

# TECHNOLOGY IN CONSUMER TALK

**New routes to insight**

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**This paper investigates how ordinary people use technology as both topic and resource in their natural interactions, away from research. New insight into attitudes and behaviour is achieved by researching how people use technology to manage real-life issues and relationships, e.g., by remarking on the technological taste and know-how of others. Research data of special interest are technology-mediated communications, from web pages to chat rooms. New research methods have emerged to tackle these data: in this paper, a selection of ethno-methods is introduced. The findings concern trust in cyberspace, stability in virtual communities and displays of individual expertise.**

## INTRODUCTION

This paper presents original research that explores the role of technology in the everyday lives of consumers, with a particular focus on new communications technology. This is accomplished through practical analysis of some raw, qualitative data. We will examine these data closely in the pages to follow.

As we analyse the data and draw our conclusions, I will be arguing the case for observing people's spontaneously occurring behaviour – the things they say and do in their 'real world', away from the constraints of the formal research situation. Of course, devices such as the market research discussion group have evolved as such because of the unique opportunities they offer to focus respondents' minds on questions that are specific to the research client, as well as giving respondents the chance to react to prototype ideas and stimulus that they wouldn't encounter in the normal run of things. However, what devices such as discussion groups and even depth interviews necessarily lack is much resemblance to what goes on in consumers' everyday lives. Traditional research methods rely on people's ability to remember what they normally do, and their willingness to talk about it. For that reason, there is a very good case for studying consumers in their natural habitat, and seeing what kinds of behaviours and attitudinal expressions emerge spontaneously, without the intervention of a moderator. Readers may recognise this as a broadly *ethnographic* position. We will investigate some spontaneously occurring behaviour around two kinds of technology-mediated communication and learn something about how ordinary people engage with and manage such technology in their day-to-day interactions with one another.

As technology-mediated communication takes up more time of more consumers, it becomes an integral feature of people's daily activities. In this paper we will look at two samples of communication – one single-author piece of prose published on a web page, and one multi-party, real-time chat room conversation. It is becoming increasingly 'normal' for consumers of all ages, with no outstanding economic resources or technological know-how, to spend time interacting with each other online, publishing their opinions on web sites and indulging in idle chat. At the same time, as uptake of technology-mediated communication (henceforth TMC) increases, consumer needs develop and change. In the data analysis to follow, we will discover something about the needs of online communities, private individuals and about how people in TMC identify and attempt to manage 'problems' such as 'true' identity and ownership of intellectual property. This is going to be especially relevant for anyone who wants to serve the needs of consumers through new products and services in TMC. Whether your ambition is to build a portal that people want to come to, to create a virtual community of happy users around some service or brand, to make people feel safe shopping online or to encourage them to set

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up home in your web space, there are wonderful insights to be gained by taking a broadly ethnographic approach to researching consumer behaviour.

There have been some notable ethnographies of TMC and people's behaviour on the Internet, in particular. Three to mention are those of Sherry Turkle (1995), Christine Hine (2000) and the works collected by Smith and Kollock (1999), especially that of Judith Donath. Every ethnographic study is original, in the sense that it is performed on fresh data – unique and unrepeatable – but new ethnographic insights are clearly facilitated by knowledge of research that has gone before. It's especially good to know how research methods adapt and evolve as time passes, technological innovation unfolds and research findings accrue. In this paper we are going to use a combination of three *ethno-methods*, carefully selected for their ability to grasp the local interactions of which TMC is constituted – a specific IRC conversation, say, or a particular message on somebody's web page. These methods let the researcher get very close to concrete, tangible data, which means that clients, the end users of research, get very practical answers and recommendations at the end of the project, as well as the broad theory.

We will have a look at the selected ethno-methods in a moment. Before that, let's review what we mean by researching the role of communications technology in the lives of ordinary people. We are interested in two things. Firstly, there is the question of how consumers deal with technology as a *topic*. How do they refer to it, what kinds of concerns do they bring up, how is it made relevant as an object of attention? Secondly, we will be interested in how consumers use technology as a *resource* for doing other things. By this I do not just mean observing that people use web pages for expressing themselves, chat rooms for talking to friends, and so on. I mean that when ordinary people do 'technology talk' – commenting on the technological taste and know-how of others, say – they do so as part of the business of getting on with their everyday lives and managing their relationships. In this paper, we will look at what kinds of things people accomplish through 'technology talk' and thereby improve our understanding of how communications technology is becoming part of the fabric of people's everyday lives. In turn, this should lead us to some fairly pragmatic conclusions about how brands and service providers can recognise and fulfil consumer needs.

## METHODOLOGY

### Materials

We are about to examine two pieces of data. We will look at them in detail in the next section; for now, here is a broad description.

