

Positively Deviant: the role of moderately anti-normative behaviours in online forums

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Abstract

Online discussion forums are social networks in which members share knowledge. They are dependent on normative behaviours to function and yet there is evidence of deviance within them. Extreme departures from social norms can damage network ties, however little has been written on moderate deviancy. This paper explores the positive consequences of moderately deviant behaviour on the health and wellbeing of an online discussion forum. The study used a thematic analysis of materials gathered during a three-month virtual ethnography of a technical forum for database developers. Themes identified were examined for the effect of 'positive deviance' on the trust, network ties and technical problem solving. From this analysis a typology of deviant behaviours was developed, focussed on moderately deviant behaviours identified as the 'lawful stupid' and 'in-crowd enforcers'. The study suggests positive deviance influences network social norms by clarifying social rules. This positive outcome had a mitigating effect on the negative impact of deviance on interpersonal trust.

Keywords

deviant behaviour; online discussion forums; social networks; social norms; trust

Introduction

Online discussion forums are environments which support communication between participants. Formally, they are for sharing knowledge on a particular topic. In reality, however, they require social networking to work. Members of technical forums discuss specialist issues and problem solve. Through posting on threads, participants can discuss complex concepts. Whether the discussion is constructive or not depends in part on trust between members. Trust helps develop and maintain social ties. That trust is strengthened by positive experiences but what happens when members encounter deviant behaviours?

Not all experiences are positive in online discussion forums and occasionally members encounter deviant behaviours. Some deviance is extreme such as trolling; however there are less extreme examples of deviance as well. There are members of online social networks who behave as trolls, but are not motivated by attention-seeking and disruption. In online forums the members who exhibit these behaviours are not necessarily extremely deviant like trolls but moderately deviant. For the purposes of this paper, these members will be referred to as positive deviants who fall into two categories: 'lawful stupid' and 'in-crowd enforcers'. Even though they may present many of the same deviant behaviours as trolls, they are motivated by interest in the integrity of the social network and not by self-interest as most trolls are. This behaviour is a form of 'positive deviance' (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004). Members who behave in this manner have positive intentions, referred to as 'honourable', even if the outcomes of their behaviour are not necessarily positive.

It would seem that the behaviours of these positive deviants would have the same negative effects on the social networks as more extreme behaviours. Yet, an important distinction between extreme and positive deviance is the motivation behind the behaviours. Since positive deviants have honourable intentions for their deviance, this study suggests that the benefits of their intentions have positive effects on the forums. Specifically, the study suggests that there are positive influences from moderate deviance within online discussion forums. The primary benefit is clarification of social rules for the social network.

Social norms can be difficult to identify in social networks, but because deviance violates norms it can also help clarify normative behaviours. It is through these deviant interactions that the social norms are developed and given meaning. Therefore an essential component in establishing meaning and clarifying social norms is that members interact. In online forums, members actively negotiate norms through thread posts. Positive deviance helps

establish norms because it illustrates boundaries as the members engage in discussion. Birchmeier, Joinson and Dietz-Uhler (2005), for example, suggest that when an ambiguous act occurs, members must determine whether it is deviant. If the behaviour does deviate from the norms of the group then members must discern a normative reaction to it. Dysfunctional or unfavourable behaviour puts positive social identity for the group at risk. Most members identify norms by inductive categorisation; they emulate or model their behaviours on a prototypical member, generally an in-crowd member. Positive deviance, however, identifies social norms by departing from them.

In the following sections, this paper will introduce the literature on online social networks, deviance and the social capital constructs of social norms, trust and motivation before discussing the methods used in this study. Following, will be an analysis of the results of the study discussing positive deviance in online discussion forums. Finally, the paper will conclude with a suggested typology of deviance for online discussion forums.

Literature Review

In the social networking literature there are a number of studies about how social interaction occurs; what are the social rules and cultural practices of online social networks and how they operate in a productive way. There are informal social rules to encourage normative behaviours. Members negotiate these rules through trial and error or by emulating the actions of in-crowd high-status members. The rules enable members to develop trust between each other and the forum social network as a whole. The social rules, however, are often taken for granted and can be difficult to see. That is why anti-normative behaviours also have a role in social networks by clearly identifying the boundaries of normative behaviour. To appreciate how social rules operate it is important to understand those who resist them.

The extant literature on online social networking, such as social network sites, blogs and online discussion forums, discusses the development and maintenance of social ties (boyd & Ellison, 2008; Donath, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 2002). Social ties are formed and strengthened by trust, reciprocity and adherence to social norms. Not all members of online social networking, however, follow social norms. Due to the diversity of participants, there are members of online social networks who display behaviours contrary to group norms. These members who exhibit deviant behaviours can have negative effects on the network causing mistrust and loss of effective communication. A subset of this literature is on deviance in online social networks. It is primarily on extreme deviance, such as trolling, in which new and

vulnerable network members are baited in an attempt to draw them into embarrassing or potentially dangerous situations. This literature on trolls, spammers, and flammers emphasises the destructive nature of these antisocial behaviours in online environments (Donath, 1999; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, & Barab, 2002).

