When Online Communities Collide: Boundary Identity Construction and Spanning

Research-in-Progress

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Abstract

Online brand communities reflect a shared interest among participants that sustains community identity around and through brand consumption. While exchanges within such a community are typically supportive, conflict can exist between different, and sometimes competing, brand communities. The phenomena of communities in conflict introduces an element of 'other' that allows each community to delineate its values more succinctly by affording a comparative point of reference. The aim of this research is to understand online inter-community conflict using a boundary object theory lens to examine the how online brand communities construct and span boundaries. Using the example of two online brand communities comprising the followers of the authors J.K. Rowling and Terry Pratchett, preliminary results illuminate how discrete communities assert their individual boundary identity construction and spanning.

Keywords: Online brand communities, Conflict, Boundary theory, Identity

Introduction

This research aims to better understand online inter-community conflict by examining how community members engage in boundary construction and spanning activities. Our research question is: What are the implications for brand communities and boundary relations in the co-creation of online inter-community conflict? We propose a virtual ethnography (Hine 2008) to concentrate on how online communities extend traditional organizational boundaries through temporal emergent processes. Here, like Barrett et al. (2012), we go beyond a singular or dyadic focus in an effort to explore a more dynamic enactment of boundaries.

Because of the paucity of research examining brand communities in conflict, we examine how community members engage in online inter-community conflict. Online brand communities reflect a shared common interest among the participants that sustains a recognizable community identity. Exchanges within an online brand community are typically composed of supportive interactions, but conflict can also be a feature. Both types of exchanges are necessary aspects of an online community and form the basis of an
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intricate network of friendships and competitions that helps to define a group (Fletcher et al. 2006). Rather than being dysfunctional, conflict within and between online communities can yield an alternative set of unifying principles and rationales for understanding identity, and can provide a more complete conceptual model for interpreting the simultaneous pressures for collaboration and competition that are sometimes observed in online communities (Campbell et al. 2007; 2009).

The example being used in this study involves the Harry Potter (HP) and Discworld (DW) fan communities. They represent the two largest brands of fantasy novels sold worldwide. While DW is the older and initially most popular of the brands, in recent years, sales for the HP franchise have surpassed DW significantly. However, in contrast to communities of opposition research reported previously (see Múñiz and Hamer 2001; Múñiz and O'Guinn 2001), HP and DW community members are not exclusive consumers of the one brand. While individuals from each community may “poach” from each other’s brands (Jenkins 1992), they make their preferences known through their online community membership and engagement.

This paper proposes an innovative analysis of the reactions of these communities to a media initiated event that brought the two communities into direct conflict. The initial incident was driven by the publication of an interview with J. K. Rowling where two issues of contention arose: 1) Rowling stating that she did not realize the first Harry Potter novel was in the fantasy genre; 2) the reporter describing the fantasy genre as “an idealized, romanticized, pseudo-feudal world, where knights and ladies Morris-dance to Greensleeves”. These two issues motivated Discworld author Terry Pratchett to write to the publisher criticizing the article and implying that comments reportedly made by JKR were disingenuous.

The case is important as it highlights conditions in which online conflict can occur and a response of online communities to such an event. Online communities that extend beyond traditional organizational boundaries are an important, yet not well understood area of research in information systems (Beekhuyzen et al. 2015). This paper seeks to address this gap by examining boundary building and crossing activities (Hara and Fichman 2013) during a period of disputed identity between two online communities of interest.

Community Boundaries and Boundary Spanning

We adopt a community boundary perspective as conflict represents not just an individual’s emotional dissonance when confronting the other (Jansz and Timmers 2002; Lawler 2003), but also the individual’s need to negotiate personal and social structures that create, enhance and mitigate conflict (Waddington 1989). The distinctions between ourselves, as the in-group, and everybody else, as the out-group, are established through conflict, as enmities and reciprocal antagonisms maintain the system by balancing its component parts (Coser 1974). Conflict can draw people together as they identify like-others, in a common enmity against and rejection of others (Simmel 1950). How then do online communities resolve in-group versus out-group distinctions through conflict when membership is voluntary, transient, and reflects personal and social identities rather than wider societal structures and hierarchies (Schau et al. 2009)?

