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"Just trying to spread the groove" creating and sustaining community online at Phishhook.com

Daniel J. Lair

The University of Montana

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"JUST TRYING TO
SPREAD THE GROOVE:"
CREATING AND SUSTAINING
COMMUNITY ONLINE
AT PHISHHOOK.COM

by
Daniel J. Lair
B.A. Carroll College, Helena, Montana, 1996
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
The University of Montana
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Approved by:

Chairperson

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Date
Online communities are an increasingly common form of social organization and are frequently subjected to debate over whether or not they merit the label “community.” Phishhook.com is one such online social organization experienced by its members as a “community.” Phishhook.com is a website devoted to the trading of live concert recordings. Its several thousand members store lists of their collections on the site, negotiate trades of their recordings, and engage in discussions ranging from trading to music in general to a remarkable range of other topics as well.

The site was studied using three methods of data collection: participant observation, interviews, and discourse analysis of publicly available documents, such as personal collection lists and discussion board threads. The study was conducted – much of it retroactively – over a six month period from September 1, 2001 to March 1, 2002.

Phishhook members conduct themselves according to a strong set of technical and behavioral norms. Technical norms are those governing the trading process itself; behavior norms are those governing how Phishhook members act towards one another. Members also share a set of “positive” values such as tolerance, diversity, and respect. These values stem from member’s connection to “music” – in particular the music they largely share in common, “jamband” music. The value system is enacted through twin obligations members place on one another: first, to “spread the music” by sharing the music they collect widely and freely; and, second, to “spread the groove,” or act towards one another in the positive manner their music embodies. Members who do not share in this value system reject the “community” label, typically describing Phishhook as “discussion board” instead.

The majority of members, however, experience Phishhook as a community in three senses: as the exchange network where live concert recordings circulate, as the collection of individuals circulating those recordings, and as a metaphor with normative implications for how members should – and should not – act towards one another. These three senses help articulate why members of online social organizations experience their collectives as communities.
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Two years have passed more quickly than I ever could have imagined. I leave my Master's program having discovered, I guess, the inevitable. For years, I put off going to graduate school because I was always afraid to embrace the academic life. In fact, I entered the program with no intention of an academic career. But I guess it's difficult to deny one's nature, and so here I am, closing one chapter of my academic career and about to embark on the next.

In the course of my program of study, I have learned far more than I expected I would (and I expected a lot!), but my graduate experience at The University of Montana certainly transcends the collection of knowledge in and out of the classroom. Throughout my two years, here, the relationships I have developed - both academic and personal - have been what has truly characterized my experience and, even though it is trite to say, my time here would not have been the same without them.

So a few words of thanks are certainly in order.

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CHAPTER ONE:
BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

The Year 2000, had it been one of the corporate-sponsored years in the heavily mediated future of David Foster Wallace's 1996 novel *Infinite Jest*, might well have been termed "the Year of Napster." Media coverage of the controversy of Napster, a software interface that allowed its users to swap (usually) illegal digital compressions called mp3s of nearly every musical artist imaginable, was extensive (Poblocki, 2001). From the editorials of university newspapers to Senate Committee hearings, debate raged over the legal and ethical implications of Internet file sharing, bringing to the forefront questions of copyright law and intellectual property protections as they evolve in the Internet era (Herbeck and Hunter, 1998).

Beneath the highly publicized debate over Napster, a hobby based on similar interests continued its steady growth: the trading of live concert recordings. Buoyed by the instant connection capabilities of the Internet and the rapidly plunging costs of Compact Disc-Recordable (CDR) technology, music aficionados who collect rare live recordings through trading with one another — once known as "tape traders" — increasingly developed online associations, which they often labeled as "communities," to further the rapid growth of their hobby.

Study of such online communities is warranted for several reasons. The trading of live concert recordings, often referred to as "bootlegging," lies at the heart of two separate controversies: first, the controversy over issues of copyright and intellectual property as found in the Napster case, and others like it; and, second, the controversy over the meaning of the word "community" as it applies to social organization on the Internet.

Not only does the trading network's location within these two controversies make it an important object of study, but its very nature merits investigation as well. In a sense, online trading communities have a foot in both the "real" and the "virtual" world. Individuals connect online to form associations and negotiate trades that they then send — on "real" media and to "real" addresses — to their contacts. While the communities formed online between traders may be "virtual," unlike many online associations, they have at least some grounding in the "real world." As such, an investigation into the emergence of online
communities to trade concert recordings may offer a window into the workings of communities in the
"real" and "virtual" worlds alike.

Issue Background

While largely coincidental, it is interesting to note that the histories of the Internet and of the
practice of tape trading follow similar trajectories. Both have their origins in the late 1960s. Both saw a
rapid expansion in their popularity in the mid-1990s. And both, throughout their history, cultivated non-
hierarchical forms of organization focused around the open distribution of information.

The Development of the Internet

Internet pioneer J.C.R. Licklider claimed in the 1960s that "life will be happier for the on-line
individual because the people with whom one interacts will be selected more by commonality of interests
and goals than by accidents of proximity" (in Shapiro, 1999, p. 2). Licklider's prediction strikes an eerie
chord with the reality - "virtual" and "real" - of the 21st century: while the question of on-line society's
effects on "happiness" are certainly the subject of a rich and vibrant debate, the fact that individuals (at
least those who have the luxury of access to the Internet) are now able to choose whom they talk with
"more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity" is amply evident. A few
keystrokes at a search engine will take the web surfer to any number of collections of individuals sharing
their own interests, whether they be baseball, needlework, stock trading, or Marilyn Manson. The trading
of concert bootlegs is no exception, and associations based upon this shared interest have likewise been
facilitated by the advent of the Internet.

The Internet traces its roots to the efforts in the 1960s and early 1970s to connect U.S. Department
of Defense computers with those of several research universities (Abbate, 1999). ARPANET was
conceived as a communication system that would be able to withstand a nuclear attack and as a network of
computers that would be cheaper to administer by connecting computers at research institutions, thereby
reducing the amount of computer power needed (King, Grinter, & Pickering, 1997). The early developers
and pioneers of ARPANET were, according to King et al "a community that was geographically distributed
but bound together by a shared interest in a technology that was both the subject and the object of their
efforts" (1997, p. 4). This community was, in part, mapped on to a pre-existing community: the “invisible college” of research professors, meeting in conventions and conferences to share their ideas (Pickering & King, 1995; Castells, 2000).

Two elements of this community left their indelible mark on the development of the Internet. First, as ARPANET developed, it was a relatively closed system, protected by the Department of Defense and limited to the DOD-ARPA and select members of the academy of research universities and laboratories (King et al, 1997). Second, since the original users of the ARPANET were largely computer programmers, they were also its creators, shaping the network to fit their needs; as a result, the system was designed with limited central authority (Abbate, 1999). These elements fostered the democratic and egalitarian nature of the ARPANET community, influencing the development of the future Internet’s structure, and, consequently, the nature of the Internet once it went public (King et al, 1997).

As other computer networks were created throughout the 70s, they were ultimately linked with ARPANET and, with the assistance of the National Science Foundation, the Internet was ultimately born (Jones, 1995a). By fostering connections between a broad array of computer networks, public and private, “the Internet essentially serves as the main connecting point for many other networks. It has, in a sense, come to be a backbone by which networks link up with each other” (Jones, 1995a, p. 4). And, as a backbone of networks, the Internet becomes increasingly central in an increasingly connected world.

The nature of the Internet as such a center, as a “network of networks,” makes it very difficult to gauge the size and rate of growth at any given time (Wellman et. al, 1996, p. 3). Bimber (1996) reports that, by 1996, 51 million Americans had access to the Internet; in 1998, at least 107 million people worldwide were online (Marriott, 1998). In 1999, it was estimated that the Internet consisted of over 800 million documents (Forhdal, 1999). While the uses of these documents and the activities the world’s “netizens” engage in are seemingly infinite, Galston (2000) reported that participation in online interest groups – such as those devoted to the trading of live concert recording – ranks as the second most common activity among Internet users, behind email.

The rise in public interest-based groups was an organic and unplanned development in the use of the Internet. Such developments, however, should not be unexpected, according to Abbate (1999), who views the Internet as a process of continuing invention, arguing that “since ‘information’ (that infinitely
malleable entity) is at the heart of the technology, media are particularly responsible to being adapted for
new purposes” (p. 4). The use of the Internet to form such interest-based groups signifies an entirely
different use of the Internet as a communication medium.

Not content with simply a “transmission” model of communication, where information is passed
between users, members of these interest-based groups have developed what Carey (1989) views as a
“ritual” mode of communication as well, using the medium to create shared experiences. In order to
understand how the online organization of live concert trading constitutes such a group, it is necessary first
to examine, briefly, the history of “bootlegging” live concert recordings.

The History of Bootlegging

The taping and collecting of bootleg concert recordings is driven by the desires of both those who
tape and those who trade such recordings. Hoffman (1995) described the popularity of bootleg recordings,
writing: “Bootlegs are prized by collectors because they contain material not available elsewhere, material
the record companies don’t or won’t release, such as live recordings and studio outtakes” (p. 2). This
archival impulse is further explained by Simpson (1998), who writes that bootlegging provides “a quest for
adventure and [traders] actively involve themselves in a search for history” (p. 3). In a sense, bootleg
recordings of live concerts not only pad the collections of tapers and traders, but also serve to preserve
moments of musical history that would otherwise be lost, except in the memories of concert-goers.