Not much, however, has been written about moderate and less deviant behaviours. Moreover, what has been written about deviancy has focussed exclusively on the negative consequences to the social network. What is not really discussed is the positive side; how the social network conducts itself through members who engage in moderately deviant behaviours and push against the established rules. What influence do these behaviours have on the social norms within an online discussion forum?

Social norms are an important facet of maintaining social networks. Norms encourage trust between members. In networks where there are high linkages (extra-network ties) but low integration (intra-network ties), anomie can occur. This breakdown of social norms is an extreme state where the social network has only weak bridging ties and no bonds from stronger ties. Woolcock (1998), for example, characterises this state as providing members with a wide range of opportunities to pursue but lacking a stable social network base and social norms for guidance. The trust developed through positive interactions fades as network members pursue their own self-interests. Investment in social capital diminishes and the value of the network deteriorates. In online discussion forums, active participants invest by helping other members; by posting questions and replying on threads. For online social networks it only takes a few active participants to support a large network of passive members. Blanchard and Horan (1998, p. 10) for example suggest that “a few group members’ helpful actions will reinforce the group’s concept of itself as being helpful to its members”. The norm of reciprocity motivates members to participate and invest in the social network.

There is a strong association between trust and social networks in the social capital literature (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; Portes, 1998). Blanchard and Horan (1998) for example suggest that trust is highly integrated with the generalised reciprocity found in social networks. Trust is built on the expectations that there will be adherence to social norms and that investing in the network through contributions and help will be reciprocated. Trust is also a way to deal with complexity and social relations are very complex. It is difficult for individuals to know how to behave in an interaction because there are so many variables. The cognitive aspects of trust, such as familiarity, allow individuals to generalise and make predictions about courses of

action in an interaction (Lewis & Weigert, 1985). Trust is an important part of online social networks. It is damaged by negative experiences such as the deceptive practices of trolls and spammers. Without trust virtual communities may lose members and experience reduced active participation (Wagner, Ip, Cheung, & Lee, 2005).

Extreme deviance in online social networks is self-serving and generally motivated by self-interest and a desire to attract attention (Herring et al., 2002). Conversely, motivations for positive deviance are linked to interest in the social network. Motivations for participation and continuing membership in social networks vary depending on how closely identified the individual is to the network. According to Birchmeier *et al.* (2005) in-crowd, high status or active members' responses to deviance usually have more condemnation and are of greater intensity. This ability and motivation to depart from social norms is due to in-crowd members' power and influence within the social network. They are able to respond harshly to deviance because other members understand that their intentions are 'honourable' and in the best interests of the network. They are motivated to protect the network because they identify strongly with the group. Persuading deviants to change or conform reveals motivation to restore sense of the norm's validity. Redemption of members engaging in deviant behaviours reinforces social norms by illustrating boundaries of normative behaviour and demonstrating how members can be returned to it.

Deviant behaviour in groups has been the topic of many studies. The literature predominantly focuses on the negative effects of deviance within a collective. Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006) for example, characterise several types of deviance, including 'interpersonal deviants' who attack individuals through speech and actions. Typical behaviours of 'interpersonal deviants' include acting rudely and publically embarrassing others. Deviant behaviours, however, can also have positive effects on a group. According to Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) although much of the study of behaviours within organisations has focused on dysfunction and negative effects, little research has been conducted on deviant behaviours with positive benefits. They describe a normative perspective and provide a model (Figure 1) identifying three major aspects of positive deviance. Firstly, these behaviours are *honourable* in intent. The individual presenting positive deviance is motivated to do the right thing. Secondly, their motivation is intentional and *voluntary*. Lastly, the behaviours are a *clear departure from the norms* of expected behaviours within the group.

