ED 385 261   IR 055 494

AUTHOR   Wang, Hongjie; Hong, Yan
TITLE   Flaming: More Than a Necessary Evil for Academic
              Mailing Lists.
PUB DATE   [95]
NOTE   11p.
PUB TYPE   Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   *Computer Mediated Communication; *Discussion Groups;
              Electronic Mail; Higher Education; Hostility;
              Information Networks
IDENTIFIERS   *Flaming (Computer Mediated Communication); Insults;
              Internet; Professional Communication; Scholarly
              Communication

ABSTRACT
        Academic mailing lists are formed by scholars and
professionals interested in intellectual discussion and professional
exchange of ideas. Academic mailing lists focus on academic and
scholarly subjects, but they are not immune from "flaming," hostile,
insulting language in computer-mediated communication. Two scholarly
mailing lists, ANTHRO-L and MEDLIB-L, were monitored to during 1994
and investigated for flaming. Three types of flaming were discovered
in those professional groups: the personal attack (venomous remarks),
taunting (sarcastic barbs), and didactic (admonishments, rebukes,
reprimands). People flame when others violate the rules of Internet
culture, when there is ethnocentrism (differences in values), and
when people misunderstand each other. The following tips for
understanding flaming are discussed: educate the ignorant; enforce
the rules; facilitate effective communication; and reshape society.
As a unique part of the Internet culture, however, flaming has a
special role to play in academic mailing lists. Although a punitive
measure, it educates the ignorant, polices cyberspace, brings order
to the group, and scares away unwanted commercial advertising.
Flaming also encourages clear writing and no-nonsense communication.
(Contains 23 references.) (MAS)

ED 385 261

Flaming: More than a Necesary Evil for Academic Mailing Lists

by Hongjie Wang
Yan Hong

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FLAMING: MORE THAN A NECESSARY EVIL
FOR ACADEMIC MAILING LISTS

INTRODUCTION

Flaming permeates the Internet culture. Although refraining from flaming is advocated by all Internet gurus and warily observed by many rank-and-file users, from time to time flaming messages shoot up. In some cases, this behavior escalates from a "mild scorch" to a "roaring blaze" (Thompsen 1993). Academic mailing lists may see less egregious types of flaming than that found in other situations, yet, even there it abounds in various forms.

Flaming never stops. A close look at the characteristics, the forms and the nature of this distinctive Internet phenomenon reveals that flaming exists for a reason. Despite its outwardly intrinsic destructiveness, flaming educates the ignorant, tames the uncouth and deters potential violators of rules upheld by specific academic discussion groups. In fact, flaming is the only means to enforce the "netiquette", a set of general etiquette rules developed for Internet users. Flaming also scares away commercial advertizing, which, in general, is vehemently opposed by most academic mailing lists. In its unique way, flaming can be argued to promote good writing and effective communication. To see flaming in perspective, therefore, is to understand the positive role it may play in keeping the discussion groups working the way they are meant to.

I.   FLAMING AND ACADEMIC DISCUSSION GROUPS

Flaming constitutes a distinctive characteristic of electronic mail. Definitions vary, but it generally means "attacking someone personally for their posting" by using "insults, swearing, and hostile, intense language" (Krol, 1992, p. 150; Walther, 1992). In the academic environment, "flaming refers to computer-mediated communicative behaviors that are interpreted to be inappropriately hostile" (Thompsen, 1993, p.3).

A mailing list, on the other hand, is an organized system in which a group of people are sent messages pertaining to a particular topic. An academic mailing list, by extension, are formed by scholars and professionals interested in intellectual discussions and professional exchange of ideas. Academic mailing lists focus on academic and scholarly subjects, yet, they are not immune from flaming. In academic mailing lists flaming differs from other Internet communities (news groups, for example) only in depth and severity.

