

12-31-2002

# Tribalism, Conflict and Shape-Shifting Identities in an Online Community

John Campbell  
*Griffith University*

Anita Greenhill  
*University of Salford*

Gordon Fletcher  
*spaceless.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/acis2002>

---

## Recommended Citation

Campbell, John; Greenhill, Anita; and Fletcher, Gordon, "Tribalism, Conflict and Shape-Shifting Identities in an Online Community" (2002). *ACIS 2002 Proceedings*. 93.  
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/acis2002/93>

This material is brought to you by the Australasian (ACIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in ACIS 2002 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact [elibrary@aisnet.org](mailto:elibrary@aisnet.org).

# Tribalism, Conflict and Shape-Shifting Identities in an Online Community

<sup>a</sup>John Campbell, <sup>b</sup>Anita Greenhill and <sup>c</sup>Gordon Fletcher

<sup>a</sup>School of Management  
Griffith University  
j.campbell@mailbox.gu.edu.au

<sup>b</sup>Information Systems Institute  
University of Salford

<sup>c</sup>spaceless.com

## Abstract

*In this paper we progress a model that describes and explicates the systematic techniques of hostility and aggression that take the form of contemporary tribalism in technology-enabled communities. We argue that these practices are not mere artefacts of dysfunctional communication, but embody important rituals essential for maintaining and defining the boundaries between the contradictory social roles that are frequently found in online communities. Conflict therefore provides an alternative set of unifying principles and rationales for understanding social interaction within technologically enabled communities. We illustrate the importance of conflict through the analysis of dialogue from an Australian-based stock market forum concerning identity shape-shifting.*

## Keywords

Tribalism, conflict, online communities, identity shape-shifting

## INTRODUCTION

Trust is the framework most commonly utilised for discussing the variety of social interactions that unify and structure online communities (see Knights et al., 2001; Grey and Garsten, 2001; Stewart, 2000; Geyskens et al., 1998; McKnight et al., 1998). Trust, it is argued here, is a culturally and historically specific discourse grounded in a range of assumptions regarding human association and organization (Shapiro, 1987; Muyskens, 1998; Tweney, 1998; Mayer et al., 1995). In contrast, the discursive relationships defined through conflict reveal an alternate set of unifying principles and rationales within technologically enabled communities.

This study considers the extent to which online communities utilise systematised and ritualised techniques of hostility and aggression in a form of contemporary “tribalism”. These practices assist in maintaining and defining tribal boundaries through the implicit threat of further, more direct, action (Keesing, 1935). The most obvious form of this potential punitive action, in the context of technological enabled groups can be identified as a form of banishment. This study is based on an ethnographic examination of a technologically enabled interest group that is defined by participation and presence in a public Internet finance forum. This reveals the importance of “tribe”-like group boundaries and the belligerent techniques that maintain them. This technologically-enabled community participates in practices of story telling, myth-making and the reaffirmation of extended, affinal relationships to interact and construct their “tribal” view of the social world (Mead, 1959; 1969; Benedict, 1935). These “community building” methods are conducted within an atmosphere that incorporates the continual conflict of the group’s leaders and other dominant personalities (Glasse, 1965). These almost ritualised practices of conflict assist in further unifying and defining the community more clearly than could be possible with any specific application of trust networks or association. The classificatory schema utilised by this study is broad in its focus, however, the richness of the environment examined offers the possibility for more detailed taxonomies of participant’s relative roles within an online community.

The community examined in this paper consists of participants from an Australian-based online stock market forum. We argue that this community is maintained and perpetuated by a cycle of “tribal” conflicts that are conducted by, and directed towards, specific members of the community. We examine the interchanges of these key individuals in the community to obtain a broad understanding of their roles and the relationships they maintain with others in the community as well as with the community in general. While the focus of the examples offered here centre upon individuals this is not the most significant level of organization for the community. Cataloguing and detailing individual actions and antagonisms reveal the composition, dynamics and solidarity of the “tribe”. It is the continuous cycle of conflict among these individuals, within the context of the group that provides central communal focal points and offers mechanisms through which the community is maintained. The dynamism and continuous evolution of the community is similarly revealed by the changing relationships between key members of the group and the fact that their roles are achieved and maintained only with the continuing support of at least part of the community.

