

EXPLORING 'TRIBAL' IDENTITY TO STUDY ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Information Systems (IS) and Community Informatics (CI) research encompasses a variety of interpretative approaches that inform the endeavours of researchers. The research presented here is an ongoing project being conducted by IS academics from different academic backgrounds in sociology, finance and anthropology. The research is a cross-disciplinary study of online communities and offers an interpretive analysis that focuses on a conflict-based taxonomy of roles and social behaviours. We feel that this interpretive approach, drawn from anthropology, enables the potential for more erudite discussions of the contemporary IS and CI contexts. Exploring the full scope and implications of role taking in online communities will enable the achievement of the research goal of challenging the relatively conservative explorations of communities that rely upon concepts and assumptions of trust and social cohesion. The goal of this research is also a reminder to the IS academic community that strong well-articulated and alternative theories do exist in the various forms of conflict studies. In this particular research project we identify three core roles in online communities as the initial genera in a possibly widely expansive taxonomy of identities. These roles, the Big Man, the Sorcerer and the Trickster can all be clearly identified within the online finance forum that has been examined in this research. This forum is a specific example of how taxonomic understandings of an online community and of how its participant's roles can be developed.

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical foundation of this study is associated with the theories of conflict and cohesion found in the social sciences. The forefathers of conflict theory include Karl Marx, George Sorel and George Simmel. Social conflict while seemingly a negative phenomenon which simply "tears down", is upon closer inspection, a unifying factor for individuals within a group. Information Systems oriented exploration of online communities is, however, dominated by notions of trust and cohesion (for example, see Kramer and Tyler 1996). As a means of

interpretation, trust presents a problematic and disputed territory that may be more readily construed as a management technique than a basis for analysis. In contrast, the discursive relationships defined through conflict reveal an alternate set of unifying principles and rationales for social groups, including those that are technologically enabled. In this case we have drawn upon the anthropological positions in relation to role taking and reference group activity to explore notions of conflict.

We argue that the community of an online financial forum is maintained and perpetuated by a cycle of 'tribal' conflicts that are conducted by, and directed towards, specific members of the community. We have examined the interchanges of key individuals in the community to obtain a broad understanding of the roles and the relationships they maintain with others in the group. We also examined how these key members use conflict to unify the community itself. Cataloguing and detailing individual actions and antagonisms reveal the composition, dynamics and solidarity of the 'tribe'. Each of the characters identified as being central to the activities of the overall tribe assumes one of the roles discussed in this paper. It is the continuous cycle of conflict among these individuals, within the context of the group that provides the central communal focal points and offers mechanisms for the maintenance of the community. The dynamism and continuous evolution of the community is similarly revealed by the changing relationships between key members of the group and the fact that their roles are achieved and maintained only with the continuing support of at least part of the community.

INTERPRETATION AND ROLE TAKING

To present role taking as an interpretive approach it is necessary to present the core definitions associated with the theory. The concept of role is related to, but distinguished from, the concept of social position. While a person "occupies" a social position, it is inappropriate to say that someone "occupies" a role. Roles are socially determined demands, including norms, expectation, taboos and responsibilities. Roles have a close association to given social positions. Roles may also be defined as the member's orientation or conception of the part they play in an organisation. In this sense the role is the individual's own inner definition of their social position. Roles are also defined by the actions of the individual members in a community. The role in this way is the amalgam of all the characteristics of the actor rather than just those elements of their normative environment. Role theory assumes a close tie between attitudes and values, between

societal prescription and individual adaptation. According to Linton (1936) a role "includes the attitudes, values, and behaviour ascribed by the society to any and all persons occupying this status". Role taking and reference group interpretation therefore aims at examining the normative actions of community interaction and the behaviours and attitudes that individuals' display. Examining role-performances involves observing behaviours associated with a specific social position. Anything else the person does is extraneous to the role performance and consequently the interpretive position. Exploration of role performance is an assessment of the degree to which norms and attitudes are met by individual in relation to their social environment.

The focus of our research in light of this discussion is the normative behaviour associated with conflict. Expressing discontent and participating in conflict can aid in the unification of a group. Producing a unitary social cohesion is the primary position that theories of trust draw upon. Simmel presents a more encompassing position. Simmel's offers a useful perspective for advancing the understanding and importance of social unity within IS studies. Unity, Simmel argues, is the total group-synthesis of persons, a wholeness that covers the notions of unitary social cohesion as well as dualistic relations that are centred upon conflict (Simmel 1950). There are both tensions and balances that come into play with an interacting group of people. We have drawn on the particular roles of the Bigman, Sorcerer and Trickster to interpret the complex interactions in an online finance forum. Each individual who was observed in the forum occupies a social position within the group and each role reveal some understanding of the actions, norms and behavioural characteristics that these individuals display.