While the history of concert bootlegging may stem back to Lionel Mapelson’s 1901-1903
recordings of the Metropolitan Opera (Gordon, 2001), the modern era of bootlegging began with the 1969
bootleg, The Great White Wonder, by Bob Dylan (Hoffman, 1995). The bootleg contained cuts of the
“Basement Tapes” Dylan recorded with the Band (now officially released, largely because of the popularity
of the bootleg) as well as early tracks from 1961. The success of the bootleg “spurred a cottage industry”
in bootlegging, and soon recordings from the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and other bands were being taped,
traded and sold (Hoffmann, 1995).

While bootlegging found its birth in recordings of Bob Dylan, the popularity of tape trading was
fueled in large part by the Grateful Dead. Early on, the Dead recognized the marketing power of bootlegs,
and used “grassroots” circulation of tapes as a tool to spread their popularity (Gordon, 2001). At concerts,
tapers were provided access to “taper’s sections” where they could set up their array of recording equipment free from audience interference, or were provided with access to the soundboard for recording (Clancey, 2000, July/August).

The recordings – of the Dead and others – were circulated in two primary ways: by sale or by trade. Tape trading was a difficult proposition, depending largely on contacts made through concerts and magazines devoted to trading such as Goldmine; for most people interested in acquiring live recordings of their favorite artists, the answer was to purchase bootlegs at high prices from trendy music shops, often labeled as “imports” because they were manufactured overseas in places such as Italy, where copyright laws were much less stringent (Clancey, 2000, July/August). By the late 1990s, however, these barriers had largely been lifted by two developments: the rise of the Internet and the advent of Compact Disc-Recordable (CD-R) technology (Terrell, 1999). The latter of these two developments has drastically decreased the cost of producing mass quantities of bootleg CDs, making the number of illegal copies on the market widely available and vastly cheaper (Garrett, 2001). But the availability of the Internet has given would-be collectors of bootlegs greater access to tape trading networks, where they can avoid purchasing such illegal copies altogether.

Trading in the Internet Age

The trading of live concert recording owes its rise in popularity in large part to the expansion of the Internet during the mid-1990s (Hoffman, 1995). Through discussion groups, e-mail lists, and web pages, the Internet affords bootleg traders much easier opportunities to encounter one another. No longer needing to connect with each other through clubs, concerts, or ‘zines (NBCi, 1999), the social structure was in place for a bootleg boom.

The ease of connection between traders, however, did not fuel the bootleg boom alone: it was the introduction – and subsequent affordability – of CD-R technology that gave bootlegging a boost (Clancey, 2000, July/August). Until the advent of CD-R technology, trading had been conducted largely on analog cassettes, a medium with two problems: complicated and slow reproduction and generational sound loss (Clancey, 2000, July/August). These issues are resolved by CD-R technology – discs can be burned at up to eight times “normal” speed with minimal loss of sound quality from copy to copy, due to the digital
nature of the medium. CD-R technology became increasingly affordable (Braun, 1999), inviting traders to
switch from analog as well as attracting large numbers of new traders, or “newbies.” Now, with CDs
costing well below fifty cents, and CD burners available as computer drives for below $200, the trading of
CD-R recordings has become a hobby that “anyone” can afford to participate in (Clancey, 2000,
September).

Traders connect with each other and conduct trades through a variety of online methods including
e-mail lists, discussion groups, web pages, and chat rooms. “Tape trees” are also a popular method of
distribution by which a concert is distributed centrally from the taper, or someone close to the taper, out
through various “branches” and, ultimately, “leaves” (Crawly, 1997). Typically, traders compare their lists
of shows to negotiate a mutually acceptable swap. With lists as generators of trades, a general social
structure evolves amongst traders ranging from “newbies” who often have to rely on 2:1 trades (sending
two blank CDs and receiving one in return) or, simply, the kindness of others to traders who “retire” from
the circuit after amassing collections so large it is difficult for them to find but the rarest of shows
(Silberman, 1998). No studies exist currently depicting the exact scope of the trading community; the
practice of tape trading is diffuse and hard to draw boundaries around. However, the Recording Industry
Association of America (RIAA) estimates that the bootleg trade (both in terms of trading and illegal sales)
is so widespread that there are bootleg recordings of every artist performing today (Simpson, 1998), an
estimate that the RIAA finds frightening.

The trading of music through the Internet has expanded into other forms as well. Programs such
as Napster, MP3.com, and Gnutella began to appear in 1999, offering peer-to-peer transfer of compressed
music files (Poblocki, 2001). Cooper and Harrison (2001) detail the social organization of “audio pirates”
over the Internet, a community of individuals who swap music files on File Transfer Protocol sites and
negotiate their transactions via Internet Relay Chat. Most recently, Brown (2001) reported that DVD video
recordings of concerts have made their appearance in the bootleg-for-sale industry; once DVD-Recordable
technology becomes widely available, trading such discs is likely to become popular as well. The
distribution of live concert recordings in all of these varieties carries with it a host of copyright concerns.
Copyright Issues

Long before the Napster controversy, the RIAA was waging war against the illegal music recording industry. Between January and June of 1996, the RIAA oversaw the seizure of 894,594 units of bootleg CDs; most of these seizures were illicit concert recordings manufactured overseas in “CD plants” (Holland, 1996). The near million CDs seized represent a significant number – 1996 marked the first time CD seizures overtook cassettes (Holland, 1996). One bust in 1997 captured 800,000 bootleg CDs, 80 percent of domestic seizures for entire 1996 (Holland, 1997). As CD-R technology becomes more accessible and affordable, the CD-Rs gained an increasing presence in the illicit recording industry. The year 2000 saw a 79 percent increase in the number of counterfeit and pirate CD-Rs over 1999; 633 CD-R burners were seized, representing the potential to burn 9.5 million CD-Rs in the course of a year, at a cost of $150 million to the recording industry (RIAA, 2001, May 9).

Laws and definitions. The large number of seizures overseen by the RIAA since the mid-1990s reflect, in part, the sheer growth of the illicit music industry, but they also are reflective of the growth of legislation granting greater copyright protection to musicians and record labels and, accordingly, the RIAA. The Audio Home Recording Act of 1992 allows the RIAA to collect royalties on all recording materials for private use, technically requiring that most tape collectors must pay a fee to be legal (Gordon, 2001). In 1995, the RIAA lobbied for, and secured passage of, an anti-bootleg statute (Holland, 1996). According to the RIAA:

The Federal Anti-Bootleg Statute (18 USC 2319A) prohibits the unauthorized recording, manufacture, distribution, or trafficking in sound recordings or videos of artists' live musical performances. Violators can be punished with up to 5 years in prison and $250,000 in fines. (RIAA, “U.S. Copyright Law,” 2001)

The United States’ acceptance of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) increased copyright protection internationally and, according to Steinberg (1997), provided the rationale for America Online’s (AOL) to removal of the web page “Tape Trade’s Central” from its servers in 1996.

The web of laws regarding intellectual property rights and musical copyright leaves a confusing array of distinctions to be made between different illicit activities. These activities can largely be described under the umbrella term “piracy,” which “refers to the illegal duplication and distribution of sound
recordings and takes three specific forms: counterfeit, pirate, and bootleg" (GrayZone, Federal Anti-Piracy and Bootleg FAQ). "Pirate" recordings are reproductions of copyrighted material, "counterfeits" are exact reproductions of the recording along with its packaging, and "bootlegs" are recordings of performances that have not been authorized by artists or copyright holders (Holland, 1996).

In popular discourse, these definitions and distinctions become blurred. Many bands, such as the Grateful Dead, Widespread Panic, or the Dave Matthews Band authorize recording and trading (but never selling, of course) of their shows. Technically, such recordings are not "bootlegs." A cursory glance at the web pages of traders, however, reveals that they are often referred to as such. Steinberg (1997), in an article for Wired, blurs the legal distinction between "counterfeit" and "pirate" recordings by conflating the two, describing: "Counterfeits . . . are whole-hog duplicates of released albums, while pirate recordings are hybrids that combine, say, concert material, B-sides, and studio outtakes with whatever else is lying around" (p. 2).

Gordon (2001) attempts to clear up these blurred distinctions by defining "illegally reproduced recording" into two broad categories: piracy and bootlegging. Piracy, is "the unauthorized duplication of only the sounds of one or more legitimate recordings that are produced by procuring legitimate recordings and duplicating them," while bootlegging is the "unauthorized recording of a musical broadcast on radio or television or of a live concert" (p. 2). The "authorization" of the recording is important: while the RIAA views all bootlegs as illegal, "whether sold, traded, or given away" (Braun, 1999, p. 2), others are careful to draw distinctions between "bootlegging" and "tape trading," pointing out that when bands authorize the recording and trading of their shows, such activities are not legally "bootlegging" (Clancey, 200, July/August; Tanen, 1995). The shifting definitions of "pirate," "bootleg," and "counterfeit" recordings produce a wide-ranging debate about intellectual property protections and copyright law.

Contesting "Copyright"

While the RIAA may seem, because of its vocal presence and activity in seizing illicit sound recording, to be at the forefront of the controversy, other players are, of course, involved as well. Tanen (1995) identifies three sets of stakeholders in the controversy of the trading of live recordings: record labels, driven primarily by sales concerns; musicians, driven largely by questions of self-promotion; and
consumers, interested in accumulating and trading collections of rare recordings of their favorite artists.
This delineation is helpful in tracking the various arguments produced by each group of stakeholders.