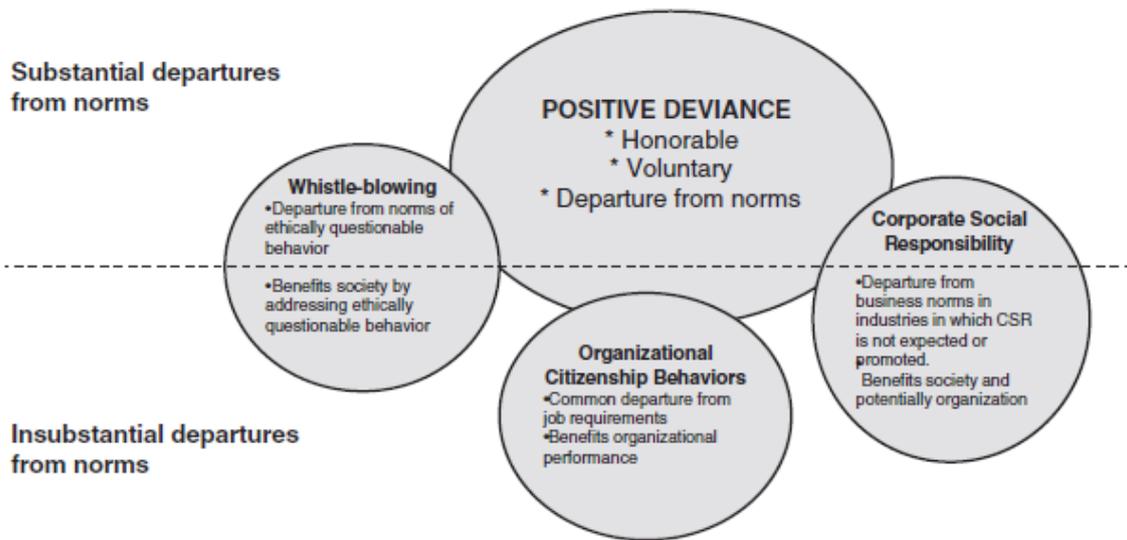


Figure 1: A Typology of Positive Deviance (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004, p. 840).

The consequences of both deviance and the motivations behind the deviance affect the social network. These outcomes can be either positive or negative. As discussed previously, extreme deviance often leads to negative outcomes. Felps, Mitchell and Byington (2006), however, suggest that outcomes can also be constructive. Responses with constructive outcomes provide benefits to the social network. ‘Motivational intervention’ uses confrontation and public criticism. ‘Rejection’ ostracises or ignores deviance. Both are constructive attempts to bring the member back into the group and reinforce normative behaviour.

This paper explores the positive consequences of moderately deviant behaviour on the health and wellbeing of an online discussion forum. It suggests that there is positive deviance in online discussion forums and investigates a range of departures for social norms in both action and motivation to investigate the positive outcomes on the social norms of the network.

Method

In order to investigate social norms and deviance within online networks of practice, a three-month virtual ethnography of an online discussion forum was conducted¹. The aim of the ethnography was to observe and reflect on member behaviours and communication in order to explore the impact of different levels of member participation on the social network of the forum. To assess and identify patterns in the empirical materials thematic analysis methods (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006) were adapted and used for this study.

¹ The study for this paper was part of a larger research project for the author’s PhD thesis.

Ethnographic study allows researchers to embed within social groups to explore their behaviours and language, “addressing the richness and complexity of social life” (Hine, 2000, pp. 41-42). Creswell (2007, p. 68) for example, describes the process as “extended observations of the group, most often through *participant observation*, in which the researcher is *immersed* in the day-to-day lives of the people and observes and interviews the group participants” [emphasis in original text]. Similarly, virtual ethnography permits researchers to explore online groups; although the researcher embeds within a virtual experience rather than physical place. In addition to experiential immersion, adopting reflexivity as an integral part of the ethnographic practice allows for “social location” (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) and exploration of the social meanings and contexts of ethnographic materials.

The group under investigation for the three-month virtual ethnography were members of the online forum, *Database Developer* (DBDEV²). This forum was chosen because it was a popular and active site for database administrators and developers. It provided a network of developers an environment in which to share knowledge and problem solve. The forum was open and had a large membership which provided a quantity and variety of opinions, knowledge and perspectives. The forum was not formally bounded nor was it an exclusive group as there were few barriers to participation. Anyone with internet access could read the forum threads. The only formal requirement for membership was that an individual was required join the forum by creating a profile in order to post a question, reply to a thread or set alerts to follow threads.

In order to conduct the ethnographic study, the author became a forum member by creating a profile with a photo, a username containing her full name, and a brief biography with links to her research blog. Even though ethnographic research often involves informant interviews, the author refrained from posting during the study. Research-related posts used to interview participants would have been in violation of forum’s code of conduct and were not permitted. The intent of the forum was to foster technical discussions, so the author remained an observer and passive participant. In lieu of interviews, participation was facilitated in two ways; through immersion within the extended social network and through fieldnotes. When links to external sites such as blogs were provided in forum members’ signatures and within the content of threads, the linked materials were read and considered in the fieldnotes. The author’s

² DBDEV is used as the pseudonym for the forum name, the development language and the wider community of developers to maintain a consistency of use with the actual forum name.

reflections and interpretation of events and texts were recorded as fieldnotes as both a documentation of the study and a reflexive exercise on the research experience.

