

As a Matter of Fact



**:Establishing Consensus on On-
line Newsgroups::**

By Larry Nguyen

Introduction

Given the dynamic nature of online discussion groups, it may seem unnecessary to investigate established records of consensual information. However, a close examination of the various roles consensual information plays in newsgroups reveals its pertinence as a purveyor of group solidarity, an anchoring point of reference, and an integral part of generative discourse.

Information technologies, particularly tools used on the World Wide Web, contribute to the formation and preservation of established reference in newsgroups. Newsgroups continue to use these tools to maintain consensual information as evidence of functionality, and not tradition, or as a gratuitous evolution of human processes into new media. The formation of consensual reference revolves mainly around the language of posting. The rules and implications of this language are more explicitly initiated and rein-

forced by other online means of preservation including websites, frequently asked questions (FAQ) pages, and polls. Furthermore, newsgroups employ administrators to mediate and govern the discussion in the group, as well as extract and document popular views and beliefs based on group consensus. Online means for newsgroups accommodate the requisite of reference documentation as a discursive resource.

Newsgroups vs. Clubs

Online newsgroups offer Internet versions of fan clubs or interest groups in the sense that they serve the same functions. Whereas clubs and groups in the physical world utilize weekly meetings and newsletters to execute discourse and debate, newsgroups employ online forums, emails, and other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Newsgroups prefer web addresses to meeting halls, and shared files to newsletters. Online polls are distributed in place of hard copy surveys. Newsgroups are translations of application with distinct systems of language and usage rather than strict representations of material cultural objects.

A Specific Group

The particular online newsgroup for this study is *HP(Harry Potter) for Grownups*, a studious and polite assembly of nearly 13,000 fans of the popular literary series by J. K. Rowling. The newsgroup uses the Yahoo Groups website for its venue to discuss and debate the literary universe that exists in the Harry Potter series. According to their own poll, the group is made up of age groups from mid-teens into the mid-forties. *HP for Grownups* has a sister group, *HP for Grownups-Archives*, which also runs on Yahoo Groups and is used for storage of older messages. The group was formed in September of

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1999 and has since accumulated over 120,000 messages with 7,818 of these messages stored on the Archives site. The group maintains that all messages in *HP for Grownups* must exclusively relate to the books directly, whether it be speculation on upcoming plot twists, or clarification and discussion of known “canon” in the five books that have already been published. Any discussion about the films based on the Harry Potter literary series is restricted to the newsgroup *Harry Potter for Grownups-Movie*. All other topics must be discussed in yet another related group, *Harry Potter for Grownups-OTChatter* (Off-topic chatter). The Yahoo Groups format provides several features in addition to the forum including storage for shared files, polls, a database, and links section. Administrators create, update, and maintain the shared files, polls, database, and also moderate the messages in the forum.

I have chosen to focus on *HP for Grownups* because its extensive use of web forms for documentation, its high level of participation, and enormous base of members makes it a prime candidate for investigating the formation of consensual information. This group comprehensively exhibits CMC technology’s advantages for posting in its plethora of crafted arguments, its asynchronous replies, and archival of past messages. The group’s over 13,000 members make its location on the internet a pertinent attribute. Finally, the newsgroup’s exemplary employment of web forms including numerous websites, online polls, and shared files is relevant to understanding the establishment of representing consensual information.

Reinforcement of Established Consensual Information

The members and administrators of *HP for Grownups* use several mechanisms for establishing consensual information. The establishment of an agreed upon view or opinion usually initiates as debate in the forum and is then confirmed through various other web forms featured on the newsgroup website. To affirm a perspective that the whole group of nearly 13,000 members can agree upon is an evolving process over numerous messages, and is almost never absolute. Administrative members update websites, FAQ's, and other web forms as new revelations emerge.

The thread I am discussing in this study is one of the most controversial and debated topics on the *HP for Grownups* newsgroup with 87 related replies and messages. The topic for this thread relates to the meaning of a “gleam of triumph” in the eye of Albus Dumbledore, one the books’ most pivotal figures. This moment is presented in the fourth book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, when the main character of the series, Harry Potter, relays to Headmaster Dumbledore that the series’ villain, Voldemort has taken Harry’s blood, has become immune to Harry’s special protection, and, consequently, is able to kill Harry. For a fleeting second, Dumbledore, the seminal character of good in the books, has a triumphant look in his eye. This is Albus Dumbledore’s one and only explicitly written contradiction of character in the entire series, which makes it a much debated topic relating to three areas of discussion: authorial logic based on established narrative consistencies, plot-driven speculative canon subversion, and speculation derived solely on a philosophical or intellectual basis. Thus, because of this versatility of discourse, this thread contains posts that are both diverse and

multifarious, and, therefore, a prime subject to investigate different strategies of establishing consensual reference.