The RIAA. As a trade agency representing musicians, record labels, and distributors, the RIAA is largely concerned with issues of profit. To that extent, the RIAA zealously guards the intellectual property of its members, and considers any unauthorized recording, regardless of its use, to be illegal (NBCi, 1999). Such a stance is evident in the RIAA’s introduction of the web page www.soundbyting.com, an RIAA campaign to “raise awareness that reproducing and distributing music illegally is akin to stealing, and such actions have serious ethical and legal consequences” (RIAA, 2001, May 9).
For the RIAA, however, there are varying degrees of severity of copyright infringement, and their attentions are directed accordingly. While most of their efforts are turned to the distribution and sale of bootleg recordings, the RIAA does not ignore trading as a copyright violation. In fact, in 1996, America Online, in response to pressure from the RIAA, shut down on its servers Tape Trader’s Central, a clearinghouse web site where tape traders meet to share information and negotiate trades (Jolson-Colburn, 1996). Certainly, the RIAA keeps an eye on the activities of tape trading networks.
Despite this cautious eye, however, the RIAA is not concerned with such trading, as long as no profit is involved. RIAA Anti-piracy Unit director Steve D’Onofrio argues “one individual trading with one individual is not a problem” but when lists of bootlegs are posted online, there is a “very thin line” between the commercial and non-commercial (in Silberman, 1998, p. 3). D’Onofrio’s assistant director Frank Creighton expands, arguing “clearly some bands authorize the taping and trading of tapes in their fan base, and while we do monitor this, and the Internet sites that facilitate tape trading, as long as there is not profit motive involved, we generally take no action” (in Cawley, 1997, p. 2). With the emphasis on avoiding profit-making, the RIAA views 2:1 “newbie” trades as a form of profit for the more experienced trader and, in 1996, busted a trader who had requested $6 instead of blank media, just to cover the cost of a tape and postage (Silberman, 1998).

Musicians. Considerable ambiguity exists from musicians’ standpoints. While bands such as the Grateful Dead, Widespread Panic, Phish, and the Dave Matthews Band (DMB) have actively encouraged taping and trading of their shows, other artists such as Bob Dylan are infamous in their opposition to the recording of their shows.
Artistic concerns dominate the arguments from musicians against taping and trading bootlegs. Gary Borman, of Borman Entertainment, who manages artists such as Mary Chapin Carpenter, Dwight Yoakam, and the Violent Femmes, for example, states: “No, we don’t support any violation of commerce and we don’t condone or support anything that interferes with our clients’ rights to present their music to their audience in the creatively and technically acceptable manner that they choose” (in Holland, 1996). Borman’s argument echoes the concern of artists such as Ben Harper, who is opposed to the recording and trading of his shows because such activities divest him of the ability to control the quality of the sounds his fans hear (Clancey, 2000, September). Citing similar concerns over quality, and in an effort to curb bootleg trade of their concert, Pearl Jam recently released 72 live albums from their 2000 tour (Catlin, 2001).

Musicians supporting taping and trading of their shows, as previously noted, see marketing value in the underground distribution of their shows. Another sentiment, encapsulated by DMB manager Coran Capshaw, that runs through the arguments of musicians supportive of bootleg trading, is the preservation of musicians’ work: “[DMB] has always encouraged the taping of our performances, but only for personal use … each show is unique and [we] want to offer our fans the opportunity to recreate the live experience through the audio reproduction of our shows” (in Gordon, 2001, p. 3). Capshaw represents the strain of the musical community that views the trading of bootlegging as a positive force.

Bands that support the trading of their concerts, however, typically take dim views of any sale of such bootlegs or any violations of their copyrights. In 1997, the Dave Matthews Band filed suit against a number of northeastern independent record stores selling bootleg recordings – “imports” – of their shows (Catlin, 1997). Metallica has long allowed, and encouraged, fans to tape and trade their shows (in fact, drummer Lars Ulrich and lead singer/guitarist James Hetfield traded bootleg recordings as teenagers), but has been one of the most outspoken critics of Napster for facilitating the trade of copyrighted material (Ybarra, 2001). Artists, while often supportive of grassroots efforts to distribute their music, are conscious and protective of the line between trading recordings and activities that infringe upon their rights.

Other perspectives are far more ambivalent in that while they hardly support recording and trading of shows, they don’t exactly feel threatened by them, either. David Braun, entertainment industry lawyer who has represented clients such as Dylan, Michael Jackson and Neil Diamond, argues that “some artists think it’s kind of a hip honor to be bootlegged. The idea that people are spending hours taping and trading
on the Internet... it's kind of like kids sneaking into a ballpark. That's not high on artists’ radar screens” (in Braun, S., 1999, p. 7)

_Tapers and Traders._ Certainly, there are those out there who view the recording of concerts as an opportunity to profit, as evidenced by the number of illicit CDs and CD-Rs seized by the RIAA each year. But members of the bootleg trading community are quick to point out that it only takes a few people to produce such numbers, instead arguing that “most traders are more interested in the music, not making a quick buck at someone’s expense” (NBCi, 1999, p.1; see also Simpson, 1998). Since they are not out to sell, but rather spread, music, Gordon claims that “bootleggers do not see themselves as infringing upon band earnings. In other words, record companies have no right to claim a loss of earnings on something they never intended to sell” (Gordon, 2001, p. 3). For traders, trading is about the music, not about money.

To that end, bootleg traders have undertaken a number of steps to squelch the unauthorized sale of concert recordings. From organizations such as Tapers Against Bootleg Sales (TABS) to “combat boot” trading trees which try to spread concerts far and wide before illegal bootlegs can hit the market (Tanen, 1995), conscious efforts are made by traders and tapers alike to ensure that their hobby is not harmful to the musicians they collect. Clancey (2000, September) contends that:

> The ethos of the taping community provides a free policing service for the performer. For example, legions of fans on eBay keep an eye out for people selling live concert tapes or bootlegs and alert eBay to the illegal activity. They do this for the performer and for the continuing privilege of taping and trading that performer’s shows. (p. 1)

As will be demonstrated later, such efforts to regulate the behavior of traders and tapers provides part of the basis for constructing online tape trading networks as “communities.”

The conflict between tapers, traders and the music industry will only intensify as live recording aficionados become more connected over the Internet and the technology they use to trade becomes cheaper and more accessible. As a trader and taper who uses the alias Tapewyrm in online chat rooms argues: “In practicality, they can’t stop me. There are 40 more people there every night doing the same thing. You can’t stop a movement” (in Braun, 1999, p. 1-2). Tapewyrm’s confidence in the taping and trading “movement” is most likely bolstered by the way in which traders view themselves as a community.
Research Questions

In order to examine how traders understand their online organization to be a community, I focus my study on two major lines of questioning. The first will be largely descriptive in nature, attempting to characterize the social structure of the networks. The second will be more interpretive in focus, attempting to discern individual traders’ perceptions of the networks as a community, and how those perceptions affect traders’ understandings of the ethical, legal, and political issues surrounding the trading of live concert recordings.

Focusing on the first level of analysis, I propose:

RQ1: What are the structural characteristics of the trading network?

This question attempts to address the social organization of the trading network, and is comprised of three secondary questions:

RQ1a: What are the patterns of communication within the network at these levels: dyadic, node-to-subgroup, and node-to-network?

RQ1b: How do traders perceive the membership composition of the network?

RQ1c: What key network characteristics (i.e. reciprocity, strength of ties, roles, etc.) mark the relationships between traders?

This series of sub-questions will focus my analysis on the characteristics of the network that provide the social structure around which participants can develop a sense of community.

To examine how network members view this structure as a community, I turn to:

RQ2: To what extent can the trading network be characterized as a community?

This question addresses the “flesh” of the community coloring the social structure, and is comprised of two secondary questions as well:

RQ2a: To what extent are values, norms, and typical practices established within the network and how are they communicated and enforced?

RQ2b: How does the term “community” function discursively within the trading network?
By focusing on these secondary questions, I hope to determine how traders view their network as something rather than a simple means for the exchanging of concert recordings, but as a community of traders engaged in a common activity.

**Case Exemplar: Phishhook.com**

The trading community is comprised of a large network of traders spread across the globe. Trading occurs through no fewer than five major web sites and one newsgroup, not to mention traders who practice their hobby independently through their own home pages. The sheer size of the trading network, combined with its relatively diffuse nature, make narrowing the site of research essential.

I have chosen to focus my research on one such site, Phishhook.com. Phishhook, or Phook, as it is often referred to by its members, boasts a membership of over 26,000 traders, and although members estimate that only 2,000 to 3,000 are active at any given time, the sheer size of the site makes it a worthy location of study. Additionally, Phishhook members engage in the same essential practices as members of the trading community at large in terms of finding potential partners, negotiating trades, and monitoring the exchanges. Indeed, membership is not exclusive to Phishhook — Phishhook members make use of other trading community resources, just as non-members also use Phishhook’s resources. In this respect, Phishhook is just one community in the larger community of traders. Finally, Phishhook is particularly suited for investigation because it is undergoing an identity crisis of sorts: a rapid increase in membership has forced members to discuss — explicitly — the nature and future of Phishhook as a community.

In Chapter Three, I will more fully describe Phishhook in the process of outlining my methodology. Before doing so, however, I now turn my attention to a review of the literature that will inform the analysis answering the research questions.

