

### **Craigslist Forum in Philosophy: Analyzing an Online Group**

The concept of choosing a group that is entirely facilitated by online communication seems initially like an easy task. There are hundreds of social networking sites, media sharing portals, and online forums where people allegedly meet in some fashion to engage in virtual interaction. Given the common assumption that this is in fact occurring everywhere, I was incredibly surprised at how hard it was for three people looking for a group to analyze to actually find one we could agree actually functioned within the constraints of a defined 'social group'. Perhaps we were taking the constraints too literally because every site we explored, and we initially looked at the more popular and interesting one's from stikam.com to flickr, seemed to facilitate communication but not the kind of group dynamics we were looking for. A couple comments dropped here or there between users, friend lists that seemed to imply connection but not necessarily unite users into a cohesive group and closed off private chat rooms did not seem to signify anything but personal identity development or one on one conversation. Given the amount of media that is uploaded and used by members to participate in these sites, and the time and energy spent in creating and playing with identity using this media, I found it rather ironic that the group we ended up choosing is hosted by a site composed almost entirely of text and hyperlinks.

The extent of my experience with Craigslist was previously somewhat limited. I had used the site before to find apartments and conducted the occasional classified add search. I did not even realize that they hosted discussion forums; it had never occurred to me that they would. One of the members of our three person group searching for a group to study has a background in philosophy. I'm not sure how she discovered the philosophy discussion forum on Craigslist, I never asked her. But I suppose it was partly her general interest in the topic and she possibly even the thought that, given the topic, we would discover some sort of meaningful discourse. Throughout the entire time of our research, we were communicating completely via email and by the time she suggested the forum two things became evident. The first was that, even among three people, email was a terrible way to come to a conclusion about something when all there participants have different ideas about what an 'online group' actually is. Links fly back and forth and no decisions are made. The other and more important realization was that we were running out of time and that we simply needed to pick something. I myself have never belonged to or consistently read a text based forum before, and the craigslist ones in particular are so simply executed that it makes them somewhat hard to read and follow. But something about the lack of media, of context, of flashy user-interfaces and extensive personal profiles was appealing. Plus, it was philosophy. Maybe we would actually read something worthwhile. And more importantly, it was the only suggestion we all even remotely agreed upon.

Initially, one of the first rules you learn about the Philosophy forum when you first click on it from the Craigslist main page is that there really are no rules. At least not any that are explicitly evident. As one member put it himself, "the forums are an experiment". They appear to be completely unmoderated, although through member demand some forums are marked R, which means that you have to login to post, and others are marked R+, which means that you additionally cannot change your handle. The philosophy forum has neither of these limitations instituted. It is unclear who one would contact to invoke such limitations but I am assuming that it would have to be done through a majority group consensus. And, as we would soon find out, getting this particular group to agree on something of that nature, despite the fact that many members seemed to think it would benefit the group, would probably be impossible.

Given my lack of experience in participating in such kinds of conversation, I took the general approach of reading and 'lurking', without even registering, rather than participating for my initial investigation. The first thing I noted about the forum was its overall structure. Anyone could post a new thread at any time and that thread would rise to the top of the left half of the page. Threads were categorized by city, which I soon realized was somewhat irrelevant since you could change your location easily via a drop down menu on the right hand side at the time of posting. I came into the forum from my actual location in New York so I had the additional option of being able to only view threads that originated in New York. This also seemed like a pointless feature since the location of the participants spanned many different cities. Although the threading of conversation seems at first to be intuitive; the thread becomes indented to the right as people respond, either replying to last person's response or two any other comment within the thread that they choose to respond to. I soon realized that there were many other conversation going on in different threads down the page that were not as visible because they were not the most recent thread posted.