Lamont and Molnár (2002) argue the importance of studying boundaries as relational processes to help us to understand social and collective identity, and communities. Hernes (2004) developed a framework for analyzing boundaries through a two dimensional view. The first dimension seeks to address the “types of process that a boundary represents” (p.13). Processes involved in boundary establishment include explicit boundaries that are enacted through physical structures, such as buildings or formal rules; they also refer to social boundaries that are manifested through the assertion of personal identity, and community norms that divide one group from another. Finally, mental boundaries are operationalized through the identification of beliefs and core ideas central to organizations. The second dimension considers “the effects that boundaries have on the organization” (p.15)—as ordering agents, distinctions and thresholds.

According to Abbott (1995, p.263), “social entities come into existence when social actors ties social boundaries together in certain ways”. By focusing on the relationship between social and symbolic boundaries, cultural mechanisms for the production of boundaries, difference and hybridity, cultural membership and group classification, Lamont and Molnár (2002) are able to conceptualize boundaries as borders; symbolic boundaries that have conceptual distinctions. By examining these elements it is
possible to “capture the dynamic dimensions of social relations, as groups compete in the production, diffusion, and institutionalization of alternative systems and principles of classification” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p.168).

There are a number of frameworks presented in the literature to study boundary spanning within traditional organizational boundaries. Carlile (2004) developed a framework to classify boundaries in a context of knowledge transfer that inspires innovation. Levina and Vaast (2005) have found that boundary objects-in-use have a common identity in practice and have articulated three conditions for their emergence. Lee (2007) argues that artefacts can be used to “push boundaries rather than merely sailing across them” (p. 308); her advanced conceptualization of boundary objects identifies five types of boundary negotiation artefacts. Sturdy, Clark, Fincham and Handley’s (2009) study of the organizational boundaries of knowledge flow among management consultancies builds upon this previous work to reframe the analysis of boundaries. They discuss how sociological approaches to boundaries tend to focus on the multiplicity of boundaries (i.e., how individuals move from one boundary to another) and through their organizational research they identify physical, cultural, emotional and political boundaries. Sturdy et al. (2009) contend that physical boundaries are “physical and technological arrangements” created by “architecture and various boundary objects including human agents” (p. 633). Cultural boundaries have cognitive and emotional dimensions; cognitive boundaries are similar to the “semantic boundaries” proposed by Carlile (2004). Emotional boundaries consider that people have emotional attachments to knowledge, which may make the flow of knowledge difficult. The political boundaries identified are created by power relations through structural differences in organizations.

As can be seen from the discussion above, boundary construction and boundary spanning activity in the context of knowledge transfer within organizational structures has received much attention in the literature. While boundary object theory also offers promise for understanding identity work in non-organizational contexts such as online communities (see Marshall 2003), little has been done to examine boundary construction and spanning activities in which online groups engage—particularly during periods of conflict and identity discordance. In viewing conflict between online communities from a boundary perspective this paper addresses issues of how such communities construct, negotiate and span the amorphous world of internet social structures, which subvert traditional societal structures and hierarchies (Curran and Seaton 2009). Rather than focusing on conflict as a challenge to an individual’s identity, we address the social structuring of conflict within and across online communities. By identifying the agents, materials and resources, and responses to conflict that confrontation between two online communities elicit, we are able to identify the structural elements that create, enhance and mitigate conflict, and thus ideally understand the role of online environments in facilitating such events.

Method

Observation is a flexible technique, complementing most other data gathering techniques (McMurray et al. 2004). In this study, the observations gave the researchers access to narratives detailing how the communities construct, negotiate and span community boundaries through complex interaction patterns. Narrative refers to any text or discourse, and it can refer to the text used within the context of a mode of inquiry in qualitative research (Chase 2005). To analyze narratives we focus on the stories told by individuals (Polkinghorne 1989), and a key event (Creswell 2007). The researcher can then “zoom out” to put the discourse into context. Narrative inquiry has particular appeal for this study as it supports the identification of a plot, complete with characters, setting, problem, crises, and resolution. We used this to guide our data analysis (performed by one of the authors).