During the study, 397 active threads were followed. This entailed reading new posts, taking fieldnotes and collecting and coding answered threads several times per week. The threshold for whether or not a thread was followed was when it reached 10 or more posts. This was in order to cull out quick replies and focus on more in-depth discussions. Alerts were set for active threads which provided email notification when new posts occurred. Even though the author was a regular participant on the forum it was unlikely that any members took notice or were aware of the ethnographic study. The one possible exception could have been the forum moderators who might have noticed the high number of alerts set.

From the study, the analysis of empirical material supported the characterisation of several levels of forum participation. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature typically discusses three roles: leaders, posters and lurkers (Blanchard & Markus, 2004), however this study identified slightly different definitions. Posters were separated into *active* and *out-crowd* because different behaviours were observed between the two groups. Additionally, lurkers were identified, but because it was difficult to determine how many unique individuals were included in a thread's 'visit count', their numbers have been omitted. In addition to the categories described in Table 1, there were other characterisations of forum participation. A member who asked a question was an 'original poster' (OP). OP is a common internet term for the beginning of a thread. It is used for both the person (as in the original poster of the question on the thread) and for the first post in a thread (as in the question from the original post). 'Answerers' were able to mark any thread as 'answered' even if they were not the OP. 'Moderators' had administrative privileges to perform a wide range of tasks such as moving, deleting and censoring threads.

Table 1: Degrees of forum member participation during the three-month study

Degree of participation	Description	Number of members
In-crowd	Frequent contributors who regularly monitored and posted to threads	30
Active	Active contributors who posted questions or responded to posts on multiple threads	118
Out-crowd	<i>Newbies</i> (new members to the forum) and infrequent contributors who only posted questions or responded to posts on one thread	485
Lurkers	Passive participants who anonymously read or follow threads, but do not post	N/A

After the observation period, the remaining answered and unanswered threads from the study were coded. The fieldnotes and unformatted thread narrative were imported and coded in nVivo software. This paper focuses on the empirical material coded as ‘deviant behaviour’ and in particular on forum members ‘calvin’³ and ‘dbdevwizard’. The relationship between these two online identities illustrates issues on identity, deception and deviance due in part to the suggestion that they may be the same person.

Positive deviance in online forums

Online discussion forums provide members of a social network the opportunity to share knowledge and problem solve. Perhaps the forum and its membership are best illustrated by an in-crowd member’s description:

...DBDEV forums are the cyberspace reincarnation of old Greek city market (agora, forum) places where free forum intellectual discussion is taking place. As a result experts may start debating each other, leaving the beginner OP way behind. But then again, the threads will be read by thousands in the coming years to the benefit of the larger DBDEV community... (dbdev,1980)

In order to work effectively, the social network is dependent on members adhering to social norms. Most of the interaction between forum members follows distinct patterns of behaviour. During the study typical normative behaviours were observed such as professional interactions, succinct communication (often using only code snippets), providing advice without judgement. Additionally, between in-crowd members there was praise, direct communication, pleasantries, citing and cross-referencing to personal blogs or other threads within the forum.

While most members of the forum interacted in pro-normative manners, there was also deviance evident. There was only minor evidence of extreme deviance, such as trolling, but there was positive deviance. The first type of positive deviant, lawful stupid, criticised and personally attacked ‘newbies’ (less experienced and new members) who failed to adhere to the strict programming practices and standards. Lawful stupid members lost sight of the original OP question and presented long off-topic (OT) diatribes without consideration to other points of view or to the potential damage to network ties. Yet they did not behave this way out of a desire

³ All forum participant actual names and usernames have been replaced with pseudonyms. Other identifying features have been changed or omitted.

to distract from the goals of the forum or to divert attention to themselves. They strongly adhered to personal principles, even though it was at the cost of social relationships.

In addition to lawful stupid, the other positive deviancy discussed in this paper is in-crowd enforcer. They chastised and reprimanded members who acted in ways they found detrimental to the social network of the forum and in particular lawful stupid members. In-crowd enforcer behaviours could be quite harsh compared to the forum's social norms. They often sought to embarrass or shame the norm violators into conforming to social norms.