Organizing posts in this format makes some sense, perhaps it would be too complicated otherwise, but on further consideration, it appeared to cause a problem as well. Users either disinterested in the most recent thread or seeking attention for their own topic could post new threads and push others further down on the page. I did not ever notice this being used as an explicit 'attack' against particular topics, but it did seem to encourage some users to discuss multiple topics within one conversation if that conversation was occurring in thread that was the most recent and thus most visible at the time. It also seemed to encourage the idea that threads would never contain excessive amounts of posts. Once a thread reached enough posts to push it down far enough on the page a new thread would start. I could not always ascertain whether this occurred because the interest in the topic had dwindled or whether it just made more sense for user's seeking maximum visibility. Conversations certainly did continue in threads that were half way down the page, but not usually for more than four or five posts. This structure also seemed to make it impossible for users to go back to specific topics unless they posted a new thread. There is a search function but it didn't seem like it was being utilized frequently. I read a few comments where users would refer back to older posts and say 'this topic has already been discussed'. Thus the structure seemed to cause reiteration of ideas.

As I began to read more and more of the conversations it became very evident that many of the members, particularly those that were active on a daily basis, knew each other well within the constructs

of the forum. It also became evident that there were five distinct kinds of posters. The first group were those that had been around in the forum for a long time. By clicking on a user's name, provided that they were posting under their registered handle which was often not the case, you could view how long they had been a member of the forum, their email address (which nine times out of ten was an anonymous craigslist address), a note about themselves, which more often than not was left completely blank, and 30 of their most recent posts. A couple of the active members had been around since 2002 and a quick search back through the history of the forum (not exactly an easy task as one has to consistently hit next a hundred times to get to the beginning) showed that their participation had remained quite constant throughout the years. The second group was made up of those who had been members of the forum for around a year. Many of these users were also very active, posting daily. Others seemed to post only once or twice a week. The third group was the anonymous posters. Comments appeared frequently with no handle attached to them. However, especially when the comments were childish attacks or off topic ridiculousness, the other members of the forum seemed to think they knew who was posting them, which suggests that the number of lurkers like me who would then actually resort to posting something may actually be very low and that most of these posts were coming from known members choosing to make themselves temporarily anonymous.

The most interesting group to observe, however, were the trolls. The 'trolls', as they are called by other members, are people who would consistently take the discussion off topic and intentionally attack the opinions or posts of other members for apparently no reason, often with childish rude comments. One would initially assume that the trolls would remain anonymous in their attacks. But this was not the observable case. In fact the forum seemed to have one particularly active troll who would mostly post with their own registered handle. This troll seemed generally uninterested in engaging in any kind of real conversation, although continuously exerting intellectual superiority over the other members. Scrolling back to former posts quickly revealed that this troll did occasionally have interesting or relevant contributions, but the minute their opinions were questioned or attacked, the troll would resort to name calling or simply ignoring the topic at hand and posting garbage. A trolls' appearance in a particular thread would often cause the members to shout out to ignore the troll. But rather than doing so themselves, most of the members, particularly the long-term ones, would get sucked into an individual argument with the troll that only seemed to end when one would sign off or a new thread of particular interest to other members currently online would begin. Even then, the argument would frequently move to the top thread and many of the members would eventually sink into the same level of name calling and off-topic behavior that they blamed the troll for infecting the forum with. Other members would occasionally use the forum's flagging system to flag such posts as off topic but this didn't seem to have much effect.

The fifth group I observed was members that had been around for a short period of time. There was a surprising number of people who had only been members for less than a month. A quick search back in time, however, suggested that it was a common occurrence where people would enter and participate in the forum for a few months and then leave. While many long term users seemed to not mind the presence of newbies, posts by this group often seemed to be singled out by the troll. These kind of members had not yet learned how to interact within the forum and would sometimes post

questions that were not necessarily the norm (my group members had this experience) which would instantly be inviting for a troll. Perhaps this is why many new posters would eventually leave; either through irritation or finding that they had not really discovered what they were looking for. This particular discovery combined with incessant trolling and elementary school insults quickly had me wondering why anyone, particularly those who had participated for a long time, would stay around. What were they getting out of the experience?