The first is a single author piece of prose. It is a man's expression of his strong opinion which he has published on a website. The site is not his own, but he treats it as a platform for addressing 'his' community. The second piece of data is a conversation among three men in an internet chat room. None of them owns the facility but all behave as though they have some personal stake to defend. Both pieces of data were found on the world wide web, available to be viewed by anyone who cares to look.<sup>1)</sup> This raises interesting questions about the difference between public and private. Are these data public announcements, and to what extent are they unspoiled by the intervention of research?

The answer is reached by asking how privacy and publicity are treated as concerns by participants themselves. In the first piece of data, the author designs his communication as though it were going to be read by a large audience, albeit one that shares certain interests. He delivers a fairly public announcement. In contrast, the men in the chat room carry on as though alone, acknowledging neither the other chat room visitors nor the vast, silent, non-contributing audience of web surfers who could view the conversation then or some time in the future.

In this regard, the data are different. What they share is that, audience notwithstanding, these speakers have not designed their talk with market research in mind. They are just doing what comes naturally – expressing themselves and managing their relationships – within the limits and opportunities offered by the technology. The situation is comparable to researching consumer behaviour in any public place – people are aware that they are in public view but this is within the realm of normal, everyday experience and qualitatively different from answering interview questions or otherwise acknowledging the agenda and priorities of research.

The data at hand originated in textual form. We are not required to analyse transcripts, videotapes or any other second-hand representations of talk that originated elsewhere, with the inevitable loss of meaning in translation. We have original, complete documentation of the communication because it originated *as* documentation, so we can be confident that all the resources we need to interpret it as an interactional event are right there on the page. This is a unique aspect of TMCs such as web publications and chat rooms and we will want to choose our analytic methods so as to take full advantage of the

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opportunity to assess what these communications are doing as more or less strategic ‘moves’ in people’s social interaction.

## Method

The ethno-methods we’ll use here are in a period of rapid development, alongside developments in technology; they are advanced tools for understanding technology-mediated communication. They evolved out of each other as independent disciplines and share the same roots, so they are highly compatible for use in combination.

The first method, *EM*, is properly called ‘ethnomethodology’. *EM* was introduced to sociology by Harold Garfinkel (Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984) as a research method that was designed to pay full attention to people’s *accounts* of themselves and the world around them. *EM* does this so as to examine their common-sense knowledge, to develop a real ‘insider’s view’ of the society under study. The objective is to form a really clear picture of how society organises itself through people’s talk, how local knowledge systems are structured, and what behavioural conventions or protocols seem to be in place.

As a form of sociology, *EM* lends itself to contemporary topics such as community in cyberspace. We will bring two insights from *EM* to the data. Firstly, we will look for signs of social behavioural conventions – people visibly observing conventions or else providing an account for doing otherwise. Secondly, we will look for explicit reference in the data to the idea of ‘community’ and its various manifestations, such as web ‘sites’, discussion ‘boards’, chat ‘rooms’ and so on. This focus will help us reach findings about how stability in online communities is achieved.

The second method is conversation analysis, or *CA*. Originated by Harvey Sacks, its influences include *EM* and the sociology of Erving Goffman. *CA* offers many practical resources for doing analysis because of its focus on specific instances of interaction. *CA* investigates the mechanics of conversation, right down to turn-taking systems and pauses. There are already important studies in *CA*, such as the work of Ian Hutchby (Hutchby 2001) and Emmanuel Schegloff (Schegloff 2002a, b) that examine interaction through new technology, and these offer a valuable analytic resource.

The practical focus of *CA* research provides a range of known conversational phenomena that we can look out for in the data. For our data, *CA* findings concerning phenomena such as assessments (e.g., Antaki, 1994) and membership categories (Sacks, 1992) are likely to be useful, for instance. In particular, we will use insights from *CA* to look at how people bring up and evaluate matters of taste and expertise when it comes to technology. We will

investigate how people attend to these matters in their talk and what interactional functions are thereby achieved. This will help us to reach a new understanding of consumer needs and concerns around technology.

The third method is discourse analysis, or *DA*. An interdisciplinary method, it owes much to EM and CA and also to *semiotics*. DA shares with CA its focus on specific pieces of data. However, DA extends its remit beyond conversation and regularly investigates printed documents and things like TV and radio broadcasts, so it is particularly well equipped to tackle materials such as web pages which appear to be relatively self-contained and addressed to a general audience, unlike chat room talk which resembles the face-to-face equivalent.

DA, especially the form developed by social psychologists such as Derek Edwards, Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (e.g., Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Potter, 1996) has also generated useful findings about how people manage personal accountability (personal credit, blame, integrity, moral behaviour) in their speech and writing. For instance, Edwards' pioneering study of relationship 'troubles talk' (the kind that occurs in couples therapy) offers fantastic insight into how people manage their personal credit or blame through discourse (e.g., Edwards, 1995). We will use insights from DA to investigate issues such as trust in our data. This will lead to useful findings about how trust and related concerns are managed in cyberspace.