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1 I use the term "structural" here in a loose sense to describe the general features of the network's social structure.
CHAPTER TWO:
LITERATURE REVIEW

Phishhook members, who often refer to themselves as “p-hookers,” frequently argue that, for them, trading live concert recordings is “more than a hobby.” The exchange of CDs is certainly part of the activities occurring at Phishhook, but by no means the extent of members’ interactions. P-hookers consciously identify themselves as members of a community. In order to understand why p-hookers label their online organization a “community,” it is first necessary, from a communication standpoint, to examine how and for what purpose members communicate. Accordingly, the literature review that follows first examines the question of how members communicate by focusing on the Computer-Mediated Communication literature. Next, to explore for what purpose p-hookers communicate, the literature on network exchange theory is examined. Finally, community theories and the subsequent debate over the question of “virtual” communities are addressed, in order to provide a framework from which to approach Phishhook as a community.

Computer-Mediated Communication

Computers mediate the associations which people form online and are intrinsically linked with the formation of virtual communities. As Rheingold (1996) argues: “If Computer-mediated communication (CMC) has a potential, it is in the way people in so many parts of the Net defend the use of the term “community” to describe the relationships we have built online” (p. 415). Riva and Galimberti (1998) argue that “CMC is generating a new, alternative concept of communication as the shared construction of meanings” (p. 2).

Geise (1998) explains the potential for community formation stemming from CMC arguing that unlike other forms of mass communication such as the telegraph, telephone, and television, CMC is “the first technology able to mimic the kinds of communication interactions typically available to members of a traditional geographic community” (p. 3). Postmes, Spears, & Lea (1998) expand on the community-building potential of CMC, arguing that

Because of its power to perform the functions of any other communication medium, and because
of its easy accessibility and low cost, it is acclaimed as giving individuals the autonomy to engage in interaction irrespective of geographical, national, religious, and other restrictions (p. 4).

Once individuals are able to interact in such a free manner, CMC offers the promise of connectivity and the potential to “do by way of electronic pathways what cement roads were unable to do, namely, connect us rather than atomize us, put us at the controls of a “vehicle” and yet not detach us from the rest of the world” (Jones, 1995a, p. 11).

Walther (1992) defines CMC as “synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders’ computers to receivers” (p. 52). Walther (1996) extends this definition to describe the environments created by CMC by outlining its effects on a range from impersonal, interpersonal to hyperpersonal. From this perspective, Walther (1996) draws the following conclusions:

- Mediated interaction is rarely impersonal;
- CMC is interpersonal when users have the time and interest to interact on a relational level, and
- CMC is hyperpersonal when users can manage relationships and impressions in ways more effective than with face-to-face communication or other mediated channels.

Viewing the effects of CMC along these lines affords the researcher a window into the levels at which individuals connect with each other in the form of computer-mediated communities.

Traditionally, research into CMC has focused specifically on the technologies at hand. Recently, however, the qualitative and theoretical turn in CMC research “acknowledges the phenomenal growth of the Internet, and perhaps more important, the sense that the Internet is more a cultural phenomena than a technological one” (Giese, 1998, p. 2). With that in mind, I now turn to relevant research that helps explain how CMC serves to assist in the formulation of virtual communities.

Structure of CMC

Broadly speaking, CMC exists within a temporal structure which is either synchronous or asynchronous (Riva, 1998). Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Guilia, and Haythornwaite (1996) offer the following typology of CMC as it exits in its online manifestations:
- Email – asynchronous mail messages between senders,
- Asynchronous discussion groups – such as message boards, and
- Synchronous “chat” rooms, such as those based on IRC.

E-mails are asynchronous and generally private, being exchanged either between individuals or distributed to subscribers of mailing lists. The time that elapses between message and response mirrors that found in discussion groups such as message boards; the difference lies in access – message boards are typically open for unconnected individuals to just happen by. Synchronous “chats” can occur either between individuals or groups. Hollingshead and McGrath (1995) offer the following expansion of temporal structures in which CMC occurs: one (bounded) meeting, synchronous or asynchronous; a series of meetings, synchronous or asynchronous; or a continual asynchronous meeting – such as the ongoing asynchronous nature inherent to online discussion groups (Tiene, 2000).

Much of the CMC which happens online, especially in trading circles, is asynchronous, whether through e-mail or on message board discussion groups. The effect of this asynchronous communication is outlined by Shank and Cunningham (1996):

from the oral side, it is as if everyone who is interested in talking can all jump in at once, but still their individual voices can clearly be heard. From the written side, it is as if someone had started writing a piece, but, before, he/she gets too far, people are there magically in print to add to, correct, challenge, or extend the piece. Therefore, what we have is a written quasi-discussion (p. 30).

Shank and Cunningham offer a very positive view of the asynchronous nature of CMC: voices are heard in a jumble of communications because they can be parsed from the cacophony and, at the same time, thoughts can be revised nearly mid-stream – ideas can be floated for feedback before they are fully formed.

Riva and Galimberti (1998) take exception with this view, arguing that collaborative commitment of participants in the co-formulation of messages is eliminated in CMC and adding that the feedback that allows the social meaning of messages to be processed immediately is also missing. Chesebro (1999), on the other hand, speculates that limited feedback may assist the processing of meaning in CMC because of its orderly nature, being simple, direct, and devoid of confusing “noise.” If anything, the research about the effects of CMC’s structure reveals contradictory tendencies.
To make sense out of such tendencies it is wise to heed Jones’ (1995a) argument that “reality is not constituted by the networks CMC users use; it is constituted in the networks” (p. 12). With that in mind, I turn now to examine two bodies of literature which shed light on the question of CMC’s ability to assist in community formation: media richness and social presence.

**Media Richness**

Media richness theory is based upon the assumption that people distinguish between different media based upon their intrinsic properties, such as warmth (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Ngwenyama and Lee narrowly define richness as “the ability of information to change understanding within a time interval” (p. 7). Daft and Lengel (1984) offer a broader view of media richness, analyzing media’s information carrying capacity according to the rate of feedback, the propensity to communicate nonverbal cues, the use of natural language rather than mathematical expressions, and the ability to convey emotion. Much early research pointed to CMC as relatively low in richness (Fulk & Collins-Jarvis, 2001).

Recent research, however, indicates that e-mail, for instance, might be much richer than previously anticipated (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000; Straus, 1996, 1997). This may be due to the style employed by interactants in CMC, which Gallagher (1998) found to be “informal, direct, and engaged,” noting “writers employ conventional devices such as run on sentences, ellipses, parenthetical remarks, exclamatives, and first and second person pronouns to approximate conversational style” (p. 11). Such conclusions would follow the premise that people possess more agency than technology does when engaging in CMC, for as Ngwenyama and Lee (1997) contend, “it is through the process of enactment that people, not electronic communication media, bring about the richness that they experience in their communications” (p. 2).

**Social Presence**

Social presence theory, according to Walther (1996) “predicts that the fewer channels or codes available within a medium, the less attention that is paid by the user to the presence of other social participants in an interaction” (p. 7). Essentially, social presence is the combination of factors which creates “a sense that others are psychologically present and that communication exchanges are warm, personal, sensitive and active” (Papacharissi, 2000, p. 3). A social presence approach is particularly
warranted in examining the effects of CMC on community formation, for as Chesebro (1999) argues, in CMC the context and culture of a community are altered because of the lack of knowledge of the others' environments and no shared sense of time or location.

Traditionally, social presence theories have been applied to CMC through a “cues filtered out approach”. Baym (1995) writes:

The computer is assumed to have low social presence and, therefore deprive interactants of salient social cues. Because computer-mediated interactants are unable to see, hear and feel one another, they cannot use the usual contextualization cues conveyed by appearance, nonverbal signals, and features of the physical context (p. 139).

The “cues filtered out approach” contends that CMC is limited in social presence due largely to the lack of both nonverbal and socioeconomic cues about the parties interacting (Flaherty, 1998; Chesebro, 1999). Palmer (1995) contends that

CMC restricts the number of channels, specifically nonverbal, vocal and kinesic ones, and thus limits interpersonal and social information. The increased real-time, interactive capabilities of the medium are not generally considered to be important interpersonally” (p. 287).

From a social presence theory perspective, CMC appears not to possess the appropriate channels for information to create interpersonal relationships necessary for community, or, at the very least, the limited bandwidth of CMC would make forming such relationships difficult.

Other research, however, seems to indicate that CMC users do not passively accept the minimization of traditional social cues and instead invent methods of inserting new cues (Baym, 1995). Walther (1992) observed that CMC participants conveyed social information through language use, e-mail addresses, and signature files attached to the bottom of files sent. Rintel & Pittam (1997) agree, arguing that interactions on IRC strongly resemble face-to-face interactions, especially in the opening and closings of interactions. Pratt et al (1999) found that the lack of social richness in e-mail communication is largely compensated for by greater use of personal questions than in face-to-face interaction. CMC users readily abbreviate their language use in meaningful ways, by taking shorter conversational turns, abbreviated spellings (“goodby” for “goodbye”), and using constructed linguistic forms such as acronyms (“IMHO” for
"in my humble opinion") and emoticons, or graphic expressions of emotions ( :-) to indicate happiness or approval, for example) (Werry, 1995).

For Collot and Belmore (1996), CMC users adapt their language use according to the communication context. They contend that four factors shape the way in which CMC users alter their language use:

1) The degree of common interests and shared knowledge between participants.
2) The purpose of the communication.
3) The "tripartite role" of participants as addressee, addressee, and audience member (in the case of discussion boards or newsgroups, for example).
4) The relation of the "speaker" to the text.