Narrative inquiry often follows a straightforward chronology, as do the forum posts examined in this paper. Attention to chronology takes into account continuity, space and interaction between participants. From this, we can identify themes, which allow the telling of the story from different perspectives, such as those in support of or opposition to TP and JKR. This approach fits the “oral history” approach proposed by Plummer (1983) which gathers personal reflections of events, and their causes and effects from one or several individuals. The narrative analysis was supported by NVivo10 software.
**Conflict Event**

The conflict event developed from the publication of an interview with JKR reported in Time Magazine in which two apparent issues of contention arose (Grossman 2005). The first issue was JKR’s statement that she did not realize that she was writing fantasy when she wrote the first HP; the second issue was a quote from the reporter that described the fantasy genre itself as:

> It’s precisely Rowling’s lack of sentimentality, her earthy, salty realness, her refusal to buy into the basic clichés of fantasy, that make her such a great fantasy writer. The genre tends to be deeply conservative—politically, culturally, psychologically. It looks backward to an idealized, romanticized, pseudofeudal world, where knights and ladies morris-dance to Greensleeves.

These two issues motivated TP to respond by writing a letter to the editor criticizing how fantasy literature was described in the report and insinuating that comments attributed to JKR were disingenuous (Pratchett 2005). The reporting of this correspondence by the BBC online news service initiated the conflict between DW and HP online communities (Pratchett 2005). TP describes the events leading to this incident:

> It was someone [at the] BBC website that morning who conflated the two parts of the letter so that an attack on the silly comments of the interviewing journalist became an attack on Rowling herself, and put an inflammatory headline on it ('Pratchett Anger at Rowling’s Rise').

> This page got changed and toned down later that day (not because of any intervention of me and mine) and the head of the site actually sent me an e-mail apologising for how the story had been handled. But by then the story had escaped to fan sites where it was being spun like a tornado. (Terry Pratchett, Personal Correspondence)

The change in the story and the headline appeared to go unnoticed by the fan communities. So it should be noted that the conflict between the communities was based on two different media reports that had differing perspectives, with the first version being the more negative in tone. The online activity after the publication of this letter (in both versions), included thousands of posts made on DW and HP sites, with numerous interpretations by online fans as to the nature of the event, the role of the media, the motivation of the brand heroes, and how this all affected the brand and each community, respectively. During the following three to four weeks, TP engaged with the online communities in an attempt to control the situation. In contrast, JKR provided no response to the media, the HP community, or any other public information.

**Data**

This case data took shape as one of the authors was engaged in a larger ethnographic study of the relationship between TP and DW communities. As the event was unfolding, one of the authors conducted participant and non-participant observation of online fan forums for both fan communities. Also, both JKR and TP were contacted via email about the event; TP agreed to participate, while JKR declined.

Besides the forum, which was used as the main source for the ethnographic study, other forums were accessed through each brand hero’s official website and either entering the official discussion forum available or going to unofficial discussion forums listed. A total of three forums were used based on the amount of activity present and whether the forum was officially supported (see Table 1). These forums included two official fan forums, one created by the US publisher of DW (the original forum studied) and the other established by Warner Brothers, the movie distributor for HP. The third forum was a UseNet group, which had been studied previously (Múniz and Hamer 2001). These are slightly different to discussion boards as topics (also known as threads) can link across groups. In the Usenet group (discussed in this paper) the DW and HP group was combined. TP also posted within the DW group.

In a three-four week period the forums yielded over 1,500 pages of discussion, with the highest concentration of posts occurring in the first week. The systematic analysis of forum threads followed methods outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). Firstly, each post was coded based on the issues raised, and then categories were built. Finally, themes were developed and a theoretical understanding of the case generated.
Table 1: Forums for Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Forum</th>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Moderated</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Terrypratchettbooks.com</td>
<td>DW</td>
<td>&gt;5000</td>
<td>US publisher</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Board</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mugglenet.com</td>
<td>HP</td>
<td>&gt;80,000</td>
<td>Movie studio</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Board</td>
<td>Non-participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alt.fan.pratchett / alt.fan.harrypotter</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>1348/1751</td>
<td>TP participates / No JKR</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Usenet</td>
<td>Non-participant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preliminary Findings

Boundary construction has been studied extensively (Luedicke et al. 2010), and previous research shapes our preliminary findings in the following section. Online reactions to the articles reported by the media web portals were notably influenced by members’ interpretations of both the event and perceived motivations of JKR and TP. The involvement of TP in the debate exacerbated the ire of some antagonists but appeared to be appreciated by others keen to debate the issues. JKR’s lack of response led to speculation from both communities about what she actually meant by her comments.