## ANALYSIS

Let's begin our analysis by looking at the first piece of data. Extract 1 is drawn from a contribution to a website called Anime Tourist. The site is for fans of *anime*, a distinctive genre of Japanese animated film, noted for its unusual graphic style and its fantasy content – there's a lot of emphasis on magic and science fiction with a cast of inventively named characters that fans of anime films know and can discuss. There are lots of these anime fan sites around. Anime Tourist is aimed at the newer kind of fan who is still getting to know the scene. The piece of text we are going to examine was contributed to the site by a young man called Chris, who has nicknamed himself 'Rand', perhaps in reference to some aspect of anime culture. As we will see from the extract to follow, Rand has his own fan website where presumably he is free to express his opinion whenever he wants. But this text is a contribution to the Anime Tourist site. It is described by Anime Tourist as a 'rant' (an angry outburst) by Rand: 'Rand expresses his opinions about poorly constructed fan websites.'

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**Extract 1**

When you surf the World Wide Web long enough, you come to one inevitable conclusion: most of the websites out there suck. I mean they suck in every respect: graphically, design wise, and content wise. Now, I'll be the first to admit that 'Rand's Fantasy & Anime Homepage' wasn't anything pretty to look at, and it was poorly  
5 designed during the first year. However, the one thing it did have was original content.

I visit most websites and find nothing but fan pages that just say 'Fushigi Yugi rules!' and 'Gundam Wing kicks ass!' They'll have a few pictures, maybe an animated gif of a super-deformed Gundam. Perhaps a link here or there, but not much more. What  
10 then, is the point of having a website if you don't TELL PEOPLE WHY you love a series. If you're trying to spread fandom, you don't accomplish anything with what you currently have. If I want to learn about Fushigi Yugi before investing in the series and visit thirty websites that say 'it rules', then I know nothing more than when I started. At least on our site, we are trying to spread fandom through reliable  
15 information on each series.

The only thing that bothers me more than cheap looking websites are websites that claim ownership of pictures or steal content from other websites. I visit plenty of websites that say things like 'don't steal my Gundam pics'. What is there to steal? Did you, the crappy designer with your Geocities page, actually draw the storyboard  
20 or animate the cel for that Gundam pic? Well, if the answer is yes, then you should have a better-looking website. If the answer is no, then YOU DON'T OWN THE DAMNED PICTURE. Get it straight people. You can't tell people to not steal what you don't own yourself.

Now, as for stealing content, that really gets me angry. Recently I visited a website  
25 that shall remain nameless that had suspicious Gundam content. Graphics looked familiar, as did text. Upon closer investigation, I saw that the content had been stolen from Gundam Project, which I consider to be the best English Gundam site. Seeing the content from there on this crappy little site got me really angry (enough to right  
30 this rant as a spur of the moment). This website in question also covered various other series, and that content sounded like it was stolen as well.

If you're going to make a website, do us in the net community a favor: put some work in it. Just slapping together some page on Geocities with a cheap midi and a star background does nothing to further spreading the good word about anime or fantasy.  
35 Don't attempt to hoard graphics you don't own, and don't steal things from other websites. Make something that you're proud of and think people will like to enjoy. not to argue over. It's sad how many people have forgotten that.

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STE (2003) <http://anime-tourist.com/article.php?sid=70>

This is a fascinating piece of discourse, bursting with investigable phenomena. However, we shall resist the temptations of an exhaustive analysis and concentrate on one or two observations that will further our knowledge of the topics at hand.

Let's begin with the topic of stable online community. We shall not assume from the outset that we know much about what a stable community is and then try to evaluate how that affects and constrains people's talk. Rather, we shall stand by a key principle in ethno-methods and examine 'stable community' as it exists as a concern for participants themselves. How is the idea of a 'stable online community' manifest in participants' talk, and what is it doing there?

The idea of 'community' appears in Rand's rant at its most explicit in line 32: 'Do us in the net community a favor'. It is contrasted against people who are not members, characterised as the 'you' of 'If you're going to make a website' (line 32). Clearly, Rand is keen to draw attention to the difference between himself and those other people, and therefore it is a good analytic strategy to ask what they might seem to have in common. The answer, of course, is that both Rand and those he criticises are authors of anime fan sites so that an analytically minded reader might wonder how Rand himself measures up against such criticism.

Rand goes to quite some trouble to work up a distinction that culminates in line 32 in his contrast between the people he is criticising and himself, a member of 'the net community'. The CA concept of membership categories is useful here. Membership categories are rhetorically loaded descriptions that people introduce into their conversations, often to their own advantage. Membership categories are conventionally thought to have certain personal characteristics, rights and responsibilities attached to them which society expects will be generally observed unless some account is provided for doing otherwise. Rand announces himself as a member of the category 'the net community' and as such he awards himself a privileged position from which he can legitimately pass judgement on the efforts of other people to make web sites.