Table 2 Types of forum member participation

Type of participation	Description	Example behaviours
Troll	Members who engage in deception in order to pass as legitimate participants in threads (Donath, 1999). They engage with newbies, naïve and vulnerable members in order to disrupt and attract attention to themselves (Herring et al., 2002).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attention-seeking • derogatory or inflammatory speech • <i>hijacking</i> threads • starting off-topic (OT) discussions
Lawful stupid	Interpersonal deviants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • grandstanding • philosophising • act rudely • publically embarrass others
Out-crowd self-defender	Newbies and infrequent contributors who become defensive when confronted by negative comments on posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • exploding • leaving the forum network
In-crowd enforcer	Use motivational intervention to protect social norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confrontation • public criticism of deviance
Lurker	Lurkers read anonymously but do not post. Their only departure from norms is not at an individual level, but the group as a whole. There is an expectation that some members of the forum will participate actively, so in that limited sense the group of lurkers deviate from norm.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hidden/unseen • do not post • may not register as a forum member
Normative	Typical behaviour of most forum members.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • code-to-code communication • professional demeanour (no swearing, name calling) • giving advice, but not mandates or ultimatums

Table 2 lists all of the types of forum member participation identified in this study and is provided for context. 'Trolls', 'lurkers', 'out-crowd self-defenders' and the 'normative'

behaviours listed in the table will not be discussed in this paper. The focus of this paper is lawful stupid and in-crowd enforcer positive deviance.

Moderately deviant behaviours were exhibited by ‘lawful-stupid’ and ‘in-crowd enforcers’. In the discussion that follows for each type of behaviour, the paper will present a definition, examples for illustration, a description of how the behaviours deviate from norms and finally the negative and positive consequences of each.

Lawful stupid

‘Lawful stupid’ is a trope from the role playing fantasy game Dungeons & Dragons (DnD). This term has been borrowed to describe behaviours that are similar to ‘trolls’ and ‘spammers’, but with more honourable motivations. The term lawful stupid is actually a play on the character trait ‘lawful good’. In the game, Paladins are holy warriors (Paladin, 2005). They are characterised as lawful good because whenever they encounter evil agents they must act and attempt to destroy them. Often the evil characters, however, are much more powerful and by blindly following the rules the outcomes end up quite damaging. In particular they can end up hurting relationships between characters within the game. Often they end up compromising trust and future interactions between characters for the sake of following their ideology. This behaviour is illustrated in a DnD-related web comic. In *The Order of the Stick* one character says to the other,

Sure, you fight Evil, but when was the last time you showed a ‘concern for the dignity of sentient beings’? You’re just a mean, socially inept bully who hides behind a badge and her holier-than-thou morality as excuses to treat other people like crap. (Lawful Stupid, 2010)

This behaviour is similar to online forum behaviours. In an online forum, lawful stupid behaviour is related, but distinct from trolling. Occasionally members demonstrate behaviours unacceptable to the expected norms of behaviour for the group. For instance, members will denigrate others (usually the OP). They also speak in extremes or absolutes, such as “we always/never...” They are often rude and berate OPs for posting poor questions and having lesser programming skills. To clearly differentiate between the perceived lack of knowledge the OP has and the vast amounts of knowledge the lawful stupid possess, it is not uncommon to find them telling the OP to ‘read a book’, ‘visit a website’, ‘Google it’ or generally increase their knowledge before posting again. Often the book or website was developed by the lawful stupid.

Example: Granite is not a screwdriver

In the forum, calvin and his alleged alter-ego, dbdevwizard exhibited behaviours which had both positive and negative consequences. Their intentions were to introduce proper programming standards into forum threads. They departed from the social norms, however, when they personally attacked other members, called them names and questioned their technical abilities. They berated and condescendingly communicated with the OP and the other thread contributors in a manner that demonstrated that either they did not recognise or they did not care to uphold the social norms concerning communication. This negative behaviour was often met with swift condemnation.

Lawful stupid means that the rules must be followed no matter what the outcomes. To dbdevwizard, if the OP has violated a programming rule then he *cannot* help him solve the problem. The programming rules are more important than the social rules of the forum. In Example 1, dbdevwizard's first post is a condemnation of the way the OP is trying to solve his problem. dbdevwizard had answered the OP with an extreme perspective on the nature of databases. It can be assumed that the OP was seeking a fairly simple and straight-forward definition of the two terms, but dbdevwizard used the opportunity to promote his very strict and probably technically correct view on databases. In dbdevwizard's view, he cannot help the OP with his problem because the OP has violated programming rules, so all he can do is point out the rule breaking ("not a universal magic number"). This was not well-received by other forum members.

Example 1 Lawful stupid⁴

Member	Post
dbdevwizard	If you are modelling a ticket system, the ticket number is an artificial key consisting of a hash that is built from the subset of attributes within the entity (it is verified externally etc). <i>It is not a universal magic number.</i>
bet40	[in response to dbdevwizard, although addressed to calvin (using his actual first name)] calvin, Maybe you didn't read the OP's question so well. Historically, you reply to a thread by <i>bashing the user for being an idiot</i> and not bothering with an answer that works in the DBMS being used. You've changed tactics lately. You've stopped bashing the user and started bashing the process. You have also stopped responding to anything the user is actually asking. The former is commendable; it is a first step to helping others. <i>You have a lot of knowledge, and I hope one day you put it to good use.</i> The latter, however, is making your replies even more useless. Not only do they not answer the question, they go off on a tangent too! Please stop posting to the DBDEV forum in threads marked as questions. <i>Your posts are off-topic, borderline abusive, and misleading (to new posters).</i>

⁴ In the forum examples, emphasis has been added by the author and only selected sections of the thread are presented. Additionally, typographical and grammatical errors made by original authors in the written text of forum threads were left intact as much as possible with exceptions made to improve legibility.