This paper offers alternative directions for the examination of phenomena that have increasingly moved into the IS discipline’s frame of reference that do not have ‘system-like’ qualities. Most particularly, this paper approaches the examination of voluntary, fluid and happenstance social organizations that “sit on top of” structured, formally planned information systems. While our example finance forum is web-based, this paper takes the opinion that the critical examination of tribalism as an essential aspect of community offers the means to more fully understand at least some of the relationships between an information system and its users.

## **INTERPRETING ONLINE FORUMS**

The difficulties of interpreting technologically-enabled groups and understanding the defining qualities of groups that have no definite physical boundary is the source of many debates within the information systems literature. Identifying distinct groups within a culture is not a new problem and one that has its heritage in the earliest ethnographic works of anthropologists such as Malinowski (1979) and Radcliffe-Brown (1977). At the core of the problem is the need for the researcher to identify a coherent community that is not unique or defined solely by physical difference, language difference or other specific differences in their social organization or structures.

Technologically enabled groups are hard to locate and define because they do not even possess the privilege of geographic proximity to aid the researcher. The research approach to this problem has not been unanimous. One common response is to position these groups within the context of ‘trust’ communities and to interpret the interactions within the group as a trusted exchange with a greater degree of privilege than transactions that are conducted external to the group. The other, perhaps predictable, response is to couch the technologically-enabled group within the broadest abstract melange of contemporary society and argue for the absence or death of community. The technologically-enabled group within this research regime is a merely a consequence of happenstance, maintained and dynamically evolving as a result of the broader range of social circumstances bearing upon the environment. This position too, while offering some advantages, can rapidly descend into conundrums that play with the binaries of presence and absence, internal and external, online and offline.

An alternative interpretative path for understanding these groups can be charted between the extremes of the individualised psychological motivations of trust communities and the nihilistic assimilation of more post-modern positions. Addressing technologically-enabled groups as conflict communities, or tribal groups, presents a range of research possibilities and understandings. While the concept of a “tribe” is a contentious and much-debated category within Anthropology it is, nonetheless, a well-documented and analysed level of organization and community that is smaller than a cultural group but wider than the associations brought through direct kinship. In fact, the anthropological notion of “tribe” substantially mirrors the sometimes diffuse and amorously labelled “organization” within which information systems are located. The parallels do not end at this level of comparison.

A major debating point in discussions of “tribes” and tribalism is the relationship that exists *between* tribes (Keesing, 1935; Salisbury, 1965; Evans-Pritchard, 1976). While “tribes” may conduct various forms of warfare against other “tribes” it is often also the same “enemies” who provide marriage partners and strategic allies against other aggressors. Organisations, as a single entity, must also interact with one another in variously competitive and strategic relationships (e.g. Microsoft and Apple or Microsoft and IBM). In effect, both tribes and organisations do not act or exist in isolation from ‘others’ and are largely defined by their relationship to other similarly organised groups. The difference between the relationships to “others” and the relationship to ones’ own group may be a subtle difference of degrees. However aggression and conflict are as readily discerned internally amongst individuals within a group as it can be seen enacted towards the collective “others” of a competing tribe.

Previous studies of communication in networked communities have viewed conflict as a dysfunctional force and hence sought to find the conditions that lead to conflict resolution. In contrast, this study views conflict as an integral element of the social interrelations found within finance forums. We therefore commence with the premise that conflict has both functional and dysfunctional outcomes. This conflict-oriented analysis provides a useful vehicle for analysing Internet finance forums as it explicitly recognises the existence and persistence of discord and dissonance. It highlights the simultaneous pressures for both collaboration and competition within the group and indicates that these two divergent social forces are necessary but incongruent and cannot be completely resolved.

## **CONFLICT AND TRIBALISM IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES**

While the examples utilised in this study are drawn from the interactions of contemporary stock market and finance fora, a significant body of research exists in social anthropology that also concerns itself with the conflictual interrelationships of participants in a community. The most concentrated collection of this form of work concerns the organization of the Papua New Guinea Highland tribes. Within these ethnographies conflict, both physical and threatened, is a regular and commonly described feature. The volume of work in this area offers three advantages to this paper. 1) importance of conflict in these tribes is confirmed by the repetitiveness with which it is cited; 2) the number of separate ethnographers making these observations independently suggests that it is not just a flight of fantasy on the part of colonial anthropologists; and 3) the range and scope of these works enables a broad taxonomy of community roles to be discerned and understood at a conceptual level. It is this final point that is of most direct utility to this paper as it is this taxonomy that enables a structured examination of the different participants of the online fora. In this taxonomy we focus on what, in the context of the data gathered to date, are arguably the three most significant roles, that of ‘Big Man’, ‘Sorcerer’ and ‘Trickster’<sup>1</sup>.