Throughout the text, Rand introduces a number of devices to endorse his right to pass comment and to build up the contrast between himself and others. The very first thing he does at the beginning of line 1 is to bolster up his position as someone who is about to pass judgement: 'When you surf the World Wide Web long enough'. Rand is asking to be treated as a man of experience, someone worldly and adventurous who can be credited with an authoritative opinion. Later in the text he introduces category membership more explicitly. He suddenly pluralises his personal pronouns so that first-person talk about 'I' and 'me' becomes 'we' around line 14, where the site formerly referred to as 'Rand's Homepage' (lines 3 - 4) becomes 'our site', on which 'we are trying to

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spread fandom'. Other members of the category 'we' are implicitly co-opted in Rand's online activities. Near the end of the text, he constructs a difference between 'us' and 'them' by providing a description of 'them'. On line 33 Rand paints a damning portrait of those 'others' in terms of the organisation that hosts their web space ('Geocities', like AOL, widely claimed to serve those of poor economic status and technological know-how) and their taste in website ornamentation ('a cheap midi and a star background').

There is an interesting insight in Rand's criticism that helps to explain why people sometimes downplay their expertise. In lines 3 - 5, Rand produces what ethno-methods researchers recognise as a disclaimer (first documented by sociologists Hewitt and Stokes, 1975): 'I'll be the first to admit that 'Rand's Fantasy & Anime Homepage' wasn't anything pretty to look at and it was poorly designed'. Rand's admission is that his personal output – his presence – on the web has sometimes fallen below conventional standards of taste and functionality. However, his admission serves the useful interactional purpose of demonstrating that he *now* knows what those standards are – so he is in a position to comment on the output of others.

A useful insight into community is also gained at this point. We can see that in Rand's virtual world, the idea of community and group membership is an important one. Community matters to Rand because it establishes him as a *bona fide* authority and arbiter of taste in his chosen subject and gives his personal interest some purpose – look at his 'mission statement' of lines 14 - 15 ('we are trying to spread fandom through reliable information on each series'). This in itself is revealing if your ambition is to build an online community; around a brand, let's say. You might choose to investigate more deeply the kinds of needs being expressed by Rand – the need to shore up one's own creative efforts such as personal web pages, for instance – so as to help consumers develop a personal, even emotional investment in the facilities for doing 'community' that are offered to them.

The other topic we will explore before leaving Rand is trust in cyberspace, and its family of related concerns such as deception and theft. Looking at Extract 1, we may observe that Rand seems to have more than one 'issue' on his agenda. It is not simply that he enjoys asserting the superiority of his website over those of other people, although that may perhaps be the case. More than that, as he asserts himself he is clearly working to prevent some negative evaluation of himself by the reading audience and take the moral high ground. We can examine this by looking in detail at how Rand manages issues of property and ownership in cyberspace, in particular, the tension that emerges between 'pictures' and 'content' (line 17).

Rand's rant is on the surface a critique of anime websites and an appeal to the constructors of those sites in general (look at the inclusive audience implied by

his parting appeal to ‘make something that you’re proud of’ and his expressed attachment to broad, long-standing principles that regrettably ‘many people have forgotten’). However, having set up his target, Rand then takes the opportunity to express and work out certain concerns around theft and ‘proper’ behaviour. In particular, Rand is very careful to construct a difference between ‘pictures’ and ‘content’ or ‘graphics’ and ‘text’. According to his rather convoluted reasoning, careless anime fans, putting together their ‘cheap looking’ websites (line 16) routinely cut corners by adding ‘stolen’ web content or text (lines 17, 24, 26, 31, 35) to the site along with the ‘cheap midi’ (music) and the ‘star background’ (lines 33 - 34). This is theft and it is morally reprehensible. However, unlike ‘content’, ‘pictures’ and ‘graphics’ of anime principals such as ‘Gundam’ are up for grabs; using such graphics on one’s site is not a matter of personal ownership because they were mostly generated by the same people who ‘draw the storyboard’ and ‘animate the cel’ for anime movies. Such graphics are therefore part of the common wealth of anime cultural artefacts and morally distinct from ‘content’ which is generated by anime fans.

DA research into people doing relationship ‘troubles talk’ invites us to consider what Rand is working to achieve in this vivid, rather emotional account. In particular, it’s useful to consider DA studies such as those of Edwards (1995 and *passim*.) in which couples present contrastingly worded descriptions of events and thereby work to shore themselves up morally with the listening counsellor while blaming each other (for instance, describing events so as to say ‘my wife is untrustworthy’ versus ‘my husband is overly possessive’). Having seen this kind of verbal behaviour before, we are in a position to observe that Rand is not just ‘telling it like it is’ but working to prevent his audience drawing some negative conclusion about him – namely, that his own website content is not ‘original’ in the sense of being authentically his (especially the graphics!) and indeed that his website itself may not be the long-standing ‘original’ he makes it out to be (line 5) but just one among many fan sites, all endlessly copying and circulating each other’s material.

