From Usenet To Gaydar: A Comment On Queer Online Community

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Abstract

This paper provides a brief overview and introduction to the intersections between queer theory and online community in the UK and USA in the 1990s. Different communities and theoretical paradigms that relate to this are examined.

General Terms

Human factors, theory

Keywords

cyberqueer, online community, sexuality

Introduction

From the first discussions and practices of online community there have been both intersections and collisions between queer and cyber theories and cultural formations [1]. In the early 1990s, in Britain, the repercussions of queer theory were being constituted across academic feminism and lesbian and gay studies. At the same time the internet was emerging as a key structuring device for academic networks, and as an important area of study. With the advent of the web in 1994 the internet intersected with popular culture and the key questions of modernity – identity, community, governance, time and space – were understood to intersect with the web as it unfolded across multiple social domains.

Whilst the mid-1990s wasn't the beginning of cybercultural studies, internet research or queer, it was a period of sustained attention and excitement in relation to identity and the web. Nina Wakeford [1], whilst detailing 'cyberqueer', writes that 'the impression is that cyberspace is the post-modern space *par excellence'* (1997, p. 412). In this period the ideal queer subject and the imagined ideal cybersubject came to occupy the same ground. Thus cyber and queer became mapped onto each other as the postmodern, queer and cyber subjects combined to become represented as closed examples of each other.

However, whilst these theoretical paradigms were colliding and collaborating, communities of interest and practice were continuing to form alongside, and despite such academic debates. 'Soc.motss' and the multiple formations that have both flourished and collapsed online since 1983 are evidence of this. Thus, the internet has continued to sustain queer community formations, despite and because of the assumptions of gender swapping and play which might have undermined such crucially embodied identities [2].

The newsgroup; 'Soc.motss' was first set up as net.motss in 1983, and then changed to soc.motss when the usenet hierarchies were (re)formed in the mid 1980s . The history of soc.motss is well documented by the group and the archives preserve the first

posting as well as birthday postings 15 years on. The name 'Soc.Motss' refers in the first part to the usenet level of 'social' and in the second part to 'members of the same sex'. It is identified as the 'first explicitly cyberqueer newsgroup' [3].

In a sense 'Motss' queered the online gay scene, partly through the ambiguous title, thought to help keep the group gay-centred, rather than attracting negative attention and heterosexual voyeurism. However, the use of 'non-heterosexual' and 'Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Others (LGBTO)', the mixed genders of the group, and the ambiguous 'motss' label, contribute towards a queer formation. This example seemed to vindicate the promises of new beginnings in cyberspace [4] as it created a queer virtual arena that was more than the sum of lesbian and qay.

Essentialist orientated accounts of disembodiment and gender play, such as those apparent in Turkle's [2] narratives, can be a destructive force in thinking about cyberqueer because the slippage they invoke can evacuate specificity, power and subjectivity from accounts of identity. Whilst gender play can be understood as a discursive resistance in cyberspace [5] it can simultaneously operate to undermine the importance of structural location and embodied experience central to sexuality.

An additional assault was made upon queer communities online by the post-1994 commercialisation of the web, and with it, the capacity of late capitalism and its technologised infrastructures to commodify identity politics through niche marketing. The development of queer online media monopolies, marketing their portals as 'communities' is documented by Joshua Gamson [6] through the changes of ownership relating to PlanetOut.

However, as is apparent from some of the articles in Jonathan Alexander's 'Queer Webs' [7] collection, and in several other studies since [8] , there has been a proliferation of queer communication, community and activism online since the emergence of the commercial web. As with offline queer spaces, the boys appear to have more of it. Gaydar, which has become a popular service in the UK, is very much a boy's toy. The alternative – gaydar girls – although commercially viable, is a much less generic service in queer communities in the UK.

As is also true of offline communities, gender segregation and transgender have also come into conflict in the policing of community. Replicating the debates (which have become epitomised by the controversy surrounding the infamous Michigan Women's Music Festival's 'women born women' only policy) about the admission of transwomen into women only groups, some groups have decided, after deliberation, to allow transwomen 'in' to the women only online 'spaces'. These moves and the attempt by portals to use inclusive terms appeared to promise that more divergent, more ambiguous, and less hierarchical queer community formations might be facilitated by online communication, and contribute to 'rainbow' coalitions offline.

Collisions and Collaborations

In the USA (where queer theory emerges) and where the use of online media has historically been more widespread than elsewhere, commercial sites designed to market to a broad identity spectrum are prolific. 'Queer' in these sites is a negotiation between lists of identity choices (pick one and identify), and the assumption of a queer subject. An example of this tension is apparent in the inclusion statement on 'Technodyke' which reads:

> If you know how to turn on a computer, and you're a woman who loves women... (bi/trans/curious included!!!!) you're a Techno Dyke!; [9]

Although the site appears to invites an inclusive queer female subject, discussion forums within the site simultaneously often require that one specific identification is made within this more inclusive 'umbrella' term. Likewise, the Gaydar site uses the logo 'King of Queer' [10] whilst simultaneously requiring precise definitions of identity in the profile.

It is from USA commentators that the collision of queer and subject subjectivity has perhaps been at its most intense. Bornstein and Sullivan's novel, *Nearly Roadkill* [11] is emblematic of the attraction in this collision where online fluidity becomes conflated with queer performativity and an idealised version of performativity unfolds across both cyber and queer.

