A Thesis
titled
Promoting Civility in Online Discussions:
A Study of the Intelligent Conversation Forum
by
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Master of Liberal Studies Degree

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Discussions on Internet forums show a higher tendency towards incivility than those conducted in person. This is partially caused by the anonymity of the web; therefore, some have suggested that the solution is requiring website commenters to provide their real names. There are many benefits to allowing people to maintain their privacy, however, so this thesis examines alternative methods that websites could use to promote civility.

A website was created to study the effectiveness of asking users to agree to behavioral standards and allowing them to vote on the quality of each other’s contributions. Users who chose to participate in the “Red Room” were expected to follow the agreement, and those who commented in the “Green Room” had no such expectations. The study compares and contrasts the behavior of posters as well as participation levels in both rooms.
Results show that users will adhere to some expectations and will behave with civility when they have agreed to do so. The voting system was underutilized and did not appear to influence behavior. While discussions in the Red Room were polite and fact-based, discussions in the Green Room appeared to more meaningfully explore differences. Therefore, it might be advisable for website administrators to weigh the benefits of encouraging civility against the benefits of encouraging free expression.
Acknowledgements

This Thesis would not have been possible without the guidance of my advisor, Dr. Benjamin Pryor, who helped shape the study into something much improved from its original conception. I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Jacqueline Layng’s Fall 2010 COMM 6220 class, who participated in the Pilot Study and provided invaluable direction on the design of the Full Study, and to Dr. Sumitra Srinivasan who gave me an excellent opportunity to further develop the project.
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Preface

Computer-based communication creates exciting opportunities for individuals to interact with a wider range of people on a wider range of topics than is possible in face-to-face communication, but there appear to be disadvantages to these exchanges. The anonymity and physical distance of the Internet can often encourage individuals to be uncivil with each other and create disruptions (Suler, 2004, Coffey & Woolworth, 2004, Stone, 2007).

Some observers have recommended that online communities should require participants to register using their real names and other personally identifying information (Katz, 2010, Rieder, 2010, Blade Staff, 2012, Kravets, 2012). They posit that this will create personal accountability and therefore reduce antisocial behavior. “Removing the veil of anonymity typical to online dialogue will contribute to a more positive forum environment, promote constructive conversations, and connect the Blizzard community in ways they haven’t been connected before,” (Blizzard Entertainment Inc.) said. (Katz, 2010)

Other research suggests that anonymity and privacy have positive effects on Internet discourse that would be lost if real names were required (Christopherson, 2007).

Researchers have recommended a variety of other tactics for encouraging positive

All of these solutions require community creators to structure their sites in ways that promote desirable actions and discourage or prevent undesirable ones. The question of exactly how site administrators could best do this requires further research.

This paper examines the problem of incivility on the web and the various solutions that have been proposed. The potential positive and negative outcomes of banning anonymity are discussed, with a consideration towards ways that society has regulated anonymous speech in the past. Working from the proposition that online anonymity should be preserved, other methods of promoting civility are explored.

A research study was conducted, in which a discussion website was created to more closely examine possible solutions to the incivility problem. The design and outcomes of that study will be described. The paper finishes with some conclusions that might be drawn from this study and suggestions that website administrators might consider when managing discussion-based communities.
Chapter 1

Incivility on the Web

Online Disinhibition

Text-based Internet communication is distinct from face-to-face communication in a number of ways. Individuals cannot see or hear each other online, and therefore do not have the benefit of body language, facial expressions, or vocal intonations to assist with understanding. This physical separation can also make it easy for participants to forget that real people with real feelings are on the other side of the conversation, and it can reduce the immediate consequences of certain types of speech (Suler, 2004). Suler (2004) has called this The Online Disinhibition Effect. Research suggests that as a result of this relative level of isolation, communication online can sometimes show a greater tendency for incivility and interpersonal cruelty (Suler, 2004, Coffey & Woolworth, 2004).

In their study of a 2000 incident in Tacoma, Washington, Coffey and Woolworth found that participants in an online forum dedicated to community discussion of a shocking local crime made comments that were far more angry, critical, and racist than
those made by participants in an in-person town hall meeting held on the same issue. “The web forum permitted anonymity with no social constraints on reactions to the incident, language used, or attitudes expressed,” they observed.

A review of the comments sections on major news websites, blogs, and social media sites will often show several examples of profanity, name-calling, and threats. Commonly-observed examples of incivility on the web include “flaming,” where users engage in harsh attacks on other users, and “trolling,” where users post deliberately incendiary comments in an attempt to provoke outrage among other users. Users who wish to criticize others online have also been known to create parody sites, post manipulated photographs, and even issue death threats (Stone, 2007).

**Anonymity on the Web**

It has been suggested that the anonymity of web communications is a significant cause of incivility. In face-to-face communications or other types of interaction among individuals who personally know each other, people must consider what the reaction to their words will be. Consequences can range from the possibility of receiving an equally harsh response to the damaging of relationships to the potential for physical violence. However, when an Internet commenter uses an untraceable alias to post hurtful statements, the ability of others to hold that person accountable is reduced (Suler 2004). According to Rieder (2010), “the opportunity to launch brutal assaults from the safety of a computer without attaching a name has done wonders for the bravery levels of the angry.”

This has led some to propose that website administrators should require users to post under their real names rather than aliases. They suggest that fear of offline
embarrassment or retribution will motivate users to exercise temperance in their comments. For example, Blizzard Entertainment Inc., owner of the online game World of Warcraft, instituted a policy in July of 2010 requiring real names in their official user support forums, saying they hoped to create a more positive environment (Katz, 2010).

Although Blizzard backed down from this policy in a matter of days due to customer outrage, calls for prohibiting anonymity have continued. In March of 2012, Toledo, Ohio newspaper The Blade initiated a policy on their websites, requiring all commenters to log in using Facebook accounts, thus requiring them to reveal their real names. “The goal is to foster better and more civil public discussions,” The Blade said (Blade Staff, 2012).

Legislation banning online anonymity has also been proposed. In 2008, Kentucky State Representative Tim Couch introduced a bill into the Kentucky Legislature that would have fined Kentucky-based web administrators for failing to require real names (Polwatchers, 2008). Couch was quoted as saying, “when you’re anonymous, you can say anything you want to about someone and nobody knows who you are.” The New York state legislature proposed in 2012 to require all New York-based websites to remove anonymous comments unless the poster reveals his or her name (Kravets, 2012).

Other observers point to the benefits of privacy that come with anonymity. Some individuals may have valuable insight to share in a particular discussion, but might not want certain details of their personal experiences or opinions to be communicated to friends, family members, or coworkers. According to Christopherson (2007), giving a real name on the Internet also creates safety concerns, as it could assist unbalanced or criminal individuals to locate and physically harm other users. By allowing people to post
anonymously, the entire community benefits from a viewpoint that might otherwise be self-censored.

Christopherson (2007) also talks about how privacy has psychological benefits for individual participants. The ability to control personal boundaries and express feelings in an unhindered way contributes to emotional health. Privacy also helps people from marginalized groups, such as gays and lesbians, to communicate more safely about their specific concerns. In addition, anonymity can allow people, particularly adolescents, to explore aspects of their personality that might not have an offline outlet.

While Christopherson (2007) also points out negative implications of anonymity, it is clear that eliminating privacy online would have a detrimental effect on some types of communication. It should also be noted that there are significant technological and logistical problems with attempting to verify the offline identities of website participants. Creating a false identity on the web is very easy to do, and it is not clear how web administrators would go about locating every individual and confirming that they have provided accurate information.