By varying their language use according to these influences, computer-mediated communicators have a wide range of alternatives by which to attempt to compensate for the technical deficiencies of computers as a medium.

Accordingly, "as computer-mediated communication develops over time, communicators adapt their language and textual displays to enhance immediacy and to manage relationships they develop through CMC" (Papacharissi, 2000, p. 3). The adaptability of CMC communicators speaks to the fact that "despite the limited social presence of CMC, people find social support, companionship, and a sense of belonging through the normal course of CSSNs of work and community, even when they are composed of persons they hardly know" (Wellman, 1996, p. 6). CMC is not a medium devoid of social presence; rather, users appear to strive to create such presence in new forms.

Part of the reason that early CMC research may have viewed the medium as especially limiting in terms of identity formation and social bonds, media richness, and social presence is due to the experimental nature of such research; Walther (1996) argues that relationships over CMC take much longer to develop than in face-to-face contexts, skewing the observations of researchers negatively. In fact, Walther (1995) argues that there is little difference between CMC and face-to-face communication, that they are essentially just different modes of the same interaction. While Sawhney (1996) contends, rightly, that such a view unnecessarily privileges the transmission over the ritual view of communication (Carey, 1989), but
Walther’s arguments illustrate the importance of not dismissing the potential of CMC to develop meaningful relationships.

To offer a richer perspective on CMC, Baym (1995) proposes a structure of five factors influencing CMC, affording a more open perspective on its effects:

- External contexts
- Temporal structure
- System infrastructure
- Group purposes
- Participant characteristics (p. 149)

Analyzing CMC in virtual community contexts along these lines may allow for a richer perspective to develop.

Such analysis is important to evaluate the powerful potential of CMC and online associations between individuals with similar interests. Postmes et al (1998) argue for the democratizing potential of CMC in its ability to transcend traditional power and status relations. Flaherty contends that, due to both its interactive dimensions and wide access to information, “the Internet can function as a unique medium to satisfy both interpersonal and mediated communication needs” (Flaherty, 1998, p. 3). Finally, Giese (1998) sees great potential for community development, contending that “CMC technology provides the wide distribution of mass media with the tight feedback loop and egalitarian potential of one-to-one communication” (p. 3). Investigation into the ways in which CMC assists the formation of online associations whose participants define themselves as “communities” will prove helpful in assessing the positive potential of CMC.

Communication Networks

Viewing the bootleg trading communities from a network analysis perspective will enhance our understanding of how they function. Their nature as virtual communities places them inherently in network structures: they exist on top of a vast physical network of computers and as a network of individuals in their own rights. Riva and Galimberti (1998) stress the increasing importance of networks, claiming:
Networking now enables us to access any sort of information without having to move. By becoming nodes in a network, individuals can analyze the information they have access to with ever-greater thoroughness and freedom of manipulation, and because networking can take them anywhere they want, it opens the way to global interaction. (p. 4)

Fulk (1993) concurs, contending “communication technologies in particular link disparate entities in a seamless web that engages joint sense-making in the process of mediated interaction” (p. 922).

Network exchange theories are those which “seek to explain human action by a calculus of exchange of material or informational resources” (Monge and Contractor, 2001, p. 458). Cook and Whitmeyer (1992) state that “exchange theorists advance a basic image of social structure as a configuration of social relations among actors (both individual and corporate), where relations involve the exchange of valued items (which can be material, informational, symbolic, etc)” (p. 110). As trading communities are based upon the exchange of items (recordings) that possess material and symbolic value because of their rarity, a network exchange approach seems to be particularly applicable. To view these networks as systems of exchange, three aspects of the networks need to be considered: the structure of the exchange system, the actual objects being exchanged, and the participants involved in exchanging.

Where Does Exchange Occur? Restricted Versus Generalized Exchange Systems

Exchanges can be viewed on either dyadic or social levels. Much of the initial work in network exchange theory focused on the dyadic level of interaction, later turning to a broader analysis viewing such dyads as embedded within larger networks (Yamagishi and Cook, 1993). Ekeh (1974) emphasized instead a viewpoint which puts the broad social network at the foreground of analysis; for Ekeh, there are two types of social exchange systems: restricted and generalized. A restricted social exchange system is one in which parties exchange resources directly, contingent upon what they receive from one another. In a generalized exchange system, what one party gives to another does not depend on what they receive in return. Both types of exchange system can be found in the tape trading networks: restricted exchanges when participants exchange recordings of concerts that they have negotiated, generalized exchanges occur when veteran traders offer “gifts” to “newbies” to help them start their collections.
Ekeh (1974) identifies two variants of the generalized exchange structure. In group generalized exchange structures, participants pool their resources together to maximize the benefit of all. In network generalized structures, however, an actor provides a good or service to one network member, and expects to ultimately receive a good or service in return from some unidentified other. In either case, generalized exchanged structures are based on the premise that the contributions of many are in the best interests of all (Yamagishi & Cook, 1993). The problem with this premise, however, is that some members will take advantage of the contributions of others without contributing themselves, posing a social dilemma.

Social Dilemmas. According to Yamagishi & Cook (1993), the theory of social dilemmas is based upon the idea that, in an exchange system, the cooperation of every participant is in the best interests of all, but that the best interest of each individual is not to cooperate and instead rely on the contributions of others. This phenomenon is known as “free riding.” Yamagishi and Cook contend that this problem is inherent in generalized exchange networks, but other theorists have contended that social dilemmas are apparent in all forms of exchange, due to the temptation to receive a good or service without reciprocation (Hardin, 1988, Mueller, 1979). In order to avoid, or at least mitigate, the social dilemma’s problem of “free riders,” exchange systems must develop accounting systems to ensure their success.

Exchange Accounting Systems. Kollock (1993) identifies two basic structures of accounting systems available to exchange networks for keeping tabs on the contributions of members: restrictive and relaxed accounting systems. Restrictive accounting systems allow no “credit” – goods and services are immediately and directly exchanged. Theoretically, under a restrictive accounting system, the principle of reciprocity would pay off (Axlerod, 1984); participants would see other participants cooperating and respond in kind. However, according to Kollock (1993), such systems cannot account for any institutional “noise,” which could come in the form of temporary financial difficulties, physical unavailability, or, in the case of tape trading networks, computer malfunctions. Accordingly, exchange networks have available relaxed accounting systems, which are characterized by the allowance of credit, not keeping exact tabs, and trading in a wide variety goods which are not necessarily alike. (Kollock, 1993). The variety of goods traded is essential, in that it allows flexibility in making good debts, as well as creates a variety of bonds between network members, contributing to the stability of the exchange system (Coleman, 1988).
The development of such an accounting system is essential to the success of a social exchange network (Blau, 1989). Trust is necessary, especially in generalized exchange systems, because of a relative lack of individual efficacy. Yamagishi & Cook (1993) argue "in the network-generalized structure, each participant depends totally on the one actor to whom he or she is linked for receiving any benefit" (p. 240). Individuals need to be able to believe that others will uphold their end of the bargain in order for the exchange system to flourish.

To ensure that trust is maximized, relaxed accounting systems rely on a two-pronged incentive structure: performance and sanction (La Valle, 1994). Trust is maximized first by actors viewing – and modeling – the actions of other actors. La Valle (1994) contends "in the social system, an actor's behavior has value (also) as a form of knowledge, because it communicates acceptance of a particular pattern" (p. 4). Here, La Valle echoes Axelrod's (1984) conclusion that reciprocity in network, once it reaches a critical mass where enough actors recognize others cooperating, begins a self-reinforcing chain reaction which institutes reciprocity as a norm.

By paying attention to the way in which members behave according to established norms, other networks members are able to evaluate them according to their performance. Goffman (1971) argues that individual performances in particular situations are read by others as evidence of their performance in general:

Any deviation, then, on any one occasion when the rule is supposed to apply can give the impression that the actor may be delinquent with respect to the whole class of events.

And any compliance can carry assurance regarding the actor's handling of all other events that come under the rule (p. 97).

By watching the performances of others, network members are able to anticipate how they might interact and, accordingly, potentially avoid conflicts.

The second incentive for cooperation lies in the use of sanctions. Drawing on the work of Parsons, La Valle (1994) contends there are two basic types of sanction: intrinsic and social. Intrinsic sanctions are direct, and related to the exchange – often they are as simple as a refusal by one actor to trade again with another who has violated trust. Social sanctions, on the other hand, are subtler. This is because, according to La Valle (1994), the rewards of exchanges are not merely material. Instead, exchanges also
carry with them social approval and esteem. Lavalle (1994) describes the process by which positive reinforcement leads to the ultimate stability of an exchange system:

> It is only when … expressive behavior finds confirmation (a positive sanction) in the reaction of the alter that the pattern can be said to be institutionalized. Institutionalization sustains internalization and pushes the system toward an equilibrium condition (in which social interaction automatically distributes positive sanctions which reinforce the internalization of shared patterns).

(p. 7).

The use of sanctions, both positive and negative, encourage cooperative exchange behaviors that lead, ultimately, to the benefit of all network members.

