CAPITAL AND STRATIFICATION WITHIN VIRTUAL COMMUNITY:
A CASE STUDY OF METAFILTER.COM


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**Capital and Stratification within Virtual Community: A Case Study of Metafilter.com**

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**Abstract**

In this thesis, I conduct a case study of a virtual community (Metafilter.com) in order to apply Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and class to an online community. The specific goals for this thesis are in mapping the different forms of capital that are active in Metafilter in order to see how they structure its social space. The questions I address are: 1) what forms of capital are active in the Metafilter community? 2) How are they similar to the forms of capital presented by Bourdieu? Having identified the active forms of capital, 3) do they act to influence stratification in the Metafilter community?

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# CHAPTER ONE:

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Research Context and Rationale for this Study

A large proportion of past studies on virtual communities have focused on whether or not virtual communities could be defined as 'communities' in the traditional meaning of the word (Kollock and Smith, 1999; Parrish, 2002; Rheingold, 1996; Watson 1997; Reid 1996; Baym 1996; Goldwin 1996). I argue that standard sociological definitions for community (Hillery, 1982) adequately describe virtual communities, with only minor adjustments needed to account for the specificities of the medium. Secondly, participants in virtual communities experience and define these spaces as 'real,' and therefore they should be seen as being real in their consequences.

An especially crucial theme in the study of virtual communities, which is of particular importance to this thesis, is focused on the interaction and social structure of participants (Hagel and Armstrong, 2004; Burnett 2000), applying the concepts of social and cultural capital (Prell, 2003; Ferlander, 2003; Daniel et. al, 2003; Rafaeli et. al., 2004). These concepts originated from the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu, who explored various definitions of types of 'capital' to explain the structure of class based societies.

In this present thesis, I conduct a case study of a virtual community, called Metafilter, to apply Bourdieu's theory of capital and class to an online community. According to Bourdieu, the first task when studying a new social space is 'mapping' the active forms of capital. Existing research has shown that the notions of social and cultural capital are applicable constructs that can be useful in studying online communities; this research also shows that virtual communities are highly socially structured. However, this research works with the assumption that the forms of capital that are active in the 'real world' are directly compatible with the 'virtual world.'

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The specific goals for this thesis are in mapping the different forms of capital that are active in Metafilter in order to see how they structure its social space. The questions I wish to address are: 1) what forms of capital are active in the Metafilter community? 2) How are they similar to the forms of capital presented by Bourdieu? Having identified the active forms of capital, 3) do they act to influence stratification in the Metafilter community?

## 1.2 Thesis Outline

The following section will act as an overview of what the reader can expect from the rest of this thesis. The goal of chapter two is to examine the existing research on virtual communities, looking at the debate over defining virtual community as 'real' communities. This chapter will also discuss the sociological concept of community, and will conclude with a working definition for virtual community. Chapter three will explore the theoretical framework, first detailing Bourdieu's theory of capital and class, and then by examining research that has been done within virtual communities and that has used aspects of Bourdieu's theory of capital. Chapter four details the methodological framework I will be using, looking at the methodological concepts of virtual ethnography, case study research, as well as computer mediated discourse analysis. Chapter four also explains my data collection methods and ethical considerations.

Chapter five looks at the 'mechanics' of Metafilter. This chapter explores the design of Metafilter, as well as its rules and norms of behavior and interaction, specifically in terms of the Metafilter's notion of 'self-policing.' Chapter six examines the social properties of Metafilter, investigating its power structures and de-emphasis on individuality. Chapter six focuses on users who have risen to celebrity status within Metafilter, and looks at the commonalities that these users have. This section is the first

look at the active forms of capital on Metafilter. Chapter seven concludes this thesis with

a discussion of the active forms of capital found on Metafilter, and then compares them

with Bourdieu's forms of capital. Chapter seven also discusses the ways in which the

forms of capital work to stratify participants in Metafilter.

# CHAPTER TWO:

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

This chapter will explore the history of academic studies of virtual communities, which has focused primarily on the 'pros' or 'cons' of the effects that virtuality has on the individual and society, as well as whether or not online social aggregates can be properly labeled as "community" in the traditional meaning of the word. After looking at the virtual community debate, I will examine some definitions of community, followed by a discussion of the structure of virtual communities themselves; how they are experienced by users as well as a typology of the different forms that virtual communities take on.

## 2.1 The Virtual Community Debate

The debate over calling online social aggregates 'community' has centered on the similarity with the traditional face-to-face 'community.' Two opposing visions are popular – a positive approach (the 'pro' side) and a negative approach (the 'cons' side) (Kollock and Smith, 1999, p. 4). Authors who see virtual community as being similar to real world community point to its positive effects in facilitating democracy and prosperity, the renewal of community in the modern world, job creation, and education (p. 4). There is a common understanding that computer networks create new places of assembly that generate opportunities for employment, political participation, social contact and entertainment (p. 4). Parrish (2002) notes that the proponents of virtual community focus on the following five areas: (1) transcendence of Cartesian space; (2) emphasis on choice; (3) fluidity of identity; (4) evaluation by communication; and (5) equality (p. 273). Cyberspace is seen as a bastion of hope for those who see the isolation and fragmentation of modern life; a place for humanity to reconnect.

Parish (2002) observes that objections to virtual community come in two broad varieties: objections of consanguinity and geography, (the argument that people must be

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related either by blood or place of birth/residence to form a community); and objections

to the medium itself (i.e. those who identify some aspect of the way in which online

communication is allegedly problematic for the concept of community). (p. 264). Authors

who are uncomfortable with the rise of virtual communications view them as a new

opportunity for surveillance and social control, as well as for its part in the increased

strength of existing concentrations of power (Kollock & Smith, 1999, 4).

### 2.1.1 'Pro' Virtual Community

The strongest proponents of virtual communities come largely from people who

are involved in them. Howard Rheingold (1996) describes "The Well" (Whole World

'Lectronic Link) as an 'authentic community' (p. xvi), and says that it is comparable to

its participants real lives as they "use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and

argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share

emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose

them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk" (p. xvii). He explains

that "I care about these people I met through my computer, and I care deeply about the

future of the medium that enables us to assemble" (xv). Other authors, such as Reid

(1996b), point out that for members of virtual communities, the physical aspect may be

only virtual, but the "emotional aspect is actual" (p. 403).

Watson (1997) states that in her years working as a cyber ethnographer in an

online community for the rock band Phish, there was a "community which created not

only individual benefits for participants, but also a group strength which enabled them to

alter the routines of the record industry" (p. 102). Thus, the online experience of sending

computer mediated messages acted in creating new social bonds, while at the same time

influencing the real world environment (in this case, the record industry). Watson

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explains that "we should begin thinking of community as a product, not of shared space, but of shared relationships among people" (p. 120). Other proponents see the 'virtual community' as being founded on 'points of difference' rather than similarities between individuals (Kelemen & Smith, 2001, 376).

## 2.1.2 Against Virtual Community

.       On the other side of debate, authors such as Reid (1996a) note that though the Internet seems anarchic, online communities "are as subject to the enactment of power and privilege as are more familiar face to face social systems" (p. 132). Kolko and Reid (1998) note that though physical characteristics are not visible, people are still re-categorized with new status symbols and "new languages of social domination and subordination" (p. 216).

Baym (1998) argues that we should be worried about using cyberspace to escape the consequences of an increasingly difficult 'real world' (p. 37). Online users come overwhelmingly from first world countries, and thus she is concerned with the homogeneity of on-line users that is further enhanced by the fact that a majority of the world's population has no access to the Internet (p. 36). Other authors such as Kelemen and Smith (2001) state that making primary social connections in virtual communities could be re-interpreted as a "strategy of social defense," where users cling to virtual communication as a way to cope with the "real world" (p. 376). Thus, they conclude that the virtual identity becomes a form of narcosis, providing individuals with 'alternative realities' that 'trick' their senses through technical manipulation (p. 376).

The most problematic aspect for many authors is the fact that people are forming community online at the 'expense' of traditional community. A common complaint lies with the fact that when communication is mediated through computer networks, it lacks

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the connection formed with face to face contact. As noted by Watson (1997), an unwillingness to apply the term 'community' as a descriptor for online collectivities stems either from the desire to hold on to a specific conception of community in the hands of those with the knowledge to classify a 'true' community, or from an unwillingness to recognize cyberspace as medium with the potential to change traditional social arrangements (121).

Other opponents, such as Mike Godwin (1996), ask whether you can really call someone a neighbor if you can't see a face or hear a voice (p. xv). Weinreich (1997) does not believe that it is possible to construct communities online as virtual communication cannot substitute for the sensual experience of meeting people face-to-face. He says that "trust, cooperation, friendship and community are based on contacts in the sensual world. You communicate through networks but you don't live in them." Weinreich (1997) states that people may get to know other people through computer mediated communication, providing the means to maintain contact and interconnections between people and organizations, but they "won't constitute communities because computer mediated communication cannot substitute for the sensual experience of meeting one another face-to-face." Driskell and Lyon (2002) note that members of virtual communities are physically and socially distant. Individuals who are looking online for companionship or support rather may find virtual communities unfulfilling, and they note the "low level of trust, intimacy and commitment makes the kinds of emotional support associated with traditional, local place communities difficult to replicate in cyberspace" (p. 383).

Authors such as Gattiker (2001), worry that communicating online may come at the expense of communicating with people off-line. Turkle (1995) sums up the argument; "is it really sensible to suggest that the way to revitalize community is to sit alone in our

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rooms, typing at our networked computers and filling our lives with virtual friends?" She says that "instead of solving real problems, both personal and social, many of us appear to be choosing to invest ourselves in unreal places. Women and men tell me that the rooms and mazes on MUDs are safer than city streets, virtual sex is safer than sex anywhere, MUD friendships are more intense than real ones, and when things don't work out you can always leave."

Fernback and Thompson (1995) state that virtual communication offers some advantages over face-to-face communication, such as the removal of preconceptions based on appearance, ease of coming together, and equal access to the conversation among those participating. However, the disadvantages outweigh the advantages because appearances do matter; conversation should not be based solely on efficiency; some ideas *are* more useful than others. An example is provided by LambdaMOO creator Curtis Pavel (1996), who describes the "shipboard syndrome," where there is a feeling that since one will likely never meet anyone from the community in real life, there is less social risk involved, and thus inhibitions are "safely lowered" (p. 357). Ryan (1997) states that disembodied communication, where nobody has to say who they actually are, results in exchanges that are vapid and repetitive just because they lack the constraints of real life; "free speech is free when it is responsible --not in the sense of being dreary and commonplace, but in the sense of the utterer having to live with the consequences of their utterances." For example, there is the well documented case of a virtual rape that occurred in the LambdaMOO, where one user took control of the community (disabling other users from talking) and proceeded to describe how he was raping and torturing the female users who were online at the time (see Dibbel, 1993).

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### 2.1.3 Virtual Communities?

How then can we view virtual community? Scott Peck (1987) warns of "pseudocommunities," which are groups that proclaim that they are communities, but lack the engagement and acceptance of individual differences to work as one (p. 88) Many question the validity of virtual community when it can be effortlessly turned off when convenient to the user. Pippa (2004) shows that the Internet is a medium where users have almost unlimited choices and minimal constraints about where to go and what to do; as such, "commitments to any particular online group can often be shallow and transient when another is but a mouse click away" (p. 33). Similarly, as Jones (1997) points out, with virtual community no longer do we as members of a group belong to the community, rather the community belongs to us (p. 16).

Examining both sides of the virtual community debate, the issue of which side is 'right' is as murky as ever. If we are to believe Rheingold and Watson, there are clear advantages for the people who are involved in virtual communities, including forming diverse relationships with people all over the world who share common interests. However, it is important to see virtual communities as having 'real' consequences for the people using them, such as being subject to social control in an environment where people are anonymous and can 'turn off' the community at will. Opponents of the rise of the virtual community worry that we are shutting ourselves off from real world human contact in favour of relationships found online.

On the other hand, a recent survey conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project (Norris, 2004) suggests that in general, the Internet both widens the experience of community (by helping to connect with others of different beliefs or backgrounds) and deepens the experience of community by reinforcing and strengthening

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existing social networks (p. 40). Following Fisher (2002), the truth about virtual community lies somewhere in between these utopian and dystopian interpretations; "in order to understand realistically this technology that is changing society, we must recognize the extreme readings of its effects as what they are; products of a cultural lag between the diffusion of the Internet across society and society's adoption of the technology."

### 2.1.4 Social Network Analysis

Proponents of social network analysis suggest that the *social* aspect of community should be emphasized over the *spatial* (Wellman and Hampton, 2002). Wellman and Hampton (2002) note that prior studies of virtual community looks at "community" as something that is physically bounded, "but by geographies of bites and bytes rather than by streets and alleyways"(p. 1), and "online relationships are treated as entities in themselves as if existing social networks and existing means of communication did not exist" (p. 1).

For social network proponents, a community is nothing more than a network (as opposed to a local group). Wellman and Hampton (2002) note that "We are not members of a society which operates in "little-boxes," dealing only with fellow members of the few groups to which we belong: at home, in our neighborhood, workplaces, or in cyberspace. Rather, each person has his/her own "personal community" of kinship, friendship, neighboring and workmate ties"(p.1). They state that when maintaining ties within a community, people use many different methods of communication, and as a result the dystopian view of the Internet eroding real world communities is off base. Hampton (2002) notes that when we look at cyberspace while ignoring the network of social relations that extend in to other social settings, we fail to "consider the cross-

cutting nature of community. Online relationships should not be treated as entities in themselves as if existing social networks and existing means of communication did not exist"(p.2).

An in-depth study by Wellman et. al. (2003) looked into the effects that the Internet has had on real world community, by studying a real world community (Netville a suburb in that was built with free broadband Internet access) and examining the ways in which having access to the Internet effects the real world community. They state that the developed world has been experiencing a shift away from communities based on small-group-like villages and neighborhoods and towards flexible partial communities based on networked households and individuals, for over a century (par. 5). Wellman et. el. Note three specific changes that have been facilitated by the proliferation of the Internet (par. 34). First, social changes such as birth control and liberalized divorce laws and dual-career families have both reflected and driven the transition from a place-to-place to a person-to-person mode of domestic and community life (par. 35). Secondly, land-use changes, such as zoning separation of residential from commercial, as well as work uses meant that "people had less contact with coworkers in the community and that their travel time had eaten into their community networking time" (par 36). Third, technological changes such as car cultures (more people driving, freeways and drive through), affordable air transportation, as well as affordable long distance rates enabled "people to have more frequent meaningful contact with physically distant relatives and friends" (par. 37).

Wellman et. al. state that instead of operating at the expense of the 'real' face-to-face world, virtual communication is an extension, with people using all means of communication to connect with friends and relatives (par. 38). They note that the

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Internet is actually just another means of communication that is being integrated into the regular patterns of social life (par 38), and proposes the rise of a society based on "networked individualism," and notes that the Internet is helping each individual to personalize his or her own community; "this is neither a prima facie loss nor gain in community, but rather a complex, fundamental transformation in the nature of community" (par. 44).

## 2.2 Definitions of Community

This debate over the 'definition' of what is and is not 'community' is nothing new to sociology; a great deal of sociological analysis has gone into producing an authoritative definition of community, an academic concept that has been debated by sociologists for over two hundred years. The critique of modern society provided by classical sociology often centers on the loss of community. As noted by Driskell and Lyon (2002), social theorists such as Tonnies, Simmel, Durkheim, Marx and Weber all concluded (in one way or another) that the quantity and quality of community is reduced when a society becomes more urban or more industrial (p. 373).

However, defining what community 'is' has remained almost unattainable in some respects. As noted by Bell and Newby (1971), "the more [one] attempts to define it . . . the more elusively does the essence of it seem to escape" (p. 21). They state that elaborating on what the concept of community *involves* has not proven difficult to explain; attempts to describe what it *is*, however, have proven virtually impossible without value judgments (p. 21). This is largely due to the fact that most authors writing about community have not been immune to the "emotive overtones" that the word 'community' carries with it; thus, the subjective feelings that the term conjures frequently lead to confusion between what *is* and what it *should be* (p. 21).

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In the 1950's George Hillery (1982) went through the existing literature on community in order to establish a 'super-definition' using only explicit statements of definition. What he discovered was ninety-four unique definitions, which he subjected to qualitative and quantitative analysis. He notes that there is no agreement over what the object that the term "community" is supposed to describe, except that it refers to something that is living (p. 13). Hillery says that "an attempt to create a super-definition was futile, since there were unavoidable contradictions by recognized authorities" (p. 27). Hillery notes that the "concept of community is to be found within the broader concepts of social interaction (with or without area), and that an area of common ties and social interaction can be present in a community (though some authors prescribe additional and limiting factors), no matter how many other types of groups and phenomenon are also community" (p. 24). Hillery worked the ninety-four definitions into seven subclasses of definitions, and saw a majority of definitions included elements of area, common ties, and social interaction (p. 23).

If attempts to define 'community' have proven to be problematic, it is no surprise to find an increasingly large number of definitions for the 'virtual community' (see Baker & Ward, 2000; Blanchard, 2004; Gattiker, 2001; Kelemen & Smith, 2001; Plant, 2004; Stevenson, 2002). However, I believe the most useful to be from Robin Hamman (1997), who worked Hillery's seven subclasses of community into a workable four point outline. He defines the sociological term 'community' as meaning "(1) a group of people (2) who share social interaction (3) and some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group (4) and who share an area for at least some of the time." Hamman notes that since the term community in both its everyday and sociological usage is almost always used in a positive manner, it is not at all surprising that we find that many have

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lamented its loss over the past century as we have shifted from rural to urban societies. This feeling of loss towards traditional forms of community informs both sides of the virtual community debate. People who are positive about virtual community see it as a way of reconnecting a fragmented society, while those who are negative about virtual community see it as further erosion of face to face human contact.

A word of caution comes from Parrish (2002), who explains that problems arise when one attempts to apply traditional communitarian thought to the virtual arena, "as though virtual community must directly mimic the specific manifestations of community found in geographic space" (p. 261). Evans (2003) notes that this misunderstanding stems from the fact that in previous times, "community" and "place" were closely linked. Thus, it is important to identify the similarities and differences that exist between traditional and virtual communities. While Parrish notes that both forms of community exist and arise from the same general ideals, problems arise when one tries to transfer classic understandings of community to the new virtual world (p. 261). Thus, while the definition of a traditional community may be used as a springboard to an acceptable definition of virtual community, it must be done in ways that accommodate how virtual communities are both similar and unique

## 2.3 Experiencing Virtual Community

Quentin Jones (1997) says that an examination of how virtual community is perceived "highlights how virtual communities are more than just a series of computer mediated communication messages. They are sociological phenomena. . . [there is a] need to distinguish between a virtual community's cyber-place and the virtual community itself." Following Jones, it is important to note the distinct difference between a community of individuals who meet online and the virtual space these groups occupy

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.The spatial aspect directly influences their social structure, constraining the range of action and directly influencing the substance of communication between users. The spatial aspect of the internet comes out of computer networks that allow people to create a range of new social arenas in which to meet and interact with one another (Kollock & Smith, 1999, 3). Blanchard (2004) states that virtual communities can be seen as being "virtual behavior settings," which are created through the shared interactions of members and a developing sense of "space or place."

### 2.3.1 The 'Space' of Virtual Community

Steven G Jones (1998b), one of the leading authors of virtual community, says that the 'space' of cyberspace is "predicated on knowledge and information, on the common beliefs and practices of a society abstracted from physical space" (p. 15). He notes that virtual communities are social spaces in which people still meet face to face, but under new definitions of both "meet" and "face" (p. 15). Ward (1999) says the "merging together of the physical and virtual realms creates a new hybrid space that is neither wholly physical or virtual" (p.96). Ward points out that the popular rhetoric surrounding cyberspace continues to perpetuate the myth that the physical and virtual are somehow different entities; they are "portrayed as existing in separation from each other and possessing thoroughly distinct characteristics" (p. 96).

### 2.3.2 Embodied Identity in Virtual Community

Though online communities may be spatially virtual, online communication is rooted in an "embodied identity," and thus it is necessary to reach a coherent vision of this to understand the workings of virtual communities (Koklo and Reid, 1998, p. 227-228). Baym (1998) suggests that online groups are often woven into the fabric of offline

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life rather than set in opposition to it (p. 63). Her evidence is the pervasiveness of offline

contexts in online interaction and the movement of on-line relationships off-line.

Removing the dichotomy of 'real' and 'virtual,' it is easier to see the Internet as a hybrid

space. Thus, we cannot begin to understand the 'virtual community' if we ignore its ties

to the real world of social networks that influence and shape communications online.