This study considers the extent to which online communities utilise systematised and ritualised techniques of hostility and aggression in a form of contemporary "tribalism". These practices assist in maintaining and defining tribal boundaries through the implicit threat of further, more direct, action (Keesing, 1981). The most obvious form of this potential punitive action,

in the context of technological enabled groups, is banishment. This study is based on an ethnographic examination of a technologically enabled interest group that is defined by participation and presence in a public Internet finance forum. This approach emphasises the importance of "tribe"-like group boundaries and the belligerent techniques that maintain them. This community participates in practices of story telling, myth-making and the reaffirmation of extended, affinal, relationships to construct their "tribal" view of the social world (Benedict, 1935). These "community building" methods are conducted within an atmosphere that incorporates continual among dominant personalities in the group, who are described throughout this paper as its "Big Men", "Sorcerers" and "Tricksters" (Glasse, 1965). This conflict assists to unify and define the community. Analysis of this aspect of community experience reveals machinations within the group that would not be possible with the application of a trust based perspective. The classificatory schema utilised here to delineate and interpret individuals in the community is coarse, however, the richness of the environment examined offers the opportunity for more extensive taxonomies to be developed.

THE COMMUNITY

The discussion in this paper is drawn from data gathered from participants in an online finance forum. The overarching objective of most finance forum participants is to profit from trading stock market securities. As a group, the forum's purpose and utility is paradoxical. Forum members are allies, attempting to collaboratively generate strategies and uncover information that might assist them in their mutual aims of achieving monetary gain from trading or investing. However, these same allies are often also adversaries, taking opposing positions in the specific transactions of securities. We argue that this is a community maintained and perpetuated by a cycle of 'tribal' conflicts that are conducted by, and directed towards, specific members of the examined forum. The cycle of conflict among these individuals provides focal points for the community and offers mechanisms through which it is maintained and unified.

The dynamism and continuous evolution of the 'tribal' community is also revealed in the changing relationships between its key members. As a consequence individuals who are assigned particular roles in this paper's coarse taxonomy may not occupy the same role at a future date. However, it is stressed, that our emphasis here is upon the roles themselves and the fact that the roles we can identified within the 'tribal' community are themselves persistent and a necessary aspect of this community.

Interpreting Online Forums

This paper draws upon Hegel's conflictual oriented dialectic and Marx's conflict theory to critically discuss the 'tribal' online community. These sources, in their application to Information Systems research form a solid basis for the examination of conflictual relationships within technologically enabled communities. Avison and Myers (1995) argue for the worth of anthropological perspectives to explore the complexities of Information Systems phenomena. They state that, "the value of an anthropological perspective is illustrated by looking at the relationship between information technology and organisational culture." This paper responds to these claims by directly applying anthropologically inspired perspectives to the examination of organisational culture within an online finance forum. As one of the authors is an anthropologist, we similarly subscribe to the sentiments of Jones and Rafaeli (2000). They state that, "there is a strong case ...[to] be made for the cross-fertilisation from anthropology to the study of Computer Mediated Communication" and technologically enabled communities (Jones and Rafaeli 2000:2).

The writings of social anthropologists, and particularly the 'classical' ethnographers of Papua New Guinea, provide a large body of work with which to further extend and refine this line of inquiry. Extending IS studies with a more clearly conflictual theoretical position also furthers the understanding of roles and relationships within ill-defined and fluid groups. Groups that are increasingly an important aspect of technologically-enabled communities and the effective use of information systems.

The problem of interpreting technologically enabled groups and understanding the defining qualities of groups that have no definite physical boundary is the source of much debate within Information Systems literature. Identifying groups that are distinct within a culture is not a new problem and one that has its heritage in the earliest works of anthropologists such as Malinowski (1979) and Radcliffe-Brown (1977). At the core of the problem is the need to identify a coherent community that is not defined solely by differences such as physical, historical, technological, organisational or structural. These differences have proved in conventional interpretations of 'tribes' and communities to be convenient, if sometimes arbitrary, classificatory tools that assist understanding and interpretation. Technologically enabled groups, in contrast, are notoriously hard to locate and define because they do not possess the privilege of geographic proximity. The research approach to overcoming this problem is not unanimous. A common response has been to position online communities within the context of 'trust' communities. Interpreting the interactions within the group as a trusted exchange relies upon the existence of privileged amicability within the community while external transactions are problematised as disruptive. The continuing success of these communities it is therefore concluded relies upon a predictable and stable organisational existence.