**Historical Approaches to Anonymity**

Concerns about anonymous public expression are not unique to the Internet era. Anonymity and pseudonymity have a long history in public discourse, enabling people to speak freely without fear of persecution. The early American pamphlets “Common Sense” and “The Federalist Papers” were published anonymously, and Benjamin Franklin wrote under many different pseudonyms (Crosbie, 2006). Authors such as George Eliot,
Frances Burney, and Walter Scott have used pseudonyms to protect their identities and allow their writings to be evaluated without prejudice (Griffin, 1999).

There is a correspondingly long history of objections to anonymity. Critics throughout history have complained about the dishonesty and unfairness that anonymity can encourage (Griffin, 1999, North, 2003). Some have called for legal action to control the problem, but others have appealed to their audience’s moral sense and encouraged people to voluntarily reveal their identities (North, 2003, Castle, 1999, Kinnear, 1867).

In 19th Century London there was a lively debate regarding anonymous journalism. Newspaper articles of that time were customarily printed without bylines, and some observers felt this inflated the significance of the opinions presented (Kinnear, 1867, “Anonymous Journalism,” 1855). They said that when no author name was printed, the articles’ ideas appeared be the thoughtful consensus of the entire newspaper staff, when they were actually the words of just one individual (Kinnear, 1867, “Anonymous Journalism,” 1855). Journalists defended the practice, however, saying that anonymity kept the focus on ideas and not personalities (Hampton, 2004). In 1850, France passed a law requiring newspaper articles that discussed political, philosophical, or religious issues be signed. (“Anonymous Journalism,” 1855).

In many cases of controversy over anonymous publication, the printer or publisher has been held accountable for the accuracy or civility of the content (Griffin, 1999, North, 2003, Crosbie, 1999). The idea was that the public might not have known the identity of an author, but the publisher did, and by printing the piece he vouched for the author’s character (Crosbie, 1999).
Anonymous speech is protected under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, according to the Supreme Court (Talley v California, 1960, McIntyre v Ohio Elections Commission, 1995). In 1995 the Court struck down an Ohio law requiring political pamphlets to include the signatures of their authors. Justice John Paul Stevens, writing for the majority, said that “Under our Constitution, anonymous pamphleteering is not a pernicious, fraudulent practice, but an honorable tradition of advocacy and dissent. Anonymity is a shield from the tyranny of the majority” (McIntyre v Ohio Elections Commission, 1995, p. 357). The Court made a similar decision in 1960, when Justice Hugo Black wrote, “Persecuted groups and sects from time to time throughout history have been able to criticize oppressive practices and laws either anonymously or not at all” (Talley v California, 1960, p. 64).

An interesting example of resistance to public anonymity can be found in the Anti-Masquerade Ball movement of 18th Century London. Masked balls were condemned by some at that time, because they allowed for uninhibited dancing, swearing, gambling, and sexual freedom, but also because they enabled the social classes to unknowingly mix with one another (Castle, 1986). Others suggested that these problems could be mitigated by reasonable controls, such as holding balls in private homes with vetted guest lists rather than in public halls where anyone could purchase a ticket, and/or having a ceremonial unmasking at the end of the evening, so that everyone eventually knew who everyone else was (Castle, 1986). This idea shows that, historically, banning anonymity has not been the only solution, and that creating safe spaces and limited accountability has been used as well. The parties were briefly outlawed in 1750-51, when an earthquake
in Lisbon was blamed on masquerade’s immorality, but for the most part attempts to ban masquerades failed (Castle, 1986).

Another case of the tension between free speech and public protection is that of Free or Pirate Radio. Operators of anonymous unlicensed radio stations feel they are expressing a point of view not represented in commercial radio, but the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) says their broadcasts interfere with legitimate communications (Dick and McDowell, 2000, Soley, 1999). While the FCC has sometimes shut these stations down through cease and desist orders or even raids, they’ve also proposed creating a limited band of frequencies where independent stations can operate without disrupting others (Dick and McDowell, 2000, Soley, 1999). These plans have yet to come to fruition, but this is another example of an attempt to create a safe space for anonymity, rather than ban it altogether.

Historical debates over anonymity tend to focus on the same concerns that are raised regarding anonymity on the Internet. Namely, that it has the benefit of protecting people from unfair retribution and allowing them to more freely express themselves outside of their usual social roles, but that the lack of accountability makes it easier for them to be dishonest or irresponsible. While many have suggested banning various forms of anonymity, others have attempted to set reasonable restrictions to help control any negative outcomes.

Other Solutions to the Incivility Problem

Pankoke-Babatz and Jeffrey (2002) identify the importance of documented rules and expectations in maintaining online communities. Their analysis of “netiquette” rules in
various electronic media showed that definitions of social norms are widely used to specify desirable and undesirable behavior, as well as set sanctioning mechanisms. “Our study provides evidence that the written netiquettes aim to support the community building and maintenance process and to discourage media-specific disruptive behavior,” they said.

The effectiveness of written rules was supported by Hurrell’s (2002) study of the Canadian Foreign Policy Dialogue, a web-based discussion which solicited the input of Canadian citizens on foreign policy issues. In order to maintain a civil and productive conversation, the Foreign Policy Dialog required users to agree to a set of “civil rules,” including the expectation to stay on-topic and take responsibility for their comments. The site also employed moderators to screen posts for compliance with the guidelines. Hurrell’s analysis showed that “the majority of posts submitted to the Foreign Policy Dialog abide by the civil rules” (p. 72).

Moderation in combination with reputation scores have been used successfully on the large technology site Slashdot, according to Lampe and Resnick (2004). Slashdot moderation duties are shared among a group of users, who can assign positive or negative reputation points to posts and to other members. Users who have earned a sufficient reputation rating are allowed to participate in moderation if they wish. Meta-moderators observe the moderators for abuse and can remove bad moderators, or reward good moderators by assigning a higher point value to their votes.

Users of Slashdot can scan these reputation scores to locate posts and users who are valued by other members of the community and focus their attention accordingly.
While there are flaws in this system, Lampe and Resnick showed that it enjoys widespread participation and that the moderation reflects the group consensus.

Reputation scores can also be generated via Ballot Box Communication (BBC), a concept wherein voting systems and other mechanisms allow all users to register simple opinions about web content (Xia, Huang, Duan, & Whinston, 2009). These systems are used on sites such as Reddit, YouTube, and Flickr to gather feedback on site content or on user behavior. BBC allows multiple user inputs to be aggregated into a “majority voice” that reflects the consensus of the community.

Halavais (2009) studied the voting patterns on news-aggregating site Digg and determined that receiving feedback from other users helped individuals become socialized to community norms. The analysis revealed that as participants became more experienced users of the site, their number of votes increased, reflecting their increased adoption of behavior that is valued by the community. Halavais (2009) demonstrates that a reputation system can be used to shape user participation in an online community.
Chapter 2

The Intelligent Conversation Forum

Research Problem

The goal of this study is to further explore the general historical idea of creating safe spaces for anonymous speech and, more specifically, the findings of Hurrell (2002), that setting guidelines for online discussions will result in more productive and civil debate. It will also examine the effects of BBC on this aspect of user behavior.

The website studied in Hurrell (2002) included moderation as a technique, in addition to guidelines. This is somewhat analogous to the historical approach of holding publishers accountable for the works of anonymous writers, but on the Internet it may not be an option for all sites. Not all web administrators will have the resources to provide effective moderation. As an alternative to moderation, this study examines whether implementing a reputation system combined with setting behavioral expectations in a web-based forum will result in compliance with requests for civility.
The following research questions will be explored:

*RQ1:* How does specifying behavioral expectations in an online community affect adherence to those expectations?