### 2.3.3 The Symbolic Nature of Virtual Communities

Given that web communities exist through the literal manipulation of symbols

(typed messages that individuals send to each other), one way of making sense of these

hybrid spaces is to focus on the symbolic aspects of web communities. Cohen (1985)

states that the boundaries that encapsulate the identity of the community is often called

into being by the "exigencies of social integration" (p. 12). Cohen shows that community

boundaries are largely symbolic in character, and thus, they not only have different

meanings for different people, but it also suggests that the boundaries of the community

may be "utterly imperceptible" to non-members (p. 13). He says that the symbolic nature

of the community is held in common by its members, but its meanings vary with its

members' unique orientations to it. In the face of this variety of meaning, the

consciousness of community has to be kept alive through manipulation of its symbols. (p.

15). In other words, the sharing of symbols does not mean that all members share that

same meaning. Cohen notes that "the reality and efficacy of the community's boundary -

and therefore the community itself – depends upon its symbolic construction and

embellishment" (p. 15).

This is backed up by the research of Reid (1996a), who shows that users of

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) have devised specific systems of symbolism and textual

significance to ensure that they achieve understanding, despite the lack of more visual

channels of communication (p. 397). Reid notes a variety of virtual social sanctions that have arisen amongst the IRC community in order to punish users who disobey the rules of etiquette and the integrity of those shared systems of the interpretation (p. 398). Community on IRC is created through the "symbolic strategies and collective beliefs," by which users share a common language, as well as a shared web of verbal and textual significances that are substitutes for, and yet distinct from, the shared networks of meaning in virtual communities (p. 408).

### 2.3.4 Temporal Restraints

Time is another aspect of that is important in the definition of virtual community; Jones (1997) says that we think more about the web's ability to 'take us places,' (the popular advertisement for the software company Microsoft asked consumers "Where do you want to go today?") and less about its insertion into the mundane temporal practices of our everyday life. If we can say that the spatial aspect of cyberspace exists in a hybrid space of real and virtual, where does time fit into the picture? According to Baym, the temporal structure of virtual communication are either synchronic (communications that occur in "real time", such as in a chat room) or asynchronic (they occur at different times, such as on a message board) (p. 43).

Harold Innis (1951), a communications theorist in the mid twentieth century, saw a dichotomy between those cultures obsessed with space and those cultures obsessed with time. As the Internet largely conquers 'space,' it seems to be preoccupied with conquering 'time' as well. Innis says that "the general restiveness inherent in an obsession with time has led to various attempts to restore concepts of community such as have appeared in earlier civilizations" (p. 88). This is important to virtual communities because the structure of online communication allows not only the elimination of space

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(talking to a friend in Australia from your apartment in Toronto), but a bridging of unique

temporal conditions allow for communication between opposing time zones. Alternately,

looking at the temporal conditions allows us to examine the amount of 'real time' spent

online as an important aspect of virtual community.

### 2.3.5 Power in Virtual Communities

Lash (2002) discusses the social impacts of technology. In his book *Critique of*

*Information,* Lash examines irrationality of information overloads, misinformation,

disinformation, and "out-of-control information…[that] leads to a *dis*informed

information society" (p. 2). Similar to Innis, Lash states that

> once the medium becomes the message, or the byte of information, the stakes are
> radically altered. The value of a discursive book will last 20 or more years; the
> informational message in the newspaper will have value for only a day. After a day we
> throw it in the garbage; there is no time for reflection. It must be produced pretty much in
> real time, a time contiguous with the event, separable with difficulty indeed from the
> event, and in this sense 'indexical.' This is another way in which time is compressed in
> informationalization. It is very different from narrative or discourse. The bit of
> information has its effect on you without the sort of legitimizing argument you are
> presented with in discourse. Information here is outside of a systemic conceptual
> framework. (p. 3).

Lash notes that power in the information age was attached to property as a mechanical

means of production. However, it is now attached to intellectual property; "it is

intellectual property, especially in the form of patent, copyright and trademark, that put a

new order on the out-of-control swirls of bits and bytes of information so that they can be

valorized to create profit" (p. 3). Thus for Lash, power is no longer something that takes

place between elements in the system, between capitalists and proletariat, but instead has

to do with exclusion from the system, both from the loops of information and

communication flows (p. 75). This is especially true for the virtual community; power

doesn't come from anything physical, but rather from control of information.

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### 2.3.6 A Working Definition of Virtual Community

Virtual Communities can be seen to have similar properties as real world community, with a number of features that are unique and need to be accounted for in a working definition. This definition works specifically in relation to the study of the social properties of virtual communities as they are experienced online (as opposed to an examination of the real world effects of participation in a virtual community such as in social network analysis). This definition is similar to the way in which social network analysis emphasizes a social definition of community, while taking into account the physical dimensions (comprised of bits and bytes) that enable and constrain action within a virtual community.

A virtual community can be defined as referring to (1) a group of people (2) who share social interaction (3) with some common ties between themselves and the other members of the group (largely based on interest) (4) that communicate within a hybrid virtual space rooted in the real world (5) that is symbolically constructed and (6) exist in a variety of temporal structures and systems.

Virtual communities are constructed by users who participate from the real world, and as such, they bring with them their real world experience and expectations. In fact, a majority of virtual communities are structured around a topic (or topics) of interest that exist exclusively in the real world (for example, web communities centered around a specific sports team, television show, political party or celebrity). As such, virtual communities do not exist in 'isolation' from the real world. However, because their interactions occur within the confines of the virtual setting, the communication that happens within them can be seen as existing in the symbolically constructed 'hybrid space,' and that are then unique to the online realm.

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## 2.4 A Typology of Virtual Communities

The first virtual communities were the bulletin-board services (BBS) of the mid 1970's. The BBS type of asynchronous posting forum has carried through to present day, continuing to be one of the main forms of virtual community. The other major early form of virtual community was the synchronous 'chat' communities, first popularized on the internet relay chat (IRC), where communities form in "chat rooms." The third early form of virtual community is the asynchronous mailing list, where the community corresponds via email lists.

Since the commercialization of the internet, all virtual communities have used either asynchronous or synchronous communication. Many current popular virtual communities facilitate both types in one form or another. For example, synchronous communication occurs in chat rooms, one to one messaging or communicating real time in a video game; asynchronous communication occurs in forum postings or email exchanges. Gardinau (2003, p. 72) provides a useful table for the different types of virtual communications which I have updated to reflect some current trends (specifically, the rise in popularity of the "blog", a webpage that is constantly updated with commentary and links, often particular to an individual's day to day life; a "community blog" is a blog that can be added to by any member of the community, and is characterized by the sharing and discussion of links).

Hagel and Armstrong (in Plant, 2004, p 55) broadly defined four different types of virtual community: communities of interest, communities of relationship (i.e. newer types of "social network" virtual communities which gained popularity in 2003 such as Friendster or Orkut, both of which rely on pre-existing social networks), communities of fantasy (i.e. Multi User Dungeon's, and more recently, massive multiplayer online role-

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playing game's such as *Everquest*), and communities of transaction (i.e. eBay) (p. 55). It should be noted that these types are not mutually exclusive; it is possible that a virtual community could contain any or all of the above types present at any time.

Seeing that the structure and types of virtual communities remains (for the most part) stable, it is no surprise that the types of behavior are fairly stable as well. According to Burnett (2000), behaviours within virtual communities may be divided into two broad types: non-interactive behaviours and interactive behaviours. Non-Interactive behaviours (otherwise known as "lurking") refer to participants reading of portions of text created by other participants, and Burnett notes that these behaviours do not necessarily constitute interaction. This requires the process of "interlocution," which refers to the presence of both a speaker and a listener in a face-to-face event. In a virtual community, Burnett notes, it "requires that participants are willing to be active as both readers and writers, that they take a dynamic role in ensuring that the discussions remain viable, ongoing, and self-sustaining in the long run." Interactive behaviours are more readily apparent: in a virtual community, interaction requires active posting, or writing of messages, in addition to reading of others' messages.

# CHAPTER THREE:

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

I will now be narrowing the focus of the study of virtual communities specific to

this thesis. I will first explore the work of Pierre Bourdieu and his notions of capital and

social stratification. That discussion will be followed with an exploration of how

Bourdieu's framework will be used in the study of virtual community.

## 3.1 Pierre Bourdieu: Capital and Social Stratification

The classical understanding of capital is mostly economic; For Bourdieu however,

capital presents itself in three fundamental guises:

> as *economic capital*, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may
> be institutionalized in the forms of property rights; as *cultural capital*, which is
> convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in
> the forms of educational qualifications; and as *social capital*, made up of social
> obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic
> capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of a title of nobility (Bourdieu, 1986,
> 243).

Bourdieu's theory of capital is an expansion of earlier notions of capital, specifically

from Marx's theory of capital, to which Bourdieu's notion of economic capital is closely

related (for both, economic capital represents ownership of the means of production).

Social capital represents the social network resources available to the individual,

including family, friends, acquaintances, and contacts. Cultural capital represents the

meaningful symbolic resources at an individual's disposal. For Bourdieu, cultural and

social capital are convertible into economic capital. Thus going to business school earns

both a degree (cultural capital) and a network of other business school graduates (social

capital), which can be traded in for economic capital.

*Cultural capital* is used to describe the combination of non-economic forces such

as family background, social class, levels of education, and different symbolic resources

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(such as art appreciation). Bourdieu (1986) says that cultural capital can exist in three forms: first, in the *embodied* state, which is ingrained within each individual and represents what they know and can do. Embodied capital can be increased through self improvement (such as education). Secondly, cultural capital exists in the *objectified* state, in the form of cultural goods, material objects such as books, paintings, instruments, or machines. They can be appropriated both materially with economic capital and symbolically via embodied capital. Finally, it exists in the *institutionalized* state, "a form of objectification which must be set apart because...it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee" (p. 243). In its institutionalized state, cultural capital manifests through academic credentials and qualifications which create a "certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power" (248).

Bourdieu (1986) posits that if the social world is not to be reduced to a "discontinuous series of instantaneous mechanical equilibria between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles," the notion of capital should be reintroduced" (p. 241). In other words, a theory of capital is necessary to give society meaning and structure (as opposed to an anarchic society whose members are all completely interchangeable and whose interactions are meaningless). Capital takes time to accumulate and is a "force inscribed in the objectivity of things" so that everything is not "equally possible or impossible" (p. 241-242). Thus, an individual with high economic and cultural capital will have different life experiences than an individual with low economic and cultural capital.

Bourdieu states that the structure of the distribution of the different types and subtypes of capital at a given moment in time represents the "immanent structure of the

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social world;" it acts like a set of constraints that is inscribed in the very reality of society

that regulates its functioning and determines the chances of success for practices (p. 242).

In other words, capital (in all its forms) is the foundation of society, and at the same time

works to guide the actions of its participants. Bourdieu posits that "it is in fact impossible

to account for the structure and functioning of the social world unless one reintroduces

capital in all its forms" (p. 242).

According to Bourdieu (1984), one can construct a space whose three

fundamental dimensions are defined by volume of capital, composition of capital, and

change in these two properties over time (which is "manifested by past and potential

trajectories in social space"). (p. 114). He notes that

> The primary differences. . . derive from the overall volume of capital, understood as the
> set of actually usable resources and powers – economic capital, cultural capital and also
> social capital. The distribution of the different classes thus runs from those who are best
> provided with both economic and cultural capital to those who are most deprived in both
> respects (p. 114)

Thus, for Bourdieu, society is structured (and to a degree stratified) as the result of the

distribution of capital; the upper classes possess both economic and cultural capital while

lower classes are "deprived" of both. Elsewhere, Bourdieu (2002) says that social space

is constructed in such a way that agents or groups are distributed in it according to their

position based on the *two principles of differentiation.* He states that most advanced

societies rely on the most efficient forms of capital: economic capital and cultural capital.

Bourdieu notes that "it follows that all agents are located in space in such a way that the

closer they are to one another in these two dimensions, the more they have in common"

(p. 271).

This principle of differentiation comprises Bourdieu's notion of class, which is

"sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions

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and selected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions

and interests and therefore producing similar practices and adopting similar stances"

(Bourdieu, 1985, 198). Class, from this perspective, is not purely an economic condition.

To sum Bourdieu's theory; capital exists in three main subtypes; *economic*,

*cultural* and *social*. Bourdieu shows how capital has a role in stratifying society into

different classes via the combination of capital that different agents possess, especially in

regards to *economic* and *cultural* capital. Those with low economic and cultural capital

are found in the less powerful classes, while those with high economic and cultural

capital are found in the powerful classes.

## 3.2 Capital and Stratification in Virtual Communities

The purpose of this thesis is to identify the different forms of capital as they occur

within a virtual setting, one where the users are (for the most part) anonymous, and where

economic capital is not a factor (the lack relevance of economic capital is yet another

feature of virtual community that is unique from traditional community), leaving

members of virtual community to rely on social and cultural capital. This next section

will explore some of the ways in which the theories of social and cultural capital have

been used in the study of virtual communities.

An important component in using the theory of capital in the research of virtual

communities has been in relation to the study of online social networking. Prell (2003)

defines a social network as a "set of individuals or groups who are connected to one

another through socially meaningful relationships." Social capital highlights the central

importance of networks of strong personal relationships that develop over a period of

time; these relationships provide a basis for trust, cooperation, and collective action

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(Daniel et. al, 2003). Ferlander (2003) points out that "social capital is about networks, and the Net is the network to all ends" (p. 171).

Daniel et. al. (2003) argue that despite growing research efforts to examine, understand and apply social capital, little has been done to extend this understanding to virtual communities. They state that social capital can be understood as a composite of different variables, each of which can be interpreted independently; they define social capital in virtual communities as *"common social resource that facilitates information exchange, knowledge sharing, and knowledge construction through continuous interaction, built on trust and maintained through shared understanding."*

Following that definition, Gattiker (2001) states that virtual communities may share language and culture if their membership is limited to a geographical region but in many cases, neither language, nor culture nor having played the same games as children and watched the same shows may apply. Gattiker states that "accordingly, people's interests (e.g. professions and hobbies) may support an imagination of communities in cyberspace" (p. 202-203). Prandstaller (2003) backs this up: "identity, community boundaries, and solidarity are produced also through the background knowledge that is required to give a meaning to posts and citations"(p. 22).

Rafaeli et. al. (2004) state that the Internet supplements traditional social capital rather than transforms or diminishes it; it is used to complement face to face conventional social activity like its technological predecessors (such as the telephone) did. In their paper exploring the passive use of online communities (otherwise known as lurking), Rafaeli et. al. note that virtual social capital "supplements "real" social capital, because when engaging with virtual community, even in a passive way, a person is involved in very social activity." They state that that "reading and posting in a virtual community

creates a social network where all participants, both active and passive, acquire social capital by getting access to valuable information, learning the social norms of the relevant virtual community, and getting to know active participants." They define virtual social capital as "a collection of features of the social network created as a result of virtual community activities that lead to development of common social norms and rules that assist cooperation for mutual benefit." They similarly define personal virtual cultural capital as "the level to which a person is involved within the virtual community."

Soroka (2004) notes that current virtual community researchers focus on the cooperative aspects of social capital, whereas Bourdieu defines social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." Soroka states that Bourdieu's definition emphasizes a *personal* benefit rather than a *mutual* benefit derived from social capital.

For Soroka, the term cultural capital represents the collection of forces such as family background, social class, investments in education, etc, that works for the personal benefit of the individual, and predicts an individual's position in the society. Soroka argues that "some parameters of a social network created by any virtual community might determine the amount of embodied social capital possessed by a user. This cultural capital can in fact predict a position of the user in the virtual community and patterns of her behavior." Soroka states that the notion of cultural capital is an important idea in researching virtual communities because:

> We need to realize what position means in the setting of virtual community. In the real society a struggle for resources means a struggle for power – be it economic power, political power or other type of power. I argue that virtual communities have their own mechanism of power. Respect, influence on others and popularity are only a few of the indicators of a position of the user in the virtual community. Studying the position can help us predict a future behavior of users in virtual communities.

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He argues that an example of such behavior could be a decision to become an active poster (de-lurking), as a vehicle to become more influential in the community, and states that cultural capital definitely influences such decisions.

Putnam (1993) notes that norms and networks that serve some groups may obstruct others, particularly if the norms are discriminatory or the networks socially segregated. Recognizing the importance of social capital in sustaining community life does not exempt us from the need to worry about how that community is defined; who is inside and thus benefits from social capital, and who is outside and does not. Putnam argues that some forms of social capital can impair individual liberties, as critics of comunitarianism warn; "many of the Founders' fears about the 'mischief's of faction' apply to social capital. Before toting up the balance sheet for social capital in its various forms, we need to weigh costs as well as benefits."

Social inequalities may also be embedded in cultural capital. Lamont and Lareau (quoted in Kingston, 2001, pg 89) defined cultural capital as being institutionalized, meaning that it has widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goals, and credentials), that are used for social and cultural exclusion. Culture capital is a resource that has 'market value' in the struggle for privilege.

However, as noted by Kingston (2001), cultural capital is not a general resource available and valuable to everyone; it is largely the property of the existing elite. The elite benefit because "their" particular cultural signals, not others, are rewarded; "cultural capital is like money in that it can be saved, invested, and used to obtain other resources (such as access to economic positions). It has currency because its 'signals' are broadly

accepted. Cultural capital 'counts' because many people (or, at least key gatekeepers) believe it should be rewarded" (p. 89).

As noted in Reid (1999), virtual communities may seem "anarchic" and "uncontrollable" at first glance. She states that "they are in fact highly socially structured. Users may play their cultural game according to personal whim, but they play it out on systems that are subject to the enactment of power and privilege as are more familiar face-to-face social systems" (p, 132). Brey (2003) notes that "in virtual environments a status function of a virtual entity is fixed, either because some recognized authority (such as a producer, provider, system operator, or certifying agency) is believed to endorse this status, or because this status has been proposed in a non-authoritative way and members of the community of users have come to accept it as useful" (p. 281). His example is that an online community may become "women-only" either because a provider has labeled it that way from the beginning or is granted this authority by its users, or because this status has gradually emerged and come to be accepted within the collective of users (p. 282).

Prior research has shown that the notions of social and cultural capital are applicable constructs that can be useful in studying online communities; at the same time, this research shows virtual communities to be highly socially structured. It is the task of this thesis to investigate the ways in which social and cultural capital will work toward stratifying an online community.

# CHAPTER FOUR:

# METHODOLOGY

For this study, I performed a virtual ethnography using a combination of two specific research methods; 1) a participant observation case study and 2) the use of focused discussion threads posted to MetaTalk that worked in a manner similar to a focus group. This chapter will first discuss my research questions, followed by an introduction to Metafilter.com, the community I studied. I will then explore some of the issues dealing with virtual ethnography, as well as the use of case studies as a research tool.. I will also look at a form of discourse analysis called 'computer mediated discourse analysis.' I will conclude this chapter with an outline of my research design.

## 4.1 Research Questions

For this thesis, I worked to uncover the specific forms of capital present in a virtual community, metafilter.com. My thesis looks at this online community and attempts to map the active forms of capital that play out in this virtual community. Further, it attempts to identify how holding specific forms of capital positions users in an informal social hierarchy. This discussion will be structured around the following questions: 1) What forms of capital are active in the Metafilter community? 2) How are they similar to the forms of capital presented by Bourdieu? 3) Do these forms of capital act to influence stratification in the Metafilter community?

## 4.2 About Metafilter.com

Metafilter is a community weblog (or 'blog') founded in 1999. Metafilter's 'about' page states that it

> is a weblog that anyone can contribute a link or a comment to. A typical weblog is one person posting their thoughts on the unique things they find on the web. This website exists to break down the barriers between people, to extend a weblog beyond just one person, and to foster discussion among its members.

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Metafilter is established on a base of user driven content; users post discussion threads that other users can comment on (see Bowers, 2000). The posts to Metafilter range through a number of different topics. The community expects posts to be well thought-out and unique; one of the main rules for the community is that 'double posts' (or the posting of a link that has already been posted and discussed) are not allowed, and will often be deleted unless the poster has a 'compelling' reason for the double post. Other than that, pretty much any topic is allowed; politics and religion, movies and music, oddities and rare finds of strange areas on the internet. The key belief is that Metafilter serves to filter the 'best of the web.'

What makes Metafilter unique and sociologically interesting is its well structured, yet flexible system of rules, norms and etiquette. A continual discussion of what is and is not acceptable takes place in a separate area of Metafilter known as 'Metatalk.' Matt Haughey, Metafilter's creator and webmaster, explains that he added Metatalk as a forum where users could

> talk about issues around the site, bugs and features users wish for, or any etiquette that may have been breached, and I created it because I noticed people were talking about the site on the site itself fairly regularly. Gone unchecked, I noticed it created circular discussions where people talked about other parts of the site on the site itself and it appeared to be senseless navel-gazing. Having a separate section conveniently allows that to run in an organized fashion, while at the same time keeping the main site free of looking like one big game of Duck-Duck-Goose.