The other dominant response to understanding technologically enabled groups is through the more abstract *mélange* of contemporary society. This position argues for the effacement of community sentiment and the triumph of individualism. This introduces a variety of existential dilemmas, including the criticism levelled at some forms of postmodernism that it can only engender a form of research nihilism. With this caution, we argue that an alternative path for interpreting these groups can be charted between the extremes of trust communities and the nihilism of postmodern positions.

The 'Tribal' Community

Addressing technologically enabled groups as 'tribal' communities defined through conflict presents an expanded range of research

possibilities and understandings. While the concept of a "tribe" is a contentious and much-debated category within anthropology it is, nonetheless, a well-documented and analysed level of organisation that is smaller than a cultural group but wider than the associations of immediate kinship. In fact, the anthropological notion of 'tribe' substantially mirrors Information Systems' obtuse notion of "organisation". Other fruitful parallels can also be identified. A major discussion point for tribalism is the relationship that exists *between* tribes (Keesing 1935; Salisbury 1965; Evans-Pritchard 1976). While "tribes" may conduct various forms of warfare against other "tribes" it is often these same "enemies" who provide strategic allies against still other aggressors. Organisations must also interact with one another in variously competitive and strategic relationships (eg. Microsoft's technology partners or various clustered technology consortia). In effect, both tribes and organisations do not act or exist in isolation from 'others' and are largely defined by their relationship to other 'similar but different' groups. The difference between the relationships to 'others' and the relationship to ones' own group may also be a subtle difference of degrees rather than a clear delineation. Conflict is as readily discerned internally within a group as it is expressed collectively towards another tribe.

Evidence of the ever presence of conflict is revealed through the identities that members adopt. Previous studies of communication in networked communities have viewed conflict as a dysfunctional force and hence sought to find the conditions that lead to conflict resolution (Bandow 1998). In contrast, this study views conflict as a defining element of the social interrelations found within these 'tribal' communities. The observed conflicts have both functional and dysfunctional outcomes. The simultaneous pressures for collaboration and competition indicates that the social forces of trust and conflict are both necessary. This balance ensures that conflict is never completely resolved or absent from the 'tribal' community.

The 'Tribal' Community, Conflict and Tribalism

The volumes of work that discuss tribalism and conflict in anthropology, and particularly ethnographic work from the New Guinean highlands, offers three core understandings for this paper:

- The importance of conflict for these tribes is confirmed by the repetitiveness with which it is cited;
- The number of separate ethnographers making these observations independently suggests that conflict is an inherent aspect of these tribes and not a fiction of colonial anthropology; and
- The range and scope of these works enables a broad taxonomy of community roles to be discerned within the observed tribal groups and understood at a more conceptual level.

This final point is of most direct utility to this paper as it is this taxonomy that enables the means for a structured examination of the different participants of the online forum. In this taxonomy we focus on what, in the context of the data gathered to date, are arguably the three most significant roles, that of 'Big Man', 'Sorcerer' and 'Trickster'. Other hybrid roles may also be identified with further detailed taxonomic analysis of individual roles.

A key point of departure for this paper from other discussions of networked communities is our attempt to analyse and discuss our data in a manner that moves away from the textual analysis of existing IS/CI ethnographies. We emphasise the inter-linkages between disparate conversations and actions that help to bind and

maintain the community. We present an examination of 'threads' as they are defined through the forum to focus attention upon key role-holder's actions and activities.

The three roles of significance that we have identified in the online finance forum are a trinity of association. Each role-holder is defined, at least in part, by their interaction with the other role-holders. While individuals do not identify themselves in the terms that we employ here, their actions generally indicate an awareness of those with similar roles as well as those who occupy different roles from their own. This trinity also represents the potential directions for role shifts. While these shifts can occur in any direction, there is a tendency for individual's to move away from the Trickster role to the more 'mature' and sophisticated roles of Sorcerer and Big Man (see Figure 1). Only a limited number of participants in the entire community move into this cycle of role-holding but there is always an eventual end to individual participation in this cycle. This formation and reformulation of individual identity also reflects the structuralism of Levi-Strauss (1966).