Rand’s defence to the ‘people’ of line 22 takes the form of a conversation with more than one speaker: look at how he ‘voices’ the injunction ‘don’t steal my Gundam pics’ (line 18), followed immediately by a retort in his own ‘voice’. In CA, this is called ‘active voicing’ (see Wooffitt, 1992; Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998). In active voicing, speakers ‘formulate information so that it can be heard as reported talk when in fact it is unlikely that the words so reported were actually said in that way (Hutchby and Wooffitt, 1998: 225). Ironically, once the reader has noticed Rand’s remarks as active voicing, the effect is rather spoiled and we are given occasion to consider how such a

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conversation might ‘really’ have gone, what really is the nature of the dispute in which Rand imagines himself (the ‘argument’ of line 37)? The charge that he himself ‘steals’ graphics looms in the background, like a threat.

What does this tell us about trust in cyberspace? Rand’s outburst suggests that issues such as personal integrity and trustworthiness are very important to members of ‘the net community’ and it also grounds those concerns in some very concrete examples. For instance, it is a problem for the community of anime fans that disputes and ‘arguments’ break out over textual and graphic property, and this is connected to the way that owners of personal sites within a community will try to compete with each other in terms of being long-standing, the first, ‘original’. If Rand is anything to go by, and we would certainly want to do some more research to find out, people do not deal well with the suggestion that their creative efforts are somehow inauthentic or one among many. They look round for ways to police community practice on the assumption that others in cyberspace are not trustworthy, so as to shore up and protect the status of their own products and their own community membership. This is an insight with commercial applications. For instance, you may want consumers to create and store personal information online in the course of using services, shopping online, playing branded games, banking, paying for web space and so on. In this case, and especially if the consumer will be displaying a public face to others in cyberspace, through a personal web page, an avatar or whatever, they can be appealed to by providing them with ways to date, sign, authenticate and individuate the products of their activity, to mark things as ‘original’ and to mark off boundaries in a low-trust environment between materials that are ‘private’ and those that are for general consumption.

Now let’s have a look at Extract 2, a sample of chat room conversation. The topic of discussion that gives the chat room its *raison d’etre* is women’s weight-lifting, wrestling and ‘bodybuilding’. The chat room is appended to a website organised around the same subject matter. The owner of the site and the chat room facility is a woman named Diana, who herself seems to be a bodybuilder, although she is not present at the time of the conversation studied here. Chat rooms are very different from pieces of continuous prose that are composed by a single author offline and then turned into html for publishing. The conversation reproduced here would have taken place in real time. Participants may enter and leave the conversation spontaneously, and in fact during the conversation shown here there are peripheral characters around who make unrelated comments, greet each other and enter and exit the chat room while conversation is in progress. The three discussants whose talk is reproduced in this extract would have communicated with each other using real-time chat software in which participants can see each other’s – and their

own – contributions appear on the screen in coloured text next to their names. As the conversation progresses, the view in the chat room software window scrolls, so that participants will normally view only the preceding four or five lines of conversation. However, chat software usually provides for whole conversations to be preserved as text files when a session is finished, and someone, presumably Diana, has done that, so we have the benefit of being able to look at a complete passage of text. It is clear from examining the files that many of the people in this chat room know each other through this forum and greet each other as familiar friends. They have developed a sense of community. Our extract of interest starts with one discussant announcing to all that Diana has ‘recommended’ that he leave.

## Extract 2

	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	Diana has recommended I leave the chatroom.
	<b>Zorro</b>	really when was that WP?
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	In an e-mail tonight.
5	<b>TomNine</b>	WP, did she actually ask you to leave, or are you infering something?
	<b>Zorro</b>	why WP?
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	No, she recommended that I leave.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	Because I am greatly disliked by many people here, BLU.
	<b>Zorro</b>	for what reason WP?
10	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I guess I have been rude to many people.
	<b>Zorro</b>	WP i come in her or a good time but never disrespect anyon,i blew my cool one time in her with JF anf i said i was sorry and we even finaly made friends
15	<b>TomNine</b>	Rob, most of the time it is a pleasure to chat with you. But you can be combative and disruptive, and that's no fun.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I have had a few problems here, BLU. I apologized but JF is unwilling to forgive me.
	<b>Zorro</b>	well you seem ok to me....why are you still here than?
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I know Tom. I am only waiting for her reply before I leave.
20	<b>Zorro</b>	tom i hope members here like me.Thats very inportant to me because i like people and just like to have fun once in awhile
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I like you, BLU.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	Diana only responded to my suggestion that it is better if I leave until people simmer down.
25	<b>TomNine</b>	BLU, I think most people like your visits. Sometimes you make strong comments that are a little upsatting, but no trouble in the end.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I may be gone for several weeks, I dunno.

