games that is enjoyed by this community. It isn't uncommon for an entire group of LBGT players, known as a “guild,” to play together on the same World of Warcraft server and be open about their sexual orientation at the same time.

Unfortunately, due to a misunderstanding in January of 2006 there was an attempt at moderating and silencing an LBGT gamer attempting to recruit more like-minded players into her World of Warcraft guild. The player, Sara Andrews, was warned to stop recruiting players by using the LBGT acronym; her actions, she was told, were in violation of Blizzard's harassment policies. According to the moderation team, Andrews' recruitment strategies could draw attention to LBGT players and incite harassment that otherwise wouldn't have occurred. Andrews felt her rights were being violated and requested the help of Lambda Legal, the nation's largest legal group dedicated to the civil rights of gays and lesbians. A lawyer for Lambda Legal, Brian Chase, released the following statement:

You can't tell gay and lesbian people that they have to be quiet so other folk won't harass them...If you want to stop harassment you have to stop the harassers not the victims. (qtd. in Crecente 1)

Chase added that under California law a place of business cannot be discriminatory:

“That is settled law in California, but these laws haven't been enforced in a virtual world, yet,” he said. “I think telling gay and lesbian people that they have to be quiet and go back into the closet is discrimination.” (qtd. in Crecente 1).

After Lambda Legal sent an official request to Blizzard regarding their moderation policies, an email was released from Thor Biafore, head of Blizzard’s customer service, admitting that the ruling was based on “an unfortunate misinterpretation” (Crecente 2). On January 30, 2006 Blizzard also released this public statement to GamesIndustry.biz:

We encourage community building among our players with others of similar interests, and we understand that guilds are one of the primary ways to forge these communities.

However, topics related to sensitive real-world subjects - such as religious, sexual, or political preference, for example - have had a tendency to result in communication between players that often breaks down into harassment ...

... in order to “promote a positive game environment... We prohibit mention of topics related to sensitive real-world subjects in open chat within the game, and we do our best to take action whenever we see such topics being broadcast.

This includes openly advertising a guild friendly to players based on a particular political, sexual, or religious preference, to list a few examples. For guilds that wish to use such topics as part of their recruiting efforts, our Guild Recruitment forum, located at our community website, serves as one open avenue for doing so. (qtd. in Gibson 1).

They agreed that this was not sufficient, and the statement concluded that Blizzard would change their moderation policy so that mistakes like this would not happen again. However, it was not until March 10 2006 that Blizzard COO Paul Sams released a statement saying that World of Warcraft Game Masters would all participate in additional sensitivity training to avoid future misunderstandings. To avoid player confusion regarding Blizzard’s official stance on LBGT recruitment strategies, Sams explained that “mentioning and discussing sexual orientation in a non-insulting fashion is officially acceptable” and “LBGT-players are now free to recruit members in the same way as any other guild.” (Sid Vicious 1).

While this entire conflict was seemingly based on a misunderstanding, it is interesting to look at the original misjudgment that sparked this controversy. It seems as if the Blizzard moderation team was attempting to complete their role as making their game safe and appropriate for all to enjoy when they flagged a legitimate alternative sexual group of players as a group of players attempting to harass others. As someone who is involved in the online gaming community, I would say this mistake doesn't seem uncommon. The majority of discussions I've seen online regarding alternative sexualities is usually in demeaning slurs used by players who enjoy "talking trash" to others that they encounter online. Blizzard's skepticism about this LBGT group of players was obviously not handled properly, but I can understand how the mistake was made. However, Blizzard's employees should take a stance that is not so blindly insensitive toward unique individual situations. Statistically, it wouldn't surprise me to hear that over 95% of the harassment complaints Blizzard receives every day are related to people using sexual and racial slurs, but that doesn't give the moderators the go-ahead to deem all discussions of sexuality as harassing. Blizzard was clearly in the wrong for what they did, even if it was just a mistake; they came off as attempting to stifle an entire community of players. Luckily, with Lambda Legal intervening, the situation was resolved professionally and the incident was a warning to other companies that their online actions and treatment of customers are being monitored for discrimination.

A third example of conflicts that have arisen between the administrators of websites and their users occurred with another popular site, LiveJournal, which boasts a wide and diverse range of members of all ages. The site can be used as an online-diary or for blogging or other written-content submissions. What separates LiveJournal from similar blogging sites is the social networking it offers, which aids members in finding people like themselves. It isn't uncommon for a member to belong to several LiveJournal sub-communities filled with like-minded people.