*RQ2:* How does enabling group enforcement through a reputation system affect adherence to community standards?

*RQ3:* How do behavioral expectations and reputation systems affect the participation levels in an online forum?

Pilot Study

A pilot study was conducted in September-October 2010. A message board website was created, entitled “Intelligent Conversation: A Forum for Reasoned Debate and Discussion.” The stated goal of the site was to provide a forum for the discussion of controversial topics in a setting which was designed to foster critical thinking and rational debate. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the functionality of the site and the methodology, in preparation for a larger study with more participants.

Features designed to examine RQ1 included a registration agreement called “Our Principles,” which consisted of a short list of values and behavioral expectations (Appendix A). All users were required to agree to abide by these principles before registering, and after registration they received a follow-up e-mail reminding them of the agreement. In addition, there was an “About This Site” section that reiterated Our Principles, outlined the goal of the site, and offered additional resources about critical thinking. The title of the website and its address, www.smartconvo.com, were also intended to reinforce the expectation of rational behavior.
The forum was initially seeded with three threads about controversial political and social issues, including the “Ground Zero Mosque,” gays in the military, and the role of media in society. The community was asked specific questions about its opinion on these issues, with the moderator remaining neutral. Users also had the option to post new topics of discussion.

To examine RQ2, features were added that allowed users to vote “thumbs up” or “thumbs down” on both specific posts and on the overall behavior of other members. The “post score” and “poster score” were shown next to each comment and under each user’s name, publicly displaying each member’s reputation to the full community. A pop-up help window was available to explain these features to members.

In addition, each new member received the tagline “Building a Reputation” under his or her name, with a single light bulb icon. If a member received 10 positive post and/or poster votes, the site was designed to change that text to “Gaining Respect” and add an additional light bulb. The next level was “Widely Appreciated” and three light bulbs, followed by “Highly Regarded” and four light bulbs, and finally “Pillar of the Community” and five light bulbs.

These features were designed to create both public accountability and an incentive for the desired behavior. As the voting system enabled users to potentially receive significant negative scores, it also allowed for the possibility of public shaming for undesirable behavior.

Users were solicited from two graduate classes at a midsize Midwestern university. Participation was voluntary and included the option to register with an anonymous user name and/or e-mail address. A prize drawing for one $50 gift card was
offered as an incentive. To qualify for the drawing, users were required to register with the site, post at least three relevant comments in the discussion threads, and complete a post-study survey. The site was open to users for a period of four weeks.

Pilot Study Results

Of the nine users who registered with the site, four posted the requested three or more comments. Three users posted only once, and two users registered but never posted. One user took advantage of the opportunity to post without registering.

The most active thread was the one devoted to the role of media in society, with eight replies. This thread related directly to a discussion held in one of the graduate courses from which users were solicited. The threads about gays in the military and the “Ground Zero Mosque” received four replies each. One user also posted to the thread reiterating “Our Principles,” which was not intended to be part of the actual discussion.

In addition, user “njgriz” attempted to start a new discussion about the film “The Social Network,” which had also been a topic in one of the graduate classes. However, no one responded to this post. Njgriz also started a new thread with the subject “njgriz,” but this appears to have been intended as a reply to another thread and was unintentionally posted as a new discussion. There were also no replies to this thread.

Six users completed the follow-up survey. Responses indicated a high motivation to behave rationally based on the fact that they had agreed to do so. On a 1 to 5 scale, with 5 being highest, two respondents answered 5 to this question, three answered 4, and one answered 3. Users also reported a motivation to behave rationally based on the ability of others to vote on their comments. Also on a 1 to 5 scale, one user answered 5 to that
question, two answered 4, two answered 3, and one answered 2. In addition, survey responses indicated that users found the site easy to use, that they did not experience any technological problems, and that they had no significant suggestions for improvement.

Despite their interest in other users’ ability to vote, no one actually participated in the voting system. When asked why they didn’t vote, some users indicated that they were unaware of the option, while others found it too time-consuming. One respondent expressed a disagreement with the voting system as a concept, writing “I didn’t feel the need to vote on others’ posts. I felt the object was to engage in thoughtful conversation, rather than make it a popularity contest.”

The content of replies generally adhered to the first part of the “Our Principles” agreement, in that comments were thoughtful, evidence-based, and reflected an effort towards critical thinking. Users seemed open to the opinions of others. They employed a respectful tone and refrained from harsh language or personal attacks.

For example, in the thread entitled “Gays in the Military,” user “Siouxsan” supported her position by sharing the personal experience of her husband, who was serving in Iraq at the time. She described how he and his fellow officers felt about the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy and suggested that the military was ready for it to be repealed. User “WordsRUs” also based comments on factual issues, pointing out how the policy hurts the military by turning away potentially capable servicemen and women who are homosexuals. Njgriz went on to cite specific statistics about the number of individuals who have been dismissed from the military under the policy, agreeing with WordsRUs’s concern about the loss of valuable people. All of these responses show an adherence to the agreement to use facts and evidence in the discussion.
WordsRUs also used a number of facts when posting in the “Ground Zero Mosque” thread. This thread asked users if they felt the proposed Park 51 Islamic community center in Lower Manhattan, near the location of the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, should be built. WordsRUs pointed out that the term “Ground Zero Mosque” was a misnomer, as the center was neither a mosque nor was it directly at Ground Zero. WordsRUs also noted other businesses in the area that could be considered disrespectful of Americans’ feelings about the attacks and yet were not receiving criticism.

Njgriz disagreed, referring to a personal experience of having visited Ground Zero and a recollection of the emotions that resulted. It was njgriz’s position that rebuilding the area as a memorial to those lost would be more appropriate. “KK19” responded by pointing out the tradition of freedom of religion in America, while sympathizing with those who were upset by the idea of the Park 51 project.

As noted above, conversation was most active in the thread titled “Is the media destroying America?” The opening post in this thread asked users why they thought the news media appears to spend more time reporting on the controversial lives of celebrities than on arguably more important matters such as covering the nation’s war efforts. Both WordsRUs and njgriz stated that the public is more interested in celebrity stories, with WordsRUs specifically citing advertising sales as the media’s motivation for promoting these more attention-getting issues. User “jburch” appeared to agree, pointing out that the situation will only change if the public demands it. “Dhunt” put the responsibility back on the media, however, suggesting that if PBS can make substantive issues interesting to watch, other outlets should be able to do the same. “Rmelgar” expressed agreement with
the previous comments, reiterating that individuals can choose where they direct their attention.

Interestingly, njgriz’s final post to the thread suggested that the phrase “Is the media destroying America” is a mischaracterization, and that a better question would be to ask if “the media is desensitizing America.” Njgriz posited that other forms of media, such as movies and video games, contribute to an overall desensitization towards violence in America, which affects the public’s “views and behaviors.” This post is notable, because not only did njgriz apply critical thinking to her own comments, she critically evaluated the very premise of the conversation. Njgriz accepted the principles of the site and took them a step further than expected.

Pilot Study Discussion

Unfortunately, the comments did not significantly engage the ideas of others and so there was little meaningful exploration of any differences. A few members, such as KK19 in the Gays in the Military thread, made specific reference to other comments, but only to agree with the position articulated. While njgriz did disagree with WordsRUs regarding the Ground Zero Mosque, it was expressed indirectly and no other users responded to this disagreement. Thus, there was no adherence to the part of Our Principles that called for acknowledging mistakes and learning from them. No users were given the opportunity to do so, as no mistakes were identified. This reflects a lack of adherence to another part of the agreement, which asked users to “respectfully point out others’ errors.”