## EXTRACT 2, CONTINUED

30	<b>Zorro</b>	well we come in here to tak about the finer things in life such as amazons that wrestle, do lifts and carries and private posing, also to talk about our common interests in these dreams come true for use few lucky guys like Tomnine
	<b>TomNine</b>	WP, if you originated the suggestion that you take a break, that's not the same as Diana suggesting it. I know she's a little tired of your darker antics as well.
35	<b>Zorro</b>	thank you Tomnine
	<b>TomNine</b>	Zorro, you are the one living the dream!
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I never said she suggested it, Tom. I said she recommended it. I know I am unliked, but I try.
40	<b>Zorro</b>	WP you try to be unliked?
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	No, I really like everyone here, but I have a depression problem that makes me very moody. That causes problems.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I am trying to fix it, though.
45	<b>TomNine</b>	WP, I hate to play shrink, but is it more bipolar than just depression?
	<b>Zorro</b>	hing wrong with explaining this to the chat room,i once recommened we have a hearing..maybe you should ask for one that all can come into te chatroom and take some kind of vote.like a private message to Diana to see if you stay or go
50	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	No. I just have zero self-esteem, Tom. I can't believe it if someone says they like me, but I always think they hate me.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	No need, BLU. I would lose any popularity contest.
	<b>Zorro</b>	sounds like my answer will be a big hit with this site something like a jury
55	<b>TomNine</b>	WP, I've seen you be very likable then later act like a jerk. That's a sure way to get a 'friend' to turn against you.
	<b>Zorro</b>	you have my vote to give you a chance to smartin up
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	I use passive aggressive behaviour, Tom, inadvertantly 99% to trick people into liking me.
60	<b>TomNine</b>	Diana wouldn't throw anybody out even if a majority wanted it.
	<b>Warrior Poet</b>	When I ask 'Why do you hate me?' I mean 'Do you like me?'
	<b>Zorro</b>	When i always come in here under a different screen name i never leave before makeing sure Tomnine knows it's me

*Diana the Valkyrie (2003), <http://chat.thevalkyrie.com/clubhouse/oldchat/log-98-08-15.htm>)*

From an ethnographic perspective, this passage of conversation (for it is the original rather than a mere transcript of an oral exchange) is quite thrillingly

alive, spontaneous and natural. Superficially incoherent and self-interested, its seemingly unpredictable movement from one topic to another, and speakers' tendency to volunteer replies that appear 'wrong' or simply inappropriate for the preceding utterance, even the mistakes and typos, are exciting evidence that this is more than the relatively tidy transcripts and questionnaire responses of traditional market research. This is live, natural, untidy, social behaviour unfolding on the page; conscious of its wider audience but unspoiled by the agenda of the latecoming ethno-researcher. As before, there are many fascinating features of the text that merit observation, but we shall restrict ourselves to one or two insights on our key topics.

The two we shall focus on here come from EM and DA. We will begin with a close-up look at the data using DA with particular attention to our questions about trust, and then broaden out slightly, taking an EM approach to return to the question of stability in online communities.

Starting with DA means that, rather than pondering the ultimate meaning of this quite long extract of data, we can zoom in on interesting phenomena in the talk. One of these occurs around line 41, where Warrior Poet introduces the new idea of psychological illness – 'a depression problem' that stimulates some interest in the recipients and provides for further discussion of 'self esteem' (line 50), 'passive aggressive behaviour' (line 58) and so on, up to line 61, in which Warrior Poet describes the pathological foundations of his talk. Now, it may or may not be the case that Warrior Poet 'actually' is depressed. That is not for us to know. But irrespective of the facts, Warrior Poet's relatively late introduction of the idea of his psychological ailment into the conversation serves a useful purpose. It explains his behaviour and morally shores up Warrior Poet as its perpetrator. As an interactional tactic it has the potential to excuse whatever Warrior Poet has done to upset the other members of the group.

This analysis of Warrior Poet's 'psychological illness' manoeuvre is confirmed and enriched by consideration of relevant studies in DA. For instance, I earlier mentioned Edwards' studies of the talk of troubled couples in relationship counselling. In particular, Edwards' well-known analysis of the exchanges of one such couple, 'Connie' and 'Jimmy' (Edwards 1995, 1997 and *passim*.) is relevant. At one stage in the Connie and Jimmy data, Jimmy admits having 'a temper', and constructs himself as pathologically prone to anger. He reflects and comments on his psychological malaise, and in so doing orientates himself to the concerns of his recipients (Connie and the counsellor) by acknowledging that he has behaved badly, while at the same time attempting to recover himself morally, through a display of thoughtful reflection on his own psychological condition. This remarkably similar tactic of Jimmy's helps us to see what Warrior Poet stands to achieve.

We can also infer that Warrior Poet's defence is good not just for now but well into the future, especially if he is visibly making some sort of effort to cure or redeem himself ('I am trying to fix it': line 43). When speakers in the position of Warrior Poet or Edwards' Jimmy use defences of diminished responsibility in situations of blame, they are effectively admitting their untrustworthiness. Being untrustworthy, in the sense of not reliably containing undesirable behaviour, holds open the opportunity for the behaviour to happen again.