Member	Post
dbdevwizard	[in response to bet40, but addressed to his alleged alter-ego, calvin] calvin, If this was a woodworking newsgroup and someone posted "What is the best kind of rocks to pound screws into fine furniture?" are you really helping them when you say "Granite! Use big hunks of granite!" <i>I am the guy who replies with "Your question is bad. Don't you know about screwdrivers?"</i> And I like to remind them that it takes six years to become a Journeyman Union Carpenter in New York State. Not Master, Journeyman.
bet40	[in response to dbdevwizard "are you really helping them when you say "Granite! Use big hunks of granite!"] Yes. You have answered the question. Then you make a suggestion about screwdrivers. [in response to dbdevwizard "I am the guy who replies with 'Your question is bad. Don't you know about screwdrivers?'] <i>Which is an abusive response. Answer first, then suggest.</i>

Consequences of lawful stupid deviance

Lawful stupid forum members, like calvin, derogated other members (usually out-crowd) and refused to answer OP questions in responses. The difficulty members faced when communicating with calvin was that he was so committed to his own perspective (and his belief about what is right for the preservation of the database development standards) that he did not empathise with others. The ability to empathise depends on understanding not only your role, but also the roles of others. In dbdevwizard's post he stated, "If this was a *woodworking* newsgroup and someone posted 'What is the *best kind of rocks* to pound screws into fine furniture?' are you really helping them when you say "Granite! Use big hunks of granite!" Unlike bet40 who recognised that the purpose of the forum was to help members and not to enforce standards ("Yes. You have answered the question. Then you make a suggestion about screwdrivers."). dbdevwizard revealed that he believed his role was the champion of the technical rules ("I am the guy who replies with "Your question is bad. *Don't you know about screwdrivers?*"). dbdevwizard did not take on the role of the OP; instead he firmly reiterated his own role.

As a result, there is a negative effect on social ties between the lawful stupid and the OP. There are, however, positive effects. The lawful stupid post often triggers a series of responses. First by the OP or other out-crowd member in self-defence. That response is commonly followed by the moderator, answerer or other in-crowd member. The lawful stupid post acts as an indicator to other members of the forum that social norms have been violated.

In-crowd enforcers

A hostile response to deviance is a form of deviant behaviour as well. It most closely fits the description of positive deviance because although aggressively confronting a troll or other deviant member is not within the norms of expected behaviour, the motivation is both intentional and ‘honourable’. Honourable in the sense that they are not self-interested, but are interested in ensuring the social network functions well for all members. For example in-crowd enforcer, eli6, explains to an out-crowd defender who was attacked by calvin that there are social norms for the forum and even though calvin did violate them, his participation also benefits the network.

If you think that was a rude answer, then you have not seen calvin at his worst. This answer was almost polished to be him. That is, calvin is notorious to be extremely insulting and I can only deplore that he hangs out here, as he only occasionally makes any real technical contribution. Thankfully, he is quite unique of its kind, and chances that your next question will get a better answer. (eli6)

Members who respond to deviance are motivated to keep the online environment open and useful, thus ensuring that the forum survives. From their view, the deviance they attack is a threat to the continued existence of the network, which they value and support. According to Felps *et al.* (2006), protective and hostile responses to deviance differ between group members. The ‘in-crowd’ of active members has more power and control within the forum than infrequent or passive participants. Group members with more power can use constructive responses more effectively.

Example: Getting on the soapbox

The forum members reacted in a variety of ways to calvin and dbdevwizard’s behaviours. There is a mechanism within the forum to mark specific posts as abusive (Figure 2). This was done to one of dbdevwizard’s posts. It did not deter him, however, from continuing to post.

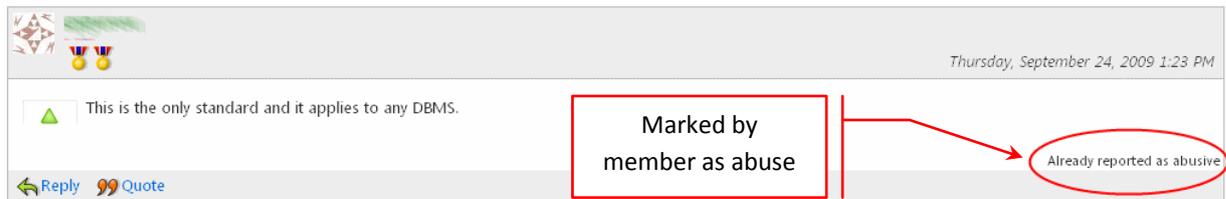


Figure 2: Abusive post.