A key shift found in our approach from that of other discussions of networked communities is our attempt to analyse and discuss our textual evidence, the transcripts of the discussions in the fora, in a manner that moves away from textual analysis and concordances. We are attempting to discern the interlinkage of conversations that bind sometimes disparate and disconnected thoughts and actions into a community. We eschew the examination of simple “threads” as they are defined by fora’s particular software to focus attention upon key participants’ actions and activities in the broadest sense across threads and, in some cases, fora.

The three roles of key significance we identify in the online finance fora form a trinary of interlinked association and are illustrated in Figure 1. The holders of each role are defined, at least in part, by their interaction with the other holders of key community roles. While individuals do not identify themselves in the terms we employ here, their actions generally

---

<sup>1</sup> As taxonomy, opportunities exist for still finer granularity of discussion. Within each of the three roles discussed here further analytical sub-divisions are possible and identifiable. Similarly, other distinct or hybrid roles may also be identified with a more detailed taxonomic analysis of “tribal” roles. Identifying these subtleties may also offer additional insight into the forms of conflict that can be observed, their different meanings and the impact of these actions on the community as a whole.

indicate an awareness of both those with similar roles as well as those who occupy a different role in relation to their own. This trinary also represents the potential directions for changes in status that are available to these participants. While this shift in roles is capable of moving in any direction between these three roles, there is a tendency for individuals to move away from the Trickster role to the more mature roles of Sorcerer or Big Man. While not all participants in the community move within this cycle of key roles, the eventual departure of those in this cycle is inevitable over time. These roles and their dynamic are discussed in further detail in the following sections.

### The Big Man

One of the best-known “tribal” figures is that of the Big Man, the leader of a whole tribal group, a phratry or a less formal faction. The significant fact about these individuals, and one that perhaps was seen as a curiosity by the earliest anthropologists, was and is that leadership is achieved and not, in most causes, directly linked to family lineage or ascription. Big Men, by the same token, do not enjoy the privileges of permanency in their role. The position requires maintenance and is dependent upon the continued support of supporters. This is garnered in a variety of ways depending upon circumstance but generally this support is sought through gifts of various forms, such as, in the Papua New Guinea context, the hosting of feasts and celebrations. The capacity of the Big Man to support these activities is generally seen as indication enough of their continued capabilities to maintain their position. The obligation that receiving gifts entails cements the continuing support of others within the community (Mauss, 1954).

In most tribal situations, there is no one Big Man but rather many Big Men. The relationship between these men can fluctuate through the entire range of human emotions. However, in most tribal situations the relationship tends towards a median of amicability. One of the skills of being a Big Man is the ability to expertly execute diplomacy as much as the ability to fight. The collective of Big Men in tribes such as the Siane forms a *de facto* council that confirms social policy and practices (Salisbury, 1965). In this variety of ways, Big Men are pivotal figures in the community. They offer a form of order and stability for the remainder by absorbing many conflictual situations personally. The requirement to achieve the role itself, however, adds a level of dynamism too, as younger men are eager to achieve the status of Big Man.