In an effort to keep the 'front page' clear of matters pertaining to its own existence (such as norm violations), the community itself was left to deal with issues as they arose in a specialized 'area.' However, the only user with the power to delete comments, threads, or user accounts is Haughey (known to the community as *mathowie*), creating a situation where the community can only take issues to a certain level, because all they can do is

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*discuss*, without the ability to take any formal action (for example, banning a problem user or deleting a problem post).

With one person with this much power, one aspect of the social hierarchy is clearly visible. Haughey is the sole possessor of formal power; he can delete threads, comments, ban users, and close the site off to new memberships. He also has the power, as some users fear, to pull the plug on the community any time he wants to. The other social hierarchies within Metafilter are less visible, as there are no other formal positions of power (such as the position of 'board moderator' in similar communities), users are in a constant state of struggle. This struggle consists of users 'calling each other out' in Metatalk, which is a daily attempt to define the direction of the community (such as what kind of posts are acceptable or unacceptable or what kinds of language are appropriate or inappropriate), as well as to air personal grievances (that tend to be mainly between the self described 'political left' and the 'political right').

The population of Metafilter remained more or less constant since early 2003, at which time it was closed to new membership at around 17000 users. Almost two years later, Matt re-opened membership, and in the following year (when a majority of this research was conducted), memberships increased by almost ten thousand users. When the population was 17000, the number of regular participants (those who would comprise the Metafilter community) was about 12%. I took a random sample of 263 user accounts, and discovered that 61.2% (95% +/- 6) of registered users in the sample have never commented or posted. Of the 38.8% who have posted, 45.1% have posted less than 10 comments, 42.2% have posted between 10 and 99 comments, and 12.7% have made more than 100 comments.

In the spring of 2004, the Metafilter community was surveyed by user *fvw* for its demographic characteristics. The average Metafilter user is a 31 year old, straight, single male (63%). Seventy-three percent are from the United Sates, and more than half work in either technology or communications (about 23% each), but there are also a good number of students (23%), teachers, and media representatives (about 6% each). One hundred percent are primarily English speaking.

The demographic makeup of Metafilter has played an important role in the development of the community. For example, it is not surprising that with seventy-three percent of the community being American that a large amount of the threads deal with issues concerning American politics and cultural events. As well, with such a large number of Metafilter users working in the technology and communications field, it is not surprising to see a great deal of threads concerning technological innovations. As well, it is important to note that gender has played an important role in the development, with a majority of users being male, many Metafilter users have commented that Metafilter can be (at times) a 'boys club,' largely in that the discourse can often be combative and offensive to the female users on the board, and most of the highly visible users (save for a few) are male.

## 4.3 Virtual Ethnography

According to Cavanaugh (1999), online ethnography is considered to be a variant of traditional ethnographic techniques, utilizing a spectrum of observational and interviewing methods to examine the ways in which meaning is constructed in online environments, and gleans much of its analytical framework from derivations of

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conversation analysis.' That being said, special considerations for virtual ethnographic research have to be made.

One of the primary considerations for the researcher is that they are dealing with nothing except text and images. For example, Thomsen et al. (1998) state that virtual communities present the researcher with nothing but text, and as such, the ethnographer cannot observe people, other than through their textual contributions to a forum. They argue that "all behavior is verbal in the form of text. There are no other artifacts to analyze other than text. Interviewing presents possibilities to meet people in person, but given the dispersed geographical nature of most current online communities, interviewing must usually be done online, again via text."

Other considerations involve the locality of the individuals being studied. As Howard (2000) notes, in the past the study of individuals within locally defined communities in the non-electronic world could be adequately addressed by assuming that those individuals comprise a single discourse community or folk group, with little or no outside reference (p. 230). On the web, individuals involved in multiple discourse communities simultaneously engage one another on multiple topics informed by potentially unlimited sources of influence (p. 231).

Ruhleder (2000) states that the increase in the use of virtual communities requires us to rethink the nature of a field site and our approach to selecting and studying these sites; "it encourages us to adapt traditional field methods to these settings, and to use these same techniques to open up new possibilities for the collection, analysis, and representation of data" (p. 4). As such, it is important to note that online social organizations deal with at least some of the same issues as face-to-face communities (e.g. gatekeeping & normative value construction). Virtual communities, however, have many

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unique facets that are not traditionally found in traditional communities, such as the fact

that virtual communities often rely on a moderator to set and maintain boundaries, reduce

conflict, and control the flow of discourse (Kinnevy & Enosh, 2002, p. 123).

Kinnevy & Enosh (2002) note that most published research on virtual community

has used qualitative approaches, drawing mostly from ethnography, conversation analysis

or discourse analysis (p. 121). Markham (1998) performed a cyber ethnography (mainly

through online interviews), and details her experience going from a 'newbie' to

'sophisticated user.' She states that rather than selecting participants and bringing them

into an official setting, conducting interviews on the spot; "I wanted to head out into the

new and, with keyboard in hand, talk with people and get them to tell me stories about

their experiences" (p. 63). However, she quickly realized the limitations of interviewing

people online, when she writes that "online interviewing is a singular, frustrating, and

exciting experience" (p. 70). She explains that online, you only see text – "not the

nonverbals, the paralanguage, the general mannerisms or demeanor of the participant" (p.

70). Because writing takes much longer than talking, being a good interviewer means

being patient; online, you can't see the other person's face, hear their tone of voice, or get

any sense of who they are beyond the words (p. 70-71) She states that she

> found it difficult to manage the basic elements of conversation, such as taking turns at the appropriate time, nodding or mm-hmming to imply "go on, I'm listening." I couldn't give a questioning glance or wrinkle my forehead, or frown slightly to let the other person know that I didn't understand what they were getting at. I couldn't smile, chuckle or laugh spontaneously. Indeed, if I wanted to react to something I found amusing, funny or striking, or in some other way, noteworthy without interrupting the flow of the story, I had to type something such as "emote smiles" or "emote grimaces understandingly." Then a message would appear on the interviewee's screen that read "Markham smiles" or "Markham grimaces understandingly" (p. 71).

However, Markham further writes that "through the words, and through my interaction

with them, I could sense joy, anger, passion, bitterness, happiness; in fact, I was surprised

and impressed by the intensity of the conversations" (p. 71). Mann and Stewart (2000)

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note that some researchers believe that CMC cannot achieve the highly interactive, rich and spontaneous communication that can be achieved in face-to-face communications. Communication differences between media are often conceptualized in terms of bandwidth; that is the 'volume of information per unit time that a computer, person, or transmission medium can handle' (p. 127). They add that if CMC is indeed a 'lean' communication medium which is neither conductive to establishing good interpersonal relationships, nor capable of addressing delicate information, then it is clear that the work of the online qualitative interviewer will be "challenging if not doomed to failure from the beginning" (p. 127). However, they state that recent research by relational development theorists have challenged these findings; "most assumptions about interpersonal relationships (i.e. physical proximity) predate CMC and may not be fully applicable in online settings" (p. 127-128).

Crichton and Kinash (2003) perceive online research in positive terms, since online conversations allow participants to 'take back their words' prior to posting them so that the developing nature of the conversation can be accommodated. They note that when research happens in a synchronous environment (such as in a real time chat room), the nature of the conversation, entailing the waiting 'other' keeps the conversation spontaneous and unrehearsed. When research happens in an asynchronous environment (such as a message board or email), the participant has the time and access to information resources, to inform, reflects, revise, and iterate responses. They also state that participants are less likely to put regrettable words in print as they are to let them 'dissolve' into the air.

Online research has its limitations as well. Crichton and Kinash (2003) state that there are limited nonverbal cues of encouragement, as well as limited means for

emotional or empathetic communication. Interruptions occur readily, as there is no capacity to know when the other is pausing for reflection and then intending to continue, or typing a response, and at the same time (and perhaps most importantly, some participants do not experience 'being in' the interview experience when it is held online.

Rutter and Smith (1999) state that when messages are posted to the community, there is a level of trust offered and expected between those involved in the group. To this end, the people posting to the community they were studying (RumCom.local), users consistently employed techniques for sharing and reinforcing details of their "real life" with those with whom they share asynchronous interaction.

For this study, what I take from this prior research relating to virtual ethnography is the need to understand virtual communities as being embodied in the real world, but at the same time unique in how they operate. Specifically, because communication occurs in the form of text, virtual ethnography presents unique opportunities to study social interaction in an objectified state.

## 4.4 Case Study

I will be presenting my virtual ethnography in the form of a case study. The goal of a case study is to strive towards a holistic understanding of cultural systems of action (Tellis, 1997). According to Tellis (1997), cultural systems of action refer to "sets of interrelated activities engaged in by the actors in a social situation." Case study research is not sampling research, yet selecting cases must be done so as to maximize what can be learned, in the period of time available for the study (Tellis, 1997). Yin (1994, in Wingardner 2002) defines case study in terms of the research process as ". . . an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life

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context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident." (p. 7).

Tellis (1997) notes that case study methodology is often criticized for its dependence on a single case, which renders it incapable of providing a generalizing conclusion. However, as Hamel and Yin (in Tellis, 1997) argue, even a single case could be considered acceptable, provided it met the established objective. In Yin's view, *generalizing from a case study is not a matter of statistical generalization* (generalizing from a sample) but a matter of *analytic generalization* (using single or multiple cases to illustrate, represent, or generalize to a theory); case studies involve only analytic generalizations. Wingardner notes that by concentrating on a single phenomenon or entity, the researcher can uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon; thus, "the case study method focuses on holistic description and explanation" (p. 3).

Stake (in Wingardner 2002) notes the generalizability of case studies as naturalistic, that is, "context-specific and in harmony with a reader's experience, and thus a natural basis for generalization" (p. 14). Wingardner states that it is legitimate to generalize based on the degree to which a case is representative of some larger population, and notes that "it is not merely a question of how many units but rather what kind of unit is under study, it is the nature of the phenomenon that is the true gauge of the population to which one seeks to generalize" (p. 14). Wingardner notes the oversimplification or exaggeration of a situation is another concern with case studies. (p. 14). She states that "skillful data collection, analysis, and reporting can reduce the possibility of this outcome, although it is characteristic of the case study that interpretation goes beyond the mind of the researcher to that of the reader" (p. 14). Thus,

she cautions researchers not to use case studies to address enumerative questions that

qualitative data are poorly equipped to answer, such as how often, how many, or how do

most people respond (p. 14).

As noted by Tellis (1997), the unit of analysis is on of the most important features

in a case study. He states that "it is typically a system of action rather than an individual

or group of individuals...case studies tend to be selective, focusing on one or two issues

that are fundamental to understanding the system being examined." He notes that case

studies are "multi-perspective analyses," meaning that the researcher considers not just

the voice and perspective of the actors, but also of the relevant groups of actors and the

interaction between them.

## 4.5 Discourse Analysis

According to McGregor (2003), discourse refers to "expressing oneself using

words; discourses are ubiquitous ways of knowing, valuing, and experiencing the world"

(p. 2). She explains that discourses can be used for an assertion of power and knowledge,

and they can be used for resistance and critique (p. 2). Due to the power of the written

and spoken word, McGregor states that discourse analysis (DA) is useful for describing,

interpreting, analyzing, and critiquing social life reflected in text (p. 2).

Fairclough (2002) states that discourse within social practices works in three

ways. First, it figures as a part of the social activity within a practice (p. 2). Fairclough's

example is that part of doing any job (such as being a shop assistant) is using language in

a particular way. Secondly, discourse figures in representations. "Social actors within any

practice produce representations of other practices, as well as (reflexive) representations

of their own practice, in the course of their activity within the practice" (p. 2). Third,

discourse figures in ways of being, in the constitution of identities (his example is the

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identity of a political leader such as Tony Blair in the UK is partly a semiotically constituted way of being) (p. 2).

Discourse analysis presents novel ways of performing systematic analysis, and contributes new possibilities for defining the field of study (Borcht, 2000, p. 11). Discourse analysis covers a broad range of methodologies, and is resistant to definition. As noted by Thomsen et al. (1998), discourse analysis is an "attempt to recognize patterns, rules, or procedures that occur among participants and the way in which these structures or conventions influence meaning and effect." Palmquist (1999) states that discourse analysis is a way of "approaching and thinking about a problem...rather than providing a particular method." Instead, as TenHave (1993) explains, discourse analysis may be conceived as a "specific analytic trajectory which may be used to reach a specific kind of systematic insight in the ways in which members of society 'do interaction'"

Thomsen et. al. (1998) explain that discourse analysis requires that the researcher "see" a complete conversation, which, in effect, may constitute a series of several exchanges; the context of a particular message is actually found in the messages or statements that precede it. Lemke (1998) states that discourse events "do not represent a homogeneous population of isolates which can be sampled in the statistical sense. Every discourse event is unique ... discourse events are aggregated by the researcher for particular purposes and by stated criteria." Borch (2000) states that the researcher needs to "follow statements and the references they make to other statements both in space and time until they seem to constitute a whole" (p. 11). In this way, as Lemke states, discourse analysis is contextual, in that the researcher is interested in the text, as well as its surrounding texts.

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**4.5.1 Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis**

The particular discourse analytic framework I will be using is known as Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). Developed by Susan Herring (2001), computer mediated discourse analysis focuses on "language and language use in computer networked environments, and by its use of methods of discourse analysis to address that focus" (p. 1). Herring points out that most of the communication online are text-based messages that are typed on a computer and read as text on a computer screen. All forms of online communication are constituted visually presented language (p. 1) that facilitates multiple participants to communicate over vast stretches of space and time (p. 3).

Herring states that participants typically experience computer mediated discourse as "distinct from either writing or speaking, sometimes as a blend of the two, but in any event subject to its own constraints and potentialities" (p. 4). For example, in particular to the case study I am doing for this thesis, users communicate asynchronously, permitting them to take their time in constructing and editing messages (p. 6). She notes that "variation in structural complexity must be understood as reflecting social situational factors which determine what level of formality, and with it, standardness and structural complexity [that] is appropriate to the context" (p. 6). Herring notes that text-only discourse is an effective way to "do" interactional work, in that it "allows users to choose their words with greater care, and reveals less of their doubts and insecurities, than does spontaneous speech" (p. 11). She notes that as a result, users have developed a number of compensatory strategies to replace social cues normally conveyed by other channels in face-to-face interaction, such as emoticons like the smiley faced : ) or the teasing :-P.

As noted by Job-Sluder and Barab (2003), an advantage to using CMDA is that because it relies exclusively on text transcripts of online interactions, the actual process

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of collecting data is fairly easy and noninvasive. They note that for some environments such as public Web boards where users are dispersed over a large geographic area and may be posting anonymously, CMDA is perhaps the best way to examine online participation.

I used computer mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) as a way to view the discourse that occurs within a virtual community as being specific to the medium. CMDA takes into account the ways in which discourse is presented in an online setting, in that communication is "visually presented" and temporally unconstrained, and this methodology is useful because it understands online communication as being subject to its own "constraints and potentialities." For example, online discourse is constrained by a lack of information that is present in face to face communication (for example body language, intonation), which sometimes has the consequence of misunderstandings between users communicating within a virtual setting.

Computer mediated discourse is constrained by a users' ability to use the technologies used in online communication, as action can be limited if a user is unable to successfully manipulate the medium in such a way as to effectively communicate with other users. Though this was more of a problem in the early days of online communities (in the mid nineties, September was referred as "Eternal September" because of the influx of new users joining communities without knowing the proper 'netiquette'), there is still evidence of users participating within virtual communities without fully understanding the norms of conduct (such as things that are now 'taken for granted' by many users, like using ALL CAPS to indicate shouting). CMDA helps to take into account the ways in which users manipulate the medium to communicate.

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CMDA also allows us to view the advantages of online communication. For example, users have the ability to self edit, and to ensure they are clear and properly understood, in that they ave the ability to type a message and then "take it back" before sending it to the other user (or users). Users can also add hyper-links to online content in order to back their statements.

Because the methodology of CMDA is currently underdeveloped, I did not follow its methodology when actually carrying out my research on Metafilter. Instead, I altered the methodology of Bondarouk and Ruël, who provide a step by step guide on how to 'do' discourse analysis, keeping in mind the framework of looking at online discourse provided by CMDA.. In the first step, I identified the theory I would be using, in this case Bourdieu's forms of capital. I then operationalized the concepts of Boudieu's forms of capital.

For my sampling framework, I used non-probability criterion based sampling, carried out through extensive observation of the Metafilter community, where I analyzed comments and threads. This was carried out over an extended period of time in which I immersed myself in the community and collected a large amount of data. The fourth step I took was the 'transcription' process, in which I copied comments and links to threads into a word processing document. The fifth step was the analysis stage, where I wrote comments on specific threads and comments by Metafilter users (and at the same time made notes regarding the context of those quotes). These thread links and quotes, once examined a second time, and then were put into categorized folders relating to the components of Bourdieu's theory and other relevant sections.

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Following these steps, I then made sense of each category as a separate unit in order to understand them as a 'whole.' After this, I identified the significance of every component of these categories, and then refined their structures. The final step was the refining of the initial research model.

This thesis attempts to examine the social interaction *within* Metafilter, while understanding that users do not participate in isolation of the real world, Metafilter itself is located in a virtual space that is governed by the 'constraints and possibilities' of the medium. That is, my focus is on the ways in which users participate within the confines of Metafilter, without examining the effects it has on the real world lives of the users involved.

## 4.6 Data Collection

The data that was collected for this research was carried within the context of an online ethnography, and was completed in a few phases. The first phase was carried out in the form of participant-observational ethnography of the Metafilter community. I became an active participant within the community, and followed every MetaTalk thread, as well as a large number of Metafilter threads where there were high levels of

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community participation. This heavy phase of data collection lasted for about eight months, where I spent an average of six to eight hours a day online, at different times of the day. I also relied heavily on the extensive archives to fill the gaps of what users were discussing, to gain a sense of history for the site, as well as to flesh out and back up various things I was witnessing. I then took the data from this collection phase and analyzed and organized it into different categories which are discussed in the next three chapters.

The online ethnography that I performed was accomplished using a variety of ethnographic tools. For example, I administered a focused discussion thread in MetaTalk that asked questions to the community directly pertaining to my research. This method was used to discuss issues and themes that I had uncovered when I was strictly observing Metafilter, and were directly related to the analysis of that data in regards to the forms of capital present in Metafilter. The focused discussion thread was used because it to be more natural to the way that people communicate in Metafilter. I did this also on a smaller scale, within Metafilter related IRC channels, as well as within pre-existing threads.

The main argument for using this method is that it remains true to the way in which users of Metafilter are used to communicating, and thus, the impact of the researcher remains minimized (as the users will be responding to the forum itself as opposed to the researcher). It is my hope that this will provide a better snapshot of Metafilter *as it is*, as opposed to how I, the researcher thinks that it should be.

## 4.7 Ethical Considerations

The main ethical consideration is whether the messages and conversations in a virtual community are "public" or "private." Bromseth (2002) asks if information on the Internet exists in a public space, allowing researchers to freely collect material for research purposes without notifying the participants. She notes that "researchers must give necessary consideration to the fact that *people's perceptions* of what is private and what is public communication may vary" (p. 37). Paccagnella (1997) notes that online field research conducted with unobtrusive techniques is inevitably doomed to create major ethical problems. He states that scholars generally do not agree on common ethical guidelines: some feel that they have a moral obligation to obtain explicit permission from the authors for *publishing* logs in academic papers. Others collect logs without asking for permission but the logs are then only processed by statistical software and not read by humans. Many others simply do not declare explicitly whether permission was obtained for their logs.

As Bromseth (2002) notes, the issue of using direct quotes of participants in the research report is complex and with conflicting aspects, many of which are related to the researched electronic group context; "who do the written words of participants in a specific group 'belong' to, the individual participant, the group only – or 'everyone', and does everyone include the re-use of those words for research purposes without consent" (p. 44)? Especially with the power of current search engine technologies (such as Google), I could anonymously use direct quote in my paper, but anyone could type the direct quote right into a search engine and easily trace the message back to the original

poster. Thus, if desired by the group, there must be extra emphasis on paraphrasing the content of a message so to remain untraceable.

The issue of informed consent comes up in the discussion of ethical considerations, and this issue is even murkier in an online community such as Metafilter. It is clear that Metafilter is a public forum, where users are participating under the knowledge that that anyone can follow their participation. However, as noted above, some users perceive the community to be at least somewhat private.

