MODERATING READERS AND READING ONLINE

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Despite the proliferation of online book clubs and reading groups, very little has been written to date on the management of these spaces and how this helps frame the kinds of discussion and interpretative work that take place. This paper reports on a study of moderators of online book-related sites, which used interviews, ethnographic observation and textual analysis of online interactions to consider the issues of authority, hierarchy, power and control that arise from their framing of discussions.

Few scholarly studies focus closely or exclusively on the role of the moderator. In internet and fan studies, the role may be discussed in relation to how order or decorum is maintained in online discourse (Whiteman 2007). Some attention has been paid to the functions and visibility of moderators (Whiteman 2007; Grimmelmann 2015) as well as to the ways in which moderation is centralised or distributed (Fister 2005; Grimmelmann 2015). There has been much less emphasis on how moderators interact and deal with forum users and those outside the community, or how they influence and shape the direction that discussion takes.

Online book clubs and forums have reignited interest in the social aspects of reading and the production of reading formations (Bennett and Woollacott 1987). Online reading forums may appear to negate many of the power-based issues affecting offline groups, allowing for anonymity and diverse group membership. The written medium lets discussion happen at the members' own pace, and moderators can be literally unseen and exert only minimal control. Online reading groups therefore have the theoretical potential to be democratic, egalitarian, diverse, and non-hierarchical.

We initially contacted moderators and administrators of over 20 online forums and book groups in 2012 to seek permission to circulate details of an online survey we were conducting into users of these communities. We found the responses very varied: some moderators were helpful and enthusiastic, while in other instances we were treated with suspicion and even barred from accessing forums. This prompted an interest in the role of these individuals, so we interviewed several moderators via email. We wanted to find out more about the people behind the sites we were researching and to hear from them about their experiences of managing discussions rather than rely

solely on the textual traces they left behind. We also wanted to see if their perception of their role matched how we 'read' the communities we were observing. Our approach was informed by studies of ethics and good practice in internet and fan studies (e.g. Whiteman 2007; Kozinets 2010) that stress the importance of engaging with users rather than treating them simply as data, and of foregrounding the relationship between researchers and the communities they study.

For some of the book sites we studied, the moderator is primarily a technical facilitator, but most of the individuals we spoke to are active participants in discussions whose enthusiasm for their reading is the reason for their involvement. In some instances we had to dig deep to uncover who was managing discussions, whereas in other instances, the moderators were visible presences welcoming and guiding visitors as soon as they entered the site. The moderators we interviewed tended to downplay their roles, saying that the most common problems they faced were with 'spam' (i.e. posting of links to external sites by advertisers). They also reported that over time the communities tended to self-manage and reach a 'golden mean' (email interview, 2012).

As well as being involved in the setting up of the website and managing its day-to-day running, the moderators of the book groups mostly initiate topics, curate discussions and mediate disputes. They also act as energisers, intervening to resuscitate flagging threads, and in many instances are treated as experts or authority figures by other users. Moderators may perform an important role liaising between users and those outside the community, for example protecting that community from trolling (abusive and intentionally disruptive behaviour), unsolicited marketing and data mining (i.e. the harvesting of information by third parties, especially for commercial purposes). Moderators may therefore be perceived and addressed as friends or guardian figures, helping to create and sustain community spirit, and to set the tone for the discussions that take place through their initial framing work (posting rules, FAQs etc) and ongoing interventions.

After our preliminary investigations, in 2014 we returned to focus on a comparison of moderation practices on two sites: The Republic of Pemberley, run by and for Jane Austen enthusiasts, and the Guardian Online Reading Group, set up as part of an online news website in the UK. These sites were chosen on the basis that they seemed to offer quite different styles of moderation, and once again we combined observation of discussions with interviews with the site moderators. Interview questions were crowdsourced from members of our research network and focused on the power moderators had to control discussions, how they established group norms and facilitated participation.

The interviews with the moderators revealed the deep affective bonds they develop with forum users, and the sense of responsibility they feel for maintaining the sites and ensuring that they run smoothly. However, our findings showed that despite the moderators' downplaying of their roles, they did set the parameters for discussion, and intervened regularly to redirect topics and to manage interactions between participants. Moreover, we also found evidence of users trying to undermine moderators and subvert discussions, particularly where any discussion arose about the management of the forums and the conduct of participants.

Meeting the moderators, albeit remotely, brought home the extent to which our analyses of their online activities could so easily result in misrepresentation and misconceptions about their roles and motivations. Listening to their experiences has also brought home the very real personal and financial investments they make in ensuring that the communities they are passionate are about continue to flourish and survive.

References

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