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In analyzing the forms of flaming, David Plotnikoff (1994) listed five basic kinds: Ad-hominem attacks flame; the surgical-strike flame; the spelling grammar flame; the you-have-no-business-being-here flame; the sneak flame and the anti-flame flame. According to Plotnikoff, "the surgical-strike methodically and mechanically refutes each tiny point in the previous post or e-mail. The on-line equivalent of disassembling your enemy's car one bolt at a time." In explaining sneak flame, Plotnikoff compared the sneakers to someone who did not throw down the gauntlet until the last moment. Using the disguise of a friendly opening, the sneaker holds his attack until the finishing line where it might read: "I'm not expecting you to be able to fathom any of this, so I'd suggest you get the one person down at the trailer park who did graduate from high school to read it for you." Hostile messages like this one are not hard to find in a mailing list.

II. FLAMING CHARACTERISTICS OF PROFESSIONAL DISCUSSION GROUPS

Flaming in the academic setting acts like insects. Some flaming messages bite with venomous remarks (personal attack); some sting with sarcastic barbs (taunting); others simply pinch with black humor (didactic). Since the best way of understanding the unique phenomenon of Internet culture is direct invovlment in professional disussion groups, I subscribed to several scholarly lists to observe and investigate. Contratry to what one would assume, the highly educated scholars and reasearchers do not always hesitate to use uncivilized language when they are online, not without a reason, though. Most of the examples cited in this paper are culled from two professional mailing lists: ANTHRO-L for anthropologists and MEDLIB-L for medical librarians during the year of 1994.

Personal Attack

Personal attacks boomerang in the cyberspace. In a rush response to a posting that is viewed in some way as offensive, well-educated professionals may say things they later feel sorry for. Periodically, an offended party lashes out at message senders by calling them names and piling up insults. Instead of addressing the issue at hand or arguing on a professional level, these flamers attempt to choke the messengers. They shoot to kill.

When a corporate researcher named JM posted a message looking for ideas to help his employees learn the knack of advertizing, a professor saw red. He declared to "flame in the spirit of the new bourgeois public sphere, the information superhighway." (Fox, 1994) Angrily, he condemned: "I deeply, deeply resent JM's facile, disingenuous comparison between the project of his henchmen...and the project of professional, scholarly ethnographers...and I don't give a f*** about your 'potential employers and clients,' JM... why don't you go join a USENET newsgroup where ignorance of the subject under discussion is a virtual pre-requisite for participation? Here and there, hatchet job haunts haunts academic mailing lists.

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Taunting

Most people do not flame to see others bleed. Many just use flaming as a rude wake-up call, not without humor sometimes. Wondering why a discussion group has been quiet for a while, a member sent the message: "I haven't read this group for quite some time and now I see there have been very few posts. Question: Is this group brain dead or just comatose???" (Kerling, 1993) Soon someone replied:"Sheeez, what a dork, this was supposed to be posted to alt.human-brain," which is a Newsnet news group, Without being too vitriolic, this message reminded the members of the netiquette to be followed---posting appropriate questions to appropriate groups. Critical messages of this nature border more on the side of teasing than hostility.

Didactic

One of the rules people follow in socializing others is to withhold uninvited advice. If this is difficult for some people to observe in their daily life, it is even more difficult for many communicating in the cyberspace where "reminders of the presence of other people and of social norms" remain at a minimum (Sproull and Keisler 1986, p 1501). For lack of direct human contact, people on Internet admonish, rebuke, reprimand, and reproach much more uninhibitedly than they would under other circumstances,and leave behind a much longer trail of troublesome or even irksome electronic seeds than when they communicate with people face to face. Not surprisingly, many e-mail messages are provokingly didactic, and are viewed by many as inflammatory.

III. WHY FLAMERS FLAME

Others Are Totally Wrong

People flame when others violate the rules and the customs of the Internet culture. Often, commercial advertisers bear the brunt. When two Arizona lawyers broke the rules by sending an uninvited advertizing message to 6000 newsgroups, they infuriated the whole Internet world. As a result, a flood of nearly 30,000 flaming messages poured into their email account and crashed the computer system that provided them with the Internet access. Internet users use flaming as a punitive mechanism to punish and scare away rule breakers.