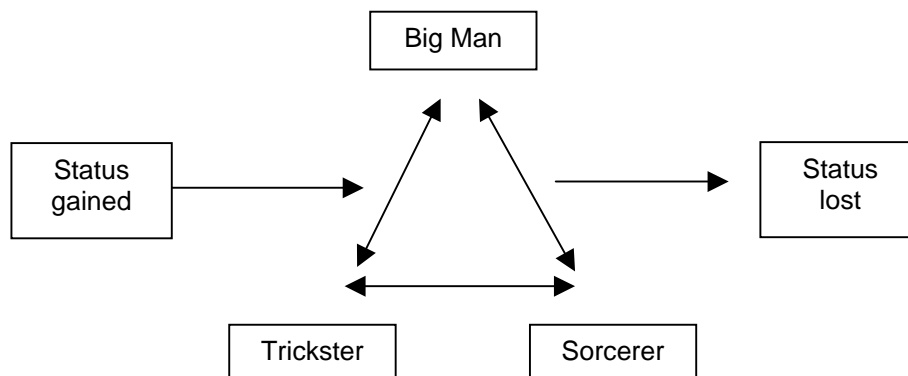


Figure 1: Status and interaction between holders of key community roles

The role of Big Man is readily seen within online discussion groups where this leadership role is taken up and maintained. In the environment of the finance forum, the Big Men provide a mediating and managerial role that is not related to the mechanical moderation of a forum, but rather to the social organization and maintenance of the community. Big Men, as befits their role and as a consequence of their knowledge, can also distribute gifts in the form of information relating to the price movements of particular securities to other participants. The Big Man in this situation is under no obligation to provide these gifts but to do so ensures longevity in their role and the continued receipt of the prestige that this may hold.

The Big Men ensure the relatively stable continuity of the community by restricting conflict primarily to other Big Men. These conflicts themselves may produce the unexpected side-effect of small gifts of information to loyal but silent supporters. Inevitably, the role of Big Man is a temporary one. There are others waiting to assume the role at signs of weakness or when the gifts of information imparted by the Big Man do not warrant the obligation of once loyal supporters. The former Big Man can disappear to become a ghost-like figure, occasionally referred to by former supporters. Alternately, opportunities may exist to again achieve the status of Big Man.

The Big Men are not the only players on this stage and while they may be the most respected and sought after individuals in the community their position is also pre-requisite on the presence of others who assume different sometimes antagonistic roles.

### **The Sorcerer**

Another key figure also found in the literature on tribalism in Papua New Guinea and elsewhere is the Sorcerer. The Tangu, a New Guinean highlands tribe, describe Sorcerers as *ranguma*, “a non-reciprocal man, a Man who will not engage his reciprocities as do others” (Burridge, 1965). With such importance placed on the obligations that receipt of the gifts that a Big Man offers, to not reciprocate clearly disrupts the order and stability of the community. The Sorcerer, while participating in the community also set themselves apart from that community. They do not conform to the community ethic and are therefore not thought of as being part of the community. The Sorcerer manipulates people within the community by precipitating and perpetuating moral conflict. Their actions are not happenstance or spontaneous, they are pre-meditated with clearly thought out purpose.

The Sorcerer does not offer support to, or recognition of, the Big Men unless there is an immediate and direct benefit in doing so. The Sorcerer, as the disrupter, assumes the role of the “rampier”, the person who will offer information to the whole community in order to benefit their own position. This is done with little or no regard for the detrimental effects that this may have on other individuals within the community. These actions can generate conflict between Big Men or even, on occasion, be seen as supportive and informative for other members of the community. In these circumstances the Sorcerer can be seen by parts of the community as a positive and beneficial member. Precipitating this conflict provides the Sorcerer with benefits that override any concerns for the stability of the whole community. Identifying the multi-faceted, tactical and self-motivated actions of the Sorcerer for what they are requires skill and experience, and is generally outside the abilities of all in the community except other Sorcerers and the Big Men.

### **The Trickster**

The Trickster is generally a comical figure and a relief from the seriousness of daily life. They often occupy this role as a result of inexperience or naïveté. While they may sometimes be mistaken for a Sorcerer, or even a Big Man, their antics are usually nothing more than an annoyance. However, in a finance forum, the Trickster’s actions can become a costly annoyance. In general, they do not consider the consequences of their actions. The “trick” is performed for the sake of the trick itself. If a Trickster performs a “ramping” activity it is not necessarily to benefit their own position, they may not even own the security. Their actions are more closely akin to that of an “experiment”, proof for perhaps nobody other than the Trickster that they can manipulate other people. The Trickster’s own inexperience and naïveté may also be their motivation. By performing various tricks they become more experienced in the motivations and sentiments that shape the community. This acquisition of knowledge may eventually enable them to assume a new role as Sorcerer or Big Man. The position of the Trickster also makes them vulnerable to manipulation by other Tricksters and by Sorcerers. In traditional descriptions of the Trickster’s role, they are often connected with Sorcerers and their actions are often claimed to be driven by a Sorcerer’s own motives. As a consequence of this relationship, the Trickster is primarily understood through their connection to the actions and conflict of Big Men and Sorcerers.