In addition, users had agreed to vote on each other’s posts. As noted above, no users complied with this request. Since some of the survey responses indicated that
voting represented extra work, it is possible that simplifying the voting system would yield more participation. It is also possible that soliciting members from a group of heavier Internet users, who may be more familiar with similar systems on sites like Digg, Reddit, and YouTube (Xia, Huang, Duan, & Whinston 2009), could result in more voting behavior.

Because there was no participation in the voting system, no observations can be made as to the effects of sanctioning, incentives, or public shaming on the behavior of community members.

Main Study Methodology

A limitation was observed in the pilot study, that it was difficult to attribute specific user behaviors to any particular aspect of the site. It was determined that stronger conclusions could be drawn by comparing the results from two similar forums with different features and expectations.

The Intelligent Conversation website was redesigned to include two main sections, called the “Red Room” and the “Green Room.” The Red Room included the same behavioral expectations used in the pilot study: a registration agreement requesting critical thinking and respect (Appendix A) and a “Welcome to the Red Room” descriptive section. The registration agreement for the Green Room simply asked users to “be open and honest without worrying what other people will think,” and the “Welcome to the Green Room” section instructed users to “go ahead and say what you really think here.” Red and green color schemes were used in each section to help remind users which
area of the site they were using. A post-registration e-mail reiterated the differences between the two rooms (Appendix B).

As in the pilot study, users in the Red Room were allowed to vote on other posts, see vote totals, and increase their own reputation level. However, the voting system was streamlined to remove the “poster” voting option and only allow users to vote on each other’s posts. Each user’s rating was still displayed next to his or her name, but the score was based on only post votes. The reputation features were not displayed in the Green Room.

Both forums were initially seeded with conversation-starting threads on controversial topics that were relevant at the time of the study. Sub-forums were created for “Politics/Social Issues,” “Religion,” and “Other.” The same topics were posted in both rooms, with a small number of topics initially posted in each sub-forum and additional topics added every few days. The community was asked specific questions about its opinion on these issues, with the site administrator remaining neutral. Users also had the option to post new topics of discussion.

A third forum, called “Community,” included sections for reiterating and discussing the site rules, providing more critical thinking resources, and recommending other sites devoted to rational discussions. It also provided a section for users to highlight their favorite posts in the site and to discuss the subject of “Intelligent Conversation” itself.

Users were solicited from the general population of the Internet, using social networking and online advertisements. Participation was voluntary and without compensation, but a $50 gift card drawing was offered to users who completed a post-
study survey. Users were free to post as much or as little as they wished, in whichever forums they wished. The site was open to users for a period of six weeks.

The posting behavior in both forums has been compared and contrasted, to determine the degree to which the expectations affected user behavior. In addition to noting the differences in civility between the two forums, the study also examines the differences in conversation length and depth. This is to explore whether requests for civility could serve to encourage or discourage open debate.

The study employs a qualitative analysis of post content and tone in each forum, in comparison with the behavior requested in the ground rules. It was expected that the forum which requires users to agree to these rules would produce fewer examples of incivility than the one which does not.

Votes cast as a part of the reputation system have been tabulated. Posts with the highest number of positive votes were expected to more closely conform to the site guidelines than those with lower scores. The study also hoped to analyze subsequent posts from those same users to determine if user behavior changed after receiving scores, and if so what changes occurred.

In addition, the study includes a quantitative analysis of the number of posts in each discussion in each forum, the number of posts per user overall and posts per user in each thread. There was also a qualitative analysis of the degree to which forum users engage the arguments of others and participate in the exploration of differences. There was no initial expectation as to which forum will produce longer or more interactive conversations.
Main Study Results

Twenty-two users registered with the site and posted at least one relevant comment. The most active user posted 24 comments. There were 148 replies in total, excluding posts by the moderator. Posts were split almost evenly between the two forums, with 75 posts in 20 topics in the Red Room and 73 posts in 19 topics in the Green Room. One new topic was started in the “Community” forum, but no users replied to it, and no users replied to any of the administrator’s posts in that forum. A total of 76 people registered with the site, with 54 of them either not posting or posting advertisements which were removed as spam.

As in the Pilot Study, posts in the Red Room appeared to comply with the Registration Agreement. Comments were informed, fact-based, and presented respectfully. Users did not attack or harshly criticize one another. They often conducted independent research into the topic and posted links to more information.

For example, in the “Reasonable Airline Security Measures” thread, user “scoop” posted a link to a newspaper article which had helped inform her opinion that additional screening methods are sometimes used as retribution against travelers who ask too many questions about procedures. “AlexFromOmaha” responded with a breakdown of the issues at hand, including an image of the type of body scans that were being introduced in airports at the time. In the “Roe v Wade and the Philadelphia abortion doctor” thread, “simple_mind” linked to the Grand Jury report on the incident under discussion, inviting users to get their information from the source and ignore media reports.
Table 1: Discussion Threads. All topics started by the administrator in both rooms, except where started by a user in only one room, as indicated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Politics/Social Issues</th>
<th>Date Posted</th>
<th># Replies Red Room</th>
<th># Replies Green Room</th>
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<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonable Airline Security Measures</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should the new Congress do in 2011?</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikileaks – Heroes or Terrorists?</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>airline security (Started by user “scoop”)</td>
<td>12/28/10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Guantanamo Bay</td>
<td>12/30/10</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismantling the Health Care Bill</td>
<td>1/04/11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSA Workaround (Started by user “JulieC”)</td>
<td>1/07/11</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Palin for President?</td>
<td>1/08/11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent political rhetoric and the shooting in Arizona</td>
<td>1/09/11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roe v Wade and the Philadelphia abortion doctor</td>
<td>1/22/11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gold Standard</td>
<td>1/27/11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control</td>
<td>1/27/11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dueling Atheist/Catholic Billboards in New York</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Mosque in Your Neighborhood</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The role of religion in society</td>
<td>12/30/11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious moderates vs. extremists</td>
<td>1/15/11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evolution vs Intelligent Design</td>
<td>1/27/11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should Michael Vick be allowed to own a dog?</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement Expectations (Started by user “JulieC”)</td>
<td>1/02/11</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting the “N word” from Huck Finn</td>
<td>1/04/11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Am I actually reading that the media believes in astrology?</td>
<td>1/15/11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Users also sometimes debated the validity of the evidence presented. “Attyfhs” posted a link in the “Is it all the President’s fault?” thread, to a blog post from pundit Sean Hannity which detailed President Obama’s shortcomings. “hroark” replied that Mr. Hannity does not have a reputation for being an unbiased source, and Attyfhs acknowledged this as a weakness and posted another link to a similar article from CNN.

Disagreements such as the one between hroark and Attyfhs were handled respectfully in the Red Room. In the “A Mosque in Your Neighborhood” thread, JulieC expressed religious views and “mudrake” challenged this by asking polite questions about perceived inconsistencies. JulieC provided civil answers to those questions, concluding with the comment, “I hope that explains my position. In religious debates or conversations, knowing where one is coming from helps immensely.” Mudrake disagreed with JulieC’s characterization of the historicity of Christ, but stated that it would be best not to debate that point further and instead gave thanks for the answers.