Ethnocentrism

Flaming also occurs when others are not quilty of violating any rules. Value differences can kindle an electronic war. When people suffer from what Spradley called "ethnocentrism" (1990) and fail to understand that others' different behavior can be motivated by a different set of cultural norms rather than an intentional violation of accepted conventions, they tend to react more intolerantly on the Internet than they would in a face-to-face situation.

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A recent skirmish over Proposition 187 in a professional discussion list illustrated this point. An anthropologist in the group opposed this proposition and called upon others to boycott their professional conference in California as a protest. At the end of his appeal letter, he listed all those people who had signed up for the protest. Another member in the electronic group, categorically against such a letter, called every signer "a fool," believing that his own value systems and moral codes are both best and universal.

Misunderstanding
Misunderstanding occurs for two reasons: the sender of a message fails to make clear what is intended; or the reader reads too much into what is not there. When a message equivocates, it forces the reader to read between the lines and make assumptions about the intended meaning based on the readers' own value systems and moral judgement. Once a message is misunderstood, the reader takes offense where no offense was intended. "The lack of nonverbal communication, of being unable to hear inflections and see facial gestures, " Professor Thompsen (1992) concluded, "makes it difficult to detect the emotional content of a message." (p. 63).

Misunderstanding poses such a serious problem that people have to deal with the situation by inventing a series of devices called "emoticons" or "smileys." A smiley is a small drawing, using only regular keyboard characters,, intended to add facial expression to a message. The most frequently used emoticon consists of a smile :-). Others convey surprise :-0, displeasure or sadness :-<, or teashing ;-) (one needs to turn the head sideways to see the faces). People use smileys to assure clarity of their electronic messages, to indicate irony and to communicate the subtle nuances of another culture's humor.Putting a smiley at the end of a sentence is sort of like saying "just kidding". (Hahn, p 203) All these efforts, however, do not remove misunderstanding, and misunderstanding sparks and fans flaming.

IV. HOW TO UNDERSTAND FLAMING
Educate the Ignorant
Flaming does not exist for destruction only. Often times, it serves to educate those who know little about the customs and rules of the Internet culture. Each academic mailing list, for example, has its distinct purpose of existence and declared scope of topics for coverage. Common interest keeps the electronically connected members together. Interlopers with an comment, question or request deemed unfit for the culture of the group infuriate the puritans for breaking the rules and offend others for wasting their time and energy with trivia beyond their interest. Intruders get punished the same way irresponsible and careless students do in taking an exam: they flunk not because they have nothing to say, but because they give answers that have nothing to do with the questions.

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For academic mailing lists, people who send inappropriate messages are guilty of "the red herring " fallacy, and have trodden on professional taboos. Flaming, then, will serve two purposes: educate the ignorant and discipline the trespassers. While a soft-spoken message of admonition might also coax the defiant into conformity, accusing messages of strong language, many believe, work faster and better. For one thing, flaming really hurts, as Tom Maurstad reported. Once burnt, the uncouth become shy, and the academic mailing lists, free from interruptions and distractions, happily assume their normal business.

Enforce the Rule

For all its magic, Internet is still a wilderness where chaos outruns order. "Anyone with the technological tools can post anything he or she wants," observes Elizabeth Dow, an Internet Gopher manager (1994). The same is true with academic mailing lists where anything can happen. A message can be sent 100 times to the same group; anyone can pick up an age-old "thread" that has already bored everyone else to death. A harangue may ramble for 20 screens with nothing substantial to tell, and, worst of all, it can all be in capitalization! It is a rare person who can put up with such an eye-sore. Reading it is worse than having Cher screaming at you at the top of her lungs. For all the invention of netiquette, the rules apply to only those who choose to comply.

Compliers, sadly, do not have many cards to play in their game to control the offensive behavior of those oblivious of netiquette and Internet codes of conduct. In fact, they have only one shaft in their quivers---flaming. Shooting an electronic arrow at someone in Internet is the only thing they could do to police the group. Although it bears the semblance of an uncivilized warrior, flaming, like flogging in Singapore, helps curb the electronic graffiti. The lesson is that "anyone who chooses to flagrantly disregard the customs and laws of a culture will get all they deserve." (Walker). Flaming, correctly handled, helps to keep the "participatory democracy" of the Internet working.