In the background to these three archetypes are the vast majority of the community who do not participate in the conflict of the community. While they are broad targets for the activities of the Sorcerers and Tricksters they do not occupy individual roles of importance. They offer generally tacit support to particular Big Men and accept gifts of information in exchange. The support is revealed in the maintenance of stability within the community and the steady continuity of the dominant framework of roles and relationships.

## **SHAPE-SHIFTING IDENTITIES**

While traditional societies provide a metaphysical position for shape-shifting, it is also a capability enabled by computer-mediated communication. Identities in the finance forum are reliant upon the individual participants themselves furnishing the identity. The forum itself relies upon the simple but clearly naive assumption that one physical user will equate with a single forum identity. Shape-shifting can be accomplished simply by assuming a new nickname and, for more sophisticated shape-shifters, is reinforced by shifting stated loyalties, changing support for a particular security, using different grammatical styles or even changing the accuracy of the spelling in postings. This capacity is a repeated focus for discussion in the finance forum just as it is an often-used source of stories in traditional cultures. In the context of the role of the Sorcerer, it is important for community members to be able to identify and protect themselves from the possibly nefarious consequences of a shape shifter's actions. At the very least, it is important to identify the veracity of the claims and the level of threat that shape-shifters' activities have upon the community. The difficulty of detecting a shape-shifter can also be accentuated in extreme situations when the identity being used is not a new one but that of another community member. Identity theft can not only be immediately damaging, it can also have long term consequences for the person who has had their identity stolen. In the finance forum examined, this form of the theft is difficult to undertake and still harder to document.

Not all shape-shifters, however, are necessarily Sorcerers. Other key identities may also utilise this technique for different and less destructive purposes. Similarly individual's attempting to assume more significant roles within the community may experiment with shape-shifting in order to better understand and "test" the community. Detecting the various purposes and identities that motivate an individual's use of shape-shifting requires experience with, and a familiarity of, the community. A combination of skills that is most readily found amongst the Big Men. Confrontation and conflict play important roles in helping the community protect themselves from identity shape-shifters.

## **AN EXAMPLE OF IDENTITY SHAPE-SHIFTING**

We will briefly examine an example of conflict centre around an incidence of shape-shifting to highlight how the tribalism concepts discussed above can be used to better understand social interaction in an online environment. The research method employed is broadly ethnographic in style. It draws upon the research foundations presented and articulated in anthropology and utilises an ethnographic approach for data collection. Ethnographic analysis is not linked primarily to a set time-frame of research but instead has the objective of providing thorough, careful and accurate exploration of the range of lived experience of the research subjects (Atkinson, 1990). Emphasis is usually placed upon detailing particular events and happenings that occurred at a research site. In general, the long-term experience of the ethnographer with the culture enables them to identify exemplary events that encapsulate the sentiments and experiences of the group at a broader level. The practitioner of ethnographic analysis, by accumulating and assimilating their contact with a range of informants, aims to provide a broad account of the lived experience and life-world of the community that is also informed by the researcher's own expertise and sensitivity to the subject.

When an aspiring Big Man (whom we have called Crashing) attempts to discredit the authoritative position of an established Big Man (whom we have called Minot) he proclaims his own skills as a successful investor and trader. His efforts to be considered seriously are attacked with a resultant deflation of his authority and a barrage of aggressive comments

from the Big Man's supporters eventually resulting in Crashing being caught identity shape-shifting. The result, in this case, clearly indicates that he is not capable of sustaining the leading role he is trying to claim. The conversation begins with Crashing in contention with the Big Man identified as Minot about his stock trading abilities:

**Message: Crashing shows Minot what a gain is**

*Again Minot, you called me a "hotshot" and joked that I could not do as well as you. And once again, I have blown you away. Last time it was BHP puts which increased 97% over 2 days. This time, its XJO puts which have increased 150% in 4 days. You can take your 30 or 40% gain and jump.*

*So keep trying to make me look like a fool and I will show who the true fool is.*

*I didnt need to bore and intimidate everyone with my "ego and attitude and proud of it" rubbish. No smartass comments. No "praise me praise me ... I'm gods gift to trading!" like you.*