Boundary Construction

Although perhaps not her intent, JKR’s reported comments served to construct cognitive boundaries between the JKR and TP fan communities through an implicit denial of the common heritage shared in the fantasy genre. TP’s response to JKR’s interview and the media’s subsequent reporting of both authors’ comments worked to further exacerbate the issue and develop boundaries between the two communities. From our initial analysis of the TP and JKR forum it was apparent that both communities took up this work to continue building and defining these boundaries. This boundary construction work is evident in the first post made to the TP forum by Grunthos, when he quoted TP’s comments, provided a link to TP’s letter to the newspaper, and also commented: “He’s in trouble now”.

Not long after, HP fans began to infiltrate the TP site to express their indignation. The following comments were made by “fist of fury”, a new poster to the TP forum:

Oh My God. How could Terry Pratchett criticise the Amazing JK Rowling? Ms Rowling is so much more original and talented! He obviously stole the idea for a magic school from her and Esk in ER was stolen from the HP books!

Harry Potter is my whole life!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Once the boundary was perceived to have been initiated, a number of TP community members worked to reify the community frontier. For example, in the second post to the TP forum, “Ellie” says, “I’m surprised she’s so successful [...] TP has been doing this longer than she has [...] Terry is far more creative, intelligent and funny”. In a subsequent edit to that post, Ellie added, ”And she has stolen a lot from Terry: Talking wizard hats and so on [...]” This final comment, an allegation of theft of TP’s ideas and themes, works to further establish the boundary.

More boundary work within the TP community focused on intellectual content. A self-identified 16 year old girl named “websterworld” changed the tone of the conversation by commenting that, “The HP books were dumbed down enough for just about anybody who has the capability to read. Take a step back and you’ll see that it’s a very simple children story that in my opinion is good for say, ages 9-10.”

The JKR forum thread was created about 20 hours after the first thread was established in the TP forum. The first post from “Ariande1325” titled “Terry Pratchett letter about Rowling” begins by praising TP's "stuff" but then refers to TP’s "jealousy" of JKR and how TP has "sour grapes". The attacks came quickly, with “The_Grey_Lady” responding just over 2 hours later that her reading of a TP novel recognized “OBVIOUS Potter references”. The member engaged in an online conversation and claimed to have asked TP directly about this, receiving what is described by the member as an unfavorable response. Despite being grateful to TP, as his work was "what first got me into fantasy", the member was "deeply disappointed in him" that he would display "dirtier" aspects. Regardless, this member claimed she was
desperate for good quality books to read so would continue to read TP books, despite knowing they come from "an ugly little mind". At this early point in the thread there is division in the support of TP, and there exists a much different and more divided conversation than is observed in the TP forum.

**Boundary Spanning: Knowledge Production and Exchange**

Community members negotiate their argument in light of the recent criticisms directly and indirectly aimed at them, and thus, in some cases, confront their digital self and group identities (Akkerman and Bakker 2011). For instance, in the TP forum “Ellie Maries” weighs in by defending TP and his history of publishing, referencing a book he published 34 years ago. This member gave specific accounts of TP's ideas in his books such as the "Unseen University" and the "Archchancellor Hat" as being similar to HP. In an attempt to span boundaries, the negotiation does not always go smoothly though, with TP members fighting back; Ellie Maries replies to an earlier post without being specific which post it is by saying "Well if you think that, then what are you doing here?" and suggests the person should go elsewhere "to the children's forum otherwise known as 'Harry Potter Mania'". "Ellie Maries" goes further in support of TP and points out that his career is "perfectly fine" and commends his long history of published books as "more than JKR could ever imagine". This same fan also clarifies for the first time in this discussion that TP's books have a very different audience to JKR, in that TP's books are “ADULT books”, refuting previous comments by saying "of course there's nothing there [in TP's work] for children's literature".

