Chapter 9

The Psychology of Trolling and Lurking:
The Role of Defriending and Gamification for Increasing Participation in Online Communities Using Seductive Narratives

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ABSTRACT

The rise of social networking services have furthered the proliferation of online communities, transferring the power of controlling access to content from often one person who operates a system (sysop), which they would normally rely on, to them personally. With increased participation in social networking and services come new problems and issues, such as trolling, where unconstructive messages are posted to incite a reaction, and lurking, where persons refuse to participate. Methods of dealing with these abuses included defriending, which can include blocking strangers. The Gamified Flow of Persuasion model is proposed, building on work in ecological cognition and the participation continuum, the chapter shows how all of these models can collectively be used with gamification principles to increase participation in online communities through effective management of lurking, trolling, and defriending.

INTRODUCTION

The study of online communities has led to such colourful expressions as trolling, flaming, spamming, and flooding being developed in order to describe behaviours that benefit some people while disrupting others (Lampe & Resnick, 2004). Since the proliferation of technologies like the ‘circle-of-friends’ (COF) for managing friends lists in online communities (Romm & Setzekom, 2008), the use of the Internet to build online communities, especially using social networking services has grown—such as on these platforms. Facebook is currently one of the more popular COF-based websites (Davis, 2008). In addition to this, microblogging, such as Twit-
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ter, have ‘status updates’, which are as important a part of social networks Facebook and Google+, as the circle of friends is. These technologies have made possible the instantaneous expression of and access to opinion into memes that others can access quickly, creating what is called, ‘The public square’ (Tapscott & Williams, 2010). The public square is the ability to publish and control editorial policy, and is currently available to all with access to and competency in using the Internet and online social networking services.

It is clear in today’s age that there are a lot of demands on people’s time, and they have to prioritise which social networking services, or other media or activity they use. This is often based on which is most gratifying and least discomforting. It has become apparent that introducing gaming elements into such environments, where they would not usually be – a concept called ‘gamification’ – can increase interest and retention in them. Such systems can promote positive activities by members and reduce the number of people not taking part, called ‘lurkers’ (Bishop, 2009c; Efimova, 2009). It can also promote activities like ‘trolling’ where content is created for the ‘lulz’ of it – that is for the fun of it. These can have upsides and downsides, but it is clear gamification can play a part in managing it.

The Practice of Defriending in Online Communities

While the Circle of Friends allows the different techno-cultures that use online communities to add people as friends, it also gives them the power to remove or delete the person from their social
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