Chapter 12
Firepups at the Lake:
Ties that Bind Until They Don’t

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines how a social community was created and developed on a left-leaning political blog, Firedoglake; in particular, it explores how readers, as commenters, engaged each other, establishing credibility, or rhetorically speaking, acquiring and enhancing their ethos and attaining the status of a respected member of the blog’s community. All excerpted threads include pseudonyms or screen names of users and all material from the designated blogs is, of course, in the public domain. In part 2, the chapter describes how the character of the blog itself, Firedoglake, changed over time as it grew to include an increasing number of front-page posters, became generally identified as hypercritical of the Obama administration, and became an umbrella site for smaller blogs under its banner. The discussion in both parts explores identity creation and the question of community in computer-mediated communication.

INTRODUCTION
My general purpose in this chapter is to explore the creation and development of social community within a blog expressly designed for political discourse. In selecting Firedoglake as the representative example, I examine how a blog transforms itself over a period of five years based on its design, the interests and biases of its owner and host, and the readership that gathers there to form a community fostered not only by the site’s owner, but by the readers themselves. Part 1 examines the ways readers develop ethos within the community and what ties form to bind interests and social connections. Part 2 examines how those same ties may fray, and for some otherwise regular participants, break. This section raises questions...
about the nature of computer-mediated community and identity in virtual spaces compared to that in our physical and face-to-face social lives. Let me begin by describing the history of the blog as it existed in the early years of its popularity.

_Firedoglake (FDL)_ , one word that combines the three pleasures of sitting by the fire with dogs at a lake, is a left-leaning political blog founded by Jane Hamsher, author and film producer. She and Christy Hardin Smith, former attorney, brought the blog into prominence during the Valerie Plame case (described below) when their reporting and analysis generated increasing numbers of readers and commenters, many of whom became regular visitors to the “Lake.” These regulars formed a community based on their mutual political interests, first, but also a social community based on other life interests. Over time, as the community of commenters grew, Jane and Christy invited guests (some of them original commenters) to post “front pages,” the main posts on the site to which people respond. The comments’ section grew, of course, some posts eliciting more than 200 comments. Still, the addition of more “front pages” by guest posters helped reduce what had become extremely long threads, too long for most regular readers to scan before adding a comment of their own. Earlier in the life of FDL, readers were accustomed to following the whole post and the comments before wading into the water. After five years of observation, I can say that practice was, at least in the early years of my reading, expected and rewarded by readers.

As with all communities, real and virtual, people moved on, moved in, or moved back for occasional visits. Some became acquaintances or friends outside the blog. Some were inspired to create their own blogs, some to become more politically active, and many found at the lake not only a place to engage in conversation about national and local issues, but also about their personal lives as the political and the personal merged.

At the time I stepped off the shore to wade in the lake, my interest was political; I was fascinated by the Plame case and was following the story and analysis, beginning with the appointment of Patrick Fitzgerald to convene a grand jury investigation into who in the George W. Bush administration may have leaked the identity of CIA agent, Valerie Plame. While no one was indicted for a crime in connection with the leak, Scooter Libby, Chief of Staff of Vice President Dick Cheney was indicted on one count of obstruction of justice, one count of perjury, and three counts of making false statements to the grand jury and federal investigators on October 28, 2005. The federal trial, United States v. Libby began in January 2007 and ended in March 2007 with Libby’s conviction on four of five counts listed above. (For the timeline on this investigation, please see the Washington Post summary at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/custom/2007/03/06/CU2007030600916.html) As I closely followed Libby’s case and the legal and political analysis at FDL, I also began following the community development at the blog, specifically, the rhetorical construction of the virtual community. The conversation there was not confined to the Plame case, but varied topically, as I previously noted, across national, local, and personal lines of interest, and it varied widely as the blog grew in popularity.

In analyzing the rhetorical construction, I relied on my own experience as a reader and occasional commenter, a rhetorician, and a literature professor. Having guided students who were learning how to engage their peers in asynchronous and synchronous conferencing as well as in class, person-to-person, I found useful the work being done by Albert Rouzie (2001) on serio-ludic play, by Neal Stephenson (2000) on the use of metaphor in maintaining virtual landscapes, and by Sherry Turkle (2011) on the attractions and complications of our relationship to computers; in particular, her explorations of identity creation and the complexity of community itself both on- and off-line. Their work, as well as that of a few others, has been incorporated into this chapter’s exploration of community building and change.
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