In another example, when discussing “Should Michael Vick be allowed to own a dog?” simple_mind disagreed with the first two posters, hroark and Themistocles, who both said yes. The issue concerned a professional football player who was jailed for participating in dog fighting and had recently expressed a desire to own a dog as a pet. While hroark and Themistocles felt Mr. Vick had paid his debt to society and had the same rights as any other citizen, simple_mind suggested that serving a prison sentence does not necessarily rehabilitate an individual. Simple_mind proposed a professional evaluation of Mr. Vick first. Although no one immediately responded to this disagreement, after the administrator prompted them for more discussion, both hroark and Themistocles replied that they saw the benefits of such an evaluation.
In other cases, users declined to participate in disagreement at all. While discussing “Sarah Palin for President,” user “KateM” stated that the potential candidate is a popular figure. “Themistocles” disputed this position, linking to resources showing that Mrs. Palin’s support is limited. KateM did not respond. In the same thread, “kyle” suggested that Mrs. Palin’s participation in a reality television show demonstrates that she is more interested in being an entertainer than a politician. Scoop replied with the opinion that the reality show was part of a political strategy to gain exposure in advance of a campaign. Kyle also did not respond to this disagreement.

When posters did express themselves harshly, it was directed at the subject under discussion, rather than at other posters. In the “Sarah Palin For President” thread, mudrake said Mrs. Palin was “snarky,” “self-serving,” and “a joke,” while KateM said it would be “sad” if she became president. In “Cutting the ‘N word’ from Huck Finn,” user “Brachs” called the editing of a new edition of the classic novel “an absolutely horrible thing to have happen,” and simple_mind said “It harms the value of our society.” While there were disagreements among users in the Red Room, none expressed this kind of negativity towards each other. No examples of incivility were observed in the Red Room.

Few users of the Red Room participated in the voting. Only twelve votes were cast, and the highest number of positive votes for any one post was three. Nine posts received one positive vote each. The highest reputation rating any user gained was also three, with two users earning a two and five users earning one each (see Table 2). No negative votes were cast.

Discussions in the Green Room were also often fact-based and respectful. In “Retirement Expectations,” a post started in the Green Room by JulieC, that user
expressed the opinion that retirement ages should be increased in light of changing economic situations. Hroark stated that some of JulieC’s points may have been flawed, referring to an article in online magazine Salon.com that had provided more facts on the issue (although hroark did not provide a link to the article). Hroark concluded by saying “Good topic, JulieC.” JulieC responded by saying “good point” in reference to hroark’s rebuttal, and then posting a link to a news story that covered another aspect of the subject.

User “Qku” shared an opinion in the Green Room discussion of “Roe v Wade and the Philadelphia abortion doctor,” which simple_mind felt was uninformed. Simple_mind posted a detailed explanation of the issue, and Qku expressed thanks for the correction. Qku went on to discuss the issue differently in light of the new information.

Mudrake and scoop were also able to disagree respectfully in “Dismantling the Health Care Bill.” While suggesting that scoop was repeating “GOP talking lines” rather than forming an independent opinion, mudrake said “Please use factual information when entering a debate.” Scoop responded, “Actually I am a registered Democrat,” to which mudrake replied “I do not mean to attack your comment, but” and then addressed concerns with the substance of what scoop had written. Mudrake in particular pointed out the difficulty of getting accurate information from the media, and scoop agreed. Scoop concluded with “Your blog sounds like a responsible and credible one,” for which mudrake expressed thanks. While this exchange was confrontational, both posters remained civil and respectful of one another.

However, there were also more harsh and negative comments in the Green Room than in the Red Room, as was expected. Themistocles openly stated that he was sharing “My shorter, less polite feelings on the subject,” regarding the Michael Vick thread, and
then proceeded to post a profanity-laden criticism of Vick. Profanity and hostility were also used by Qku in the “Evolution vs. Intelligent Design” thread. Although these were stronger remarks than found in the Red Room, in neither of these threads was the negativity addressed to other posters.

This was less true in the “Dueling Atheist/Catholic Billboards in New York” thread, the longest one in the entire study. Although the conversation started with hroark’s call for a truce between Christians and Atheists, with Themistocles and JulieC initially agreeing, the thread later devolved into a religious fight. “LORD FERO” made comments that were derisive of Christians, calling religious belief “ridiculous” and saying “It is more a matter involving the psychology of a frail mind, than it is about evidence or logic.” JulieC disagreed with this characterization, describing the experience of becoming a Christian at age 40 after discovering the importance of faith. JulieC also said “I’m very happy with the transformation.”

LORD FERO posted a harsh and detailed criticism of each of JulieC’s points, saying “I don’t require fairy tales or obscure mythology to guide me” and “Sleep well, secure in the fact that as a religious person you are helping support something that is the single largest cause of death and suffering mankind has ever endured ... religion.” JulieC responded by calling LORD FERO “the angriest atheist I have ever encountered” and said the post was “ranting.” Then JulieC continued with a lengthy refutation of LORD FERO’s post. Qku jumped in to disagree with the suggestion that atheists are angry, and then expressed agreement with LORD FERO’s overall position. Qku said,

“I have kind of lowered my standards (in the sense that I just kind of give up in advance and get a lot nicer) when it comes to Americans (I trust you are one?)
since I have the idea everyone there is at least kind of religious, and isn’t set on
changing their mind or listen to pretty obvious things”

and

“I don’t see why you should believe something so illogical just to get something
that’s perfectly possible to receive without dangling in the dark.”

JulieC replied with more rebuttals, apparently now upset with the exchange. She said, “There isn’t a reason to be name calling in a debate of any sort,” and said Qku was “throwing out insults rather than reasoned thought.” JulieC also asked, “Did I somehow insult with my posts?” before describing more of the benefits of religion and Christianity. LORD FERO did not reply again, and Qku make only one more comment in reference to JulieC’s posting of the actual billboard images in question. Qku referred to both billboards as “silly,” but did not continue debating Christianity with JulieC.

However, mudrake then joined the discussion to call JulieC “an interesting Christian” but saying that this brand of Christianity is the great minority in America. Mudrake disagreed with JulieC’s earlier point that atheists are concerned with issues like prayer in schools and “In God We Trust” on the money, pointing to the larger problem of religious influence in government and education. JulieC agreed that “the Christian Right is a scary beast.” This was a shorter discussion than a similar one these two users had in the Red Room thread “A Mosque in Your Neighborhood,” but maintained a correspondingly respectful but challenging tone.

Although JulieC seemed to be offended by the way she was treated in this thread, it was this discussion that resulted in the most extensive debate of the entire site. Arguments for and against Christianity were presented in great detail, with users
engaging the content of each other’s arguments and presenting cogent refutations. It is not clear that any minds were changed by the exchange, but it does appear that users were exposed to ideas they had not previously considered. Even with the incivility, this thread inspired more discussion than any other.

Another thread which contained some incivility also produced some productive discussion. While JulieC’s “Retirement Expectations” topic included a respectful exchange with hroark, Themistocles replied more negatively, saying “I often find this argument somewhat despicable” and telling JulieC to take up the subject again “when you are a little older.” Themistocles assumed that JulieC was relatively young, and making a “very silly assumption.” JulieC took the criticism in stride, correcting what turned out to be Themistocles’ mischaracterization. JulieC also asked Themistocles for suggested solutions to the problems of underfunded pension problems, which Themistocles answered by proposing higher taxes. JulieC agreed with this. Although Themistocles was harsh with JulieC, both were able to explore the issue and identify potential solutions.