These sanctions can be carried out at three different levels. Ellickson (1991) outlines the three types of parties that control rules and sanctions. First party controls are when an actor sets his or her own standards and regulates his or her own behavior. Second party controls are established in contracts between parties, where the acted upon enforces the promises made in a contract. Third party controls are divided among social forces (or operating norms), organizations applying particular rules, and governments, regulating through the use of law. Of these, first party, second party, and third party – social forces comprise a social system’s informal system of social control, “the system of control that arises out of the operation of decentralized social forces” (p. 131). Through such systems of control, social systems are able to create and enforce a system of norms establishing behaviors which members can expect from one another.

*Gift and Commodity Exchanges*

After noting the system through which exchanges are enacted, it is important to analyze, specifically, the contents of the exchange. Anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1969) makes the useful distinction between two objects of exchange: gift and commodity. From this perspective, gift exchanges are those which are social and enduring, commodities are material and transitory (Carrier, 1991). Bell (1991) argues that in a gift exchange, something fundamental from the giver remains in the gift; it cannot be alienated from the giver. Commodities, on the other hand, are exchanged for commodities, without implied obligations or enduring relationships (Gregory, 1982).
For Mauss, these two types of exchanges were fundamentally separate forms of social relations. Carrier adopts a somewhat softer (and therefore theoretically more useful) stance, viewing them as simply different relations within the same social system, or even as different aspects of the same exchange. Carrier (1991) contends that "objects exist in two distinct spheres that may overlap in particular cases" (p. 132). In tape trading exchanges, for example, objects are often simultaneously gifts and commodities: when a trading veteran offers a "newbie" to trade for blanks-and-postage, he or she is engaging in the trade of commodity (both are exchanging compact discs) and a gift (the veteran's favor of exchanging a recording for a blank disk is an exchange of clearly unequal value).

Due to the potentially blurred distinctions between gifts and commodities, objects of exchange can be viewed on a continuum ranging from "gift-like" objects to "commodity-like" objects (Dore, 1983; Granovetter, 1985). By viewing exchange objects on such a continuum, their relationship to the social relations between members, and the exchange network as a whole, can be more clearly examined.

Viewing tape trading networks through network exchange theory offers the analytical tools necessary to examine the processes by which network members practice their hobby, and also affords insight into some of the deeper, social meanings which are created during such interactions. These meanings form the basis of the "community" which such traders occupy, or at least feel they occupy. Having seen both the media and the structures by which tape traders operate, we now turn our attention to a discussion of how these manifest themselves in online communities.

Communities, "Virtual" and "Real"

Type the words "bootleg trading community" into the Yahoo! search engine, and you'll receive over 1000 "hits" leading you to pages where tape traders identify themselves as members of a broader community. The number of successful returns to the search query not only evidences the popularity of swapping bootlegs via the Internet, it points to a critical way in which traders define themselves: as a community. As such, bootleg traders are part of a much broader trend: in countless corners of cyberspace, collections of individuals are increasingly defining themselves as "communities," sparking debate not only over the value of such association, but over whether they ought even be described as "communities" in the first place. To examine this debate, and provide an analytical framework from which to view the tape...
trading networks as a community, I first look at traditional and contemporary perspectives on "real" communities, and then focus on the body of literature discussing "virtual" communities.

Perspectives on "Real" Community

Definitions of Community

Community, by its nature, seems to be an inherent form of organizing for humans, the social animal (Cooley, 1929). At face value, community appears a simple subject: you know it when you see it; or, as Watson (1997) might put it, you know community when you feel it. When scholars attempt to define community, however, such simplicity disappears; what materializes in its stead is a wide range of definitions, from functional, limited perspectives to broad, cultural views. The difficulty of defining "community" is clearly evident from Hillery's (1955) oft-cited study listed 94 separate definitions for the term. This wide array of meanings for community can be categorized along a continuum from more to less restrictive.

At the most restrictive level, "community" is defined in strict, specific terms. These terms can either focus on the geographic or the social qualities of communities. Park (1936), for example, takes a narrowly-constructed vision of communities as geographic, defining:

The essential characteristics of a community, so conceived, are those of: (1) a population territorially organized, (2) more or less completely rooted in the soil it occupies, (3) its individual units living in a relationship of mutual interdependence ... (p. 3).

Park's view grounds the concept of "community" firmly in the ground. Taking a restrictive, social view of "community," Freie (1998) defines community as

an interlocking pattern of just human relationships in which people have at least a minimal sense of consensus within a definable territory. People within a community actively participate and cooperate with others to create their own self-worth, a sense of caring about others, and a feeling for the spirit of connectedness (p. 23).

Freie draws tight boundaries around what can and cannot be called "community." For Freie, those boundaries are drawn strictly along lines of social values; for Park the lines are strict geographic boundaries. Both definitions are illustrative of the restrictive tendencies of some definitions of community.
Moving along the continuum, a set of definitions emerges that are somewhat more permissive about what can and cannot be rightly viewed as “community.” These definitions still set certain restrictions on what a community must be, but are much more open as to what those categories are. The less restrictive definitions are drawn along functional, social, and psychological lines. Warren (1972) offers a clear picture of community defined from a less restrictive, functional sense. For Warren, a community is “that combination of social units and systems which perform the major social functions having locality reference” (p. 9). The functions Warren outlines are: (1) production, distribution and consumption, (2) socialization, (3) social control, (4) social participation, and (5) mutual support. Whereas Warren focuses on the functional nature of community, Bellah et al (1985) argue “a community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision making, and who share certain practices (which see) that both define the community and are nurtured by it” (p. 333). Sennett (1970) takes a psychological perspective on community, contending that the idea of community is not interchangeable with the idea of a social group; a community is a particular kind of social group in which men believe they share something together. The feeling of community is fraternal, it involves something more than the recognition that men need each other materially. The bond of community is one of sensing common identity, a pleasure in recognizing “us” and “who we are” (p. 31).

Each of these definitions, in their own way, expands the meaning of community to allow for a greater variety of social associations, but each definition still places clear limits, whether functional, social, or psychological, on what forms of associations lie beyond the scope of “community.”

At the furthest end of the spectrum are very permissive definitions of community, such as that implied in popular books such as Shaffer and Anundsen’s (1993) book Creating Community Anywhere: Finding Support and Connection in a Fragmented World. This sense of community is especially prevalent in popular literature on community, particularly in the realm of business interests in the notion of “virtual community” (see Young and Levine, 2001; Bressler & Graham, 2000, Preece, 2001). This usage of the word “community” as something that can actively and consciously be “built” implies that “community” is transitory, flexible, and transparent – and open to any number of consciously created variations.

While the precise nature of community may remain contested terrain, the definition of community
believes important political and cultural assumptions about social organization (Watson, 1997). Consider, for example, the Communitarian movement, spearheaded by sociologist Amitai Etzioni, which argues that "now is the time to push back the pendulum. The times call for an age of reconstruction, in which we put a new emphasis on "we," on values we share, on the spirit of community" (Etzioni, 1993, p. 25). The assumptions we make when we discuss community have deep ramifications for the way we view society.

In addition to recognizing the importance of defining community to tease out cultural and political assumptions, Calhoun (1980) argues that confusion over the definition of community leads to simplistic analysis of community forms, whereby theorists take a social association and attempt to either romanticize it as a community, or debunk it as a fraud. In order to conceptualize community for the purposes of this study, I borrow a definition of community from Brint (2001) who views communities "as aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern" (p. 8). Brint's definition is clearly moderate – while it is certainly permissive, its focus on the qualities of social relations between members serves to exclude hastily and consciously constructed versions of "community" which attempt to force close relationships, or mask ties that are not strong. Additionally, Brint's definition lends itself to an analysis of community that is not based upon an "either/or" distinction, either romanticizing or debunking an association of individuals, but instead focuses on the variables which characterize the organization (Wellman, 1997). With that definition in mind, I now turn my attention to some traditional perspectives on community.

**Traditional Community Perspectives: Tönnies and Durkheim**

**Tönnies.** While "community" as a concept was discussed as far back as the ancient Greeks, and probably before them, Ferdinand Tönnies is generally credited with introducing the subject to modern audiences with his 1887 book *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (generally translated as *Community and Society*). Tönnies described the societal transformation from *gemeinschaft*, or traditional, communal relations, to *gesellschaft*, or modern, societal relations. Tönnies viewed this progression as largely linear, and lamented the transition to the impersonal *gesellschaft*, romanticizing the warm and communal relations of the lost *gemeinschaft* (Poblocki, 2001). According to Lyon (1987), Tönnies understood that no society
was the perfect embodiment of either; rather, he posited *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft* as two ends of a continuum by which to characterize the progress of a society. His work, while influential, is confounded by a large theoretical problem.

Extending Calhoun’s (1980) analysis, Brint (2001) points out that Tönnies’ continuum leads essentially to the simplistic “romanticize/debunk” dualism, rather than detailed descriptions of the characteristics of a community. This dualistic nature of either a glorified or reviled form of community leads, according to Sennett (1970), to the “myth of purified community.” The idealized form of community typified in *gemeinschaft* never truly existed, but its romanticization is used as a justification for high social cohesion, exclusion, and control within communities.

**Durkheim.** Emile Durkheim offered a vision of community that, on the surface, appears to be similar to that of Tönnies. In *The Division of Labor in Society*, Durkheim (1964) characterizes two forms of social organization: mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity is a traditional, older form of organization, based on similarities between community members; in this respect, mechanical solidarity resembles Tönnies’ *gemeinschaft*. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, is a strong cognate for *gesellschaft*, being based upon social differentiation. Like Tönnies, Durkheim viewed society as progressing from traditional, mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity. Durkheim (1951) also recognized that as society moved to organic solidarity, forms of mechanical solidarity remained on local levels: people feel the need to associate with like people. The similarities between Durkheim’s and Tönnies’ analyses are of a general nature, however. Durkheim’s theory marks somewhat of a departure from Tönnies’ continuum by introducing of variables.