My asking such a question is not meant to insinuate that relevant discussion was completely absent. This is not the case at all. But it took almost two weeks of reading the forum daily for me to realize how much interesting information was actually being exchanged. Many members, especially those who were brand new to the forum or who had been there for many years, would post interesting questions that ranged from political discussion with a philosophical twist to my personal favorite 'what if there was no air?'. Some threads continued with very little off topic banter and even those that were interrupted by members seeking unnecessary attention were often pulled back on topic by other interested parties. Although the peak time for participation in the forum seemed to be in the evening between the hours of seven and midnight, most of the more interesting threads were posted during the day. It seemed that as the evening approached the tendency for the threads to evolve into two people off topic fighting matches was much greater. This was not always the case as it was entirely dependent upon who was online at the time, but it was definitely more likely to be the case. I thought that this could perhaps have been because discussion moved much more quickly and the desire for recognition and attention was greater, but I'm not entirely sure. I did notice that when a good discussion evolved, it most often evolved slowly, sometimes taking hours and many different members' contributions to make it interesting.

Good discussion, however, did not necessarily seem to be the only thing that kept members involved in the forum. It was obvious that certain members would only participate in threads that were provoking actual discussion. But many members, as aforementioned, would begin with that intent and then find themselves involved in arguments or sexual discussions (although the topic of sex was quite rare). This is not necessarily a surprise as argument by its very nature promotes interest. If people constantly agree with what you are saying or simply provide polite suggestions to other opinions, interaction becomes somewhat boring, especially within philosophical debate, which from its very nature is about provoking differences of opinion and heated discussion. Even in the most polite and informational threads the attraction in communicating seemed to primarily be about out-witting another user and demonstrating intellectual superiority or at the very least superiority over a specific topic. For someone who is unfamiliar with philosophical topics or not as quick to come up with responses, this kind of conversation can be intimidating. But it is interesting because through these little debates of wit members, even those with differences of opinion, seemed to gain respect from one another. In fact, as I soon found out, engaging some of the more long-term members in discussion is actually quite difficult because it appears that in order to do so you must develop some level of respect from them by displaying your intellectual prowess. They will rarely speak to members whose 'personalities' within the forum they don't know.

As I read more and more of the discussion I slowly realized that I myself was beginning to recognize the personalities of the more active users, even when they posted with different handles, no handles or finished their sentences within the space allocated for their handles. It was at this point that I felt comfortable enough to decide to register. My first instinct was that it was pointless to arrive within the forum appearing as though I was analyzing their behavior by asking the questions that I really wanted to ask, like what they were getting out of their participation, what did they think of the trolls, etc. I had already observed that newbies who posed actual questions or initiated contact concerning the forum's topic were more likely to get some kind of a response than those who asked questions about the forum's structure. Not that some of the members were not pleased to answer. But such questions would inevitably invite the response of the troll, as one of my group members realized when she was called, among other things, a 'pigfucker' for simply implying that the personalities within the forum were interesting and she would love to have them all in her living room. Despite the fact that any user could immediately see that she was a newbie by clicking on her handle, I don't think they even had to exert the extra effort. Many of them knew right away because she invoked what seemed to be a taboo within the group, the concept of physical interaction. I saw this occur in another instance when a newbie invited the group members to email her responses to a question and she immediately received dozens of responses within the forum by members warning other members not to give this person their email address.

Despite the fact that the architecture of the forum did provide the member's with the ability to place some level of identity on their handle, most declined to do so. Although many seemed to know each other well in regards to opinion, style of posting and even relationships to other members within the forum, the idea that any of this knowledge was relevant outside the constructs of Craigslist Philosophy seemed to be unthinkable. One member even remarked, when asked by one of my group members if more structured identity within the forum would make it function better, that the ability to be anonymous allowed the members freedom to express their ideas. It also seemed to afford freedom to the trolls, but most members were willing to put up with this particular downside in order to remain completely unknown to each other in the real world. This forum seemed to simultaneously be attractive because there was a level of social knowledge of each other while restricting this knowledge to the context of this one particular web page. In fact the only linking of any kind that the members participated in was linking to YouTube videos or Wikipedia definitions. Only once did I personally see a link to someone's blog, webpage or any suggestion of their actual identity, even among the members who had invested years of their life to the conversation.