*Just good info, and good tips with unbeatable results. Theres room on <forum name> for more tipsters than just you ya know.*

One of the community members pre-empts the antagonism Crashing's post might bring from other forum members:

**Reply by maderich to Crashing**

**Message: Crashing shows Minot what a gain is**

*Ease off guys, this really is becoming quite ridiculous. lets just get on with the trading, as if thats not hard enough at the moment! just as well we're in cyber space otherwise we'd have blood on the streets! maybe the market is getting to you but i cant imagine why on earth you would take such offence and get so riled by comments posted by a totally anonymous person thru a computer. ill give any person who makes a buck trading their due. by "you" im referring to anyone so infected by the nasty bug....lol. id like to think there is a brotherly spirit amongst the <forum name> crew, on a population basis we are a tiny few taking on an absolute giant in a game badly stacked against us, for those that prosper in this hard environment my compliments...i hope (with the aid of some <forum name> info from whoever) i remain one of those few. dont get mad.....make \$\$... lol*

Another community member challenges the ability and authority of Crashing to claim Big Man status prompting a more modest reply from Crashing:

**Reply by bono to Crashing**

*Hi Crashing,*

*The noticable difference between you is Minot accepts that he has an ego and is proud of his abilities. you on the other hand just make egotistical comments and generally insult posters with views that differ to yours. The 'mine is bigger than yours' attitude belongs in the playground. If you are making real money then great for you. The % is great but have you sold?, how much did you outlay?. You can't bank percentages. I stated in an earlier post that I would love to see a challenge between Minot and some of the great derrivative traders. You may be gods gift to trading Crashing but something tells me it is all in your mind or you wouldn't need to post such drivel.*



### **Reply by Crashing to bono**

bono:

*I dont for a minute think I am gods gift to trading or anything close to it, and I doubt anyone here does. I have posted numerous times on this forum that I am not a good trader due to discipline problems (and permabear symptoms). Never have I stated or implied that I am gods gift to trading.*

*It was nessesary to defend myself from Minots constant attacks and ridicule. So the guy has some talent. Lots of people here do. And I dont mean me. Does that give him the right to ridicule and harrass others with his big head? I am more interested in actually making money rather than going for HC legend status. Thats why I only post golden tips when made a fool of.*

*I must apologise for stooping to his level, but I was really frustrated after he abused me for giving him a compliment. Congratulations on your MAY call Minot. I offered you a truce but you chose instead to keep attacking me. Again I make the offer. Are you man enough to accept it?*

### **Reply by bono to Crashing**

*Good thoughts Crashing.*

*I must admit I missed it when you complimented Minot and then copped it. Probably crossed wires as alot here are. I think that some of your calls are great as some others here are. Another poster here advised some weeks ago that it was time to take profits in gold and got attacked. I think that was Michaelu. The attackers took a longer view and Michael was talking now. He was proved right in my opinion and the investor rather than trader may also be right further down the track. I didn't take profits as Michael suggested but it help me search a bit deeper and reduce my loss.*

*What I have noticed is that there is some pretty good talent here and all have different trading approaches so their tips are valid for those that trade in the same style. I guess no-one will win all the time...not even the Eagles (officially drug free!B#@%s..t) but it doesn't hurt to get some competition amongst those that have the guts to have ago. The attacks then counter attacks become unproductive but I guess gets a bit of spirit in the forum. Credit to you for offering the olive branch.*

Another forum member takes the opportunity to remind Crashing about an earlier incident where Crashing had chastised him for alleged boasting. This causes Crashing to react in anger while still cloaked in a second identity – that of Mahalo. Realising his mistake, Crashing comes forward with a more conciliatory approach. Interestingly trader22 does not notice Crashing's alternative identity instead seeing only the Crashing persona and responding accordingly.