According to Brint (2001), Durkheim viewed community not as a set social structure, but as a set of variables that could be used to describe forms of human interaction. There are six variables: (1) dense and demanding social ties, (2) social attachment to and involvement in institutions, (3) ritual occasions, and (4) small group size. These four variables are structural; the remaining two are cultural: (5) perceptions of similarity, and (6) common belief in an idea system, a moral order, an institution, or a group. Durkheim’s innovation was to view community as such a set of variables, offering the advantage of characterizing different forms of communities rather than trying to determine if they map on to ideal types (Wellman, 1997).
Contemporary Views of Community

Tönnies' and Durkheim's conceptions of communities were largely based in geographic terms. The prevalence of geographic descriptions still continues, as evidenced in Freie's (1998) definition of community. Gradually, forms of community were allowed that were not strictly geographically based. Warren (1972) stressed that community is not geographic alone – it is also psychological. Chaskin (1997) describes three commonly accepted non-geographic forms of community: communities of limited liability, communities as social systems, and communities without propinquity. The common understanding of community is clearly expanding beyond the confines of physical space.

Three different contemporary typologies of communities prove instructive in outlining the range of accepted communities, those of Warren (1972), Kirkpatrick (1986), and Brint (2001). Warren (1972) outlines six different ways in which community can be viewed: as space, or in traditional, geographic senses; as people, or from a demographic point of view; as shared institutions and values; as interaction; as a distribution of power; and as a social system. Kirkpatrick (1986) outlines three models of community which may overlap to some extent, but nevertheless provide useful lenses through which to view community forms: atomistic/contractarian communities, resembling Tönnies' *gesellschaft* and comprised of people as independent parts; organic/functional communities, resembling *gemeinschaft*, composed of people as interdependent parts; and mutual/personal communities, largely religious in nature, which view members as distinct people who find mutual fulfillment in their association. Finally, Brint (2001) offers perhaps the most useful typology of communities to date, describing five types of community: (1) collective/commune communities, such as those described by Moss Kanter (1972); (2) communities of place, such as those defined by Park (1936); (3) imagined communities, as imagined by Anderson (1991); (4) elective communities (see Adams, 1998); and, finally, virtual communities, such as those heralded by Rheingold (1993).

Structure and Community

Tönnies' and Durkheim's descriptions of community highlight tensions between communal and structural bonds that are reflected, in different ways, in the works of anthropologists Victor Turner and
Mary Douglas. Douglas (1970) characterizes this tension by contrasting what she terms “group” and “grid”: “Group is obvious – the experience of a bounded social unit. Grid refers to rules which relate one person to others on an ego-centered basis.” Group and grid are not mutually exclusive, rather Douglas views them as axis by which a society can be examined.

Rather than describing the tension between structural and communal bonds, Turner (1967) describes them as poles on a continuum that can describe any given society: structure and communitas, or a “generalized social bond” (p. 96). Turner does not view these as mutually exclusive concepts, either; instead, he places them in dialectical conversation, contending that, for individuals and groups, social life is a type of dialectical process that involves successive experience of high and low, communitas and structure, homogeneity and differentiation, equality and inequality. In such a process, the opposites, as it were, constitute one another and are mutually indispensable (p. 97).

Accordingly, the tensions isolated by Douglas and Turner are useful ways of viewing the tensions that exist within – and consequently characterize – any social structure with claims to “community.” The structure of a group and the bonds between its members serve to define the way that they interact and identify with one another.

Community as a Field of Interaction

With an eye towards the way in which these tensions structure the interactions between community members, I borrow from Wilkinson’s (1991) theoretical lens of community as a field of interaction. Wilkinson defines a community field as “a process of interrelated action through which residents express their common interest in the local society” (p. 2). The focus on interaction is essential, for Wilkinson, since “interaction is . . . a core property of the community, one without which community, as defined from virtually any sociological perspective, could not exist” (p. 2). Wilkinson, however, views a community as explicitly tied with locality.

For Wilkinson, locality essentially means physical territory. There are several problems with this geographic bias. First, geography is eroding as a definitive identifier of community (Wellman, 1997). Secondly, Wilkinson makes his argument in 1991, when the question of online communities was only
beginning to be answered – his argument for territoriality is based on less interactive forms of electronic communication. Finally, Wilkinson provides no warrant for why “territory” must necessarily equate with “geography.” At one point, Wilkinson argues “rather than rejecting the territorial element, the interactional conception of the community supports the view that contacts among people define the local territory” (p. 24). In much the same way, it seems entirely possible for members of a community online to define an online territory through their interaction with one another.

The extent to which members of an online social collective are able to do so will be explored throughout the course of this study. In order to do so, and determine why individuals in these collectives choose to label themselves communities, I will treat “community” as a field of interaction defined, again borrowing from Brint (2001) by “relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern” (p. 8). “Community,” then, is as much a quality (or set of qualities) governing the interaction between members of an online social collective as it is the tangible group of members interacting.

The State of the Community

Wellman (1998) outlines three arguments which are advanced about the contemporary state of “community”: community lost, community saved, and community liberated. Advocates of the community lost and community saved positions both base their arguments on traditional assumptions of geographic communities: “Lost” advocates contend that traditional community involvement has eroded (i.e. bowling league rosters are dwindling; see Putnam, 1995), while “saved” advocates contend that new community forms have taken their place (i.e. soccer leagues are on the rise; see Putnam, 2000). “Liberated” advocates, on the third hand, contend that communities have been emancipated from their traditional geographic boundaries (Chaskin, 1997); while local considerations remain strong, increasingly geographic proximity does not necessarily define communal interactions (Wellman, 1996). Those who advocate the “liberated” position echo the conclusion of Wellman and Berkowitz (1988) that communities have not disappeared, but have been transformed. One of the transformations in traditional communities is the advent of “virtual” communities, to which I now turn my attention.
Virtual "Communities"

As computers gained increasing prominence throughout the 1980s, many saw in them the potential to create new forms of community. Paul Virilio's (1991) book *The Lost Dimension* posited that computer-mediated communities would arise to "replace" geographical cities as centers of human activity. Similarly, Williams, Stover and Grant (1994) contend that computers create "non-geographically based communities." By allowing communication that is not only not face-to-face, but can occur over vast geographic distances, computers allow forms of association radically different than communities of the past.

Defining these new associations in the limited, functional sense, Femback and Thompson (1995) define virtual communities as "social relations forged in cyberspace through repeated contact within a specified boundary or place (e.g., a conference or chat line) that is symbolically delineated by topic of interest" (p. 7). Like Baker and Ward's (1994) view of "real" community, Femback and Thompson focus on the functional associations of "interest."

Rheingold (1993) expands this sense of community, bringing into the discussion the formation of relationships online as well, rather than just the sharing of interests. For Rheingold, virtual communities are "social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on these public discussions long enough, with sufficient feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (p. 5). Virtual communities in this sense are much richer; others take this sense of community even further, arguing that the Internet is "a place where people develop and cultivate friendships, associations, and small groups which come to supplant the lack of communities in the real world" (Maignan and Lukas, 1997, p. 346; see also Laquey, 1994).

A review of the academic and popular literatures of "virtual communities" demonstrates the vast variety of association formed by Internet users. Several reviews demonstrate the breadth of "virtual communities," ranging over communities dedicated to everything from sports teams to alternative sexualities (Vickers, 1997; Kling, 1996; Shulgan, 2001; Evans and Carpenter, 1996). Communities are organized around:

- political participation, often heralded as potential saviors of democracy (O'Sullivan, 1995; Schuler, 1994; Tanner, 2001; Benson, 1996; Meeks, 1997);
commercial enterprises (Rothaermerl & Sugiyama, 2001; Guthrie, 2000; Telleen, 1998);

- age, ethnicity, and religion (McKay, 2000; Furlong, 1999; Regan, 2001);

- geographic communities from neighborhoods (Roig-Franzia, 2001; Harris, 2001) to state and national affiliations (Stonehouse, 2001; Perera, 2000);

- education (Haythornwaite et al, 2000);

- medical care (Fox and Robers, 1999; Anders, 2001);

- duck hunting (Kuriloff, 2000);

- fan groups for television shows (Baym, 1995; Bird, 1999) and music groups (Kirby, 2000; Watson, 1997);

And, most relevant to bootleg trading communities, virtual communities are also organized around other forms of trading music (Poblocki, 2001; Cooper & Harrison, 2001). The ability of the Internet to bring people together according to common interests creates an almost unlimited number of interests around which people can congregate to create virtual communities.

Those who see virtual communities as “communities” see such associations as positive, liberating forces. Others, as we shall see, are hardly sold on the concept of virtual associations as deserving the title “community.” Crang (2000), for example, asks if “communities are the best metaphor for such groupings as alt.rec.music.indigo-girls?” (p. 7). I will return to such questions below; certainly, questions over whether online associations qualify as community will inform large portions of this study. For the time being, however, following from Chesebro’s (1999, p. 4) observation that “virtual reality constitutes a new social reality,” I wish to bracket those questions in favor of an examination of “virtual communities” to explore first what gives rise to such associations and then consider how such associations function.