Reinforcement Through Posts

Verbally, posts on the forum initiate the topic, initiate the emergence of numerous ideas about the topic, challenge those ideas, and subsequently, the most agreed upon ideas become consensual reference. Replies to posts perpetuate this process and incite even more replies with emerging ideas. Agreements are in the several forms: overlapping parallel reactionary posts that are similar, posts that recognize an idea as part of an elaboration, or the ambiguous “silent” agreement, an assumption of accord from a lack of opposition.

The role of information technology accommodates, augments and accelerates this process of appropriation and consensus in several ways. The ease and comprehensiveness of the Yahoo format of newsgroups, encourages a high level of participation in both synchronous and asynchronous time. As the author of *Virtual Ethnography* Christine Hine contends, newsgroups have a “setting construed as interactive” and, therefore, ideas are “in principle” and “in practice” challenged in debate (125). These different frameworks for disagreements or embellishment further test the robustness of an idea and, inadvertently, secure its placement in the realm of consensus. CMC on forums as an inherently interactive technology appropriately requires a high level of participation. CMC allows easy accumulation of messages on the website for years, which prompts members to expect a high level of knowledge and acknowledgment of past posts, as a sign of both responsibility and respect. In addition, CMC through its accumulation, accommodates recognition of past ideas to build upon the credibility or recession of arguments.

Verbal Newsgroup Argumentation

In terms of content, the ideas that emerged from the “gleam of triumph” thread have developed verbally through numerous posts in the forum. The original set of messages established a need for continued debate to properly substantiate a consensus on the subject, as well as a preference for assertions that utilize contextual support from canon.

The original post on July 10, 2000 (message 3730) about “the gleam” came directly after the release of the fourth book from which this episode is cited. The content of the post poses the question of the meaning behind this “gleam,” as well as other concerns pertaining to the book. At that time of the posting, member enrollment was low, however, the post still received ten different replies, five of which actually relate to the “gleam.” Of these replies, all agree that since its meaning is yet to be revealed; the “gleam” cannot assume any contradiction of Dumbledore’s character. However, all of the replies also contend that Voldemort makes an unknown mistake in taking Harry’s blood, and so therefore, a triumphant gesture is appropriate. During this first period of discussion, the “gleam” is fairly new to discussion on the newsgroup, and, consequently, four of the five relevant posts supplement their trust of Dumbledore with an acknowledgment that no one “[can] know for sure” (Archive 3738). This first set of replies are accurate indicators of the development necessary to substantiate information as consensual, as well as the ensuing emphasis on narrative context as a substantial requisite for consensus.

After the original post on July 10th, various members continue to develop numerous different theories displaying a range of discursive strategies and

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subversive frameworks, but also maintain the most agreement on arguments supported by the narrative context of the Harry Potter series. The nature of each of the theories determine the outcome of agreement or disagreement. Posts that cite from the narrative context of the Harry Potter canon directly to support their arguments are typically more successful than those that rely on sources outside of the series' canon.

The day following the original post, a member called "rainy-lilac" posted a more specific elaboration that the "gleam" indicates a vulnerability related to Voldemort's actions (Archives 3953). Rainy-lilac's post is a prime example of reliance on narrative context, as well as philosophical or intellectual logic. Rainy-lilac writes in her post:

"Who knows what he might be thinking? The one thing I do know is that he always seems to have a good view of the larger picture and is typically one step ahead of everyone."

Rainy-lilac bases her trust of Dumbledore on the consistencies of his actions in the series so far. The member's logic is based purely on past regularities exhibited in the character of Dumbledore in the series that make any of his suspiciously contradictory actions exempt from "evil" connotation. Thus, the logic here is presented as steeped in context of the series' "canon."

In contrast, Rainy-lilac, as a way to explain Voldemort's unknown mistake, goes on to write:

"What protected Harry was the love of his mother, and Voldemort wanted that same kind of protection. Well, love makes one vulnerable-- and human."

