Chapter 10

It Was Only Natural: A Cross-Disciplinary Approach to a CMC Study

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the cross-disciplinary conceptual frameworks used to examine a popular American entertainment website that employs a virtual newsroom utilizing instant messaging as its primary means of communication. This computer-mediated communication reconfigures the standard place-based newsroom arrangements and significantly influences the group’s organizational dynamics and culture. Because of the distinctive content and unconventional organizational structure of this site, no single theoretical perspective can be applied to its organizational context and content. Therefore a combination of organization theory (Schein, 2004), and newsroom sociology theoretical frameworks articulates an emerging dynamic represented by such a medium’s evolution from hierarchical to networked organization. This chapter exemplifies the potential for new media researchers to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach to their analysis. As old models for understanding media cease to support the complex structures of new organizations we must look to other frameworks for additional guidance.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the cross-disciplinary conceptual frameworks used to examine a popular American entertainment website that employs a virtual newsroom and instant messaging as its primary means of communication. This research is derived from a case study of the website jezebel.com which considered how organizational structure and routines shaped the site’s media product. This case study initially posed three central questions. What effect do personal values and professional roles and ethical norms play at the individual level? What news values, sources of routines and routine channels are utilized within the organization? How does instant messaging affect communication and organization dynamics? In addition, this research presented
three assumptions. Despite employing new technology, many conventional elements of media production routines, such as accountability and deadlines, remain intact; a virtual newsroom will utilize a more lateral power configuration, rather than a hierarchical organizational structure, and; because instant messaging is a more informal mode of communication than face-to-face, email or telephone interaction, the culture will promote a sense of creativity and community.

As background to Jezebel’s operations, the site’s content is written by five editors and helmed by a managing editor (also called a site lead), and consists of original content that links to stories culled from the online versions of conventional news sources, such as The New York Times, The New York Post, and Glamour magazine.

Each editor is responsible for six to ten posts per day and the site lead, Anna, assigns and edits each post and controls the site activity (by making content “live”). The site’s parent corporation, Gawker Media, monitors the site’s traffic by tracking the page views for each linked post and rewards editors who exceed an individual page view goal with quarterly bonuses to their salary.

What makes this site exemplary is its use of instant messaging (IM) as the primary method of communication. Taken as a whole, the instant messages exchanged between Anna and the different editors are inconspicuously extremely nuanced, not because of their exceptional prose or complex writing style, but because they contain so many dialogues. Informal chitchats folded into editing directions, gossip about other sites coupled with story assignments: all of it together, exchanged rapidly and without florid elaboration. These instant messages are a crucial part of the culture, in that they are the main dialogue of the workers. The exchanges are processed in syncopation with editors while they cultivate information, write and edit. The following excerpts from their IM conversations illustrate this multi-faceted dialogue. These excerpts are categorized here utilizing four thematic concepts: friendly banter, editing copy, assigning stories, and complaints about other editors:

Figure 1. A glimpse of the Jezebel homepage (6/12/09)
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