The following message from a professional testifies to the effectiveness of flaming: "the reason the messages say 'send replies to me rather than the whole list' is because I have been flamed enough about sending out requests for information about 'trivia' (and other less attractive descriptions) that I'm a bit fearful of continued fall out (but notyet fearful enough to quit asking althogether)." Duffel (1994)

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Facilitate Effective Communication

If flaming hurts, no one wants to get flamed. Since flaming can result from misunderstanding, message senders will strive to speak with clarity and straightforwardness. They will try to avoid ambiguity, obscurity and vagueness. Double entendre and double speak, therefor, have little place in electronic communications. For fear of getting flamed, many writers go extra miles to explain their messages where ambiguity looms. While discussing political correctness, a member said: "The following is the way I feel about it. Your mileage may vary. Please consider the second-person 'you' below as third person." (Bach, Newsgroup). Out of fear of being flamed for misunderstanding, he makes himself more clear. Strange as it may sound, flaming encourages clear writing.

In professional discussion groups, flaming messages of personal attacks are very rare. More are those which aim to taunt and satirize. This type of flaming makes people more candid. With fewer inhibitors in expressing themselves in an electronic milieu, writers have become more direct and honest with each other than they normally are. In real life, constructive criticism is loosing ground to the practice of "going along to get along," and positive thinking may go to the extreme of narcissism. The everything-is-great mentality reigns over the American culture. The emphasis on being positive is so heavy that criticism and confrontation have almost become endangered species in our daily life. Flaming, however, is changing the scenario.

Reshape the Society

In his book <u>Future Mind</u>, Edward Lias explored the aspects of changes brought forth by new media. He believed that communication through networks "will make life different, publicly and privately." (p 27)

Lias argues that new media cause underlying social values to change. "One value change resulting from the general use of the computer medium may be that people will have less rigid, more accepting attitudes to social conventions and ways of doing things...it could reduce one's prejudices or beliefs that certain ways are the only ways." (p 187). Internet, as a new communication device introduced into our culture, will certainly bring changes along with it and flaming, a distinctive feature of Internet culture, will impact our way of life in its own way.

In the electronic world, exchange of opinions happens immediately. Contradictory comments are explicit. "Let's talk turkey" is more a practice than a cliche in discussion groups. Circumlocutions seldom sell. Before we know it, electronic communication might change the way we define politeness and the way we socialize. People might become more straightforward in

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dealing with each other and, as a result, more tolerant of negative criticism and challenging comments. "Such tolerance," Lias pointed out, "does not imply that one has fewer values or standards, but rather a more honest consideration and appreciation of other cultures and personalities." (p187). "Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative" may still flow from mouth to mouth, but people who say it might have a different understanding of what is positive and negative.

Flaming as an Internet phenomenon both mirrors and reshapes the society we live in. History tells us that "human behavior is modified by the addition of each new medium in the social environment" (Lias p188). Today, with more than 30 million users regularly accessing Internet in 146 countries (Calcari p54), and with the Internet's growth rate at a staggering 20 percent per month (Petthia 1993), it is highly likely that Internet will alter the values and relationships of life. Flaming, too, will have its role to play in the change.

V. CONCLUSION

Flaming is a fact of life for Internet users. It might be frowned upon, but it never goes away. As a unique part of the Internet culture, it has special roles to play in academic mailing lists. As a punitive measure, flaming educates the ignorant, polices cyberspace and brings order to the group. It scares away unwanted commercial advertizing.

On a more positive note, flaming encourages clear writing and no-nonsense communication. Properly handled, it serves as a workable tool to monitor the participatory democracy rather than a weapon for mob rule. More importantly, flaming reflects the change of some human behavior resulted from electronic communication. At the same time, it illuminates area of life significantly altered by our acceptance of computers. How flaming modifies human behavior and our way of life merits further investigation.

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