After it was marked, there was continued discussion on dbdevwizard's participation in the thread. One very active forum in-crowd member, kaitl, quickly responded to dbdevwizard's extreme statement with the following rebuke.

It just gets very tiring. I would prefer to report it as abuse, but it is not. It is just very tiring... What I would like to see from you, dbdevwizard, is to stop hijacking threads to soap box. I might also be able to make the case that consistently *hijacking threads to soap box IS abuse* -- and you are good at it.
(kaitl)

The harshest response, although, came a few hours later from in-crowd forum moderator, al842.

Unfortunately it feels like your head is so far up your own back side - probably too busy helping to define those standards and then coming here to preach about them - that you have lost your grip on reality... *Gets on soap box* *dbdevwizard (vain or what???)*⁵, this forum is designed for users who require assistance with using a specific databases namely DBDEV and its implementation of programming standards using DBDEV. If you don't like it then don't come here... *Continued abuse of our users will not be tolerated* and responding to your posts is often futile and a waste of our time. *Gets off soap box* (al842)

Consequences of in-crowd enforcers

In-crowd enforcers try to socially control the deviants by acting out themselves. In essence, in-crowd enforcers try to shame deviants into behaving within the social norms either through direct confrontation or public criticism. In-crowd enforcers are motivated to protect the social network of the forum. Because they are in a stronger network of ties, they have more

⁵ "vain or what???" refers to dbdevwizard's actual username (replaced by the pseudonym 'wizard'). The word he uses in his username, like 'wizard' implies that he is an expert, authority and teacher.

power within the forum, but they also have a greater investment in its well-being. The more involved they become in the forum, the more their identity becomes dependent and interrelated with the forum's reputation. This is most prominently demonstrated in their signatures, usernames and external blogs. It is common for in-crowd members to use DBDEV references in these names. They portray themselves as experts in the language by describing themselves in that way. If the forum has a high reputation then by association they will too. With such a strong sense of commitment to the social network, fear of anomie influences their uncharacteristic departures from social norms. Essentially, they choose to violate norms in order to protect them. If they see behaviours that do not fit with their perceptions of the forum they take action to reduce their cognitive dissonance.

As a result, there is both a negative effect on social ties between the in-crowd enforcer and the other member (usually a lawful stupid) and a positive effect with the member they are defending (usually the OP). The primary benefit, however, is that social norms were identified and clarified for other network members.

Discussion

Lawful stupid and in-crowd enforcers deviate to some degree from the normal behaviours of the forum. They have different motivations and their deviancy has different outcomes. The diagram in Figure 3 extends the 'Typology of Positive Deviance' model (Spreitzer & Sonenshein, 2004) to include the motivations behind the deviance in an online forum. The positive deviant behaviours are circled. They differ from the other forum behaviours in that they are all honourable, voluntary and a departure from norms.

The typology in Figure 3 depicts a range of deviance and motivations exhibited by forum members. Low deviance behaviours have insubstantial differences to forum norms. They were the typical interactions observed in all levels of participation from in-crowd frequent engagement to active members to infrequent out-crowd posts. Questions were posted that were well-formulated, clear and on-topic. Advice and code-snippets were offered in a professional manner. Through conversations within the thread solutions were developed and discovered. When there were difficulties with communication or divergent points of view, differences were directed at the tasks and not at individuals. There was an effort to maintain the social ties even if the motivations were self-interest in finding a solution to a problem. As expected the passive participation of lurkers also shows low deviance from group norms since the only evidence of their participation was through the influence they have as the audience to other members.