However, controversies around both the case of transgender and that of lesbian feminism, can expose the problematic tensions of the fluid identity paradigm. Although transgender is a theoretically ideal queer fluid subject; the experience of transsexuality is often that of an essentialised and fixed identity. Lesbian feminism is also often expressed through a policing of the borders of the categories of women and lesbian. The capacity for either of these positions to be encapsulated in a queer formation can be limited and contingent. Although the theoretical model of transgender is made to articulate the ideal queer subject [12], trans

experience is not only or always queer. It is evidently possible to experience trans through a heterosexual narrative of desire and becoming, as it is possible to experience lesbian identity through an antagonistically anti-queer frame.

Although there have been assumptions made about the freedom of the cybersubject to be performed through an identity of choice online, there have simultaneously been continued anxieties about authenticity online. One of the archetypal cyber myths, which underscores this anxiety most clearly, is the oft cited tale of Joan the disabled woman whose experience of embodiment turns out to be that of an able bodied man [13] [14][i]. Transgender, in the form of transsexual subjectivity, problematises the correlation made between embodied experience and authentic identity in this anxiety paradigm. This problematisation occurs around trans experiences of the body as the site of deceit (e.g. wrong body narratives), coupled with the establishment of an articulated identity, separated from the morphology of the body, as the site of authenticity. The cyber-anxiety around reclaiming bodily identity as the site of authentic identity effects a series of tensions between both the positioning of online media as a site of gender play, and the experience of transgender subjects such as transsexuals, for whom embodied experience is often precisely the problem.

The theatres of MUDs and MOOs, and other multi-user domains (e.g. online gaming), both textual and graphic, have been explored as the sites where both online community and identity play can work in tandem [15] , [16] [17], [18]. LambdaMOO, for example, has been subject to much scrutiny in relation to the concepts of online identity and community, and analysed as a 'queerspace' [19]. In the instances of both MOOs and gaming, identity play is often the premise of the community, where character authoring is a skill. Alternatively, game playing or location building may be the skill, whilst an assumed character is part of the play. While some of these environments have facilitated the expression of multiple or experimental genders (e.g. 'per' as an alternative form of 'his' or 'her') or the anthropomorphism of other animals and objects; gender definition and sexuality remain important identifiers and participants often narrate experiences of being continually asked to 'reveal' their identity [20]. What also emerges from studies of graphic avatar communities, is that visually stereotypical sexed bodies are used as frequently and often more dominantly than experimental, queer or avant-garde avatars [21].

The ideal cybersubject and the ideal queer subject as fluid, converge in fictions such as Sullivan and Bornstein's [10] and critique's such as Turkle's [2]. However, there is more evidence to suggest that contemporary online queer communities are stratified into fixed identity hierarchies [22], and anxiety about bodily identity is a strong determinant in online queer formations. To take the example of Gaydar, which predominantly serves gay men, it is clear that embodied experience and online image correlations are a foundation of the Gaydar process. An object of the Gaydar exercise is often to meet in person and to experience embodied sex. To this end the Gaydar profile is subject to a strict hierarchy of categorisation and objectification and a photograph is an important factor in the process of self-constitution [23]. On 'gaydar girls' the list of choices to self-select gender and sexuality categories are highly limited and prescriptive, and 'queer' is not a designated category.

Conclusion

There are several important tensions that run through online queer community politics, experience, and theory. The cybersubject, assumed as a fluid performative intersects with the ideal queer subject as trans, bi or pan sexual [11]. This intersection is both a collision and collusion that produces a series of tensions with both utopian and dystopic network effects. The queer subject assumed as a fluid pansexual, bi or trans subject appears to map onto the cybersubject, assumed as free flowing and elective, in an illusion of virtual materialism. However, at the centre of the ideal cybersubject runs an anxiety over authenticity, reproduced through the site of embodiment. At the centre of the ideal queer subject is a fluidity rarely experienced by queers, who may be as likely to identify through one of the choices on the queer identity menu. The 'queerest' and most 'cyber' identity in the imagined hierarchy is trans. However, trans is embodied in transsexual subjects who are neither necessarily queer, nor experience bodies that are constructed as the authentic site of their identity.

The successful formation of online queer communities has fragmented into prescriptive identity menus, which serve marketing purposes as much as they are expressive [6]. In terms of numbers and commercial viability, the portals of PlanetOut, Gaydar, and Diva's Blue Room with their select and click identity menus, are the contemporary sites of online queer identity formation. However, Soc.motss with which I started this polemic, is still around and operates in parallel to these monopolies. Multiple sites such as newsgroups, home pages, email lists, zines, activist and fetish sites, MUDS, MOOs, IRC, IM blogs and journals also operate alongside commercial formations and beyond the frame of the fluid cybersubject. In these sites, and in more overtly commercial sites the individual and community negotiation, and constitution, of identity operates at an intersection with the ongoing politics of queer.

A more expansive project to articulate more clearly the intersection of queer and cyber subjectivity would include ethnographies of activism and identity, and histories of those individuals who have played a longitudinal part in queer formations and theories. Other technologies such as mobile telephony also intersect with the myriad of online modes. A close attention to the intersections of, and spaces between, identity and community would help to illuminate the networks and the gaps involved. This short and condensed polemic seeks only to give a brief overview of some instances of the cultural formations and theoretical formations and their intersection and collision in relation to queer.

The very partial history that I hope to have articulated here is that of the temporal hinge that has repeatedly opened and closed around queer and cyber, identity and community: wherein performativity [24] unfolded across both the ideal cybersubject, and the ideal queer subject, in the late 1990s. This subjected identity and community politics to a legacy of productive and destructive forces that have made heavy assaults on what it means to be queer and online.

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