As noted above, the number of topics and replies in the Red and Green Rooms were almost evenly balanced, however, threads in the Red Room tended to be longer than the same threads in the Green Room. There were ten Red Room threads with more replies than the matching Green Room thread, and six Green Room threads with more replies than in the Red Room. There were also fewer threads in the Red Room that had only one or zero replies than in the Green Room: seven and ten, respectively. The thread with the most replies, 20, was in the Green Room: “Dueling Atheist/Catholic Billboards in New

Of the 22 users, eight posted in only the Red Room and four in only the Green Room, with ten posting in both (see Table 2). Six of those who used both rooms posted more often in the Red Room, with three posting more often in the Green Room and one posting in both equally. Users who posted in both rooms did not show a significant difference in behavior between the two areas, and appeared to be joining whichever discussion was most active.

Twelve users completed a post-study survey consisting of seven questions. When asked if they preferred using the Red Room or the Green Room, 50% said they preferred the Red, 8.3% said they preferred the Green, and 41.7% had no preference. Comments on why they indicated such a preference included:

“I like the idea of being free to swear and call someone an arse when they deserve it”

“I prefer to avoid confrontation whenever possible”

“It’s too easy to become combative in the Green Room. If we truly want to learn, we must learn to appreciate, but not necessarily agree with, the other views.”

“I’m not all that put out by salty language or rude behavior when it is slightly depersonalized. People aren’t arguing/insulting me: they’re doing it to an avatar… A separate person.”

“I’ll go wherever the action is!”
**Table 2:** Forum users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User Name</th>
<th>Date Registered</th>
<th>Total Posts</th>
<th>Red Room</th>
<th>Green Room</th>
<th>Reputation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>JulieC</td>
<td>12/28/10</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scoop</td>
<td>12/28/10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Themistocles</td>
<td>12/28/10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mudrake</td>
<td>12/29/10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qku.</td>
<td>1/03/11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>simple_mind</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hroark</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brachs</td>
<td>1/03/11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtprovo</td>
<td>1/12/11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>+1</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>attyfhs</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>ladygaga</td>
<td>12/27/10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kelley K</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AlexFromOmaha</td>
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<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>logansteel</td>
<td>1/04/11</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>+2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barney</td>
<td>1/11/11</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>0</td>
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<td>ncik</td>
<td>1/23/11</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AlbatrossArcade</td>
<td>12/31/10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The third survey question was “If/when using the Red Room, how motivated are you to write strong, well-reasoned posts based on the fact that you accepted the User Agreement before registering? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being highly motivated and 1 being not motivated at all.” Responses to this question were: 8.3% answered 5, 50% answered 4, 24% answered 3, 0% answered 2, and 16.7% answered 1. This indicates that most users who answered the survey were motivated by the User Agreement to follow the community guidelines.

The fourth question was “If/when using the Red Room, how motivated are you to write strong, well-reasoned posts based on the ability of other users to vote for or against you? Please rate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being highly motivated and 1 being not motivated at all.” Responses to this question were: 8.3% answered 5, 33.3% answered 4, 8.3% answered 3, 0% answered 2, and 50% answered 1. This indicates a lower level of motivation based on the voting system, as compared to the User Agreement.

One third of survey respondents said they had voted on the quality of other posts, while two thirds said they had not. When asked why or why not, comments included:

“Uh.. Didn’t know how, and wasn’t even very aware it was possible.”

“I simply like to participate and see the thought process.”

“It doesn’t seem as if anyone is interested in having or getting votes. Why bother with something that isn’t worth anything to the person?”

“I am just not that interested in providing people a shallow validation of their views.”

The final question was a request for suggestions to improve the site. Responses to that included:
“The site is great. Will only continue to improve as more people sign up. This will allow for increased exchange of ideas.”

“More contributors.”

“The discussion stalls. Mostly because it is a pretty like-minded group. People aren’t interested in scaffolding their thinking with each other, it seems.”

“Some sort of karma system.”

The comment about karma is interesting, because that is another term that can be used to describe the voting system. This respondent may have been unaware of the voting option, as was another user, quoted above. The voting may have been underutilized because it was insufficiently communicated to users.
Chapter 3

Conclusions

Discussion

The behavioral expectations set in the Red Room did appear to produce more civility and politeness than found in the Green Room. This is consistent with the findings of Pankoke-Babatz and Jeffrey (2002) and Hurrell (2002). However, adherence to the Red Room user agreement was only present for the portions which called for applying critical thinking and treating opposing ideas with respect. The agreement also asked users to vote on the quality of other posts, and this was rarely done. It seems that users will comply with some requests but not others.

The reputation system in the Red Room was used very little by posters. In addition, the comments in the user survey suggest that some users did not see the value in such a system. This could indicate that, even if users did vote more, reputation scores might not have significant impact on post content and/or quality. This is in contrast to the findings of Halavais (2009). However, these findings may be limited due to the fact that
users were required to register with the site and post one comment before the voting features were available to them. This was done to prevent casual site visitors from participating in the voting system, but it may have also discouraged registered users. Future studies could remove this requirement.

It can be argued that, while participation levels were similar in both rooms, the Green Room was host to the most substantive debate. Whereas differences in the Red Room were often met with silence or reiteration of common ground, users in the Green Room more often disagreed with one another and presented opposing views. This was most clearly seen in the Green Room discussion “Dueling Catholic/Atheist Billboards in New York.” If the purpose of debate is to expose and explore differences of opinion, the Green Room was the more successful forum.

It appears that a certain level of behavioral restriction is beneficial to promoting the free exchange of ideas, but that too much restriction may discourage conversation. Users in the Red Room may have felt inhibited in their expressions by the expectation of civility. They may have confused conflict with impoliteness, and been reluctant to further explore their differences with other posters for fear of violating the site rules. If this is true, then the rules were somewhat counterproductive. Only by voicing disagreement can all participants learn about the strengths and weaknesses of their respective ideas, and perhaps modify their positions.

This suggests that online communities should develop guidelines that strike a balance between encouraging open debate and discouraging incivility. That specific balance will no doubt vary based on context, such as the subject matter being discussed and the audience targeted. Administrators and community leaders may wish to
experiment with different kinds of rules and seek feedback from their members to
determine the best policies for their site. The appropriate balance may need to be
developed through a process of trial and error, and regularly modified over time as the
community grows and develops.

Research into the value of online anonymity shows that this is a worthy goal to
pursue. While requiring users to provide real names and identifying details may increase
civility without the need for carefully-calibrated rules and expectations, banning privacy
will prevent some users from participating. People may have a wide range of legitimate
reasons to avoid attaching their real name to their ideas. Comments on the Internet
theoretically exist forever and are searchable by anyone that person knows or may know
in the future. It may not be beneficial for everyone to so widely communicate details of
their political or social views, religious affiliations, sexual interests, or other personal
information. That information may, however, be relevant and useful to a conversation on
those topics.

If denied anonymity, many people will simply decline to participate in a
conversation they might otherwise have joined. This not only prevents others from
hearing their voices, it denies those individuals the opportunity to express themselves.
Discussing concerns and receiving feedback from others can be beneficial to people’s
emotional health and provide them with useful insight. Allowing people to express
themselves freely without fear of retribution has value, even if it means they can express
themselves hatefully, also without fear of retribution.