The 'Tribal' Roles

The Big Men

One of the best-known 'tribal' figures is that of the 'Big Man'. The historical context of this identification is predominantly masculine, we acknowledge the gender bias of this description but adhere to terms found in existing literature on tribalism. In the context of our research, however, a 'Big Man' may equally signify participant of any gender. The 'Big Man' is the leader of either a whole tribal group, or a less formal faction of the main group; a 'phratry'. The significant fact about these individuals, in anthropological discourse,

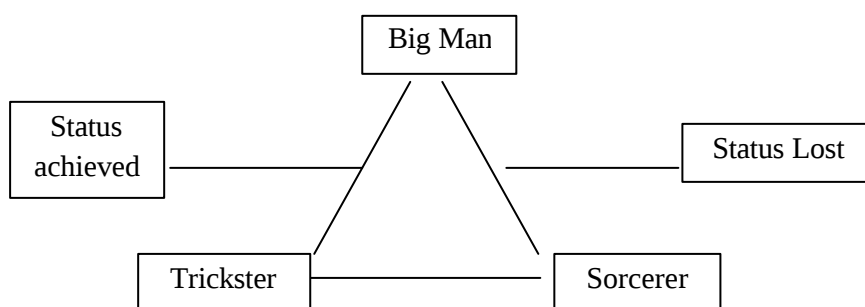


Figure 1. The cycle of role-holding

is that leadership is achieved and not, in most cases, directly linked to family lineage. Big Men, consequently, do not enjoy the privileges of permanency in their role. Their position requires maintenance and is dependent upon continued tribal support. Traditionally Big Men garner support through gifts. In the Papua New Guinean context, the community are furnished with a series of feasts and celebrations. The capacity of the Big Man to support these activities is generally seen as indication of their continued capabilities. The obligations associated with accepting these gifts acts to cement the continuing support of 'lesser' members of the community (Mauss, 1970).

In most tribal situations, there is no one Big Man but rather many Big Men. The relationship between these men can fluctuate through the entire range of human emotions. However, in most tribal situations the relationship tends towards a median of amicability. One of the skills of being a Big Man is the ability to expertly execute diplomacy, sometimes more so than an ability to fight. The collectivity of Big Men often work as a *de facto* council who define acceptable practices (Salisbury, 1965).

In these ways, Big Men are pivotal figures in the community. They offer order and stability for the majority of the group members by personally absorbing conflictual situations. Achievement of the role itself, however, incorporates a level of dynamism, as 'lesser' community members jostle with existing Big Men to achieve to this role.

The role of Big Man is readily identified within the 'tribal' community of the finance forum. In the environment of the finance forum, the Big Men provide a mediating and managerial role that is not related to the mechanical moderation of a forum but to the organisation and maintenance of the community. These Big Men distribute gifts in the form of information relating to the price movements of particular securities. The Big Man in this situation is under no obligation to provide gifts but does so to ensure the longevity of their role and its attendant respect and prestige.

The Big Man is under no obligation to respond to queries from 'his' supporters. The Big Man's role within the community moves widely outside these more petty circles. In many cases the Big Man is content to let 'his' words be repeated by others. The Big Man will only intercede where he sees fit, for example when a supporter quotes the advice of another Big Man or when 'his' words have completely lost their original intent. Big Men also ensure the relatively stable continuity of the community by reserving their own conflict to other Big Men. These conflicts may themselves produce the side effect of small gifts of information to loyal but silent supporters.

Inevitably, the role of Big Man is a temporary one. There are others waiting to assume the role at signs of weakness or when the gifts of information imparted by the Big Man do not warrant the obligations of once loyal supporters. The former Big Man can disappear to become a ghost-like figure, occasionally referred to by former supporters or opportunities may exist to once again achieve the status of Big Man. The Big Men are not the only players in this tribal environment and while they may be the most respected and sought after individuals in the community their position is also pre-requisite on the presence of others who assume different, sometimes antagonistic, roles.

The Sorcerers

Another key figure in the literature on tribalism in Papua New Guinea is the Sorcerer. The Tangu tribe, describe sorcerers as *ranguma*, "a non-reciprocal man, a man who will not engage his reciprocities as do others" (Burridge, 1965:230). With such importance placed on the obligations that the receipt of the gifts from a Big Man implies, to not reciprocate clearly disrupts the order and stability of the community. The Sorcerer, while participating in the community also set themselves apart from that community. "They do not conform with the community ethic" and are not thought of being part of the community. The Sorcerer manipulates people within the community by perpetuating moral conflict. Their actions are not happenstance or spontaneous. They are pre-meditated with clearly thought out motives of self-benefit.