The lack of identity on the site and the simplicity with which the members interacted made it very difficult to imagine changing this interaction through media. The forum was definitely suffering from numerous problems but it was also succeeding in maintaining a dedicated user base. I initially had thought that further information about the members could be helpful in the form of more extensive media based personal profiles. For many sites, particularly in the social networking world, this has been the logical thought process. If members can control their identity presentation they will be more likely to not want to remain anonymous. But this introduces a new problem. Conversation no longer becomes a group effort around information but seems to revert to self promotion. The focus is shifted from

discussion to the kind of personal self-expression that never really leads anywhere, at least in a group formation sense. This forum suffered from a certain kind of self-promotion. But its lack of relationship to media and physical identity meant that the expression was often about ideas rather than physicality. Given the topic of the forum, it also seemed as though it would be unnecessary and counterproductive to introduce ways of including media in the discussion.

The only change that I could think of that I honestly thought might be beneficial was a change in the architecture of the threading itself. Although it was easy to understand once you got used to it, I reasoned that if members could more easily reference particular conversations it could perhaps encourage them to engage in more dialogue. I figured that if posts could easily be sorted by topic or most recent post rather than most recent thread, members could also more easily ignore the trolls. The trolls would frequently invade threads that were at the top of the list. If it was easier to obscure and change exactly which thread was at the top of any members screen at any particular time it would make it more difficult for a troll to gain the attention of the entire forum. It would also make it easier for members to find topics they were interested in discussing and maybe less likely that they would post threads that reiterated past thoughts. Even after not signing in and looking at the forum for just a couple of days, I found it hard to catch up on and discover exactly what had been discussed. I thought that this also might promote more in depth discussion about particular topics. The downside of such an approach is that directing attention to multiple different places would also mean that attention was less focused. This could be particularly relevant when thinking about member relationships. Members would frequently call out for responses from specific other members, seeming to suggest that many had already developed an idea of who they wanted to speak to. Diverting attention might mean that this kind of one on one request would become more frequent and opposing viewpoints within threads may be become less likely.

Although I have not posted much to the forum since I began my research, a strange thing has happened over the last couple of weeks. I have become interested. I find myself wondering what's going on when I'm not there and being somewhat excited to read who said what to whom and what topics were brought up. I don't know that this is anything more than a temporary fascination. But the fact that it is a fascination at all is interesting to me. They have sucked me into their world to a certain extent. I even find myself wondering what the infamous troll will do next as I'm sure, deep down inside, they all do, which in turns facilitates the troll's purpose. The simple fact is, despite the annoying interface and the lack of coherent structure, the conversation can be very engaging and I now understand on some level why certain members have been there for years. It has become their community. A community I might add, with negligible overhead compared to sites like MySpace or flickr. All you need to do is show up. I'm not saying this makes it a completely successful interaction necessarily. But to some of them it is enough.

As I came to these conclusions, I wondered if my other group members had the same experience. It is actually ironic that we chose such a group because our experience within our own group had considerable similarities. Never before at ITP have I successfully completed a group assignment without meeting with my group consistently face to face and primarily discussing my thoughts and observations via email. Our reasons for structuring our communication this way was

entirely accidental and due mostly to an inability to coordinate schedules. But I must admit that we didn't try very hard to do so. I almost think that it was better that we didn't. The impressions of the other members of my group, which we sent back and forth via email, was very helpful at times, but I realized that I had to actually 'get it' on my own. Meaning that no one else's experience of the space could inform what mine would be like, even though our collective experience ended up being somewhat similar. I would have liked to have been a little bit more organized, especially towards the end of our research when we had to give a presentation discussing our experiences. I would also like to know at this moment what my group members' conclusions are. But overall, our method of communicating asynchronously online the way our group did seemed to be effective on some level.