The history of anonymity in public expression also provides insight into the value
of maintaining online privacy. While objections to anonymous communication have
often focused on civility and accountability, there has also been an aspect of social
gatekeeping at work. Publishers and lawmakers have attempted to use their power to
ensure that only certain people are given access to public forums, and that those who are
deemed unworthy are left out. This has sometimes meant that people from lower classes
and marginalized groups have been excluded from public debate. This is not only unfair
to those individuals, it denies all of society the opportunity to consider multiple
perspectives before forming conclusions.

One of the strengths of the Internet is its ability to democratize human
interactions. Everyone with a computer and a connection can interact on the same level
with everyone else. If users are unaware of an individual’s race, gender, class, or other
demographic information, they are unable to take those factors into account when
evaluating his or her comments. Privilege may not be entirely discarded, but it has much
less opportunity to play a role. Interactions can become more about the ideas and less
about the person having them. If websites choose to maintain anonymity but attempt to
create conditions for civility, they can allow for a more equal and democratic discussion.

Implementing behavioral rules might also discourage some communications. It
may be meaningful that, despite a significant effort to promote the Intelligent
Conversation forum through paid advertisements on relevant sites and through social
networking, overall membership for the site was not large. This may mean that users who
like incivility simply avoided the forum altogether. If this is the case, discouraging those
users could be a preferable outcome. The site structure and rules may have acted as an
effective deterrent to those who might otherwise engage in the undesirable behaviors.
Discussion communities might prefer to encourage a smaller membership that generates a
higher quality of debate. Users who have been deterred by the site rules have many other places on the Internet where they can express themselves.

Just as safe spaces for anonymity in the past have enjoyed only limited acceptance and never been successful in fully eliminating anonymous speech, a forum of this type may only appeal to a subset of Internet users. However, the survey results appear to indicate that, for this subset, it is a desired and valuable option. Some participants found their experience on the site to be both enjoyable and rewarding.

Although the sample size of the main study was larger than that of the pilot study, this research is still limited by a relatively small number of users in a short time frame. Future research could be conducted on a larger sample of users over a longer period of time. It is also possible that, because both Rooms were visible as part of the same site and users were free to view and participate in either space, the expectations set in the Red Room may have influenced Green Room users. Those users may have chosen to behave with more civility than if they had not seen the Red Room guidelines. A study of two totally separate forums on different web domains with different groups of users might produce more contrasting results.

Additional studies could also examine different kinds of user agreements, including a comparison between simpler and more detailed ground rules, or between more and less formal language. Efforts to make users more aware of the voting system, or offering incentives for its use, might produce more information on the effectiveness of those measures.
Conclusion

While setting forth behavioral expectations in an online community does appear to result in adherence to those standards, the use of a reputation system cannot here be shown to have any effect on user behavior. The civility found in the Red Room suggests that the answer to RQ1 is that user agreements help to promote desired behavior in an online forum. RQ2 asked about the impact of reputation systems on adherence to community standards. Due to the low participation in voting, no conclusions can be drawn about how user behavior was affected by it.

Participation levels were similar in both rooms, although threads in the Red Room tended to have more replies. At the same time, the longest and most active thread was located in the Green Room. The answer to RQ3 seems to be that behavioral expectations and reputation systems have little effect on participation.

Website administrators who wish to encourage productive discussions and discourage incivility might wish to consider implementing site rules as described in this study. This may discourage some types of participation, but that could be an acceptable result. It may be useful to consider the benefits of privacy and humanity’s long-standing desire for control over identity when determining commenting policies. Allowing some freedom may encourage more lively discussions, but too much incivility may deter users who would otherwise make meaningful contributions.

Blade Staff (2012, March 13). Blade issues new rule for comments on Web sites.


Appendix A

Select screen images from The Intelligent Conversation Forum

The following pages present images taken from the websites used in the Pilot and Main studies.
Intelligent Conversation
A forum for reasoned debate and discussion

Please login or register.

Submit
Login

Login with username, password and session length

Home Search Login Register

Intelligent Conversation » Register

Our Principles

PLEASE READ. Intelligent Conversation is a community for people who care about fairness and honesty. We expect everyone to apply Critical Thinking skills to their posts, by which we mean:

- Base your arguments on objective facts, logic, and verifiable evidence.
- Remain open to different opinions and evaluate them on their merits.
- Place a higher value on discovering the truth than on supporting your current position.
- More information here.

By participating on this site, you agree to:

- Make a sincere effort to think critically.
- Acknowledge your mistakes and learn from them.
- Help the forum by respectfully pointing out others’ errors, and by giving thumbs-up or thumbs-down on the quality of individual posts and on members’ overall reasoning skills. Report posts that are irrational or abusive to a moderator.

I agree to abide by these principles.

Figure A-1: Pilot Study User Agreement
**User Agreement**

**PLEASE READ.** Do you think it's easier/more productive to talk about controversial topics when everyone agrees to be reasonable and polite and not call each other names, or when there are no rules and everyone tells it like it is?

Here on **Intelligent Conversation**, the RED ROOM is for the first set of people, and the GREEN ROOM is for the second. Either way, the goal is to have a real discussion where hopefully people learn something.

**PARTICIPANTS IN THE RED ROOM AGREE TO:**

- Apply Critical Thinking skills to posts, basing arguments on objective facts, logic, and verifiable evidence.

- Treat opposing ideas with respect and keep an open mind. Avoid attacking other members.

- Vote thumbs-up or thumbs-down on the quality of other posts so rational people can develop a high reputation. Respectfully point out others’ errors and report posts that are irrational or abusive to a moderator.

**PARTICIPANTS IN THE GREEN ROOM AGREE TO:**

- Be open and honest without worrying what other people will think.

---

Figure A-2: Main Study User Agreement
**Intelligent Conversation**

*A forum for reasoned debate and discussion*

Please login or register.

Login with username, password and session length

[Home] [Search] [Login] [Register]

**Intelligent Conversation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RED ROOM</th>
<th>Unread Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welcome to the Red Room</strong></td>
<td>Last post by Verbst in Re: Welcome to the Red R... on January 13, 2011, 01:48:35 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Red Room is for people who’ve agreed to be reasonable and polite and not call each other names. The goal is to have a meaningful discussion.</td>
<td>433 Redirects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics/Social Issues</strong></td>
<td>Last post by scoop in Re: Sarah Palin for Pres... on January 28, 2011, 03:03:16 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right, left, center, or any combination.</td>
<td>43 Posts 12 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td>Last post by ncll in Re: A Mosque in Your Nei... on January 30, 2011, 06:31:01 AM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>33 Posts 5 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Last post by KateM in Re: Should Michael Vick ... on January 25, 2011, 05:38:41 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything goes - whatever topic you find interesting.</td>
<td>18 Posts 3 Topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GREEN ROOM</th>
<th>Unread Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Welcome to the Green Room</strong></td>
<td>Last post by Verbst in Welcome to the Green Roo... on December 26, 2010, 00:11:29 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Green Room is for those who prefer an open forum with no rules. The goal is to have a meaningful discussion.</td>
<td>211 Redirects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Politics/Social Issues</strong></td>
<td>Last post by C in Re: The Gold Standard on February 14, 2011, 10:24:53 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Right, left, center, or any combination.</td>
<td>43 Posts 12 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Religion</strong></td>
<td>Last post by QiQu in Re: Evolution vs Intelli... on January 27, 2011, 06:07:03 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31 Posts 5 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other</strong></td>
<td>Last post by JulieC in Re: Retirement Expectati... on January 17, 2011, 04:37:06 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anything goes - whatever topic you find interesting.</td>
<td>18 Posts 4 Topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community</th>
<th>Unread Posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>About This Site</strong></td>
<td>Last post by SampleUser in Re: Critical Thinking Re... on January 09, 2012, 12:16:00 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please read. Includes a description of the site along with a list of resources to help develop your critical thinking skills.</td>
<td>4 Posts 3 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Picks of the Week</strong></td>
<td>Last post by JulieC in Debating in Internet Lan... on January 02, 2011, 09:49:02 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominate your favorite posts and posters.</td>
<td>0 Posts 0 Topics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intelligent Conversation</strong></td>
<td>Last post by JulieC in Re: Intelligent Conversation on January 13, 2011, 01:48:35 PM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk about the art of conversation itself, including what makes for a productive discussion and what tactics you really hate.</td>
<td>1 Posts 1 Topics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure A-3: Main Study Home Page
Welcome to the Red Room

Welcome! Do you think it’s easier/more productive to talk about controversial topics when everyone agrees to be reasonable and polite and not call each other names, or when there are no rules and everyone tells it like it is?