Here, Rainy-lilac defends her theory by way of logic based on philosophical or intellectual belief. There are no substantial means to qualify "love" as

something that is exclusively “human” or something that weakens a person, implied by the lack of psychological or biological reference, nor does this argument even qualify as based in narrative context, since there is no anecdote in the Harry Potter series that exhibits love as a source of vulnerability. Both these contentions are evidence of the member’s own philosophical belief that love is a solely human characteristic of defenselessness. Ultimately, Rainy-lilac’s argument based on narrative context is more similar to popular consensus of the gleam’s meaning than the argument supported by personal belief.

Another theory, posted by “Danemead” (Archives 4198) utilizes non-contextual logic to support his argument. The member writes:

“Since the body replaces all its cells on a regular basis, surely the so-called “protection” that Voldemort thinks he’s achieved with Harry’s blood will not last. Within a few months, all those cells will have died a natural death and replaced by [his] own blood cells. Perhaps Dumbledore realizes this. . . .”

Danemead bases his argument on the biological science of the real Western world entirely outside the context of the literary series. The issue here is that the member’s employment of biology is inconsistent with his contextual belief in the logic of the Harry Potter universe—where unicorns, flying brooms and invisibility cloaks all defy common real world logic. Even when Rowling utilizes real world scientific logic, it rarely ever influences significant plot points. In a context where magic is real—in the sense that it exists as a fact of the series’ enclosed reality—scientific knowledge from the real world, in which the members lives, simply does not apply as major plot devices.

Predictably, other members pick up on this, and reply with more contextual responses. As one member aptly states, Danemead is “thinking like

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a Muggle,” the wizard term for ‘non-magical person, in his application of biology (Archives 4200). The theory is outside the narrative context of the Harry Potter world, and, as a result, receives little agreement, or even notice, evident by the low number of replies by other members that elaborate on it as a solid speculation.

The level of verbal acknowledgment and agreement in posts ultimate whether or not an opinion or view is considered a piece of consensual reference for future posts. In the case of Dumbledore’s gleam, posts that near the second half of the almost two years the thread has been debated reluctantly express their acknowledgment that many members “have theorized” before them (*HP for Grownups* 36212). This acknowledgment of the “gleam” thread’s longevity and depth inherently attributes consensus to the thread. The absence of exposition of meaning in mentioning Dumbledore’s gleam, therefore, assumes a general unanimity of knowledge about the event. The fact that no are no replies in the entire two-year-long thread that inquire about the definition of the gleam confirms its place as consensual information. Furthermore, explicit verbal citation of posts, such as a message from December of 2001 in which the author of the message “commend[s] message #27 to your attention,” reinforces the appropriation of these ideas as consensually referential (*HP for Grownups* 31243).

The Role of Technology in Posting

While the verbal component of posts essentially determines the selection of content in consensual information, the technological component is the means with which these selections are made. The CMC format of the *Harry Potter for Grownups* newsgroups provides many advantages to building more substantial and efficient debate. The cumulative nature of Yahoo news-

groups in which all messages may be revisited allows for a longevity and endurance of ideas that have retroactive capabilities. One “gleam”-related message posted by a member named dfrankiswork defiantly declares his “belief that the gleam discussion is not dead, just tramlined,” exactly a year and five months after the first “gleam” message was posted (*HP for Grownups* 31243). Messages posted once on the newsgroup CMC format simultaneously carry indefinite life spans as subjects of debate.

The option of asynchronous posting in online newsgroups provides accommodation for members’ time and, thus, increases participation of debate. Both benefits of cumulative and asynchronous posting allows for more research and preparation, and, consequently, posts are able to be much more comprehensive than real time face-to-face discussion. With CMC, members have the option of spending days instead of minutes crafting their arguments. For example, the same message mentioned in the above paragraph, is a crafted document of 1,224 words.

All of the possibilities CMC provides effectively influence the way argumentation and discussion is executed on the *HP for Grownups* newsgroup. These possibilities provide a more nonlinear, richer and complex experience of debate, and essentially initiate the need for supplementation of readily available consensual references.

Websites, FAQ’s, Online Polls, and Files

The most explicit indicator of consensus in newsgroups are administrative files, polls, general reference websites and Frequently Asked Questions. Administrators of the group extract information from posts, collect and

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aggregate the information into a convenient and readable format, and then publish the material to solidify it as consensual.