Most LiveJournal sub-communities serve a very particular purpose. There are many groups that offer aid for rape victims, child abuse survivors, and incest survivors, as well as places for people who have dealt with these tragedies to keep personal journals that can be shared with others who have had similar experiences. Some of the more controversial sub-communities are child-love groups of closeted and outed pedophiles who fantasize and role-play regarding sexual encounters with underaged lovers. Groups like this serve an important purpose by acting as an outlet for pedophiles' emotions without causing any direct harm to children with whom they might come into contact.

As LiveJournal grows and expands, its administration strives to find ways to keep the site safe for all members. Because there is only a 13-years-and-older age requirement to create an account, LiveJournal must constantly monitor sexually-themed material on the site. To understand precisely what happens, one must understand the specificity of the many groups that are formed. A “group” means a new section on the site with specific content. When administrators delete one of them, the content that the members have contributed is gone and can no longer be used as a means of helping members. However, a problem with doing this is that sometimes Rape/Incest/Abuse support groups are deleted as well as “ChildLove” groups. Although the former are not what one normally thinks of when considering which ones to censor, they still contain sexual themes and can be flagged for removal. The repercussions of these removals can be devastating. Someone who is contemplating suicide and is desperately seeking help could find themselves with no one to talk to; thus, the trust that people have built and established with the groups they belong to can be destroyed in an instant.

At times the removal of groups has created strong community hatred for LiveJournal, particularly on the part of people who realize how effective the LiveJournal communities can be in helping individuals cope with traumatic issues. After the group deletions in late May of 2007, a noted LiveJournal contributor, Warren Ellis, publicly removed his support from LiveJournal and its parent companies, stating:

Until such time as LiveJournal/Six Apart work out how to tell the difference between fantasy fiction communities/support groups/fashion discussion communities/survivor histories and actual criminal use and traffic, and restore those fiction groups and survivor support teams to full working order, my own LiveJournal will become read-only, and I will produce no new content to be read on that system. I do believe that some stupid people got what was coming to them today. But a lot more people have been mistreated by LiveJournal for no reason beyond blind panic. I see no reason to tacitly support that by continuing to write under a LiveJournal URL. (Wilson 1).

In a similar vein, LiveJournal member bitterfig writes:

“As a queer, feminist writer who explores the darker aspects of human nature, many of my stories deal with incest, rape and child molestation. As such, I belonged to and contributed to several of the communities which have been suspended and frankly I’m pretty offended. I don’t like being lumped in with rapists and pedophiles and other monsters on the Web” (qtd. in McCullagh 1).

Nevertheless, a considerable number of groups with sexual themes were purged indiscriminately. Judging from recent posts, the issue of censorship on LiveJournal has yet to be resolved.

When you analyze the deletion of LiveJournal groups from an act utilitarian viewpoint, you need to weigh the good in protecting young children from viewing sexually themed material against the bad that results from destroying the communities of members who need guidance from established support groups. The way I see it, even if you remove all of the sexually themed content from LiveJournal, an unacceptably large risk still exists that underaged children will see sexually themed material somewhere on the Internet by accident or by choice. Thus, purging one site of all sexual content won’t really solve any problems. Realistically speaking, no amount of censorship can remove all sexual content from the Internet.

When I take into account the damage done by the purges that have occurred, it is clear to me that LiveJournal is in the wrong by destroying these communities--not to mention that if any children on the site are dealing with abuse/incest/rape problems, they are probably receiving much needed help from the groups to which they belong. Thus, LiveJournal shouldn't concern itself with this issue to the point where it begins to threaten the existence of such important groups. LiveJournal should be embracing and promoting them since they are actually helping people deal with critical life issues.

When we analyze the three conflicts we have considered, we can identify some of the many difficulties that websites encounter and the consequences of their administrators' attempts to control the content of the sites and the behavior of their members. The Digg administration tried to moderate users that had no desire to be controlled and a revolt began. Largely due to a misunderstanding, Blizzard Entertainment tried to exclude a portion of their subscriber base and ended up facing legal action for discrimination. LiveJournal initiated a website-cleanup project targeting all sexual content, but their shortsightedness may have had a devastating effect on victims trying to rehabilitate themselves from horrendous traumas. Many popular websites now play a social networking role that greatly expands and develops the site community. Consequently, I can only imagine that more situations like the ones described above will arise. The days of unthinkingly administering website content and blindly overseeing members is coming to a close. Stronger administration-community relations will have to be developed for the well-being of both websites and users alike.

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