Here on Intelligent Conversation, the RED ROOM is for the first set of people, and the GREEN ROOM is for the second.

**PARTICIPANTS IN THE RED ROOM AGREE TO:**

- Apply Critical Thinking skills to posts, basing arguments on objective facts, logic, and verifiable evidence.
- Treat opposing ideas with respect and keep an open mind. Avoid attacking other members.
- Vote thumbs-up or thumbs-down on the quality of other posts so rational people can develop a high reputation. Respectfully point out others’ errors and report posts that are irrational or abusive to a moderator.

The goal is to have a real discussion where hopefully people learn something:

- Politics/Social Issues
- Religion
- Other

After you Register, other members can vote up or down on your posts. As you collect votes, your status in the community will rise from *Building a Reputation* up through to *Pillar of the Community*.

We’d appreciate your help in spreading the word so we can have great conversations. You can like us on Facebook, or click the ShareThis link next to any thread.

Feel free to introduce yourself below and share what you think about the Red Room.

---

*Author*

*Welcome to the Red Room (Read 521 times)*

- **Author:** Verbist
  - *Building a Reputation*

**Posts:** 50
**Reputation:** 0

Please let me know if you need anything.
Welcome! Do you think it's easier/more productive to talk about controversial topics when everyone agrees to be reasonable and polite and not call each other names, or when there are no rules and everyone tells it like it is?

Here on Intelligent Conversation, the RED ROOM is for the first set of people, and the GREEN ROOM is for the second.

This is the GREEN ROOM, so go ahead and say what you really think here. The goal is to have a real discussion where hopefully people learn something:

- Politics/Social Issues
- Religion
- Other

We'd appreciate your help in spreading the word so we can have great conversations. You can like us on Facebook, or click the ShareThis link next to any thread.

Feel free to introduce yourself below and share what you think of the Green Room.

Figure A-5: Welcome to the Green Room
**Figure A-6:** Example of Topic Area. Red Room, Politics/Social Issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject / Started by</th>
<th>Replies / Views</th>
<th>Last post</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Palin for President? Started by Verbst</td>
<td>7 Replies 146 Views</td>
<td>January 28, 2011, 03:03:16 PM by scoop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gun Control Started by Verbst</td>
<td>1 Replies 29 Views</td>
<td>January 28, 2011, 02:02:33 PM by Thoughtprov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violent political rhetoric and the shooting in Arizona Started by Verbst</td>
<td>3 Replies 56 Views</td>
<td>January 16, 2011, 04:21:40 PM by Themistocles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>airline security Started by scoop</td>
<td>2 Replies 81 Views</td>
<td>January 07, 2011, 12:09:18 PM by JulieC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dismantling the Health Care Bill Started by Verbst</td>
<td>1 Replies 61 Views</td>
<td>January 04, 2011, 04:07:25 PM by Kelley K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What should the new Congress do in 2011? Started by Verbst</td>
<td>3 Replies 84 Views</td>
<td>January 03, 2011, 04:05:59 PM by Mark</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closing Guantanamo Bay Started by Verbst</td>
<td>0 Replies 42 Views</td>
<td>December 30, 2010, 12:34:08 PM by Verbst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is it all the President’s fault? Started by Verbst</td>
<td>3 Replies 87 Views</td>
<td>December 29, 2010, 12:15:07 AM by attyths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikileaks - Heroes or Terrorists? Started by Verbst</td>
<td>2 Replies 120 Views</td>
<td>December 27, 2010, 07:40:57 PM by attyths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure A-7:** Example of voting feature

I, too, have considered, dreamed of, a number of trips since the security measures have been increasingly uncomfortable and have generally stayed home rather than to submit to all the discomforts. Between the burdensome security measures and all the add on pricing, flying feels like an adversarial situation.
Appendix B

Confirmation e-mail sent to all new users in Main Study

From: Intelligent Conversation [mailto:smartconvo@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, January 09, 2012 12:03 PM
To: Sample User
Subject: Welcome to Intelligent Conversation

Thank you for registering at Intelligent Conversation. Your username is SampleUser. If you forget your password, you may change it at http://www.smartconvo.com/index.php?action=reminder.

Please remember that the Red Room is for people who've agreed to be reasonable and polite and not call each other names, and the Green Room is for those who prefer an open forum with no rules.

For more details, visit the Welcome thread: http://www.smartconvo.com/index.php?topic=9.0

We'd appreciate your help in spreading the word so we can have lively discussions. You can like us on Facebook, or click the ShareThis link next to any thread.

Regards,
The Intelligent Conversation Team.
Appendix C

Overview of Website Development Process

The website was built using SMF (Simple Machines Forum) 2.0, a free open-source software program. The original plan was to use a hosted solution built and maintained by a third-party vendor, but the products available did not provide the level of customization necessary to produce the planned site features. Creating a custom configuration of open-source software was the best option, but it presented a significant learning opportunity in and of itself.

Using the web-based administration tools provided by the program, features such as the User Agreement and the sections for the Red Room, Green Room, and Community were built. In addition, the custom e-mail was built using SMF’s administration page, and settings for posting rules and user permissions were specified. When the Red and Green room were added after the Pilot Study, determining a way to display them in their respective colors proved a particular challenge, and required writing new lines of PHP code to enable the program to differentiate between them.

The design of the site was developed by modifying the default “Theme” of SMF with custom graphics and other changes to the fonts and layout. Some unnecessary
elements were removed and others were added, such as social media sharing buttons. The header logo was also a custom design.

In order to create the voting functionality, SMF’s native “Karma” function was combined with a “mod” called “Good Post/Bad Post.” Mods, or modifications, are add-on programs that have been developed by the open source community and offered for free to users. The Good Post/Bad Post mod allows users to vote on individual posts, where Karma allows voting on specific users. For the Pilot Study, these programs functioned as separate features. For the Main Study, the code for these two features was combined, so that votes on individual posts were tabulated as an overall score displayed for each user, in addition to displaying scores for the post. Help icons which launched pop-up windows with explanations of the voting system were also added.

Another mod, called “Karma based membergroups” was added, which allowed users to be assigned to different categories based on their voting scores. The default option in SMF is for groups to be based on number of posts. Because groups are given icons and descriptions, this mod allowed for the option of rewarding users with a higher status based on the votes they earned.

The development of this site required quite a bit of experimentation, and many different approaches were attempted before it was complete. It involved both custom coding and custom graphic design, and significant time spent researching the functionality of SMF. A process that was originally planned to take a few hours using a hosted solution ended up requiring months of painstaking work. However, the end result produced a site that was ideal for the goals of the study.