To deal with the ethical considerations with respect to the community, I 'came out' as a researcher within a MetaTalk thread early in my data collection phase, where I made clear the purpose of my thesis, and explained how I would be conducting my research. In other discussions concerning my thesis with members of the community, I always provided the link to this 'coming out' thread, and provided information regarding my thesis on my Metafilter user page (which also contained contact information).

In the end, through discussion with my supervisor and as a result of conversations with various members of the Metafilter community, I decided that I would use direct quotes, making sure to carefully explain the context, as well as ensuring that these quotes were always properly attributed. Metafilter is a 'public' forum, and as such each user makes a conscious choice as to reveal as much of their offline identity as they are comfortable with. Secondly, many users do not have contact information listed on their user pages, and as such, any attempt to contact every user becomes 'hit or miss.'

Finally, in all cases (except for mathowie, who is commonly referenced by his first name, Matt, and who has a 'public' persona), I attribute quotes to usernames, and not 'real names.' The nickname is the identity that is established within the context of the Metafilter community, and may not have any direct bearing on a users real world identity.

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# CHAPTER FIVE:

# THE MECHANICS OF METAFILTER

## 5.1 Volume, Reliability and Validity of Online Information Sources

Think about the last time you went online to look for something using a search engine. Most likely the number of results you received (depending on the topic and how precisely you were searching) numbered in the millions, and so you were left to decide by yourself which links to follow. Chances are you did not spend time going through all of the results in your search (research shows that most people will only look at the first ten results[1]), so you either got lucky with a good link, spent time refining your search terms or performing a trial and error method of going to a number of the websites in your results until you found what you were looking for.

This exemplifies two of the most common problems facing users who are looking for information online; the problem of *volume* and the problem of *reliability*. In the first case, the problem of *volume* exists because there is too much information available online to be digested by one person. Though there are an estimated six hundred billion pages online, popular search engines such as Google have access to six billion (about one web page for every human alive on the earth right now). For example, a search for "Pierre Bourdieu" leads me to 689,000 websites, whereas my University Library has 20 books written by or about Pierre Bourdieu. Factoring in duplication of information (i.e. often many websites will have identical information), as well as sites that might only mention Bourdieu in the context of another subject, the information available online may far outweigh what is immediately available offline.

The second problem of *reliability* exists primarily because the signal to noise ratio of useful content online is unbalanced in favor of noise. In other words, though there is a great deal of useful information on the web (signal), it gets lost in the avalanche of

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[1] Cliff Neal (2003), "Information Literacy: Four Perspectives," online at http://www.sconul.ac.uk/pubs_stats/newsletter/29/27.RTF

information that is irrelevant or purposely misleading (noise). For example, among the first ten search results for "Pierre Bourdieu", I found a bibliography, some biography, and a few articles written by Bourdieu himself which might possibly be of use. But I also found a link to a Professor who is influenced by Bourdieu, two pages presented in French, and a page advertising that the domain www.pierrebourdieu.com is for sale. I also came across an advertisement for a company that will write a paper on Bourdieu for me. The process of deciding what is noise and signal is not always an easy task, as what often looks like signal may in fact be noise (and vice versa). Aside from actually finding relevant information, how does one decipher that the information is legitimate?

The fact is that many users are uneducated about the technical backbone of the web, perhaps as a result of user friendly computers and software, effectively making computer use accessible to anyone with basic literacy skills. While there may be an understanding of 'spam,'[2] 'computer viruses,'[3] and 'pop-ups,' there may not be awareness of sophisticated acts of deception, such as recent phishing schemes,[4] or when opinion is presented as an objective fact. As such, since the commercial explosion of the web in the early 1990's, it has been flooded with a combination of innovation, creativity and the open sharing of knowledge. At the same time, the web has also been flooded with those who are seeking to exploit the anonymity of the web to perpetrate schemes, and generally to prey on web users with unreliable information, scams and other malicious

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2 Spam is the act of sending a message indiscriminately to multiple mailing lists, individuals, or newsgroups.

3 Computer viruses are pieces of software that are used to "infect" a computer, which may be a benign joke or a program that deletes pieces of data from the infected computer.

4 Phishing schemes involve obtaining access to information such as bank passwords by setting up a website that looks exactly like the original bank website. A user receives an email stating that there is something wrong with their account, and a link is provided for them to log in and address the problem. When the user imputs their password, the phishing site records it.

attempts to deceive. It is in this context that Metafilter and other such community

sites[5] arose in the late 1990's, addressing the need to filter the signal from the noise.

## 5.2 My Relationship to Metafilter

The exponential expansion of information, and the unreliability of the content

available on the web, creates a need for sites such as Metafilter. As its name implies,

Metafilter is a filter for online content. It is a collective of people who individually

gather information and post on a central hub attempting to increase the signal to noise

ratio of the web. Participants of the Metafilter community constantly surf other areas of

the web and bring back unique links, and then present them to the community in the form

of a 'front page post' (which is referred to as an FPP). Processing of the information then

occurs in discussion threads; after a link is posted, users are able to determine if the link

is valid or not. Secondly, users are able to make sense of the information being linked

through discussion with other users who may have insight into the topic being presented,

or through adding further links to back up or to discredit the information in the post. It is

through these discussion threads that Metafilter has emergently grown into a large and

vibrant community.

My first experience with Metafilter came from other portal sites, such as

Fark.com and themorningnews.org. Eventually, I was finding Metafilter linked often

enough that I started going there more than anywhere else; anything worth knowing

about (to me anyways) was being linked to Metafilter. By early 2001, I was visiting

Metafilter a few times a day as a lurker[6]. I eventually signed up as a member (shortly

after September 11, 2001), but remained a lurker, as I didn't feel like I had anything to

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[5] Sites like www.fark.com and www.slashdot.org have different mandates (weird news and technological news respectively), they became popular around the same time as Metafilter.
[6] Lurkers are users who follow the happenings in an online community, but do not themselves participate.

contribute. In the beginning, it took me a while to fully understand the complexity of the Metafilter social structure. Upon first look, it seemed like just another collection of links, and the community aspect was lost on me. At first, I could not differentiate between the regular users and the people who join, leave one or two comments on the site, and then disappear. Similar to my experiences in large Usenet groups in the early 1990's, Metafilter appeared to be a loose collection of voices talking past each other on a wide variety of topics.

I slowly became aware of the norms and rules, becoming aware of a separate area of the site called MetaTalk. MetaTalk exists as a place where a majority of the community formation takes place through an ongoing discussion of what it means to be a member of the Metafilter community, what Metafilter "should be," as well as a central point in arranging real world meetups, and a place to report bugs or errors on the Metafilter page. It became clear to me quickly why, having only ventured beyond the front page of Metafilter site, the strong community aspect was hidden. Because MetaTalk was set up to avoid navel gazing in the main area of the site, the discussion threads concerning the community itself began to play an important role in the formation of the Metafilter community.

As my awareness of the community and its norms and rules became clearer, my reluctance to fully participate in the community aspect of Metafilter also grew. Even though I had been a member of online communities in the past (I used to be addicted to Internet Relay Chat when I was in high school in the early 90's and was active on many newsgroup communities throughout the1990's), I found Metafilter to be more intimidating; Mefites[7] seemed to take Metafilter very seriously. They also had a tendency

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[7] A Mefite is someone who participates in the Metafilter community.

to gang up on each other, sometimes pushing users over the edge until they 'flamed out' and quit contributing to the site.

Gradually, through my lurking of MetaTalk, the personalities of some of the users began to shine through their nicknames. I began to unconsciously take stock of the nicknames of the users who I liked, the users who I disliked, as well as users who I had no feelings whatsoever towards, but who had clear dislike for another user. Watching MetaTalk is at times like watching a soap opera, with users whom I unconsciously attributed as villains and others as heroes, or defenders of all that was good about Metafilter. Over time, as a lurker, I become more personally integrated, making my first FPP (on Pierre Bourdieu no less), making more comments, and having fully formed opinions of *how things should be done*. I took offence to rule transgressions (big and small) and snarked[8] at users whom I didn't like (and in turn got snarked at). Over time, I transformed from a lurker into a full fledged Mefite.

As I became more integrated into the Metafilter community, what I found the most interesting was the somewhat structured system of celebrity users. Certain users got more of a response when they wrote, and seemed to have more *weight* behind what they wrote; these 'celebrity' personalities tended to have more respect, and more power over the community through the persuasion of their opinions. Celebrities were also more likely to be the targets of other users who didn't agree with their political viewpoints or other opinions, as well as from those users who were looking to make a name for themselves.

Throughout this chapter, I will be examining the structure and mechanics of the Metafilter community. I will discuss its design and the reasons that the community structure is not visible "at first glance," as well as how the structure works to constrain

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8 A snark is slang for making a snide remark. Many Metafilter threads are labeled as snark-fests, where the majority of the comments are snarks.

the range of action available to users. I will then discuss the importance of rules and norms to Mefites, following a discussion of the social properties of the community as seen through 'ongoing conversation' in MetaTalk. Finally, this section will explore the role of 'self-policing' as a tool to maintain order of the community, and how it can also get out of control in the form of aggressive 'pile-ons.'

## 5.3 Design Elements of Metafilter: "The Blue"

Metafilter users use two words as shorthand for Metafilter; Mefi and "the Blue", a name that describes the main visual design feature of Metafilter, which refers to its color. Unlike other websites, Metafilter uses a simple design reminiscent of the early days of the Internet, with the majority of screen space taken up with text, with a lack of flashing banner advertisements, or pictorial ads along the side borders of the site.[9] When looking at the visual design of Metafilter, the emphasis on information is clear. The site is presented in such a way that the user reading it for the first time is bombarded with information; specifically numbers (dates, user numbers, posting times, number of comments in a thread etc.) and words (threads, comments and usernames).

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9 Since writing this section one small pictorial advertisement has been added to the front page. However, in early February, 2005, Matt decided to accept a series of small pictorial ads from the soft-porn site www.suicidegirls.com, which was met with outrage by the community (documented at MetaTalk thread 8942). Within one day, Matt decided against keeping the ads. Besides the complaints of partial nudity (making Metafilter "not safe for work,") the other main complaint was that it disrupted the visual "feeling" of the site.
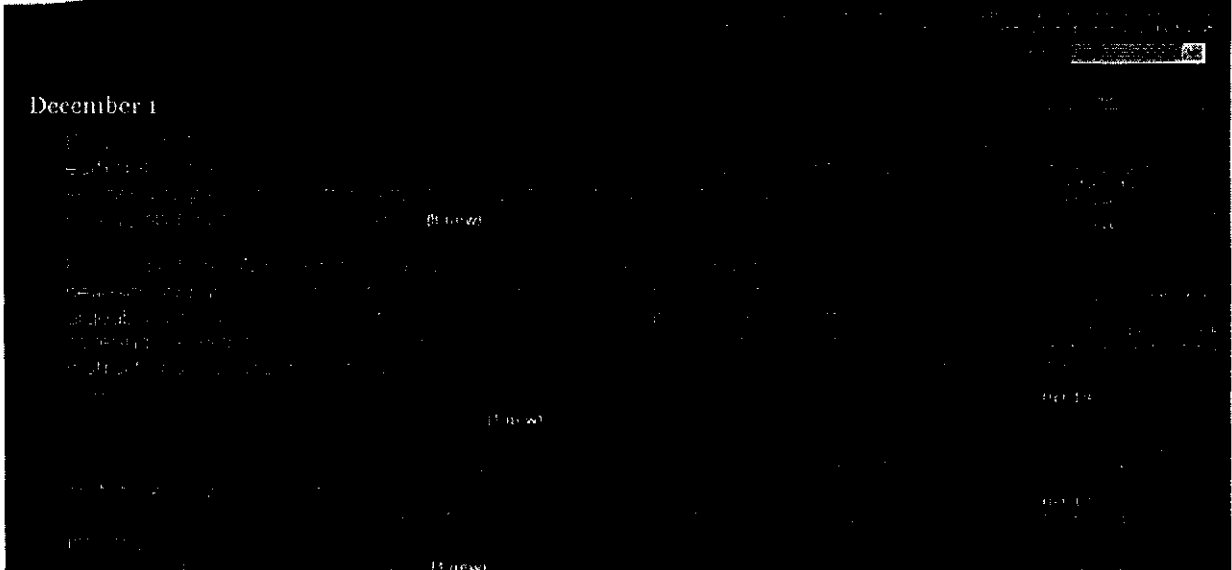
Figure 4.1 Metafilter's Front Page, AKA "The Blue"

**5.3.1 – Visible Characteristics of the Front Page**

The front page loads with one icon – the Metafilter logo which appears in the

upper right hand corner of the site. To the right of the icon is the site navigation area,

which links to other areas of interest within the Metafilter domain, such as MetaTalk and

Ask Metafilter. Under that link is information that shows the number of registered users,

the username that is currently logged in, as well as information on how many new posts

and comments since the last visit. Under the user information is a "sort by" drop-box that

allows users to customize the order of the threads by sorting by date, recent comments,

most comments and "my" comments. Under the drop box, going down the right hand side

of the page are the text-ads[10], and the side-blog, which is an area of the front page that

only Matt can update. The sideblog keeps track of site news and MetaTalk threads and

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10 For a long time, the only source of advertising on Metafilter was the presence of a small text ad, which is described as a "simple, low-cost, self-serve ads that don't annoy users with flashing or deceptive trickery." The text ad's were originally invented by Google, whose Adwords were implemented as a direct response to the increasing reliance of online advertising on invasive, animated banner ads and pop-up windows. Instead, the idea is to present a highly targeted, yet un-invasive box containing only static text that changes in accordance to the search results.

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features tools such as a link to see what was on Metafilter on that day for the last five years.

## 5.3.2 – Discussion Threads

The main area of the front page is where the posting occurs in the form of threads. The Metafilter about page defines a thread as:

> one of the main messages you see on the MetaFilter homepage. These are the starting points for discussions, and are ideally unique, interesting, valuable links accompanied by commentary that starts an engaging conversation."[11]

Every user can post one thread per 24 hours, and each thread is made up of a minimum of one link. The link can be to anything available online, and is posted in the context of a short sentence or paragraph explaining what the link is.



Figure 4.2: Metafilter discussion thread

After reading the post, the user can then click on the link or links to get to another area of the web (the topic of the thread), and view the content. After viewing the content,

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11 http://www.metafilter.com/about.mefi

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the user can comment within the thread by clicking on the # *comments* link. Comments are described as

> the heart of discussion at MetaFilter. Once a thread is started on the homepage, any member can contribute their voice to a conversation by posting comments. The best comments often include not just the member's opinion on a subject, but new links that relate to the topic being discussed, or personal experiences that might let other members see the topic in a new light.[12]

Commentary plays a central role on Metafilter as it is the main form of communication between members. On any given thread, the topic of the post is discussed (or one particular aspect of the subject), and a conversation develops where users comment on other comments, or post new links within the thread that either opposing or support the topic or another comment. Users are defined first by their commenting and FPP[13] history.

### 5.3.3 – Links vs. Discussion

There are two prevailing opinions of the role of Metafilter in regards to what is more important; the links or the discussion. Some Mefites argue that the discussion is more important than the link itself, as often more information is provided in the discussion itself than is contained in the link. Also, the wide range of users allows Metafilter access to a number of experts in many different fields who will often post within the thread, giving unique insight to a topic. In many cases, what is considered to be technically a 'bad' post can be redeemed by the subsequent discussion.

Other users feel that links are more important, and that Metafilter should even go as far as removing the ability to comment altogether. Many times, threads do not stay on topic, or the topic is ignored and another aspect of the link is discussed (i.e. the design of

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12 http://www.metafilter.com/about.mefi

13 A FPP is a post that is made to Metafilter's front page.

the linked page). Many users point out that Metafilter's primary function was to find the best links on the web, and that the often messy discussions take away from this. However, as user *stavrosthewonderchicken* points out, viewing these camps as diametrically opposed is an oversimplification, in that "most people enjoy both good FPP's and good discussion, to various degrees, and at various times."[14]

Conversations are generally *topics* oriented rather than *user* oriented. An *on topic* conversation on a link discussing the Iraq war does not usually focus on the Mefi personalities discussing the link, rather on what the link says or doesn't say. However, from time to time, arguments are carried out within threads; initially, these arguments are a result of users who have different opinions on a particular topic, but they often devolve into 'flame-wars,' where the discussion is focused on the personalities involved rather than the topic of the post.

## 5.3.4 – De-emphasized Individuality

Within a thread, comments appear prominently over the name of the user it is attributed to. Unlike other online communities, Metafilter users do not use avatars or signature lines that set each users apart as unique. Consider the difference between figure 4.2 (found on page 51), and figure 4.3.

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[14] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/1648#22203, January 14, 2002.
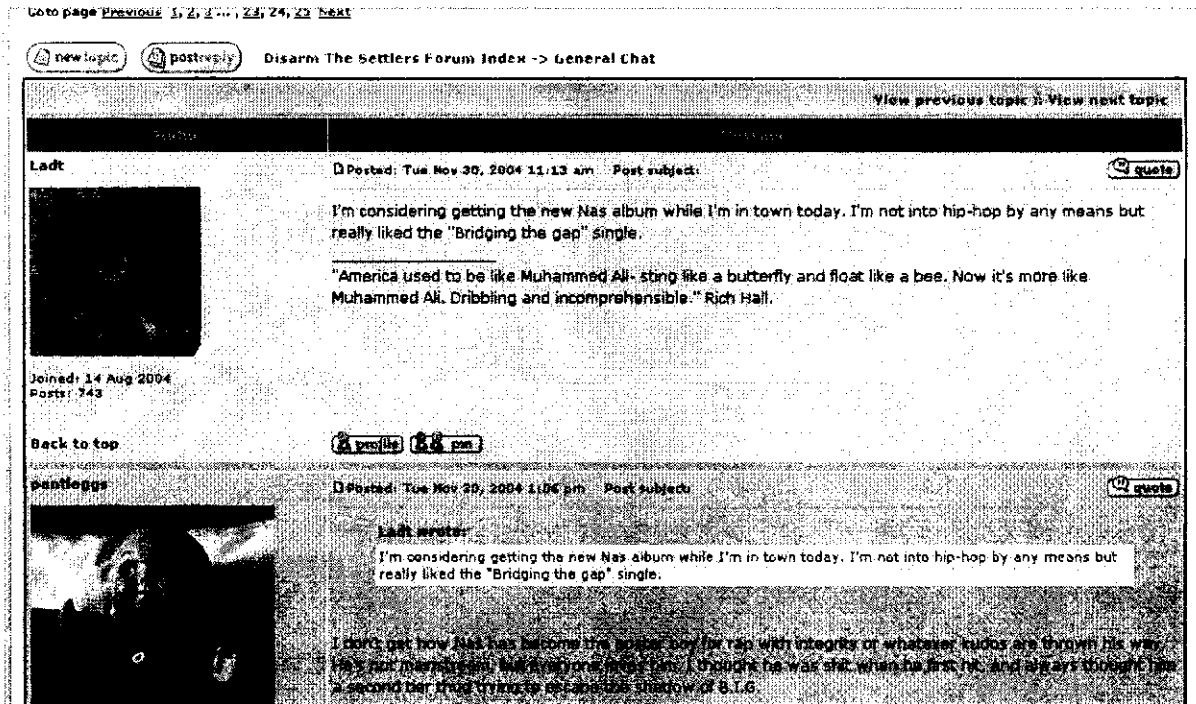
Figure 4.3 Conversation from Disarm the Settlers, a fan site for the band Guided by Voices (www.ragebox.com/dts).

Figure 4.3 shows how users are easily differentiated with a unique avatar and other visual

cues such as a signature line and demographic data showing when the user joined the

group and how many comments they have made. This information serves a few key roles

for the users on this message board: the reader can quickly identify who is who (through

the avatar) and see how integrated to the community they are (shown by the join date and

the total number of postings). Compare that to figure 4.2 where the only visible

distinction between users (at this level) is a unique screen name, and information as to

when the post was made.

## 5.3.5 – User Pages

Clicking on the user name takes you to a page that can be customized by the user.

Here, users have the option of providing their real names, a link to a web page they have

designed or are associated with, email address, location, occupation, and gender, all of

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which provide clues as to who the user 'really is.' The user's history of comments and posts in all three areas of Metafilter are also linked here. Another section is available where the user can provide insight to their identity by providing information on the meaning of their nickname, or other pieces of biographical information that the user wants to make available. All of this information is removed from the main conversation areas, so that when users are conversing, their main identity is their nick name. It is up to other users to seek out more information.

