User Trust in the BBS Communities

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INTRODUCTION

The Bulletin Board System (BBS), when it first appeared in the middle 1970s, was essentially “a personal computer, not necessarily an expensive one, running inexpensive BBS software, plugged into an ordinary telephone line via a small electronic device called modem” (Rheingold, 1993). The networked computers used to create these parallel worlds and facilitate communication between human beings constitute the technical foundations of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Nancy, 1998). CMC systems link people around the world into public discussions. While CMC can exist solely between two people or between one person and an anonymous group, increasingly, virtual communities of many people are being formed.

With advent of the Internet, the World Wide Web (WWW) brought more new technologies to the BBS. Thousands of BBSs sprang up across the world. Many turned out tremendously successful and evolved into lively virtual communities. These communities provided forums with increasing importance for individuals and groups that share a professional interest or share common activities. Online BBS communities now play an important role in information dissemination and knowledge collaboration on the Internet.

On one hand, online forums enable people to disseminate information in an extremely efficient way without geographical restriction. On the other hand, the freedom also comes with uncertainty. Any information can be released and the content is almost beyond control, or even unreliable.

To understand the content and quality of the information in BBSs, we would split the task into two subjects: one is to assess the information sources; another is to assess the information providers, people themselves in the virtual communities. Most BBSs are anonymous, because people usually use a pseudonym rather than their real name when registering. A user does not need to provide real personal information to the system, either. Thus, how to assess the trust of the users in a BBS community and attract more trustful and worthy users to participate in the activities of the community have become crucial topics to establish a successful community.

Two subjects are important for establishing user trust in a BBS community: First, a BBS system must be able to identify a user and provide efficient security protection for each user and his/her privacy. Second, the value and the trustworthiness of a user should be assessed according to that user’s behavior and contribution to the community in comparison to peers.

USER AUTHENTICATION IN BBS

The first BBS was called the Computerized Bulletin Board System (CBBS), and was developed in February 1978, with software development by Ward Christianson and hardware configuration by Randy Suess. In the 1980s, before the Internet was popularized, BBSs became increasingly popular as a base for communications between geographically dispersed users who accessed the BBS over telephone lines. Rheingold’s (1993) definition of a virtual community exactly describes the characteristic of BBSs: “Social aggregations that emerge from the ‘Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”

The typical BBS operation is that users use BBS software on their computer to dial the BBS server over a telephone line. A BBS login session consists of a user entering commands from the keyboard during the connecting time, and the BBS responding interactively. All these operations occur in the connecting time. That is, a peer-to-peer connection channel must be established and kept during the session, starting with the user login onto the BBS and ending with the user logout. The username-password authentication method, commonly used in BBSs, could be considered as enough to protect the user before the graphics-oriented, Web-based BBS forums appeared on the Internet in the mid-1990s.

The appearance of the Web-based BBS forum system is a revolution of the BBS. It replaces the traditional plain-text interface with a graphic interface. Without special BBS software, a user opens a Web browser and clicks the address link of a BBS forum. A fantastic graphic-oriented interface will appear to the user. Such friendly systems allow every layman fearful of computers to access the Internet community and to become a
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