In an attempt to mediate knowledge sharing across boundaries, “fairyliquid” is agreeable that JKR has had a positive influence on children's reading, and "has indeed made many children love books and look at reading in a different way". Again the comparison between the two authors that "pratchett has been doing it for years" is presented, however "fairyliquid" is quite disturbed by the JKR fans infiltrating the TP community with their aggrandizement of JKR, while giving great praise to TP and his literary work, in part, by quoting his record for "the most shop lifted books". "fairyliquid" refutes JKR fans' attempts within the community by "telling us JKR is brilliant for coming along with reasonable books for *children* and even considering that they match the thought provoking and interesting level that Pratchetts are known to have". Again, a comparison between the authors is presented: "His books are worthy of the recognition they receive whereas rowling has simply stepped in and taken over what he has worked hard to create", “fairyliquid” comments that he/she hopes that the JKR fans posting in the forum "coming here to tell us how brilliant JKR" will go and read one of Pratchett’s books.

Community member “fairyliquid” again weighs in on how "hilarious" he/she finds JKR fans "flocking" to the forum to talk about how "horrible" TP is, and infers that it would be less likely for TP fans to go to HP forums if JKR said something against TP. “fairyliquid” uses his/her own analysis of the situation to delineate between the audiences of the books of each author as indicating "a clear difference between the childrens and adults author". An 'edit' comment shows the frustration of the contributor who will now "not even bother with the grammar" of their post.

The negotiation then turned nastier with “McLaren’s” first post in this forum in response to a negative post about TP by “williambarkley”. This rebuttal criticizes “williambarkley’s” lack of reference to TP's full name as “disrespectful”, and claims that "[williambarkley’s] lack of a decent pun or play on words sickens me". “McLaren” calls “williambarkley” an "offended HP fan" who is trying to hit back at anyone who insults those books". “McLaren” accuses “williambarkley” of being dismissive, having only read one Discworld book and not liking it, arguing that it is not possible to say it is an unsuccessful series of books just because of this one negative experience. Lastly, “McLaren” compares himself/herself to other fans in the TP forum as being "unlike a lot of people in this forum" because of a dislike for HP books which are "over-hyped kids books".

In the TP forum, there is very little knowledge shared early on. Instead, a focus on what Akkerman and Bakker (2011) refer to as socio-cultural differences between the communities can be observed. The first new knowledge shared was a comment documented during the conversation that HP books appeal to "dumber" readers, while TP books are deemed more appealing more "intelligent" readers. Later on in this conversation, this position shifted, as different views were negotiated to agree on the existence of very different audiences for each series of books, with JKR having mostly younger readers, and TP reaching a mainly adult audience.
In the JKR forum, early comments are in strong support of JKR, however “Joshi” confessed to being "a huge fan of Pratchett" and explained how it annoyed him/her that Rowling got instant fame "when Pratchett had been doing this stuff very well for a good 10 years". “Joshi” also stated that he/she did not care what he [TP] says because “Joshi” will "still always read his [TP's] stuff and enjoy it" and that other fantasy writers have felt like this but "Pratchett's the only one to actually speak up". Joshi provides a link to a comic book author's blog, a friend of TP's who explains "the basic truth to what is going on". It says Pratchett was not having a go at JKR but instead at the "lazy" journalist. This is an interesting post, quite out of character with others up until that point, and highlights the role of external forces in facilitating the creation of a contentious object (Joyce et al. 2011).

Discussion

Our research aim for this project is to better understand online inter-community conflict using a boundary object theory lens to examine the boundary construction and spanning activities engaged in by community members. Preliminary results suggest that this theoretical lens is useful to examine the social structuring of conflict.