When a reader is following a long discussion in Metafilter between large numbers of users, it is not always easy to differentiate users. For example, when I am reading a thread and I don't recognize a username right away, I can hover over their name, and the link shows up on the bottom of my browser, which provides their user number. With this information I can check if a comment comes from new user or not, and if I want further information I can click through to a user's page. However, in the course of a discussion, it is not always possible (due to time constraints) to click on every user to get a clear sense of who is who. So unless I have a pre-existing notion of who a user is (through past interaction), most posters remain anonymous, blending together into a collective voice. Metafilter's simple and efficient visual design deemphasizes user individuality, giving each user equal footing, but at this level also tends to maintain a high level of anonymity

## 5.4 Etiquette/Policy: Ongoing Discussion In MetaTalk

One of the key aspects of Metafilter is its system of self policing, which is how the community acts against transgressions through call-outs (discussion threads in MetaTalk that deal with a problem perpetrated by another user or users) and discussions of community issues in MetaTalk. Though these discussions rarely reach consensus, the continual discussion of certain issues (i.e. what the 'best of the web' is) act to keep a

dialogue open, and through the reading of these threads, a user can get a sense of what is or is not acceptable behavior in Metafilter.

This is the case with the ongoing discussion on what makes a 'good' post and what makes a 'bad' post. The subtext of this ongoing debate illustrates the adherence to the Metafilter mission statement to find the 'best of the web.' However, the word 'best' tends to be highly subjective and is highly ambiguous, leading to frequent conflicts between users who have different ideas of what 'best' refers to.

For example; in the two U.S. Presidential elections that have occurred during Metafilter's existence, Metafilter was flooded with posts regarding the issues surrounding the U.S. elections. As the majority of Metafilter users are American, these threads were deemed to be important to a majority of the users. However, a large segment of the community (including many Americans) felt these types of threads were being posted in excess to the point of harming Metafilter's credibility.[15] User *Ethereal Bligh* writes that "the fact that a *certain kind of post* [a reference to election themed posts] is *increasingly being called out on MeTa* far more than any other (recently even more than once a day) indicates that this type of post, at least, seems to a significant portion of MeFi to be "crap."[16]

Focusing only on threads that have been tagged as "Etiquette/Policy,"[17] a common theme emerges: a sentiment of "haven't we been over this before?" This rings true because many etiquette/policy discussions follows similar patterns; there are hundreds of MetaTalk threads discussing what makes a 'good' post and why certain posts can be

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15 See Metatalk threads 8188, 8229, 8350, 8368, 8397 and most importantly 8344 for the ongoing discussion of "Electionfilter fatigue."

16 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8229#167456

17 When starting a MetaTalk thread, the poster must add a category marker from a dropbox. Categories include things like bugs (a thread that discusses technical difficulties in Metafilter), feature requests (a thread that asks for Matt to do something new to Metafilter, otherwise known as a 'pony'), etiquette/policy (a thread discussing rule violations or bad behavior), Metafilter related (a catch-all category for items that don't fit anywhere else), and Metafilter Gatherings (where users can organize face to face meet-ups)

qualified as 'bad.' Very rarely does any new ground get covered or does any formal consensus arise.

This holds true for most topics discussed in MetaTalk; threads related to reporting bug reports, and new feature requests, as well as face to face meetup reminders all follow similar patterns of posting. The details aren't the same, and the participating users aren't always the same, but the content of the discussion often follow similar patterns, and the structure of events within these threads often occur in a similar order.

So why does Metafilter continue to rehash the same topics on an ongoing basis? As I will examine in the next section, these ongoing discussions serve to reinforce norms and rules, and have a similar function as story telling in pre-literate societies. As Metafilter's posted rules are fairly ambiguous in nature, and its membership is in constant flux (that is, a regular stream of new users coming in and older users drifting away from the community), these discussions serve to ensure that the Metafilter culture is passed forward. Though there have been sites off Metafilter that more rigidly list the rules for MetaFilter (such as the highly detailed Metafilter Wiki[18]), these discussions serve to allow members opportunities to 'weigh in,' helping to internalize the culture (through the process of thinking about an issue and posting an opinion), thereby ensuring the culture remains intact.

### 5.4.1 Finding the 'Best of the Web'

As alluded to previously, not everything is acceptable to post on Metafilter. As per Metafilter's posting guidelines,[19] a good post is something that meets the following criteria:

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[18] http://mssv.net/wiki.cgi?Home
[19] http://www.metafilter.com/guidelines.mefi, a page dedicated to some of Metafilters formalized rules

> most people haven't seen it before, there is something interesting about the content on the
> page, and it might warrant discussion from others . . . A good thread values uniqueness
> over novelty.

The guideline page does little to instruct on acceptable posting behavior to new users. A

good post is something that *most* people haven't seen before, there is something

*interesting* about the content, it *might* warrant discussion, and it will value *uniqueness*

*over novelty*. How would a potential poster know if *most* people had seen the link they

wanted to post? Or what someone would find interesting, if discussion would be

triggered? Similarly, the Metafilter Wiki's section "what is a good post?" has this to say:

> Writing a good post is almost like an art, and a paradox; a good post should be short, but
> it should also be descriptive. It should link to an intriguing page yet be appealing to a
> wide range of readers. You should express your opinion in the post, but not let it
> completely bias the post. And if you manage to do all of this, the chances are that you
> won't even be thanked.[20]

The Wiki primarily focuses what makes a 'bad' post, as it is easier for members to

discuss what is wrong with a post as opposed to what is good. As it says, a good post is

like an 'art,' appreciation of which is ephemeral and hard to pin down.

The 'good' post guidelines are tricky, especially the originality statement. The

most common reason for deletion, given by *mathowie*, is that the link had previously

been posted (a *double post*: if the link has been posted previously). Similarly, one of the

most common complaints from users within threads is when a link has 'obviously' been

taken from one of the other popular link portals (such as Fark, memepool.com or

boingboing.net). One MetaTalk callout in particular addressed this issue, when user

*NickDouglas* posted a thread to MetaTalk and asked the following question:

> Via, via, via -- Engadget, Memepool, and Boing Boing, respectively. These are not minor
> blogs. Boing Boing got 3 million hits yesterday. I already saw this stuff on the blogs and
> on delicious; can we stick to fresh stuff on MeFi unless we have something insightful to
> add?[21]

20 http://mssv.net/wiki.cgi?WhatIsAGoodPost
21 MetaTalk thread 9182, March 5, 2005.

User *scarabic*'s reply was that "this exact thread has been posted several times, and people always say one of the following: 1) I don't read memepool and I don't think I should have to 2) I read BoingBoing sometimes, sure, but I still want to have everything here, in one place, on Mefi, for convenience' sake"[22] Again, this and other similar exchanges occur as a result of the ambiguity of the rules, especially when there are over 20,000 members, how could one possibly know for sure whether or not *most* people had seen it? Similarly, finding links that might have *interesting* content is contentious because it raises the question *interesting to whom*? Finally, finding links that *warrant discussion* is contentious because, as I will show, this leads to the debate on what is more important: the *links* or the ensuing *discussion*?

Often, when a user posts a link that doesn't meet the above criteria, users will comment within the thread something along the lines of, "is this the best of the web?" For example, here are a few recent MetaTalk callouts, that have dealt what is or is not the 'best of the web':

> How is <u>one link</u> to MSNBC and solicitation of opinions "The Best of the Web?" Or have we given up on that and just become a political site?[23]
>
> I was thinking, you know, maybe a <u>post</u> about a <u>celebrity</u> giving money to <u>charity</u> isn't so "best of the web."[24]
>
> <u>Here</u> we have a short (and fairly dull) Wired article, a link to Google News, a <u>repost</u>, and a bandwidth-exceeded Geocities site. I'm new(ish), but, best of the web?[25]

The 'best of the web' debate is highly contentious because it is highly subjective; what one person believes to be the 'best,' other users feel to be redundant, tired, or otherwise unsuitable for Metafilter. User dobbs states in a post that to meet the "best" criteria:

> Your FPP has one link in it. Two at the most. What you're linking to does not exist OFF the web (ie, it's not a newspaper, magazine, or product). If it does exist off the web,

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[22] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9182#205817, March 5, 2005.
[23] MetaTalk thread 8245, September 16, 2004.
[24] MetaTalk thread 8892, January 26, 2005.
[25] MetaTalk thread 8809, January 14, 2005.

you're linking to it because it appearing on the web is what makes it link-worthy (ie, an archive of all the covers of X magazine or a complete archive of all articles in National Geographic, etc.) It DOES NOT require or solicit discussion, nor is it enhanced by it. In fact, in my opinion, Metafilter would get better posts if it did away with comments altogether.[26]

## 5.4.2 – Filtering Metafilter

User *y6y6y6* built a website called *MF Distilled* that worked to filter Metafilter down even further to find the 'best' links. MF Distilled states that it is a daily 'best of' Metafilter, working from the notion that

> MetaFilter has problems which are too much of a barrier to entry for many people - It's a boys club, people are snarky and mean, the inside jokes crowd out good discussion, the arguing crowds out discussion, it's more of a news filter than a web filter, and moderation is minimal. People have given up on MetaFilter due to the low signal to noise ratio and the frequent attacks by other members.[27]

The goal of MF Distilled is to "provide a place away from the noise where the best links and discussions on MetaFilter can be highlighted. Not all of the good stuff, just the best, in our opinions. We've set an informal limit of 6-8 items per day." However, *y6y6y6* comments that "when people were adding things there everyday I found that everyone's idea of what the best was different. For me it was "best of the web". For others it was "cool finds". For others it was new and news worthy."[28]

Similar attempts at filtering Metafilter have been made, such as the case with Metafilter: Remixed,[29] which states on its main page that:

> a lot of people find Metafilter a little too unwieldy to read through these days, and a lot of people also wish they had some better way of rewarding great posts other than just commenting "Great thread!"

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[26] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8520#178156, November 28, 2004
[27] http://www.mfdistilled.com/about.php
[28] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8297#169774, October 1, 2004
[29] http://webmutant.com/mefi/remixed.cgi

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The idea is similar to MF Distilled, except that the user installs a 'bookmarklet' (a web

application that is added to the users web browser, and allows the user to perform a

specialized task by clicking a button embedded in their web browser) so that whenever

they are reading a Metafilter thread that has what they perceive to be a good link or they

perceive to have an exceptional discussion, they just have to click on the bookmarklet to

submit their vote for it, and that thread gets added to Metafilter: Remixed. Then, on

Metafilter: Remixed, threads can be sorted by the number of [this is good] votes, thus

allowing its users to only look at posts that have more than five votes. The main

difference between the two sites is that MF Distilled makes its decisions subjectively by a

small group of editors, and Metafilter: Remixed works with a voting system.

It is telling that when Metafilter: Remixed was first discussed in 2002, one user

commented that there were "a few threads that I thought were pretty great that are

missing,"[30] followed by another user who commented, "and a couple that weren't really

great that are present."[31] In that same thread, *y6y6y6* comments that:

> This seems like a fantastic way to shutdown minority viewpoints, mute emotional
> discussion, and promote groupthink. Suddenly posting becomes a numbers game. We'll
> all try and post things that will draw the highest number of "good" votes. Because good is
> better. And posts that don't get good votes are a waste of everyone's time.[32]

For him, a good post doesn't always have to be considered 'good' for it to be 'good', and

certain posts are inherently 'good'. Another user *MiguelCardoso* agrees with *y6y6y6*, and

asks "Why use numbers when we have words?"[33] *Mathowie* weighs in on the issue,

pointing out the pro's and con's of the voting system, such as the ability to look at certain

threads as 'examples' for the rest of the community, but also seeing the potential for

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[30] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2731#53449, October 28, 2002.
[31] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2731#53450, October 28, 2002.
[32] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2731#53482, October 28, 2002
[33] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2731#53483, October 28, 2002.

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abuse, and adding a way for users who frequently had high numbers of votes to feel entitled.[34]

Both these Metafilter-filter sites serve similar functions, adding further evidence that the main task of finding the 'best of the web' is a subjective and ambiguous task. The users who created them do not feel that Metafilter is doing its job at filtering the web, and as a result, required supplementary filtering. It is interesting to note that these two Metafilter-filters did not catch on as they were intended to. In September 2003, there was a discussion on MF Distilled, about why it was abandoned. User *jonson* stated the reasoning was that what makes Metafilter work was that it is so varied, and that these sites had a built in inability to capture the 'essence' of Metafilter:

> I'm not sure if all the various mefi filters will ever catch on... it's difficult for any person or group of people to so collectively nail what it is about this site that makes it work ... I think the only thing we'd have a chance of consensus on is which posts are absolutely terrible, which means mefidistilled or whatever that site was the strips news posts from the rss feed, or any other filter would have to contain the vast majority of stuff that's here in order to accomodate the diverse & varied interests of the group.[35]

to which *y6y6y6* responded that

> the reason all the various mefi filters will never catch on is that there just isn't that much value in such a thing. As weird as that sounds. We like the chaos.[36]

This is an often repeated statement, as many users point to the 'chaos' as a key ingredient to Metafilter's success.

## 5.4.3 – Identifying 'Good' Posts

Within discussion threads, users will identify a good post in one or two ways; the first is to write, "this is good," or other short affirmation messages, written to identify that that the poster has done something right (even if the commenter don't want to contribute

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[34] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2731#53484. October 28, 2002.
[35] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3528#82560. September 17, 2003.
[36] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3528#82564. September 11, 2003.

to a discussion, or the post itself is structured as to not warrant discussion). Secondly, a

post that is considered to be good may result in long and in depth discussions on the topic

contained in the post, though this is admittedly not always the case, as is often repeated

"the number of comments is not an indicator of post quality."[37] As *Ethereal Bligh* points

out "MetaFilter is not *primarily* a discussion site. The *raison d'être* of a post is *not* the

discussion which may or may not follow it."[38]

This discussion of the primacy of the *links* or the *discussions* occurred when user

*mkultra* called out a post that simply contained one link to the trailer for an upcoming

movie, calling it "bad form."[39] Other users were not so quick to condemn the post, citing

the facts that it was a web-only excusive, and user *xmutex* told *mkultra* that he was not

the "sole arbiter of what's good on MeFi."[40] User *nthdegx* stated that the post was ok

because of the "enthusiasm" of the ensuing conversation, and so long as it remained a

rare occurrence, it was acceptable.[41] Another user cited the post as acceptable because

there was precedent of previous threads linking to movie trailers (including one I myself

made of the trailer for Star Wars: Episode III). However *mkultra* reiterates his point with

an analogy:

> The political Right's favorite tactic recently is to establish an argument about a subject-
> say, that Evolution is a "theory" and should not be taught exclusively in schools. They
> then demand that their argument- that Creationism is an equally valid theory- be given
> merit by journalists merely by its existence as an "alternate viewpoint". You'd find plenty
> of people willing to speak up and discuss that, but it doesn't change the simple fact that
> something does not merit mention solely by its existence and because a certain segment
> of the population demands it be heard.[42]

Other users in that thread disagreed with *mkultra*; user *The God Complex* replies that

what *mkultra* is talking about is wanting his view of the guidelines enforced more

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[37] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200064, February 16, 2005.
[38] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9140#203787, February 27, 2005.
39 MetaTalk thread 9050, February 16, 2005.
[40] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200055, February 16, 2005.
[41] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200058, February 16, 2005.
[42] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200301, February 16, 2005.

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strongly, when "precedent suggests that these posts are okay." He states "you know

what? Who cares. They're fun and people seem to be enjoying the discussion. They don't

occur every day."[43] User *mediareport* asks if "a single link to a movie trailer at Amazon

no longer counts as a lazy post?"[44] to which user *mischief* replied "Did it ever?"[45] The

lack of consensus in this thread and others like it speaks less of what is considered to be a

'good' post, but rather what a 'good' post *is not.*

This clarification is important because it is one of the key aspects of Metafilter

identity; Metafilter is defined by what it *isn't* more so than what it *is.* The notion of the

negative identity is seen everywhere on the site: from one of the Metafilter taglines in the

logo ("The Plastic.Com that it is ok to like!"), to the constant comparisons between

Metafilter and other online communities (especially Fark.com[46], which is constantly

referred to by users in the context of "that may be good for Fark, but it isn't acceptable

for Metafilter"). However, even with the negative identity, what is unacceptable to post is

often as ambiguous and open for debate as the 'best of the web' posts.

## 5.5 Identifying 'Bad' Posts

The other component of the guidelines page discusses in some detail what is

involved in making a bad post; among the criteria are "self-linking" (linking to a site

created by the poster), not having a link in the post, posting press releases for a product or

website, as well as posts that are considered to be trolling (i.e. posting inflammatory

things for the purpose of getting a negative reaction). These guidelines are more clear-

cut; when a post transgresses one of these rules it is more likely to be deleted, and in

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[43] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200305, February 16, 2005.
[44] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200338, February 16, 2005.
[45] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9050#200343, February 16, 2005
46 Fark.com sticks to links dealing with major news stories, 'weird' news stories, and the discourse in Fark discussion threads is usually limited to one line jokes and the use of images.

some cases, the poster can have their account temporarily suspended or banned permanently.

'Bad' posts are often less ambiguous than 'good' posts, and as a result, the Metafilter community tends to focus more on them, when a post is 'bad' it is easier to spot in a number of ways. For example, when the link has been posted previously, when there is a case of suspected 'self-linking,' or when a post is a link to a product that the poster could stand to benefit from the exposure a link on Metafilter would bring.

Even still, there is ongoing debate on the issues specific to what makes a post 'bad.' For example, though links to products are acceptable to post, the line is drawn when the post is designed to sell something, often referred to as a *shill* or 'Pepsi Blue,'[47] described in the MetafilterWiki "an ad or product endorsement for reasons other than just overall consumer joy"[48] disguised as a post. The line between endorsement and interest in a new product is often difficult to spot, and as user quonsar states:

> *Pepsi Blue* is the term most frequently used around here. It's mostly shunned unless it's some new apple iWidget or a videogame, in which case it'll be a 300 comment thread. Remember, apple or gaming good, other commerce bad.[49]

There is no clear example of what an acceptable product link consists of, as certain products are often discussed without being called out for being 'Pepsi Blue' while others garner large amounts of discussion and praise for the poster for finding such a 'good' link.

## 5.6 – Trolling

Another area of the 'bad' posting guidelines that is frequently discussed within MetaTalk threads are posts that are considered to be 'trolling' the community. The

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47 The term "Pepsi Blue" comes from one of the first 'viral' web campaigns that had bloggers writing about Pepsi's new product (blue Pepsi) in 2002, and refers to a post designed to shill for a product.

48 http://mssv.net/wiki.cgi?PepsiBlue
49 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8509#177524, October 24, 2004.

problematic nature of 'trolling' is that the label 'troll' is subjective according to the topic, and the way the troll is carried out. For example, because Metafilter's users tend to be politically left leaning, a post criticizing right-wing politics may not be seen as a troll because a majority of the members will agree with a left-wing statement even if the message could be clearly defined as a 'troll.' However, if a user posts a link criticizing left-wink politics, that thread is often quickly labeled as a 'troll.'

The guidelines page defines a troll as "posting purposely inflammatory things for the sole purpose of baiting others to argue the points until blue in the face - basically people do this for kicks, to destroy conversations and communities, for the hell of it."[50] However, users who hold opinions that might be unpopular or contradictory to the 'majority view' of Metafilter users, and thus many users with politically right-wing viewpoints are often labeled as trolls. This is an important distinction, in that the term 'troll' is used both as a verb and a noun; a user can troll using inflammatory language, and a user that often trolls the community can then be labeled a troll.

For example, a new user (*Shouting*) joined Metafilter in July 2005, and, over the course of a few days, proceeded to post many comments that people felt were purposely inflammatory (sample comment in a discussion on ethnic profiling[51]: "Many ... domestic violence charges are filed as a strategy in divorce proceedings. A domestic violence charge can help a woman to gain a better financial settlement and custody of the couple's children,"[52] or "It's time to start holding women responsible for their sexual actions. Why should they get a pass. We hound men into the grave if they father a child."[53]). As a

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[50] http://www.metafilter.com/guidelines.mefi
[51] Metafilter thread 43870, July 31, 2005.

[52] http://www.metafilter.com/mefi/43870#998443, July 31, 2005.
[53] http://www.metafilter.com/mefi/43849#997815, July 30, 2005.

result, *Shouting* was the subject of a callout from user *trey* declaring him Metafilter's

"newest troll." [54]

This callout started a lengthy debate on the definition of a troll, and the type of

'troll' that gets called out more often. As user *LarryC* states *"Shouting* is being a jerk and

deserves a call out, but the call out is only happening because *Shouting* is a right wing

jerk. If he were a lefty jerk he would get a free pass here."[55] Throughout that thread,

many users questioned whether or not Shouting could even be considered to be a troll;

user loquax states that *Shouting* "seems to be expressing his thoughts and beliefs in an

honest manner, not baiting people for the sole purpose of baiting them."[56] Even

*jessamyn*[57] states "Jerk? Probably. Troll? Not as I understand the term."[58]

On the other hand, *amberglow* writes that it is "not opinions that are inflammatory

or of a certain flavor of politics--It's the attacks and insults while preferring those

opinions and statements."[59] Throughout the 304 comments in that MetaTalk thread, there

was no clear consensus on what was meant by labeling someone a troll, or if *Shouting*

could even properly be described as troll because he held unpopular opinions within the

community.