Warrior Poet is specifically working against allegations that he is 'rude' (line 10), disruptive (line 15) and generally causing a problem in the local community, meaning the chat room regulars. Moreover, Warrior Poet himself introduces and formulates the nature of the trouble in line 1, with the dramatic announcement that 'Diana has recommended I leave'. Clearly, Warrior Poet wants Zorro and TomNine to pay attention to this, and he submits various appeals for their sympathy (lines 8, 28; 38 - 39) before eventually settling on the 'psychological illness' motif, which is founded in the common-sense logic that ill people are to be pitied and not blamed. To the extent that Warrior Poet is successful in marshalling the sympathy of others, he will be at liberty to resume his controversial 'antics' (line 35) and Zorro's and TomNine's trust in him and in the peace and stability of their virtual community will continue to be undermined.

This visible concern with the peace or disruption of the community leads us to step back a little and consider the text using the resources of EM. One way to do this is to pay special attention to the contributions that Zorro offers to the conversation. EM encourages us to take an interest in patterns of social behaviour in which unexpected things happen, or things seem to go slightly 'wrong'. Zorro's contributions are interesting for this reason. TomNine fairly consistently engages with the issues that Warrior Poet is raising. However, Zorro's contributions sometimes appear rather 'off-topic' and more about Zorro himself than Warrior Poet's efforts to engage his attention. Particularly off-topic examples are 'sounds like my answer will be a big hit with this site' (lines 53 - 54) and, startlingly, 'When i always come in here under a different screen name i never leave before makeing sure Tomnine knows it's me' (lines 62 - 63), a remark which occurs apparently out of the blue.

A truism in ethno-methods is that natural behaviour is in fact usually quite orderly and that order often emerges, upon inspection, where at first disorder seemed to prevail. If Zorro's contributions to the conversation were significantly 'wrong' then we would expect to see TomNine and Warrior Poet orientating to that as a problem, and Zorro offering some sort of account for his actions. It is therefore analytically revealing that TomNine and Warrior Poet treat Zorro's more detached and superficially irrelevant remarks as in fact acceptable contributions within the terms of their discussion. EM prompts us

to ask: ‘Why should this happen? In what way are Zorro’s remarks contributing to the debate?’

While Warrior Poet is appealing for sympathy, Zorro is considering the wider implications of the problem his friend has described. In line 10, Warrior Poet offers the analysis that he has ‘been rude’ to people in the past, which might explain his unpopularity. In lines 11 - 13 Zorro fails to respond to the search for a reason why Warrior Poet is disliked and instead ponders whether he himself is disliked for past occasions of ‘rudeness’ (‘i blew my cool on[e] time in her[e] with JF [another community member] an[d] i said i was sorry and we even finally made friends’). In line 20, Zorro interrupts Warrior Poet’s account of his problems to appeal to TomNine for reassurance that ‘members here like me’. Then, at line 46, Zorro comes up with something that is more obviously relevant to Warrior Poet’s predicament. He suggests a ‘hearing’ (line 47) at which Warrior Poet can explain himself and members can vote on whether he ought to be allowed to stay or expelled from the community. Warrior Poet is unenthusiastic, but Zorro seems to ignore this and instead congratulates himself on his idea (‘my answer will be a big hit with this site’). Finally, just when Warrior Poet is getting into full emotional swing with TomNine (‘When I ask ‘Why do you hate me?’ I mean ‘Do you like me?’’, line 61), Zorro speaks up with the rather self-conscious affirmation that he always makes himself known to TomNine (implicitly a representative for the larger community) on those occasions when he logs in under a different name and identity is an issue.

The fact that Warrior Poet and TomNine accept these kinds of remarks as relevant contributions suggests that they and Zorro are discussing concerns that, in their world, are similar. Warrior Poet’s rude and disruptive behaviour is not just a problem in its own right. It is a problem because it affects the peace and stability of the online community; it is deemed to be a problem of the same order as community members not ‘liking’ each other and members being confused about who is ‘really’ behind the various names that appear on screen. These are treated as related and similar problems that threaten the integrity of online communities.

This passage of conversation is interesting because it tells us what sorts of things members of online communities are worried about. It also illustrates the key EM insight that communities are not sustained by stamping out the problems that occur for members – if such a thing were indeed possible. Rather, an EM approach to our data suggests that it is precisely *through* things like the rather punitive ‘jury’ idea of Zorro’s and TomNine’s authoritative formulations of Warrior Poet’s behaviour and his claim to know Diana’s feelings (‘I know she’s a little tired of your darker antics’: lines 34 - 35) that cohesive communities are maintained. Both Zorro and TomNine use Warrior

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Poet's predicament as a way to bolster up their own security and status as community members – and look at how they use each other as a resource to do so, in their semi-private asides of lines 20 - 21, 25 - 27, 29 - 32, 37 and 63.