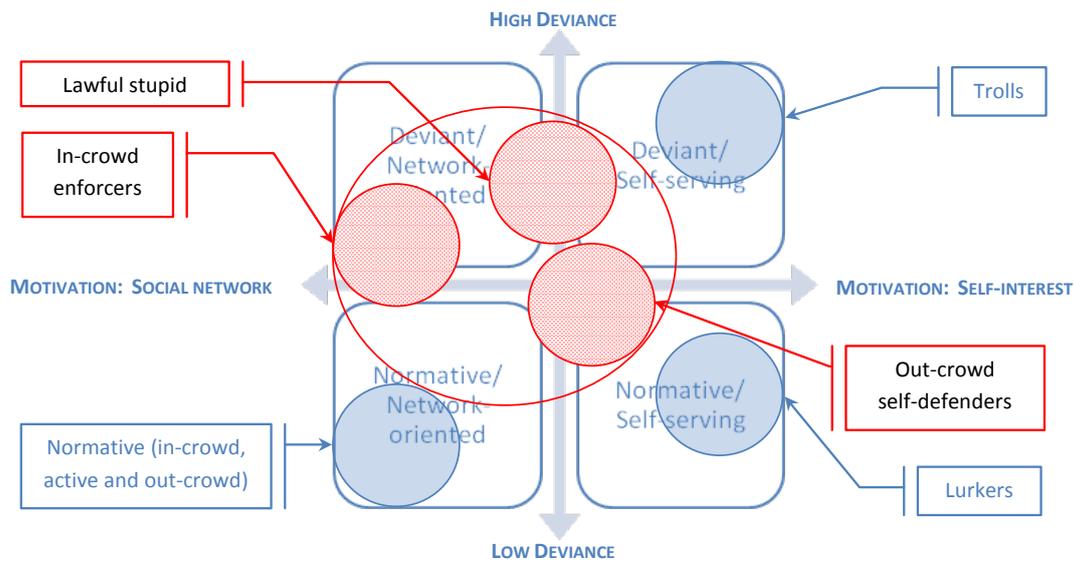


Figure 3: Typology of online forum behaviours (positive deviance circled) adapted from Spreitzer and Sonenshein's (2004, p. 840) 'Typology of Positive Deviance' (Figure 1)

In contrast, the higher deviant behaviours were atypical for the forum. For the positive deviance of lawful stupid, out-crowd self-defenders and in-crowd enforcers, the intentions behind the behaviours were honourable even if they do not adhere to norms. The least deviant from the norms from this group are the out-crowd defenders. They lashed out at negative posts directed at them. They threatened to leave the forum and sometimes left without warning. Their posts eventually became inactive, ending in a questioning "Any progress?" with no response. These threads either remained unanswered or were marked as answered by the moderator or answerer. Occasionally the out-crowd participants had a champion in in-crowd enforcers. The in-crowd members challenged negative comments with direct confrontation. That confrontation was a departure from the forum norms, but was tolerated because it protected the social ties within the forum. At the higher end of the deviance scale are lawful stupid behaviours which tend to be quite hostile and derogatory. Those members singled out newbies in order to enforce technical standards and rules or to encourage them to leave the forum until they were better informed. They often crossed the boundary of criticising the task or code snippet and attacked the person instead. The most deviance observed in the forum was from trolls who unlike the positive deviants attacked other members for dishonourable motives such as attracting attention to themselves.

The other scale in Figure 3 is the motivation behind the behaviours. Typical normative behaviours of most forum members tended to be motivated by protection of and investment in the social network. Members communicated in such a way that relationships were strengthened

(or at least not damaged). This was evidenced by the courtesies in the communication such as saying please and thank you. Additionally, it was also seen in the effort put into the code snippets and advice. Members tested code snippets before posting, wrote supplementary blog posts to further develop concepts introduced in the forum thread and provided links to other sites that could support the thread discussions. Even the more deviant behaviours of in-crowd enforcers and lawful stupid were motivated to protect social network even if it was at the cost of individual social ties between the members involved in the deviance. Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004), for example describe this social network perspective as being “honourable”. The members had honourable intentions even if the behaviour itself deviated from the norms which maintained the social network. At the other end of the motivation spectrum from network-orientation is self-interest. Members who were more interested in their own benefits rather than preserving the social network of the forum fell into this category. At the normative end were lurkers. In the diagram, as the departure from norms increases, the self-interest changes from being selfish to malicious. This was exhibited by trolls.

The results of this study suggest that there are several ways that deviance could positively affect online discussion forums.

Conclusion

The role of deviant behaviour in online discussion forums has a range of effects on the social network. At one end are somewhat deviant but honourable behaviours motivated by protecting the social network. It is interesting that it is often very active members of the forum who respond to deviance in such a hostile manner. As the deviance increases and the intentions become less honourable and more self-serving the thing that is most damaged is the social network. So deviance is actually connected to the development or deterioration of social ties within a network. Most positive deviance is motivated by the desire to champion social network standard practices which actually strengthen network ties by reinforcing norms and establishing trust. Moderately deviant behaviours, such as lawful stupid may discourage participation, but also encourage a higher standard of participation that elevates the technical discussion and encourages members to better prepare before engaging in conversations or posting questions. Deviancy is complex in social networks and has positive and negative elements.

This study demonstrates that the forum functioned well when members had positive experiences. Experiences when their problems were solved, their discussions were fruitful or their encounters with other members were socially affirming. As expected, deviance weakened

social ties. The social network of the forum, however, also benefited from clarified social rules. This positive outcome had a mitigating effect on the negative impact of deviance on interpersonal trust.

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