*Mathowie* points out that the problem with the term 'troll' stems from its overuse.

He writes that

> The term is thrown around waaaaay too much online to the point where people think that
> the work troll means "anyone I disagree with", which is not at all... A true troll post is a
> firebomb that's purposely tossed into a group known to react to controversy. [60]

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54 MetaTalk thread 9894, July 29, 2005.

[55] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9894#235676, July 29, 2005.

[56] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9894#235519, July 29, 2005.

57 In the course of researching this chapter, Matt gave a respected member of the community, Jessamyn moderation powers, though there were times early on in this appointment where Matt seemed to be uncomfortable with this decision.

[58] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9894#235792, July 29, 2005.

[59] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9894#235869, July 29, 2005.

[60] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/7256#144286, May 14, 2004.

This definition was brought up in a MetaTalk thread calling out a Metafilter post by user *111*, a user who was frequently labeled a troll, and a link he posted that discussed the apparent "medical consequences for what homosexuals do."[61]

In an earlier MetaTalk discussion of *111* and his posting behavior, user *mr_roboto* discusses why *111* is not actually a troll by explaining how the term 'troll' came into existence in the early days of the Internet: historically, a troller is a provocateur, and "at his best the troller is a jester, a holy fool, exposing and ridiculing the self-satisfaction and egomania of members of the community."[62] The troller does this by writing for two audiences; those he seeks to provoke, and those he seeks to entertain, and a careful balance must be had between insulting the community too broadly (and thus bringing the derision of it and triggering a flame war) and showing too much restraint (and allowing for a thoughtful discussion). One strategy employed by trolls is the "absurd assertion" whereby

> the troller makes a claim, typically using the tone of an expert, that is on its face contradictory to common sense and common knowledge. Most readers comprehend immediately what is happening: they say to themselves, "Ah! A troll!", sit back, and watch. Some readers, however, are outraged at the apparent affront to the integrity and intelligence of the forum, and they go out of their ways to discredit the troll's absurd claims, often making fools of themselves.[63]

The type of trolling techniques employed by *111* uses a less sophisticated approach, where all he does is insult one side of a debate. "The partisans of that side are sure to respond with bile, and if the insults are sufficiently coated in a veneer of reasonable discourse, the rest of the community will hesitate to object to the troller."[64] At the heart of this comment by *mr_roboto* is a debate on how trolls are properly defined, and that there is more than one type of trolling behavior. *Mr_roboto* wants to nuance the

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61 Metafilter thread 33096, May 14, 2004.

62 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3400#76353, July 16, 2003.

63 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3400#76353, July 16, 2003.

64 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/3400#76353, July 16, 2003.

definition of troll in the 'classic' sense of a troll posting 'bait' making his opponents look foolish, whereas *mathowie* defines a troll as simply a 'firebomb' thrown into a community to cause disruption.

As these two examples illustrate, seemingly unambiguous rules against shilling products and trolling are subject to ongoing discussions in MetaTalk as much as discussions on what the 'best of the web' is. As I stated earlier, these ongoing discussions on posting behaviors are about more than keeping Metafilter free from double posts, product placements, or removing trolls set in place to cause conflict. These posts also serve to maintain the order over a large community, as well as maintaining a collective sense of community by reinforcing norms and rules. These rules are enforced by *mathowie* and *jessamyn* (who can make the final decisions to close threads or delete comments), but it is the community members who point out rule violations or norm transgressions and discuss appropriate punishments or future actions to take. This peer-watch system is known on Metafilter as 'self-policing,' in which the community watches itself and acts through callout threads or by flagging posts and comments.

## 5.7 Self Policing

Though MetaTalk serves many purposes, the etiquette/policy discussions are primarily a site of conflict and struggle between community members. As discussed above, ongoing discussions rehashing issues of community standards occur in the form of 'callouts,' in which one user posts a thread to point attention to a particular thread or problem user. It is through these conflicts that the invisible structure of rules and norms become visible; the hidden formal and informal structures that govern discourse become visible when they are disrupted or disrespected as opposed to when they are followed. In MetaTalk the act of highlighting a rule violation works to ensure that everyone knows

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what *not* to do, providing an immediate consequence of breaking a rule (that is, having a whole community discuss the actions of one user, sometimes devolving into a group pile-on where one user gets flamed by a large number of users).

Metafilter has been operating on the principle of self-policing since its inception, and though many users are critical of its effectiveness, it is hard to argue with its end results. As user *fooljay* notes,

> If there's any doubt that self-policing works, just think what the place would be like if no one ever said anything about a double post or a stupid comment. This place would quickly devolve into a oozing mess. Self-policing creates a "think first" step that is necessary in any community, online or not. Matt of course is the final judge, jury and executioner.

This is the common argument for Metafilter's system of self-policing; it is key in the success of managing a large shifting population without lowering its standards and with minimal intervention from formal moderators. As noted by Matt, he attempts to keep a hands-off approach to community problems, as he will "delete a double post or two a day, skim the site hourly to see what is going on, but I don't have to do much more than that. Once in a while I email people about their behavior or discuss it in MetaTalk, but the community by and large is pretty much self-policing."65

> User *Stavrosthewonderchicken* states that self-policing is the
>
> shared responsibility of all members of a community to do their damnedest (when they're so inclined and able) to encourage the behaviours that they believe are appropriate to the community of which they are a part, and discourage the behaviours they believe destructive, I think MeFi is a fine example of 'self-policing' as effective community-administration policy.66

Callouts are an attempt to steer the community towards a desirable code of conduct and away from an undesirable or problematic one. Every member of the

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65 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2175#36208. May 7, 2002.
66 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2175#36175. May 7, 2002.

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community has the ability to post threads to MetaTalk, drawing attention to a

problem comment or user.[67]

## 5.7.1 – Components of Self Policing

User *MiguelCardoso* explains that self-policing has four different levels; first,

"every member should police her or himself,"[68] or in other words, users should

internalize the guidelines and MetaTalk etiquette/policy discussions and act accordingly

when posting threads or comments. Secondly, "if he or she doesn't, other members will

do the policing themselves."[69] This, as previously noted, takes place through the act of

posting a call-out thread in MetaTalk. Third, "if said members forget to or overdo it, Matt

will step in to do the policing himself." Finally, if Matt's policing is out of line, it is up to

the community to call him out on it.[70] Through his analysis, *Miguel* points to the

complexity of policing a large, complex and always changing community, and how it

works on different levels through internalization, peer pressure, and the eventual

intervention of *mathowie* and *jessamyn* who have the formal power to act.

## 5.7.2 – Criticisms of Self Policing

The most common criticism of the self-policing is that it requires at least some

consensus, and as I have shown, consensus is a rare occurrence in etiquette/policy

discussions. Due to this lack of consensus, many such threads will contain some flaming

between users, and as user *Bugbread* notes, the reality of self-policing means:

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[67] A newer component to this was installed in February 2005 when Matt implemented a system so a user can easily 'flag' any offending post or comment, giving Matt a more thorough feedback. As a result every comment and post has attached to it a small [!] that can be clicked on, taking the user to another page with a dropbox giving some reasons for flagging a comment such as 'double post,' 'offensive content' or 'noise' among other reasons. It also contains a positive flag so users can point out a 'fantastic post/comment.'

[68] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2703#52529, October 16, 2002.

[69] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2703#52529, October 16, 2002.

[70] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/2703#52529, October 16, 2002.

> people in Camp A shouting at people in Camp B for some issue, followed by people in Camp B shouting at people in Camp A for some other issue. Unless everyone knows more or less what policies or values they're supposed to be policing, self-policing just turns into yelling at people to stick to your interpretation of what Mefi should be, and in reality pretty much everything sticking except for the particularly egregious examples.[71]

User *gd779* follows this idea, and adds that

> In the absence of a central lawgiver, there are only two possible states: 1) "do as thou wilt" or 2) constant political fighting over what MetaFilter should be (leading to periods of conflict between Camp A and Camp B or, occasionally, to periods of consensus, as Camp A temporarily triumphs over Camp B).[72]

Both of these comments point to the reality that the constant stream of call-outs combined with the ambiguity of the rules leads to conflict between groups of opposing viewpoints and also the partial breakdown of the community.

Some members point to the 'messiness' of self-policing as a positive aspect of Metafilter. User *rushmc* states that "MetaTalk is *supposed* to be the filthy sewer neath the main structure that keeps everything clean and sorted out above. It's an opt-in place to hash things out."[73] *Stavrosthewonderchicken* points out that

> Like some democracies, it's stumbled along quite well despite its own inherent contradictions and messiness, and is still vibrant, when given the opportunity to be, thanks in no small part to the combination of a hands-off leader and a concerned, engaged citizenry. . . It is in the *intersection* of the desires of the active members of the community that standards and rules, unspoken or otherwise, are born. This is as it should be.[74]

*Stavros* and *rushmc* both refer to the positive ways in which callouts, even without consensus, work out problems and differences in an area outside of the main section of Metafilter, which is its 'public' face. Secondly, as *Stavros* points out, it is not consensus that acts to enable self-policing, but the *intersection* of the desires. Through the

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[71] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8738#187871, December 31, 2004.

[72] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8738#187887, December 31, 2004.

[73] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8656#183770 December 16, 2004

[74] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8738#187905, January 1, 2005.

discussions no one side will ever 'win,' but an unspoken consensus occurs to appease

everyone without having either side 'lose.'

### 5.7.3 Pile-ons

As previously stated, callouts in MetaTalk sometimes get out of hand and turn

into pile-ons. Pile-ons occur when many users 'gang up' on one user through the use of

flaming, or the act of 'attacking' another user through the use of insults or other

demeaning language. User *scarabic* notes that there should be a distinction between

callouts for self-policing and pile-ons,

> "pile-on" makes a callout sound like a purely-destructive feeding-frenzy driven by malice. Not all callouts are like that. When the consensus is absolutely clear, yes, they can go on too long and get fucked up.[75]

One such example of this happened in February 2005. User *FlamingBore* posted a thread

regarding another user (*u.n. owen*) who was apparently going through financial

difficulties, and the thread was aimed at raising money to help her out.[76] Though u.*n.*

*owen* herself was not the one to post the thread, she made the first comment explaining

her situation:

> Just in the spirit of full disclosure: I wasn't having problems, for instance, buying food or havng electricity. I wasn't eating out, and I was turning the lights off a lot, but I was going very paycheck to paycheck.
>
> Today, because I'd foolishly posted something from work to a blog, I ended up on 3 days unpaid leave. Normally I'd welcome the vacation but it strikes me at a particularly awful time and I'm pretty well screwed. It's my fault for posting it (I won't show what I posted -- suffice it to say all identifying info had been removed, but the IT guys evidently were remote viewing, and it wasn't that offensive) in the first place, but this comes at a particularly bad point for me.
>
> Thanks for looking. You guys rock. It sucks to be at a point in life where a couple hundred bucks one way or another can mean the difference between normal life and losing electricity/apartment. Yow. :-/[77]

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[75] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9263#208999, March 20, 2005.
76 MetaTalk thread 9144, February 28, 2005.

[77] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204131, February 28, 2005.

After this comment, a few of users posted some positive comments, offering to help out with money, and others offering career advice. Other users started to post comments regarding the inappropriateness of the thread, voicing a concern that it might set a precedent for other users to make similar threads asking for money.

However, things started turning on her when user *snarkout* started digging into *u.n. owen*'s Metafilter comment history:

> u.n. owen, while I'm reluctant to piss in anyone's shoes, and I think it's super that MeFi is willing to cough up money to help out someone in distress, can I ask you how, if you're twenty years old in 2005 [original comment said 2000, but snarkout corrected this later in the thread], you were a now-adultified bad girl who did not regret her vote in the 2000 presidential elections? Are you not the same person as the original user of the account? There are any number of perfectly reasonable explanations, but before people give money to someone out of sympathy for their young-and-recklessness, I thought I would inquire.[78]

This comment prompted *u.n. owen* to respond:

> snarkout, I purchased my account by trading for a gmail account on day 4 of gmail availability. And I did vote in the 2000 election, at age 16, it was fraudulent but they accepted my college ID as a form of valid ID (stupid Iowans). And yes, I used to be a "bad girl" if prostitution qualifies, but I did that as jailbait, too. Would you like the rest of my life story while we're in here? It's not always nice.[79]

At this point, other users in the thread started a pile-on, where *u.n. owen* was met with personal attacks and users questioning her credibility:

> Um, it sounds like you have some skills there that you could tap to make some serious cash.[80]

> I find you to be a wonderful disaster of a person. If you'd like to email me your life story, I'd give it an interested read.[81]

> u.n. owen is likely an unshaven balding 53 year old man with a penchant for AOL chatrooms, and the whole jeopardy thing went south because he couldn't exactly show up at the planned meetup.[82]

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[78] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204199, February 28, 2005.
[79] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204208, February 28, 2005.
[80] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204210, February 28, 2005.
[81] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204212, February 28, 2005.
[82] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204256, February 28, 2005.

WHORE!

WHORE!<sup>83</sup>

*u.n. owen* attempted to save face by responding to specific allegations about her history,

but at the end of the debate, users had tracked down her history from other message

boards and communities, and by the thread finished up, *u.n. owen* had given up and quit

posting to Metafilter.

Though this one example of a particularly bad pile on, where users were

extremely aggressive towards one user, there have been other cases on Metafilter where a

pile-on has resulted in the targeted user 'flaming-out' and leaving the community.

## 5.8 Summary

Through this chapter, I have examined Metafilter's visual design (the social

'space' where interaction occurs), specifically in relation to the ways in which it

emphasizes content over user individuality. This chapter also examined the 'ongoing

discussions' that occur in MetaTalk, and how these discussions reinforce the rules and

norms for behavior for Metafilter users. This lead to a discussion of Metafilter's notions

of 'self policing,' and the ways in which users who break the rules and norms are

sanctioned. This chapter was intended to give a more in depth view into the day to day

'mechanics' of how Metafilter operates, and is necessary to give context to its social

properties which might not otherwise make sense, or which may not have any connection

to how people interact in the 'real world.'

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83 http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/9144#204258, February 28, 2005.

# CHAPTER SIX:

## SOCIAL PROPERTIES OF METAFILTER

Metafilter's ongoing discussions about its purpose, rules and etiquette play an important role in the way Mefites structure themselves, as these discussions contain the framework and boundaries of the community. Metafilter contains two unique qualities that have defined the formation of its social structure. First, Metafilter has historically relied on one moderator, and thus the formal power is in the hands of one individual. Secondly, the de-emphasis on individuality has forced users to find alternate ways of differentiating themselves, relying on the quality and quantity of participation, instead of formal distinctions, to form the social structure.

In this chapter, I will begin by examining the formal power structure of Metafilter; I will look at how Matt has existed as the sole moderator for a large and diverse group, and how the community has had to find other ways of socially structuring itself other than with formal distinctions (for example, the distinction of 'administrator', 'moderator' in some online communities that is given to a few higher profile users). Secondly, I will discuss how users distinguish themselves through their front-page posts, online competency, quality of writing, participation in threads, as well as frequency of participation and interaction with other community members. This will be followed by an initial discussion of the active forms of capital on Metafilter.

## 6.1 Mathowie

Metafilter was created by Mathowie in early 1999, and it quickly gained popularity with thousands of users registering memberships. Within the first year, over thirteen-hundred members registered, and by the second year, membership had grown to over ten thousand users. Throughout this rapid growth, Matt maintained his role as Metafilter's sole administrator and moderator, making all of the decisions on deleting bad

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posts and banning (or giving a time-out to) problem users, as well as other issues dealing

with the website and community.

Many users show a great deal of deference to Matt's authority, and historically his

decisions are taken as 'final' and are not subject to a lot of debate. Some users treat what

Matt says almost like sacred text, evoking his words (or linking to his comments) when

conflict arises. Many users will not openly criticize Matt, and if they do, they will do it

with a great deal of deference to his authority. For example, a user brought up an issue

regarding an ask.metafilter question, in which a user asked the community how one could

fake his or her own death in America and get away with it. The discussion initially

debated whether such a question was worthy of deletion, until Matt responded with the

following statement:

> *since when does curiosity deserve censorship?*
>
> When it's illegal? I mean, it's not a thoughtcrime to ponder it publicly, but someone is
> basically asking folks how they would go about breaking all sorts of laws.
>
> I don't want Ask MetaFilter to be a place where someone goes "hey, how can I grow
> some really great pot plants" because no matter how much I try to insulate myself, I'll be
> the guy getting busted for hosting the server where it was asked (and I wouldn't be
> surprised if the DEA could pull the plug on the server).
>
> It'd be nice if people stuck to questions about stuff that's actually legal and wouldn't ever
> get me into hot water.[84]

The following twenty-four comments all (in one way or another) dealt directly

with Matt's comment. Most used humor to respond ("Oh, Matt. You're so *selfish*"

and " 'how to grow some really great pot plants' question coming to AskMe in

5...4...3...2..."), while the majority were similar to what user *luser* posted:

> I think his point was that even if Matt is totally wrong and you are totally right, it is his
> site, his labor, his creation, and his responsibility for whatever tiny amount of liability
> may truly exist for some of these posts.

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[84] http://metatalk.metafilter.com/mefi/8508#177477

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> So no matter how wrong Matt might be in the view of some, it's unseemly and even
> foolish to spend time arguing about it. When the lights go out each night, it's Matt that
> has to be able to sleep soundly, and if he needs to take a hypercautious editing mindset in
> order for him to do that, who are any of us to object.

This is a common response to Matt's comments; the sentiment commonly expressed is

that it is Matt's site and "we are only visitors here;" therefore, we will do whatever he

asks us to do. Even when people disagree with Matt, most are more indirect in their

criticism of him than they are with other users. For example, *Andrew Cook* responds

critically to Matt's comment, but does so in a way that still shows respect. He writes:

> in particular, i'm not making a personal attack on matt. i think he does an excellent job of
> running this place, and i've said so before. all i'm doing is pointing out that it's not illegal
> to talk about ilegal things, except for some small exceptions. that may seem obvious, but
> in my experience is something people often forget or have never seriously considered -
> many people never sat down and asked themselves what a "right" to something is, for
> example.

Cook qualifies his response by complementing Matt on the way that he runs the

site, and then tactfully expresses a differing opinion. He shows deference to

Matt's power, and then "humbly" disagrees. This is not to say that Matt goes

without criticism, but for the most part, the criticism follows this same

framework.

Another example occurred when Matt decided to accept advertising to a

soft-porn website called suicidegirls.com in early 2005. The backlash from the

community was immediate, yet Matt was still addressed with a great deal of

deference by a majority of the users in that discussion. For example, many users

commented that because of the ads, they would be unable to recommend

Metafilter to colleagues, or that they would now stop visiting Metafilter at work

as a result. Though these users were still criticizing Matt, they were doing it in an

indirect, non-confrontational manner. Matt listened to the community and

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immediately stopped running the ads; as a result, there were two follow-up

threads in MetaTalk discussing ways in which to help financially compensate

Matt for the revenue lost in losing an advertiser.

As the sole owner of formal power throughout most of Metafilter's

history, Matt has always moderated with a lot of respect for the will of the

community; if the community acts as the policing agent, Matt acts as the judge,

and at times, the executioner. This may explain the amount of deference shown to

him, as Matt has the power to delete your existence from the site, or even more

extremely, 'pulling the plug' on the whole community (a common fear held by

Mefites, that Matt will get sick of the all the complaints and arguments and just

delete Metafilter from existence). Many users feel that Metafilter has developed to

the community it is due to the 'lightness of touch' held by Matt, allowing the

community to sort out problems through discussions, and only interfering with

moderation when necessary.

There are two ways to look at Matt's formal power; the first says that Matt

has all the power and is Metafilter's despot. Matt alone can ban users, delete

comments and posts, and ultimately unplug the site whenever he wants, and thus

users had better not 'upset the god.' The second says that Matt uses his power not

for control over the site, but as mediator to the will of the community; as a

facilitator and not a ruler. The response to Matt by a majority of the community

lends more weight to Matt as a mediator and facilitator,

Metafilter's social structure has been informed by the power relation

between Matt and the rest of the community. Without the opportunity to increase

status by gaining formal power, the Metafilter community has developed different

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types of social stratification, based on the quality and quantity of participation in the site.