The medium of web forms such as websites, shared files, and online polls is both potentially substantial in its public nature, but also temporal in its easy modification, and so, therefore, is exceedingly appropriate for the function of displaying consensual information. Consensual information requires easily accessible and substantial documentation of past discussion as reference for aggregation and research, to prevent repetition of already covered debates, as well as to concurrently continue new and generative discussion. The nature of discourse, however, is dynamic and, thus, necessitates continuous updates of the documented reference information. Utilization of web forms solve both of these issues in their capability to provide access to all members, while allowing administrators to conveniently update as needed. The access of web forms to all members assures close scrutiny and, hence, reliable substantiation of content as consensual. Access to challenging the web forms' content through additional web tools such as posting on the forum or emailing the administrators, further reinforces this substantiation. Conclusively, web forms work both to define information as consensual, as well as to preserve its validity.

Administrators on *HP for Grownups* act as a source of authority, though never in an autocratic or dictatorial sense. The administrators serve merely as organizers and representatives of, and for, the entire newsgroup. On *HP for Grownups*, links to the administrators' emails are easily accessible on their main administrative file, and members are encouraged to challenge the established consensual information. Furthermore, nearly all of the information published by administrators employ messages from the forum to

compose the content, and conscientiously provide citation of and links to source messages.

The *HP for Grownups* newsgroup contains a plethora of various resources for consensual information derived from over its 120,000 messages including websites underneath their own domain and server space (<http://www.hpfgu.org>), a list of closed and active polls on the newsgroup site, and online folders of files containing information about posting and different topics.

Fantastic Posts and Where to Find Them (<http://www.hpfgu.org.uk/faq/>) is a prime example of employing web forms to enact appropriate documentation. The website is linked from the *HP for Grownups* home page and acts as a compendium for various major topics of discussed in the forum with links to related messages. The opening header of the home page states that Fantastic Posts serves to present “facts, speculation, and analysis from the most dedicated fans in the Muggle world to answer all your tough questions about the Harry Potter universe” (Home 1). In this sense, the website is a proclamation of its use as a substantial resource for past discussion. However, the attachment of links to messages in the forum, and a link to the website’s webmistress reinforces its alternative function as a place for updates. Additionally, the website’s statement that “new [Fantastic Post]s and revisions to existing [Fantastic Post]s are in the works” serves to communicate its dynamic nature (Home 1).

The ideas of the “gleam” thread are appropriated into consensual information through this website under its “Mysteries and Inconsistencies FAQ” page. The page includes section with a brief summary of the “gleam” thread so far and a series of links to different related messages. The summary reads:

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“Most members believe that Dumbledore was triumphant because he realized Voldemort has made a fatal mistake (Lily’s sacrifice will now make Voldemort vulnerable and able to be conquered; the blood cells acquired from Harry will die over a few months and be replaced by Voldemort’s own blood cells, thereby destroying his “protection”; Voldemort is now indebted to Harry.” (Mysteries 1)

Although all of the major ideas that have been discussed in the forum are mentioned in the summary, the explicit reference of “Voldemort[‘s]. . . fatal mistake” as the theory that “most members believe” verbally defines it as consensual (Mysteries 1). Technologically, the mere location of the thread on a reference website attributes unanimity.

The *HP for Grownups* newsgroups has a section for shared files filled with links to folders and other websites. The section includes folders for administrative files, “Chat Information,” weekly summaries of discussions, Harry Potter-related essays written by members (which may soon include this term paper), illustrations and member photos, interviews with J.K. Rowling, old administrative files, as well as information for the weekly contest the administrators run. Website links include one directed towards the “Portkey” site for sister groups, and a page devoted to the discussion of “flints.” All of these folders as web forms are contextually defined as consensual information.

In Conclusion

For online newsgroups, defining consensual information through documentation is an fundamental part of group solidarity, a high level of craft in argumentation, as well as maintaining constantly new and generative discussion. Information technology helps to accommodate and preserve this documentation of consensus. While the content of generally agreed upon information is verbally selected through a series of discursive postings, its

consensual nature is explicitly secured through technological means such as websites, shared files, and online polls. Additionally, the cumulative and asynchronous quality of CMC technology provides potential for a higher level of participation, as well as more researched and crafted arguments than in off-line interest clubs. Web forms such as websites, online polls, and shared files are inherently substantial in their public nature, but also dynamic in its easy modifiability. *HP for Grownups* is a consummate choice for this investigation because it has an appropriate location on the Internet, it displays a high level of participation and argumentation, and it thoroughly utilizes web forms for documentation. All of these components support an examination of the process of establishing consensus. This process includes initial verbal argumentation on the forum, administrative extraction, aggregation and publication of evolved consensus, and finally, representation of this information through web forms.

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