### **Reply by trader22 to Crashing**

*Just yesterday Crashing, yesterday u accused me of boasting a 10% profit, of thinking i am "smarter" than all others on this forum. Then you put forward your "greater fool" theory. Listen to you just 24 hrs later, my god your arogance astounds me. Well done on proving your theory correct.*

### **Reply by mahalo to trader22**

*Trader22 you are a complete PLONKER!*

*Just cos my post was attached to the end of the thread after yours DOES NOT mean I was talking to you. I never mentioned your nick and my post was a general statement in the context of the thread.*

*You are barking up the wrong tree and making a complete dick of yourself.*

**Reply by trader22 to mahalo**

*Crashing,*

*If that is the case i apologise but on the thread your post was a reply to mine. Now that i have re read it i see that your post was directed at the original post.*

*Once again sorry for the mixup.*

**Reply by Crashing to trader22**

*Thats ok trader, we all make mistakes. Good to see you are man enough to apologise and make amends, unlike some others round here who would much rather start wars. I take back the insults.*

*Now it seems I am the plonker. I admit I have an alter ego but unlike others I have never used it to pat myself on the back or ramp stocks. I dare anyone to show otherwise. The only reason I have this other nick is because people treat the Crashing nick with predudice and contempt. I made many enemies at the end of the tech boom when I told everyone a crash was coming. Clearly this was not in the best interests of the rampers at the time. Not hard to see why I made many enemies there. I made more enemies when I constantly protested against the ramping and "boiler room" style scams going on in a certain chatroom.*

*Yep, I was banned from there and I'm proud of it. Some of the instigators have since been prosecuted by ASIC. I started up a new room where ramping and rip-off's were strictly prohibited. That made a few more enemies.*

*Regardless of the content of "Crashing" comments they will ridicule and antagonise "Crashing" because they bear some childish grudge. The same people act differently when I posted under "mahalo". Just goes to show that some here have nothing better to do than whine, moan and pick fights.*

*As bono says I sometimes reply with egotistic and arrogant comments. True, thats me. For that I apologise. Will try to avoid it in the future.*

*Gotta be careful after a few celebratory brewskies on a friday.....can make a complete dick of yaself. Quite funny really.....*

*Anyone else gonna admit multiple nicks?*

*I didnt think so!*

The unmasking of Crashing drew a number of angry responses from other forum members. For example:

**Reply by thisist to Crashing**

*I dont know why <forum name> (or whoever owns it) cant get more registration details from users to prevent multiple nicks. You can use all the excuses you like but your actions are why you have detractors. I remember*

*being on daytraders when you were around, and all you tried to do was cause trouble. I agree, there were certain people who tried to abuse the trust, as there is here and everywhere else. However, trying to obtain some personal gratification at the expense of 95% of honest traders/ investors trying to share common knowledge on a chatroom is what I would call egotistical.*

*If you honestly believe you have been hard done by then fine explain yourself, and work hard to gain the respect back that you had lost but dont go around as different nicks. It makes me wonder how many other nicks you have.*

However, others forum members tried to glean advantage from the situation. For example, the trickster stucco (see Campbell, 2001) encourages further conflictual competition between the two protagonists – Crashing and Minot. Possibly in the hope that useful trading information and strategy will result from such a contest.

***Reply by stucco to Crashing***

*Good call Crashing, I would like to see you and the Minot pick some directions over a 2 week period.*

Within these exchanges, there is the constant sense of the distance between the role played out in the online community and the individual themselves. While speculation constantly surfaces within the forum about the multiplicity of identities that a particular individual may hold, few such deceptions are ever revealed comprehensively. A Big Man might use the guise of a Trickster to attack or challenge a rival Big Man or Sorcerer. In this way, the status of the Big Man alias is not at risk through loss of face or status. Alternatively, a Trickster alter ego may be used to criticise the Big Man persona thus drawing other forum members into a debate out of support or sympathy. Similarly, Sorcerer aliases may be used to shamelessly promote stocks without tarnishing the Big Man alias. Forum members are able to use the three roles of Big Man, Sorcerer and Trickster to create, or simulate, conflict that assists in the maintenance of status and position within the group. It is interesting to note that Minot, the Big Man challenged in this thread, at no time responded in any of the posts that were made.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research explores the notion of conflict within the “tribe” of a technologically enabled community. The focus for this paper is upon the internal machinations of a specific online finance forum. An anthropologically informed type of conflict analysis is used to consider the forum as a conflictual group directed and influenced by Big Men. The Big Man analogy is utilised as the most appropriate description of the community experienced in the finance forum. The individual investors found on the site display the range of socio-cultural identities associated with the tribal hierarchies of the Papua New Guinea highlands. Uninitiated personal investors, for example, aim for the status and recognition of day traders (who bear the financial scars of initiation). These initiation rites do not, however, include the rogues, Big Men or other socially important community members who all exist above or outside this pettiness. The stockbrokers, too, are part of this tribal organization by facilitating shaman-like exchange between the members of the tribe and the object of their interest – the stock market.