## 6.2 Distinction and De-emphasized Individuality

Though individuality and higher status are achieved within the community, the new user 'at first glance' is confronted with a massive amount of content that exists as blocks of text, which are contributed by a large, anonymous group of individuals posting on a website. Though Metafilter has an active and vibrant community, it is hidden from new users 'at first glance.' 'At first glance,' this is similar to how one might experience one of the many websites that allow users to add content through posting comments or reviews of products, such as the popular commerce website amazon.com.

On amazon.com, a user who has purchased a product has the option of returning to the site to post their opinions on what they like or don't like about the product, and give it a rating out of five 'stars.' For almost every product carried by amazon.com there are reviews by amazon.com customers. The important part to this discussion is that there is no community to speak of participating within those product reviews; and thus, to someone who is shopping on amazon.com, the identity of *who* is posting the review is irrelevant. Metafilter, on the other hand, does have a community, but 'at first glance' it is hidden.

### 6.2.1 The Metafilter Community 'At First Glance'

'At first glance,' the Metafilter community is hidden from view, and as such the new user who catches glimpses of it has a big task in sorting out *who* is talking to *who*, and who is worth paying attention to as a credible source of information. This task is

fairly simple in shorter threads where the conversation is linear, making it easier for the reader to check into who is talking to who.

The stage of getting acquainted with the Metafilter community is accomplished in a few different ways, such as hovering over a users nickname to see their user number (which is displayed within the link to that user's user page – for example, mine would show up as http://www.metafilter.com/user/11848, and so my user number is 11848). The user number can identify how long a user has been registered on Metafilter, and it is used as a type of status (where the lower the user number, the higher the status, meaning a longer period of participation).

User numbers are also used in judging a user's posting or commenting behavior. An example is a comment directed towards a member with a low user number, an indication of an individual who has been a member of the community for a long time, who posted a 'bad post' to the front page; "I'm surprised that someone with such a low user number would post something that seems so very out of touch with what the posting guidelines are." This is the notion that users who have a lower user number should 'know better' than users with higher user numbers. On the other end of the spectrum, a user with a high user number indicates naivety and unfamiliarity. Frequently, established users will bemoan the behavior of newer users ('newbies' or 'n00bs') as detrimental to the health of the community.

Another tactic for identifying 'who is who,' is by visiting user pages to gather more information of the identity of posters, though this is often impractical when a thread gets a large number of users participating. The new reader is more likely to follow a large thread by reading comments without attributing identities to who is commenting. In a

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community of over twenty thousand users, most do not set themselves apart from the collective group.

Though some Metafilter contributers might become more familiar, they can not be easily identified as to what other threads the reader has seen them in, and thus it is nothing more than the familiarity of a screen name as opposed to any familiarity with a specific personality, or someone with specific viewpoints. Though the number of members a reader is familiar with, however, is dependent on the frequency and thoroughness they follow threads and engage other users in discussion. That being said, even the most prolific Metafilter contributors will make comments regarding unfamiliarity with a specific user that other members are discussing.

From my own experience participating in Metafilter, I can only list about twenty users of whom I have more than a passing recognition. That is, I have a sense of their online persona and history on Metafilter. I noticed this specifically when I was researching this thesis, and there were certain users whom I was quoting more often, and who seemed to be somehow more important to me. On the other hand, there are users with whom I had communicated within a thread and gained familiarity with, and then had to re-investigate at a later date as to why their user name was familiar to me.

## 6.3 Distinction from the group

One of the most interesting sociological phenomena on Metafilter is the way that users become distinct from the collective. As I have shown, Metafilter is designed to de-emphasize individual identity; combined with the number of people who post to Metafilter on any given day, the fact that some users are able to distinguish themselves is astonishing. Yet there are indeed a small number of users who set themselves apart from the group and become more visible than other users.

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In Metafilter, there are a few ways in which users distinguish themselves: 1) from *what they post* (the topics they choose to discuss), 2) *quality of writing* (in terms of style and clarity, and what viewpoints they use or 3)what kinds of threads they comment in), and 4) *frequency of participation* (and thus, how often the user name appears). Users can also distinguish themselves 5) through associations (positive or negative) with other users with an already high profile. Finally, 6) users can be differentiated through manipulations of text specific to the web, such as the use of links to emphasize or oppose the topic being discussed, or by above average skill in using search engines to find content.

Aside from these elements, it must be noted that not all distinction from the group is positive on Metafilter. For the scope of this study, I will focus on two types of distinction; celebrity and notoriety. These two forms can be thought of in terms of positive distinction and a negative distinction. I will discuss both of these types within each category where appropriate.

### 6.3.1 Front-Page Posting

The first way that a user can become distinct in Metafilter is in relation with what they post to the front page. Remember that Metafilter's mission and mandate is filtering the 'best of the web,' and users who consistently post links considered by other community members as 'the best of the web' are set apart and held in high regard by the community. Similarly, users who consistently make 'bad' posts are also set apart, but as a source of frustration for the rest of the community.

An example of a user who consistently makes posts that are valued by the community is *matteo*, whose posts deal with a wide variety of topics; from posts dealing with pop culture and art, to history and politics. His posts closely follow the posting

guidelines and community norms regulating FPP's[85]; first, *matteo* tends to post

uncommon links. Secondly, *matteo* presents his FPP's in a way that leaves them open to

discussion. That being said, many of *matteo*'s posts do not trigger large discussions

because, as user *dobbs* observes, "people don't need to discuss his posts; they're self-

contained even though they're made up of multiple links." Following are a few examples

of *matteo*'s posts:

> Feet Me. Celebrity shoes live onstage: from assertive Beastie Boys and PJ Harvey to sporty Yeah Yeah Yeahs and Neil Young, from old skool Claudio Abbado and Nick Cave to minimalist, shoeless David Bowie.

> What About Judas? Dante condems Judas to eternal damnation in the darkest, deepest circle of hell. But what if someone came to the great traitor's defense in a trial to win his entrance into heaven? The playwright Stephen Adly Guirgis imagines just such a scenario in "The Last Days of Judas Iscariot," directed by Philip Seymour Hoffman and running at the Public Theater in New York City. More inside.

> Hitler's bomb. Adolf Hitler had the atom bomb first but it was too primitive and ungainly for aerial deployment, says a new book by German historian Rainer Karlsch. The book indicates that Nazi scientists carried out tests of what would now be called a dirty nuclear device in the waning days of World War II. US historian Mark Walker, an expert on the Third Reich's atomic weapons program, supports Karlsch's claims: "I consider the arguments very convincing". More inside.

As another user put it, the way that *matteo* construct his posts makes them in and of

themselves 'the best of the web.'

There are many members who have made a name for themselves from their

postings to the front page, both in a positive manner (similar to matteo, users who

consistently find links that are 'best of the web,' and who take care to add lots of

background information and carefully present the post to the community), and in a

negative manner, members who have made a name for themselves through consistently

not following the posting guidelines.

One user in particular has gained notoriety for his FPP's; user *Postroad* has the

second highest number of FPP's (after Matt), yet has also received numerous callouts in

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[85] FPP refers to "Front Page Posts," which are the posts made to Metafilter's front page.

MetaTalk because of his posting style. The common complaint against *Postroad* is that a large number of his posts are links to single articles with a 'newsfilter' angle to them. Complaints against *Postroad* have been consistent in MetaTalk, dealing with his lack of supporting material and his tendency to post the same topics from the same sources. To the frustration of the community, *Postroad* has never made a single comment in MetaTalk answering to the criticisms, giving him a unique status as a sort of mysterious 'outsider' within the community.

For a community whose primary goal is finding the 'best of the web', it makes sense to give celebrity status to users who consistently construct good FPP's. At the same time, setting apart users who frequently make 'bad' posts helps define the boundaries of what is and isn't acceptable posting behavior. Setting aside 'bad posts' and bad posters for censure helps to enforce the rules and to impose standards, giving users a clearer idea about the proper way to post to Metafilter.

### 6.3.2 Online Competency

Another element of users becoming distinct are the ways in which the user is able to use and manipulate the web, such as the use of links to emphasize or oppose the topic being discussed, or having skill in using search engines to find content. This element itself does not distinguish users, but is an element that most of the Metafilter celebrities have in common, so it is important to note.

Within any online community, the assumption is that users have at least a basic understanding of how to use internet technologies (i.e. competence with web-browsing, email, searching and the ability to post comments and links to an online forum), otherwise they would not be able to participate. However with Metafilter, most users

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demonstrate above average internet competency, signifying ease with communicating online and being able to manipulate the technology to aid in communication.

Users who distinguish themselves with their postings have to spend a lot of time web surfing to find unique links to bring back to the community, and as such necessitates staying current with blogs and online news sources. Similarly, users who want to post unique links must have knowledge of how to find obscure web pages or other online content that lie 'out of the way.'

Users who possess above-average Internet savvy have an advantage when it comes to communicating on Metafilter; in a face to face conversation, one might reference a book or article by stating "I read somewhere that...," whereas in an online forum the same conversation would be "I read somewhere that ..., and here is a link so that you can read it too." Another example is a face to face conversation where one person *kind of* remembers something they read. In this kind of online setting, they have the ability to search the web and verify the source. The ability to *show* instead of *tell* provides instant credibility, which is important when communicating in an online setting. Metafilter users frequently reference something called "Google-Fu," which is the ability to find obscure or hard to find web pages using a search engine. When one user has the above problem of having a memory lapse, other users will often help out solely to show off their "Google-Fu."

Users who are seen as celebrities on Metafilter tend to insert links into their comments to back themselves up (or to discredit other users). This is also true when users get into a flame-war on MetaTalk, where other users can link to past comments their opponents have posted in order to discredit or contradict them. A common statement in a MetaTalk flame-war is along the lines of, "you are saying this now, but back on February

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24, 2004, you said ...., which is opposite to what you are saying now." Being able to manipulate the medium in this way has clear advantages in an argument.

### 6.3.3 Quality of Writing

The second way a user can become distinct in Metafilter is in terms of how a user writes, referring to coherence and style. Being coherent and having a somewhat unique and consistent style are essential characteristic of users who have gained status within the community, as all of the Metafilter celebrities have an ability to use language to get their points across, and most of them have a distinct, identifiable style of commenting.

Coherence is crucially important in a text-based environment where users cannot rely on body language or other visual cues for information, and as such, users must put extra care in their writing in order to be understood. Metafilter has many examples of flame-wars erupting between users, stemming from a comment that wasn't clear and was then misunderstood. This is especially true when users attempt to use humor, such as when user *rcade* wrote to another user *aaron*;

> C'mon, Aaron. You know as well as I do that you would complain loudly if liberals started showing up at your klan meetings.

*Aaron* responded to this comment with anger

> Thank you for proving yourself to be a total and complete asshole, Rogers. How dare you attempt to link me to a hate organization like the Klan, you arrogant bastard. And how dare you insinuate that only people who think just like you are allowed on MeFi.

As it was explained later in the thread, *rcade* was trying to make a joke, but there is no indication of that within his comment. These types of misunderstandings are common on Metafilter, and every member who consistently participates in the community has to deal with misunderstandings on occasion.

A majority of users on Metafilter write in a conversational style, with a tendency to use slang or internet shorthand (ex. LOL, for 'laughing out loud'). Formal grammar

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and punctuation has been the topic of many MetaTalk conversations, and while some users encourage the use of formal writing conventions, the reality of how users actually communicate shows that clarity is valued over formality. In practice, most users write like they speak, ignoring formal rules of syntax and grammar.

The second important aspect of writing is the style a user writes in. This element is more difficult to pin down because there are as many styles as there are users, but seemingly more important in distinguishing users, as there are numerous examples of users becoming distinct almost entirely based on their style. User *Ethereal Bligh* initially became known to the community as a result of the frequency of his lengthy, multi-paragraphed comments. Many users openly criticized *Ethereal Bligh* for his style early on in his membership. A typical complaint comes from user *Shane* who wrote to him that:

> the frequency and length of your comments are going to make you nearly universally hated on MeFi if you don't tone it down.

*Ethereal Bligh*'s comments do not follow the norm of the conversational style used by a most users on Metafilter, which generally employ shorter paragraphs and sentences.

As a result of *Ethereal Bligh*'s perceived commenting style, there was an immediate attempt to bring him back in line with the community norms in terms of comment length and tone. This was done in two ways. First, when *Ethereal Bligh* posted a long comment, a user (or users) would comment not on the content of his comment but on the form, many times throwing insults at him in the process. For example, users were frequently calling his comments 'boring' or 'not worth reading.' Secondly, there were a few examples of users piling on *Ethereal Bligh*, on the grounds that he is 'condescending,' 'conceited' and acts 'holier than thou', as well as for the length of his comments. It is interesting to note that through

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these early 'hazings' and attempts at censure, *Ethereal Bligh* continues to post on Metafilter and has shifted from being known with a negative connotation (a user notoriously distinct) to being a Metafilter celebrity.

There is also the case of user *quonsar*, perhaps one of the most well known and controversial users on Metafilter. *Quonsar* is known for his short 'one-liner' lower-case comments, many of which are sarcastic or insulting, and often directed at other community members. *Quonsar* has a unique status in Metafilter as one of the few users to consistently criticize Matt for the way he operates Metafilter. For various reasons, quonsar has been subject to numerous 'time-outs' for a variety of reasons, most dealing with his conflicts with other users. Almost every time quonsar was removed from Metafilter, there was a response from the community to allow him to come back, and in one case other users started a 'free quonsar' campaign aimed at putting pressure on Matt to allow him to come back.

Even though many users had been subject to one of *quonsar*'s fierce one-liners (myself included), the common sentiment was that his comments were part of what made Metafilter fun to read; often users would argue that quonsar's comments 'cut to the truth' or 'said things that no one else would say,' and kept the community in focus. In my own participation, I identified quonsar early as a Metafilter celebrity, as he posted in a wide variety of threads, and his comments were easy to identify and fun to read.

### 6.3.4 Participation in Threads

Important in the distinction of Metafilter users is *where* they participate, specifically, the topic of the threads they comment in. If you look at the list of the top

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'tags' used by users to identify the main topics of their FPP's (which then get aggregated with every other post containing that tag; thus every post with the tag 'music' has a separate page at www.metafilter.com/tags/music), you find that the topics fall into a few broad categories; 'art' (posts about music, movies, photography), politics (posts about Iraq, U.S. election, George Bush etc), 'culture' (religion, media, advertising, law etc) and 'technology' (largely internet based, such as FPP's about blogs, online games, flash presentations, new applications etc.). Though there have been times where Metafilter gets a 'main topic' that might get a few FPP's in a single day or week (such as US Presidential elections, the September 11 terrorist attacks or the subsequent 'war on terror'), most days the topics of FPP' are fairly diverse. Certain topics tend to generate large discussions, and can be considered dominant within the community; topics dealing with US politics and news, as well as technology threads generate the most comments. This is interesting because, as I discussed in chapter four, Mefites often resist labeling 'newsfilter' as 'the best of the web.' The fact is that threads that are generally considered to be 'the best of the web' often contain minimal discussion, with members commenting 'great post' and little else. .

Users are identified partially on the topics of the FPP's they participate in; users who comment mainly in art threads get to know other users who mainly participate in art threads. This goes back to the notion of online communities being 'communities of interest,' in that users participate in threads that have topics that are interesting to them, creating a number of sub-communities of interest within the larger Metafilter community. There are also divisions within these sub-communities of interest, such as users who participate within political threads and who have different political viewpoints (i.e. the distinction between 'left' and 'right' political affiliations).

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Distinction of users in relation to where they participate works in three different ways. First, users who frequently participate in a diverse number of topics have a higher visibility to the community, and thus are more likely to become a celebrity. Secondly, users who stick to the dominant topics become more visible, especially when a user actively comments and engages with other users in a thread. Third, participation within MetaTalk threads works in a similar fashion as users who participate within dominant topics on the front page, as both are read by a large portion of the community, and participation here is highly 'visible.'

For users who actively participate in the Metafilter community, MetaTalk represents a common area where everyone has a chance to get to know one another. The fact that I rarely participate within threads dealing with US politics means that there are many users who stick to those threads that I am unfamiliar with. However, because I read MetaTalk, there is an opportunity to interact with them.

Celebrity users tend to participate in a wide variety of threads, and tend to be conversant in many different areas of interest. They also tend to participate regularly within MetaTalk threads, as they are more highly integrated within the community, and thus it makes sense that they are more integrated within discussions pertaining to the community. Though there are celebrity users who stick to posting in one main topic area, participation in MetaTalk is universal to all of the celebrity users.

### 6.3.5 Frequency of Participation

Another way a user can become distinct in Metafilter deals with the frequency of their participation within the community, dealing with the timeframe within which a user's participation is measured. Just as posting comments in a wide variety of FPP's increases visibility, so too does the frequency of posting. For most new Metafilter users,

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the quickest way to gain recognition is by posting a great deal in a short amount of time in all of the areas of Metafilter; the more times a user's name appears on the site, the more distinct it becomes.

Frequency of posting is somewhat unique to online participation. In the real world, participation is often measured simply by showing up. Online, however, there is no accounting to the community when a user lurks; if a user doesn't post to mark their presence, it is if they are not there at all. This is especially true in a community the size of Metafilter; the only sure way to get recognized is if a user's name appears enough to stick out and be remembered. Every celebrity user posts a large number of comments.

Frequency of posting is measured by a contribution index that was built by user Jaden; the contribution index measures "the sum of all the times a user has posted on Metafilter (comments or threads on the blue, gray and green) divided by the number of days they have been a member."[86] This script then generates lists ranking users based on their contribution index score, and this list reads like a who's who of Metafilter celebrities.

It must be noted that there are community norms in terms of frequency of posting. When a new user joins Metafilter, and starts posting what others deem to be 'in excess,' there is often an initial reaction against that user. When this happens, established community members will usually comment something along the lines of "who is this person," alluding to the fact that they feel an intrusion similar to a stranger walking up to them on the street who starts dominating a conversation. As I discussed above with *Ethereal Bligh*, a major part of the initial reaction against him was that he was posting too often.

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[86] http://dan.hersam.com/mefi_contrib_index.php?top=1

In the act of establishing oneself and becoming distinct within the group, new users have to initially balance posting frequently enough and posting too frequently, too soon. This act of establishing oneself can be thought of in terms of a 'getting to know you' stage, whereby other users have a chance to get used to a new user, and also to build trust that this new user is someone who is a credible and desirable member of the community.

### 6.3.6 Interaction with Other Community Members

The next way a user can become distinct in Metafilter concerns who the user associates with, and how they engage other users. Distinction as the result of interaction with other community members happens in three primary ways. First, within threads in the form of asynchronous conversations. Secondly, users associate themselves through local face to face meet-ups. Third, users associate through other media, such as email or IRC.

In some threads, comments deal directly with the topic of the post, and as a result, contain little to no community interaction, other than the fact that a user is posting on Metafilter and other users can read what they have written. Most threads contain a mixture of commentary directed at the thread topic and commentary directed at other users (frequently the poster of the thread or another user who has made a comment). This interaction is the foundation of the community, as without the continual interaction between users no community would exist.

This interaction between members is often selective, such as when a Metafilter celebrity comments in a thread. Usually other non-celebrity users direct their commentary at that user more than they would direct it at other non-celebrity users. This happens in a

variety of ways, though two are most frequent. First, a non-celebrity will post a 'ditto' response, showing a similar deference as users show to Matt. In the second case, a non-celebrity will attempt to engage the celebrity in debate, attempting to disprove or discredit the celebrity user in order to increase their own status in the community. A flame-war with an established user, carried into MetaTalk, is a quick way for a user to become distinct, but in this case the user is most likely to gain notoriety as opposed to celebrity.

The second way that users associate themselves is through face to face meetups. These meetups are most frequently held in high-population areas of the United States (New York, Southern California), though can happen wherever there are a group of users who are willing to meet. These meetups are initiated by a request on MetaTalk for a gathering in a specific area, and then users in that area post within that thread and figure out a date, time and meeting space. What is most interesting about these meetups are the follow up posts, which usually includes a link to the photographic evidence from the meetup, allowing (often for the first time) people to see what users 'really' look like. These photographs also frequently contain shout-outs to other users. Shout-outs occur when users hold up signs that have the names of other members of the community, and someone then photographs it. As with the contribution index lists, these signs also read as a who's who of the Metafilter user celebrities.

The third area for social interaction on Metafilter occurs online but 'off-site,' that is on other web pages, on email, or IRC. Most famously was the Metafilter IRC channel #mefi, which was not run officially by Matt, but was used frequently by many high profile users.[87] #mefi evolved into an entirely new community that ended up existing as a

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[87] I am using past tense, as in the course of writing this chapter, #mefi has been shut down, and many of the users migrated to other IRC channels. Though #mefi started off as a place for Metafilter users to chat in

separate entity from Metafilter, yet still had direct consequences on Metafilter as #mefi users would frequently discuss Metafilter threads, and then post things that were discussed on the IRC channel. Participation in off-site interaction with other Metafilter users is a way to gain visibility,.