The inhabitants of South Pentecost claim Sorcerers have the skill of shape shifting. They are able to assume forms that best suit their own needs. While traditional cultures provide a metaphysical framework for shape shifting, it is also a capability readily enabled through computer-mediated communication. Identities in the finance forum are reliant upon the participant themselves furnishing their identity. The forum relies upon the simple but naive assumption that one physical user will equate with a single forum identity. Shape-shifting can be accomplished, in this context, simply by assuming a new nickname and, for more sophisticated shape-shifters, is reinforced by shifting stated loyalties, changing support for a particular security, different grammatical styles or changing the accuracy of the spelling in postings.

The persistence of shape-shifting activity is a repeated focus for discussion in the finance forum just as it is an often-used source of stories in traditional cultures. These stories encourage caution as it is important for community members to be able to identify and protect themselves from the possibly nefarious actions of Sorcerers and shape-shifters. At the very least, it is important to identify the veracity of the claims and the level of threat that shape-shifters' activities have upon the community. Detecting shape-shifters can be difficult when their identity is not new but that of another community member. Identity theft can not only be immediately damaging it can also have long term consequences for the person whose identity was stolen. In the finance forum this form of the theft is difficult to undertake and still harder to document.

Not all shape-shifters, however, are necessarily Sorcerers. Others may also utilise this technique for different and less destructive purposes. Individual's attempting to assume more significant roles within the community may also experiment with shape shifting in order to better understand and 'test' the community. Detecting the various purposes and identities that motivate an individual's use of shape shifting requires experience with, and a familiarity of, the community. A combination of skills that is most readily found amongst the Big Men.

The Sorcerer, as the habitual thief, takes the gift of information for self-benefit. They do not offer support to, or recognition of, the Big Men in reciprocation unless they see immediate and direct benefit for themselves. The Sorcerer, as the disrupter, also assumes the role of the 'ramper', the person who will offer information to the whole community in order to benefit their own position. This is done with little or no regard for the detrimental effects that this may have on the community. These actions also generate conflict between Big Men. Precipitating this conflict provides the Sorcerer with benefits that override any concerns for the stability of the whole community.

The Tricksters

The Trickster is generally a comical figure and in traditional cultures is seen as a relief from the seriousness of daily life. They often occupy this role through inexperience or naivety. While they may sometimes be mistaken for a Sorcerer, or even a Big Man, their antics are usually nothing more than an annoyance, albeit a sometimes costly one. In general, they do not consider the consequences of their actions. The 'trick' is performed for the sake of the trick itself. If a Trickster performs a 'ramping' activity it is not to benefit their own position, they may not even own the security. Their actions can be seen as experiments, proof for perhaps no one other than themselves that they can manipulate people. The Trickster's own inexperience and naivety may also be their motivation. By performing various tricks they become more experienced in the motivations and sentiments that shape the community. This acquisition of knowledge may eventually enable them to assume a new role as a Sorcerer or Big Man. The position of the Trickster also makes them vulnerable to manipulation by other Tricksters and by Sorcerers. In traditional descriptions of the Trickster their actions are often driven by a Sorcerer's own motives.

In the background to this identifiable trinity are the vast majority of the community who do not participate in conflict. While they are broad targets for the activities of the Sorcerers and Tricksters they do not occupy individual roles of importance. They offer generally tacit support to particular Big Men and accept gifts

of information in exchange. Their support is revealed in the stability of the community and the continuity of stable roles and relationships.

CONCLUSION

The forms of conflict discussed in this paper regularly occur within the forum studied and are core elements of the 'tribal' community's social interactions. They are central to the forum because they reveal the social relations within the community. These conflicts are continual status checks on the relative standing of individuals and not just informational snippets related to securities and trading, despite the insistence for 'purity' by the Big Men themselves. In this way, forum participants form bonds, relationships and alliances with others that also contributes to the community's social fabric. The fact that a respected member of the community bothers to retaliate to a challenge by some individuals and not others, helps to establish who hold which status positions within the community. Even if the conflict has a negative outcome for some individuals the dynamic nature, continuing interest and interaction within the group ensures overall continuity for the 'tribal' community.

The conflict-oriented and 'tribe'-like research approach utilised in this paper offers an alternative means for attempting to understand online communities. Identifying specific 'tribal' roles in the community and isolating the participants who assume these roles, provides a mechanism for negotiating the vast amounts of data available to the researcher of online phenomena. By placing this work within the context of group-defined relationships the research remains firmly attached and focused upon the online community as a cultural phenomenon and not simply one of new technology use or implementation.

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