It is through high handed pronouncements about the shared goals of the group ('we come in here to talk about the finer things in life': line 29) and dramatic devices such as public trials by jury that members come to experience their community and make it real. The implications for service development and NPD are exciting. Providing online communities with the means to identify and negotiate these kinds of problems – perhaps some kinder, more moderate version of Zorro's 'jury' system for dealing with troublemakers gives people valuable resources for strengthening their relationships and renewing their own sense of community membership, as we see Zorro and TomNine doing here. Where it is in the client's interest to form a stable online community of service users or consumers of some brand, offering participants the tools to police disruptive behaviour and manage disagreements looks like a powerful strategy for encouraging group cohesion.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the previous section we completed some practical analysis of raw qualitative data, using principles and techniques from a selection of ethno-methods, chosen for their ability to tackle technology-mediated communication. This has led to some useful insights in three areas.

Firstly, we learned something about stability and problems in online communities, and about how people confirm their own status as members through trying to deal with those problems. Secondly, we encountered the world wide web as a relatively low trust environment, in which people attend closely to issues of personal ownership, copyright and integrity, and take an interest in ways to display their own trustworthiness, or indeed to withhold it. Thirdly, we saw evidence of some consumer needs in people's protectiveness towards their own creative efforts online and towards questions of their technological taste and expertise, whether they are criticising others or being knowledgeably humble about their own efforts.

There are some very practical conclusions to be drawn here. While doing the analysis, some suggestions came up for things that service providers can do to respond to people's needs and facilitate their consumer behaviour in technology-mediated environments. For instance, giving people the opportunity to pass judgement on the taste, know-how and behaviour of others in cyberspace (as the Anime Tourist site gives Rand his opportunity) is one way to stimulate interest in a community by calling attention to it as such, as well as offering individuals the chance to assert and protect their status. It also

looks as though there is some interest in self-policing devices with opportunities for community participation such as Zorro's 'jury' system.

A logical next step for research would be to further investigate what kinds of systems are already in place, that people have invented for themselves – and there are some exemplary ones around which offer great models for facilitating group trust and community membership. For instance, it is sometimes the case that consumer-led, unofficial sites will spring up alongside existing online communities centred around a brand or commercial entity. They are alongside them in the sense that participants will repeatedly include directions to the unofficial site as part of their contribution to chat room or bulletin board discussions in the 'main' area. These unofficial sites offer directories or 'guides' to known community members, often including a photo and details of the individual's personal life. Some guides function as opportunities to warn new participants against known troublemakers, and simultaneously afford group members a chance to bond with each other and affirm the community by issuing reciprocal praise. One of the advantages of research using ethno-methods is that it turns up these kinds of practical solutions for facilitating consumer behaviour.

There are also some wider conclusions to be drawn about the role of new communications technology in people's everyday interaction – 'technology in consumer talk', as the title says. Technology-mediated communication should be a priority for research. This is partly because the products of TMC – chat room scripts and html pages, for instance – particularly lend themselves to research because they often originate as textual data and do not have to be converted into text for analysis with the inevitable loss in translation. In that regard, TMC data are special and unlike 'ordinary', face-to-face interaction. However, the very similarity of TMC to 'ordinary' communication is the other reason why it ought to be a research priority. Increasingly, spending time online and communicating with each other through technology is becoming part of what consumers ordinarily do. It is becoming part of the fabric of everyday life, along with school and work and ideas of home and family.

This is important news for those of us interested in researching consumer behaviour. When people use technology, they discover new sets of hopes, worries, needs and concerns that are specific to the technology or the local environment. However, they also use technology as a continuation of what they do offline every day – which is to say, they use new communications technology to socialise, make and maintain friendships, explore their interests, worry about how they appear to others, and, of course, shop. That means that TMC is not just for clients who want to facilitate consumer behaviour in cyberspace – because they have a online service to promote or a brand with a web presence, say. It is valuable research data to any client or end user who

ultimately wants to gain insight into the fundamental network of social needs, values, concerns, beliefs and desires that structure the world consumers inhabit.

The research methods we need to make sense of TMC are ethno-methods. If we want to understand consumers' world from an insider's perspective, we must take an interest in how people behave when the agenda of the market researcher has yet to become a priority. The data we have observed here are spontaneously occurring in the sense that they would have happened anyway, whether or not an interested web surfer later gave them an ethnographic reading. This makes them very valuable ethnographic data of the kind that can be difficult to achieve in face-to-face situations when participants are made conscious of the market researcher or his or her video camera in the corner. TMC offers unprecedented opportunities to look close-up at consumers getting on with their everyday lives, expressing themselves and managing their relationships. Ethno-methods have grown up alongside innovation in TMC, accumulating a body of knowledge along the way. They are the best and most up-to-date methodological resource available to help us to take advantage of the rich data that TMC offers.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Extract 1: <http://anime-tourist.com/article.php?sid=70>.  
Extract 2: <http://chat.thevalkyrie.com/clubhouse/oldchat/log-98-08-15.htm>

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