User interaction was given a new dimension during the course of researching Metafilter in the form of the 'contact list.' This feature allows users to 'add' each other as friends or acquaintances, people they have met in 'real life,' coworkers or colleagues, neighbors, family members, romantic interest or as a 'muse.' When a user is visiting another member's user page, that user page will have a link that says 'add as contact.' If that link is clicked, that member will then be added to a list of contacts. On every user page, there is a description that reads "Contacts: This user links to # Metafilter user(s). # Metafilter user(s) link to this user." Thus, every user has an opportunity to link to other users in the community, and having a high number of users linking to you reflects directly into the possession of social capital. This is interesting in that the users with the most number of contacts are also at the top of the contribution index, and receive the most shout-outs at meetups.

## 6.4 The Active Forms of Capital on Metafilter

Looking at all of these elements used in distinguishing users provides a clearer picture of the forms of capital that are present on Metafilter. I have grouped them into three main forms; cultural capital, social capital and a new form of capital unique to online interaction that I call 'virtual capital.'

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real time, over the course of a few years it grew into its own community, with its own set of rules and norms.

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Cultural capital, (which refers to the forms of knowledge, skill, education and other resources that are available to an individual), is important for success within the Metafilter community. Here, it manifests in the quality of writing, participation in threads and the ability to discuss different topics, as well as the threads a user posts to the front page. A high level of cultural capital must exist in the real world in the form of education, in that to be successful in a text based community one must be able to effectively convey ideas through writing.

Social capital is demonstrated with the level of interaction and the connections that are established within the community. Social capital is represented with the number of members who link to a user via their user page, as well as the number of 'shout-outs' at face to face meetups.

Virtual capital is a form of capital unique to online communication, in that there is no direct reference to an offline form of capital, or if there is, it doesn't play the same role. Virtual capital in Metafilter manifests through the frequency of participation and the contribution index, as well as through the manipulation of an online social space, such as posting a comment that contains links to other areas of the web, as well as the ability to effectively use search engines. These are all related to behaviors that are important online interaction, as they aid in the distinction of users. The next chapter will more fully explore these forms of capital, and make a more explicit case for why 'virtual capital' should be thought of as unique.

# CHAPTER SEVEN:

## DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will explore in detail the active forms of capital within

Metafilter, and compare them to the three main forms of capital that comprise Pierre

Bourdieu's theory of capital. Further to this, I will discuss how the active forms of capital

in Metafilter work to stratify and differentiate the community.

### 7.1.1 Economic Capital

In his paper "The Forms of Capital," Bourdieu (1983) states that economic capital

is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the

forms of property rights" (p. 242). Bourdieu's primary focus in that paper, however, is

the ways in which other forms of capital can be transferred to economic capital, stating

specifically how cultural capital or social capital "is convertible, on certain conditions,

into economic capital" (p. 243).

Within Metafilter, economic capital appears to have little or no influence on the

community. Though users often provide clues to their economic capital (through indirect

references to consumer products or leisure activities), these clues have little to no bearing

on their social status in Metafilter. Though it is noted that offline economic capital can be

converted into offline cultural capital, in the form of paying for higher levels of

education, it is in turn impossible to differentiate those who have paid for higher

education though the aid of scholarships, student loans or grants, and those who had the

aid of their own or family's economic capital.

The possession of cultural and social capital that is obtained through participation

in Metafilter is not directly transferable to economic capital, in the real world or

otherwise. The closest example of Metafilter-related cultural and social capital being

converted into economic capital came when Metafilter users contributed money that was

given as a gift to *mathowie* to pay for a trip to Iceland. Secondly, for those users who

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work in the information sector, Metafilter can be *used* for economic capital, in that it is

content loaded. Similarly, users can use the ask.metafilter resource to aid in their jobs, but

any economic benefits are indirect at best.

### 7.1.2 Cultural Capital

Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital refers to non-economic culturally based

factors such as family background, pre-existing social class, and level of education.

Recall that Bourdieu separates cultural capital into three states. First, is the *embodied*

state, which Bourdieu says is directly related to internalized culturing that is *acquired*

unconsciously (p. 245). Secondly, cultural capital exists in the *objectified* state, in the

form of 'cultural goods,' which are material goods such as books or paintings. Third,

cultural capital exists in an *institutionalized* state, taking the form of academic credentials

and qualifications.

Cultural capital, as it exists in the Metafilter community, manifests though

making 'good' posts, having a high quality of writing, and having the ability to

participate in a wide variety of threads (that is, being conversant in many different

topics). In the *embodied* state, cultural capital in the Metafilter community manifests

through the prior accumulation of culture offline, and this accumulated culture becomes

apparent to others when commentating in a wide variety of topics.

In the *objectified* state, cultural capital exists on Metafilter in the form of a user's

body of postings and comments. After a user contributes a post to the front page, or adds

a comment within a thread, these contributions become objectified as part of the

Metafilter canon. Bourdieu states that:

> Cultural capital in its objectified state presents itself with all the appearances of an
> autonomous, coherent universe which, although the product of historical action, has its
> own laws, transcending individual wills, and which, as the example of language well

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illustrates, therefore remains irreducible to that which each agent, or even the aggregate
of the agents, can appropriate (p. 247).

This is indeed true for Metafilter, as the community exists out of the aggregation

of contributions by users. This *objectified* state of cultural capital in Metafilter

manifests in the sum of contributions that become the rules and norms that users

can point to as existing without them being clearly defined in the posting

guidelines of otherwise. This objectified state is equally available to all users,

though only at the level that each user themselves participate in (and thus buy

into) the community. Thus a user who only reads the links, and does not follow

the discussions or read MetaTalk will not have the same access as a user who is

more fully integrated.

In an *institutionalized* state, cultural capital in Metafilter has no direct reference to

the real world, in that there are no formalized qualifications to be gained from (or

required for) participation. However, one could argue that users who differentiate

themselves via the quality of their posts and comments transfer the *institutionalized* state

of their real world cultural capital directly into their online contributions. In other words,

the acquisition of academic qualifications in the real world is useful when communicating

and posting on Metafilter.

Having a high level of cultural capital directly benefits users in Metafilter. The

ability to contribute 'good' posts, as well as the ability to comment within a wide variety

of threads is directly related to the amount of status given to a user. Thus, knowing what

makes a 'good' post and what makes a 'bad' post gives a user an advantage in that they

will be rewarded with immediate praise in the short term, and if 'good' postings are

consistent over time, it can be transferred directly into higher status within the

community. Similarly, being conversant in a wide variety of topics, as well as being able

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to communicate effectively leads to higher visibility within the community, also leading to higher status.

### 7.1.3 Social Capital

Bourdieu states that social capital is the "aggregate of the actual or potential resources" that are directly linked to a durable network of relationships that provides "membership in a group" (p. 248). Secondly, Bourdieu notes that the "volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent thus depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize" (p. 249). In other words, social capital is a set of individuals that are connected through socially meaningful relationships, and these connections have individual benefits.

The collection of social capital in Metafilter comes as a result of interactions with other users. As I showed in the previous chapter, the accumulation of social capital occurs in three ways. First, it is accumulated through interaction with other users in the form of asynchronous conversations. Secondly, users associate themselves through local face to face meet-ups. Third, users associate through other media, such as email or IRC.

As noted by Bourdieu, an important feature of having social capital is being able to mobilize the network of connections. In other words, it isn't enough to communicate and engage other members of the community; they in turn must reciprocate communication. For example, a user who links to 100 users on their user page does not necessarily have a high level of social capital, as they may only have a few users linking back to them. Having a high amount of social capital is directly related to a higher level of status within the community. A high level of social capital within Metafilter also has benefits in offline social connections, specifically through face to face meet-ups.

### 7.1.4 Virtual Capital

The third form of capital that is active within the MetaFilter community has no direct relation with Bourdieu's theory of capital. I refer to this as virtual capital. This form of capital involves activities that are valued only within the context of Metafilter's online social setting. Within this form of capital, we can account for the importance of posting frequency. Posting frequency was the top response from users when they were directly queried about the qualities that differentiated some users as celebrities. For example, user *wolfdog* responded that users are given the status of 'celebrity' when they become 'too loud to ignore,' or as user *angry modem* states 'they post too much.' The common sentiment is that users post enough so that their name becomes familiar to other users.

Virtual capital also can account for other activities that have no direct relation in the real world, such as inserting links within a comments or the ability to find obscure web pages using a search engine. The ability to manipulate the web to meet ones needs is important for Mefites, as the otherwise simple task of searching for, and inserting a link into a comment then becomes embedded with new meaning, in that the previously 'plain' comment is infused with added weight.

Due to the limitations of this study, at this time I am only able to see the presence of virtual capital, and it is a concept that does need to be more fully explored and studied. For now, because the effects of virtual capital seems only have bearing within Metafilter, I argue that as a category, it is far enough removed from the active forms of capital in the 'real world' as to warrant its own category. For example, if you look at the act of having a high frequency of postings, you might argue that this behaviour is directly 'reaching out' to other community members, and is an attempt to increase social capital. Within

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Metafilter, however, a high percentage of comments are not necessarily directed towards other users (and are instead directed towards the topic or links being discussed), it is not a social act, and thus exist separately.

## 7.2 Stratification vs. Differentiation

As noted in Bourdieu's theory of capital, the possession of the three different forms of capital (economic, cultural and social), used in giving individuals different positions in society. The possession of the three different forms of capital that are active within Metafilter can be seen as doing the same. For high status 'celebrities' within Metafilter, there is a possession of high levels of cultural, social and virtual capital.

As noted by some users when they were asked about the social structure of Metafilter, there are four active levels. At the top are 'celebrities', which are users who are universally known throughout the community, and have been established as a high status user for a number of years. These users possess high levels of cultural, social and virtual capital in Metafilter. Secondly, there are users who have high visibility, but are seen to be more unstable and evoke polemical 'love' or 'hate' from different members of the community, which I referred to previously as 'notorious' users. These users can be seen as having high levels of virtual capital (such as a high number of postings and comments), but low levels of social capital (community involvement, or interactions with other users) in Metafilter. Third are users that are frequent participators, but who aren't widely known, and may be known only to a certain segment of the population (i.e. users who only participate in one or two topics). These users might have high social capital or cultural capital, but generally have low virtual capital. The last group

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comprises the majority of users, who have low levels of all three forms of capital, and remain somewhat anonymous.

It should be noted that when asked about celebrities in a discussion thread, a common sentiment, expressed by user *crunchland*, is that "there are no celebrities on [M]etafilter. There are only people who are less obscure than the rest." Similarly, user *peacay* states that "[c]elebrity is in the eye of the beholder, although I suppose you are more talking about the very publicly acknowledged variety." These comments point to the fact that the status of celebrity in Metafilter is in a constant state of flux, and that to a certain degree, even the most highly visible Mefi celebrities are not visible 'at first glance.' Thus, the important distinction is that celebrities only exist to the extent a user participates in the Metafilter community. That being said, a majority of posters agree that there are certain users who could be seen as celebrities, as most responders immediately identified at least one quality that I found to be a part of one of the forms of capital active in Metafilter. Thus, though users may not agree on 'who' is a celebrity, there is agreement that there are specific actions users take to differentiate themselves from the community.

Whereas in the real world, the combination of different forms of capital is transferable into money and class positioning, the combination of the different forms of capital have less tangible benefits in the Metafilter community. When asked the question "what are the benefits of having celebrity status within Metafilter," a majority of responders replied "there are none," or if there are benefits, it isn't clear what they are. This certainly fits my own observations, in

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that there *seemed* to be benefits (influence, recognition), but these benefits were

intangible and difficult to observe.

Of those users who responded with that there were specific benefits to

being a celebrity, there was no consensus on what those benefits were. That being

said, there were a few qualities that were brought up a few times. For example,

*jessamyn* responds that being a celebrity entitles user to the following benefits:

> You get the benefit of the doubt if you stumble and do something that
> might otherwise get you in trouble. People go to you for advice. People
> want to meet you and be your friend. You don't have to try as hard, once
> you hit celebrity and can coast for a bit. Not long, but a bit. You meet
> people at meetups who say "oh, you're THAT guy/gal" Otherwise I'm not
> sure, it's mostly like being a go-to person. People think you're wise and
> that's good for people, I guess.

User *amberglow* similarly mentions that being a celebrity means

> less explanation/clarification needed, feeling of belonging and mattering and of comfort
> in community which allows more free range of ideas/emotions/whatever, etc

Another user, *mullacc*, points to the visibility afforded to celebrities

> Whenever I come across a longish thread (60+ comments) I tend to scan for the MeFi
> celebs - jonmc, dios, amberglow, C_D, etc. I'm not sure if it's volume of comments, force
> of personality or something else completely about the MeFi celebs, but the momentum of
> the conversation is almost always directed by one or more of these people. If you were to
> read only the comments by the celebs and those they are directly conversing with you'd
> probably get the gist of almost any thread. All those non-celebs can amount to a lot noise
> and tangential topics.

Thus, from these comments (and others similar in nature), a few ideas emerge. First,

celebrities are afforded attention from other community members, and may have slightly

more influence than non-celebrities. Secondly, they require less clarification and are

given the benefit of the doubt more often than non-celebrities. Third, there is an increased

level of 'belongingness,' where these users are somewhat more valued within the

community than non-celebrities.

From my observations of the Metafilter community, if you were to visibly plot the

positions of users on a graph, the community would most likely appear be horizontally

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differentiated, with a few celebrities being vertically stratified as having slightly more power in the form of influence over other users. However, the vertical stratification of Metafilter is at all times in a state of change. Due to the importance of virtual capital within Metafilter, users must consistently and frequently participate to maintain high levels of visibility. As seen by all but a few of the top Metafilter celebrities, this high level of participation is not easy to maintain, and once a user scales back their participation, they drop back down to lower levels of status.

Secondly, in the case of users who become 'notorious' within the community, they may reach high levels of visibility, but this visibility is even more volatile as these users tend to have a higher frequency of 'flaming out' and quitting the community. As user Taz notes:

> celebrities can have more influence in terms of tilting other users toward their point of view - people are often less likely to want to disagree with them, and may recast their positions, while notorious users may inspire some people to take an opposing viewpoint even before they've formulated their thoughts on a given issue.

Because the high visibility is framed in a negative way, notorious users are constantly being met with conflict coming from other members of the community. In reference to user *dios*, who is currently seen as a notorious user, *caddis* remarks that "even when he plays nice he gets attacked." It is not until they increase their social capital (and to an extent, refining their virtual capital) do they become stabilized in the community, which many users have done (as shown by my example of *Ethereal Bligh* in chapter six).

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**CHAPTER EIGHT:**

**CONCLUSION**

**8.1 Summary of Major Conclusions**

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the concept of virtual community. I began with an examination of the early academic debates on their existence, and whether or not they could properly be defined as communities. The bulk of this thesis was a case study of one virtual community in particular, Metafilter. I started with a detailed discussion of how Metafilter's visual design emphasized content over individualizing community members, and how this worked to maintain anonymity 'at first glance,' for a majority of the community. I then looked at the ongoing conflict and struggle over policy and etiquette, as well as Metafilter's notion of self-policing.

When looking at users who had gained 'celebrity' status within Metafilter, I observed a number of qualities that lead to this distinction. Users who gained distinction all had a combination of the following qualities: a reputation for posting 'good' links to the front page, as well as the quality and style of their comments. Distinct users tended to be 'internet savvy,' using hyperlinks within their comments to more effectively argue with other community members. Distinct users frequently participated in a wide variety of topics and areas of Metafilter. Finally, distinct users tended to have a high level of interaction with other members of the community.

These qualities were seen as being compatible with certain aspects of Bourdieu's theory of capital, specifically in relation to his notions of cultural and social capital. Economic capital was not seen to be an important quality in the differentiation of users in Metafilter; however, a new form of capital, known as virtual capital, was seen to be especially important in the distinction of users. I discussed the ways in which the possession of the three active forms of capital worked to differentiate members within Metafilter.

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## 8.2 Importance of this study and implications for future research

There are two components to this thesis that are valuable to the field of sociology. The first comes from the application and extension of Bourdieu's theory of capital. In finding a social setting where economic capital was not a factor in distinction, it is exciting to discover a new form of capital that has emerged to replace it. Users still structure themselves without the presence of economic capital, replacing it with a new form of capital that is equally important in this setting.

The second component is within the study of virtual communities. Uncovering the active forms of capital in Metafilter has direct implications for the field of the study of virtual communities. As previous research has focused on cultural and social capital within virtual communities, finding the importance of virtual capital within Metafilter is a starting point to expanding and testing the concept on a wider scale.

As the scope of this thesis was theoretical and methodological in nature, the next step for future research is in applying the theoretical concepts of capital relevant to Metafilter on an wider scale, perhaps in a more empirical fashion. This could be done in two ways. First would be the generalization of the active forms of capital within Metafilter to other online communities. Secondly, as Bourdieu's theory of capital can be used to predict the position of individuals within a class based society, future research in online communities can follow his empirical procedures to predict a user's position in an online community, perhaps through the use of survey research and statistical analysis

## 8.3 Limitations of research

The two main limitations of this thesis are in terms of validity and generalizability. In the case of validity, every effort was made to ensure I had enough data to support the observations I was making, though it can be difficult to be certain that

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I wasn't simply finding examples to fit my theory. This was minimized as much as possible through multiple interactions with high profile community members, specifically with my discussion threads and in IRC chat. Through these interactions, users consistently provided examples and comments that have supported every finding that I have made.

In terms of generalizability, this thesis looked at one case study. As such, any findings and observations made at this point are generalizable only to Metafilter. However, the use of this case study is not a matter of statistical generalization (generalizing from a sample) but a matter of *analytic generalization* (using single or multiple cases to illustrate, represent, or generalize to a theory). By doing a case study on Metafilter, my goal was to uncover the interaction of significant factors characteristic of the phenomenon, focusing on holistic description and explanation.

Specific to virtual capital, the scope of this study only allowed me to *see* it in action within Metafilter, and as a concept, virtual capital is in its infancy. As such, further research is needed to ensure it is what it looks (and acts) like, and that it is not, in fact, more suited to inclusion of virtual social capital or virtual cultural capital.

## 8.4 Final Thoughts on Researching Metafilter

Throughout the process of researching and writing this thesis, a few things came up that were not directly related to the thesis, but are worth a short discussion here. First, the community of Metafilter is in a constant state of change and flux. It could be compared to doing research on a book that had a hundred pages added to it every day, all of equal interest and relevance to the study. The exponential growth is difficult to even comprehend. As a result, the thesis as reported here comes as close as possible to

illuminating the social practices of the MetaFilter community, with the understanding that this may change within a week or two.

There were a few major changes to the Metafilter community while I was researching it. First, and most importantly, Metafilter went from having its doors closed to new members, and having a somewhat stabilized community base, to having the doors being thrust open to the public. In the span of a few months, about ten thousand new members joined, and completely altered the social dynamics I was already in the process of researching.

Secondly, when it came time for me to stop my data collection and begin analysis and writing of this thesis, it was really difficult to actually stop. As Metafilter had previously been a place of leisure for me, and because I find the social dynamic of Metafilter to be extremely fascinating, I still tended to spend my 'free time' there, and constantly found new evidence or contradictory information even when I was not wearing the hat of ethnographic observer.

**Glossary of Terms:**

Blog - a webpage that is constantly updated with commentary and links, often particular to an individual's day to day life

Call-out: A thread posted to MetaTalk where one user 'calls-out' any questionable threads or comments for discussion.

Comment: A message discussing the topic of the thread it is posted to. Can be in response to the links or directed towards other users. May contain further links.

Community blog - is a blog that relies on the contributions of more than one user, and where any member of the community can contribute.

Double Post: A link that has already been posted to Metafilter at some time in the past.

Front Page Post (FPP): A thread posted to the main page.

Flaming: a comment that is hostile or insulting, generally directed at one person, but sometimes towards the entire group.

Lurking – a non-interactive behaviour characterized by an individual following a community without participating.

Mefite - someone who participates in the Metafilter community

Pile-on: the flaming of one user by many.

Post: In Metafilter this can describe an action whereby a user publishes their comment or thread to the Metafilter web page (*to post*), or it can be used to describe a thread (*a post*).

Snark - making a snide remark.

Thread: one of the main messages found on Metafilter: generally constructed as a link within the context of a sentence or paragraph explaining where it is linking to. Otherwise known as a *post* or *front page post (FPP)*.

Troll – used both as a verb and a noun; a user can troll using inflammatory language, and a user that often trolls the community can then be labeled a troll.

Wiki – a collaborative, used constructed online encyclopedia.

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