The significance of the current study is found in the opportunities that this “tribe” oriented approach offers to information systems research. By exploiting the well-trodden explorations of Anthropological research it is possible to examine the contemporary boundaries of the organization in a manner that offers an alternative paradigmatic direction to that currently offered by discussions of trust communities. By acknowledging that conflict has both functional and dysfunctional outcomes in an organization *and* that this is an inevitable, irreducible and core component of any organization, the scope for information systems research is greatly expanded. This is a useful and worthy expansion that can only fill out our understanding of contemporary organisations and information systems.

## REFERENCES

- Atkinson P., (1990) *The Ethnographic Imagination: Textual Constructions of Reality*, London: Routledge.
- Benedict, R., (1935) *Patterns of Culture*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Burridge, K.O.L., (1965) "Tangu, Northern Madang District", in P. Lawrence and M. J. Meggitt (eds.), *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
- Campbell, J. A. (2001) In and out Scream and Shout: An Internet Conversation about Stock Price Manipulation, in R. H. Sprague JR (ed.), *Proceedings of the 34th Annual Hawaii International Conference on system Sciences*, 3-6 January 2001.
- Evans-Pritchard, E. E., (1976) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Geyskens, I. Steenkamp, J. and Kumar, N., (1998) Generalisations about Trust in Marketing Channel Relationships Using Meta-Analysis in *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 15, 223-248.
- Glasse, R. M., (1965) "The Huli of the Southern Highlands", in P. Lawrence & M. J. Meggitt (eds), *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Grey, C. and Garsten C., (2001) Trust, Control and Post-bureaucracy, in *Organization Studies*, 22:2, 229–250.
- Keesing, R.M., (1935) *Cultural Anthropology: a contemporary perspective*, Fort Worth: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.
- Knights D., Noble, F., Vurdubakis, T. and Willmott, H., (2001) Chasing Shadows: Control, Virtuality and the Production of Trust, *Organization Studies*, 22:2, 311–336.
- Malinowski, B., (1979) *The ethnography of Malinowski: the Trobriand Islands*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Mauss, M. (1954) *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, London: Cohen & West.
- Mayer, R.C. Davis, J.H. and Schoorman, F.D., (1995) An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust, *Academy of Management Review*, 23, 709-734.
- McKnight, D.H. Cummings, L.L. and Chervany, N.L., (1998) Initial Trust Formation in New Organizational Relationships, *Academy of Management Review*, 473-490.
- Mead, M., (1969) *Social Organization of Manua*, Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Mead, M., 1959 *An anthropologist at work: writings of Ruth Benedict*, Westport Conn: Greenwood Press.
- Muyskens, J., (1998) Web Trust: Assurances and E-Commerce, *Australian Accountant* (68:7), August, 56-57.
- Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., (1977) *The social anthropology of Radcliffe-Brown*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Salisbury, R. F., (1965) The Siane of the Eastern Highlands, in P. Lawrence & M. J. Meggitt (eds), *Gods, Ghosts and Men in Melanesia*, Melbourne, Oxford University Press.
- Shapiro, S.P., (1987) The Social Control of Impersonal Trust, *American Journal of Sociology*, November, 623-658.
- Stewart, K. (2000) "Transference as a Means of Building Trust in World Wide Web Site", in Wanda Orlikowski, Soon Ang, Peter Weill, Helmut Krcmar and Janice DeGross (eds) *Proceedings of the Twenty-First International Conference on Information Systems (ICIS)*, December 15-17, 459-464.
- Tweney, D., (1998) Lack of Trust Hurts Consumer Commerce for Online Retailers, *Infoworld*, 20:19, May 11, 77.

## **COPYRIGHT**

John Campbell, Anita Greenhill and Gordon Fletcher © 2002. The authors assign to ACIS and educational and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to ACIS to publish this document in full in the Conference Papers and Proceedings. Those documents may be published on the World Wide Web, CD-ROM, in printed form, and on mirror sites on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.