While digital objects as boundary objects have been shown to support knowledge sharing and collaboration across diverse groups in organizational contexts, we identify salient boundary relations in the informal social environment examined here. We find that boundary objects can hinder knowledge sharing and even facilitate inter-group conflict. In considering salient boundary relations as borders (Lamont and Molnár 2002), our findings concur with Joyce et al.’s Wikipedia study (2011). In their examination of Wikipedia biographies of living persons, they argue that some shared digital objects can introduce conflicts (which they call contentious objects). However, we found that in a conflict situation the spatial boundaries need to be delineated and spanned before the social and cognitive boundaries are constructed and spanned (Hernes 2004). In our case the virtual space and architecture determined how conflict was conducted. Participation in the forums required active effort to locate the “opposing” brand community, while the usenet group members of one group automatically linked creating threads where everyone is an “insider” to the topic under discussion.

Contentious objects serve as a common field of activity that cross community boundaries, such as in our case where different fan communities found themselves being supportive, and sometimes vocally negative to the other groups’ views. We, therefore, like Hara and Finchman (2013) and Vakkayil (2012), find the concept of boundaries to be informative for a better understanding of boundary spanning through both knowledge sharing and creation, and also conflict. Further, the broad categories Hara and Finchman (2013) propose are useful for framing knowledge sharing in the fan communities. However, further research is needed to understand the nature and enactment of knowledge in inter-community conflicts.

The manifestations of cultural membership help to form a common identity in practice (Levina and Vasst 2005). The online community can be linked to those outlined by Lamont and Molnár (2002), who argue for the need to integrate existing literature to analyze how social actors construct groups that are similar and different, and how their understanding of boundaries are shaped. Joyce et al. (2011) consider conflict between groups as an established research domain. They argue that technology has the power to bring people together, in particular people with irreconcilable differences. Such artefacts can be used to push boundaries. With this in mind they propose the idea of contentious objects; these are “elements in social organization that serve as a common field of activity but within whose activities contain elements of unrealized conflict”. They identified “flashpoints for potential conflict” similar to those of the communities of JKR and TP. Indeed, the online conflicts between the JKR and TP communities could be considered flashpoints for potential conflict, particularly time-bound in the example after the news article was released.

Most research on boundaries identifies the conflict, and then focuses on how that conflict is resolved (Joyce et al. 2011). To manage contentious objects, Joyce argues that some communities employ strategies more focused on identity maintenance after the incident such as has occurred in this study. The salient boundary relations enact self and group identities through sharing brand knowledge about TP, sharing product knowledge of science fiction and fantasy, posing genre questions around “what is literature?” and the external role of institutional agents including media/publishers, authors and the bookstores. This focus on conflict clearly highlights the setting for the case presented in this paper: that is, the conflict
between Terry Pratchett and J. K. Rowling fans within their respective online communities. To help put this case in context, Kimble et al. (2010) give insight into how boundary objects and brokers are interconnected. This concept of brokers as boundary-spanners is grounded in Wenger’s (1998) work on communities of practice; he proposes that brokers can move from one group to another to bridge two communities.

**Conclusion**

This research examines online inter-community conflict through boundary construction and spanning activities. Such sociological approaches to boundaries focus on a multiplicity of moving between representing identities of self and group (Sturdy et al., 2009). Hara and Fichman (2013) posit that knowledge production and knowledge exchange is increasing in open online communities. Particularly in our global economy individuals often span diverse boundaries (Yagi and Kleinberg 2011). While boundary construction and spanning has been studied within traditional organizational structures, future research should test the applicability of these frameworks to new forms of organizations such as the online communities studied here.

The anonymity found in online communities can give rise to conflict and also arguably explains the strong sense of self put forward by the community members as they have little fear of repercussions outside of the community boundaries. Curseu et al. (2006) argues that conflict is disruptive for system dynamics if it emerges from opposed group norms and values. Typically in online fan communities, members do not often attack each other either directly or indirectly. This behavior is evident within our case study when competing fans infiltrate from the opposing author.

The notion of boundaries is an essential tool to map how models of knowledge are diffused and how they impact local institutions and identities. Boundary theory is particularly appropriate to analyzing these effects. Further, the analysis of the virtualization process through boundary theory presents a significant opportunity for information systems research that seeks to further our understanding of the challenges and dynamic nature of online communities. The next phase of this research will involve in depth coding of the data into the broad categories of boundary classifications (physical, cognitive, social and political) to allow a richer analysis of the associated manifestations of boundary construction/spanning strategies employed by each of the online communities.

**References**