**Why Online Communities Develop**

In some respects, the question of the appropriateness of the community metaphor may be irrelevant: such associations exist, in large numbers, and they define themselves as “communities” whether such definitions are appropriate or not. Rheingold (1996) argues:

Virtual communities might be real communities, they might be pseudo-communities, or they might be something entirely new in the realm of social contracts, but I believe they are in part a
response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world. (p. 418)

Rheingold’s observation is important because it attempts to recognize the impetus behind the formation of online associations. Jones (1995a) concurs with Rheingold, contending that “in a modern world, there is a need for control related to structure and homogenization, to the reversal of entropy. Such reversal comes to us in the guise of connections and associations that overcome geography and physical space” (Jones, 1995a). Wellman et al (1996) expand on this theme, contending that individuals seek community online for information, friendship, and support that they may not find in their traditional communities.

Virtual associations that define themselves as “community” are emerging at a time when “community” in the “real” world is a notion which seems to be in some jeopardy. Although his conclusions are the subject of a rich debate, the firestorm engendered by Putnam’s (1995) essay “Bowling Alone” speaks to a time of heightened concern about the loss of traditional community due to a decline in “social capital,” the social resources available to maintain community. Traditional “communities” are struggling at a time when computer technologies are rapidly offering alternatives ways for individuals to connect with each other (and, as we will see below, some argue that “real” communities are declining because of such abilities). Against this backdrop, Jones argues that

There is a sense that we are embarking on an adventure of creating new communities and new forms of community, and that sense is fueled by two motives: first, that we need new communities and, second, that we can create them technologically. (Jones, 1995a, p. 14)

Whether directly related or not, the search for new forms of community and the newfound technological ability to seemingly create them are driving individuals to form the virtual associations they view as communities. As Rheingold (1996) puts it, “virtual communities emerged from a surprising intersection of humanity and technology” (p. 413).

The Debate over Online Communities

Having bracketed the question of the existence of communities to analyze how collections of individuals online function, whether they are “communities” in the rich sense of the word or merely exist as
associations of individuals who share interests, we can now return to the larger debate over whether, as
Crang (2000) wonders, "community" is the appropriate metaphor.

Can "Virtual Communities" be "Real Communities"?

Clearly, associations of individuals in online, "virtual" reality are markedly different that those
which occur in the "real" world. The nature of these differences lies at the heart of the question over
whether such associations can properly be termed "communities." Two schools of thought compete over
the answer to the question: one holds that fundamentally, virtual associations are so different from
communities that they cannot be described as such; the other school holds that, while "virtual" and "real"
communities are decidedly distinct, "community" is still an apt metaphor for online associations.

"Virtual Communities": A Contradiction in Terms. The starting point for online associations is
shared interest, as opposed to geographic association. Snyder (1996) uses this starting point to base his
critique of virtual associations as "communities," arguing that

a community is more than a bunch of people distributed in all 24 time zones, sitting in their dens
and pounding away on keyboards . . . That's not a community . . . Newsgroups, mailing lists,
chat rooms - call them what you will - the Internet's virtual communities are not communities in
almost any sense of the word. A community is people who have greater things in common than a
fascination with a narrowly defined topic" (p. 92).

Postman (1993) argues that online associations cannot be communities because, in his view, they do not
create a sense of mutual obligation - associations on the basis of interest, in Postman's view, provide no
basis for the sacrifice necessary to instill a sense of mutual obligation. Crang (2000) posits two factors that
constrain the formation of community in the virtual arena: the fluidity of identity and electivity, or lack of
ability to sanction membership.

These factors lead virtual community's skeptics to conclude that the hopes for virtual communities
are either naïve or delusionary. Doheny-Farina (1996), for example, takes the mild approach that:

A community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental
necessities. It is not something you can easily join, you can't subscribe to a community as you can
to a discussion group on the net. It must be lived ... The hope that the incredible powers of global
computer networks can create new virtual communities, more useful and healthier than the old geographic ones, is thus misplaced. (p. 37)

Wilbur (1997) echoes Doheny-Farina’s concerns in much stronger language: “Virtual community is the illusion of a community where there are no real people and no real communication. It is a term used by idealistic technophiles who fail to understand that authentic community cannot be engendered through technological means” (p. 14).

**Virtual Communities as Communities.** Those who advocate the virtual realm as a space where communities can exist tend to portray the existence of such communities by fiat. Bruckman (1996) contends that “the Net is made up of hundreds of thousands of separate communities, each with its own special character” (p. 2). Stressing interests over geography, Crang (2000) argues that “cyberspace . . . allows knowable, mutually supportive communities to bypass the spatially divisive city” (p. 6). Likewise, Baker and Ward (2000) contend that “we can now seek out people based upon shared affinities, shared interests rather than be bounded by physical geography” (p. 3). Galston (2000) responds to Postman’s (1993) concerns over mutual obligation by arguing that since mutual obligation is diminishing rapidly in offline communities, it is an unfair standard to hold up to online communities.

Those who view online associations as productive spaces for community interest stress the strength of associations according to interests rather than geography and that such shared interests allow relationships to grow. Wellman et al (1996) contend:

> **This allows relationships to develop on the basis of shared interests rather than to be stunted at the onset by differences in social status . . . When their shared interests are important to them, those involved in the same virtual community may have more in common than those who live in the same building or block. Indeed, people have strong commitments to their on-line groups when they perceive them to be long-lasting.** (p. 9)

From this perspective, the Internet does possess the potential to connect people in meaningful ways deserving of the metaphor “community” to describe the way in which similarly-interested people choose to associate.

While debate continues over virtual communities about their existence and relative sense of worth, individuals continue to associate on line in ever increasing numbers. McKenna and Bargh contend that
regardless of whether or not virtual associations merit the term "community," "the psychological effects of virtual group participation are nonetheless real. In all likelihood, they will be an increasingly common feature of life in the age of the Internet" (in Bower 1998, p. 1). Rather than debating whether "community" is the appropriate metaphor with which to describe online associations, we would be well served to follow Watson's (1997) lead and begin to ask questions such as why are online associations experienced as communities and what kinds of communities exist online. It is with this perspective in mind that I now turn to the research project at hand.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Theoretical Framework

It has often been observed that a large portion of online community research to date — such as Rheingold’s (1993) seminal work — has been of a genre more reminiscent of “traveller’s tales” than scholarly investigations (Smith & Kollock, 1999). Most studies pick a rather specific community, analyze its inner workings, and present the findings in a usually simplistic “good”/“bad” dichotomy, falling into the romanticize/debunk trap (Wellman and Giulia, 1999). It is clear that the trading network is viewed by many of its members as a community. To ask whether or not this perception is correct, whether or not this social organization meets the criteria for a “real” community misses the point (Watson, 1997). Instead, what is important, from an interpretive standpoint, is to understand why participants experience these networks as a community, and what it is about the networks that facilitates the “community feeling.”

To make my analysis, I adopt a general social network approach in attempt to characterize the social organization of tape traders. Doing so, I take up Wellman’s (1997) call to focus on the social context in which online associations operate:

It is clear [from the literature] that computer networks support sparse, unbounded networks as well — or sometimes better — than dense, bounded groups. Yet the early state of systematic research into computer-supported social networks has raised more questions than even first-approximation answers. There are too many arguments by assertion and anecdote in this literature, and too much research that ignores the social context in which online communication takes place (p. 198).

By focusing on the context of interaction, I hope to be able to understand what characteristics of this social network create a sense of community.

Phishhook.com

Phishhook.com is a “clearinghouse”-type website with the self-proclaimed purpose of being “designed to provide resources to facilitate live music trading on the Internet. The primary feature is a
Web-based recording list editor." (www.phishhook.com, last viewed 4/23/02). As previously mentioned, the site boasts a membership somewhere between 25,000 to 30,000 members, although at any given time only several thousand of those members are “active.”

Structurally, Phishhook is divided between two separate areas: a collection of trader’s lists and a series of discussion boards open to the public. The collection of lists consists of two areas: (1) a private list editor where users can enter their bootleg collection into the central database on the Phishhook server and (2) an alphabetical list of all traders’ lists, which can be “surf ed” (and searched) by any members looking to set up a trade. There are eleven different discussion boards, divided roughly into three categories: (1) boards devoted to setting up trades, (2) boards devoted to discussing trading-related topics, and (3) boards devoted to general, wide-ranging discussions.

Research Questions

The questions guiding my research have been discussed previously and more fully at the conclusion of Chapter One. I reproduce them below, however, to inform the following discussion of my methodology.

RQ1: What are the structural characteristics of the trading network?

RQ1a: What are the patterns of communication within the network at the dyadic, node-to-subgroup and node-to-network levels?

RQ1b: How do traders perceive the membership composition of the network?

RQ1c: What key network characteristics (i.e. reciprocity, strength of ties, roles, etc.) mark the relationships between traders?

This first set of questions serves, again, a primarily descriptive function, attempting to tease out the social structure of the trading network at Phishhook.

The set of questions under Research Question #2 are more interpretive in focus. Thus, I ask:

RQ2: To what extent can the trading network be characterized as a community?

RQ2a: To what extent are values, norms, and typical practices established within the network and how are they communicated and enforced?
RQ2: *How does the term “community” function discursively within the trading network?*

These questions are designed to access members’ understandings of their own social collective. Through these sets of questions, I address Phishhook at both descriptive and interpretive levels to uncover both structure and *communitas*, exploring how and why members use the metaphor “community” to characterize their online collective.

**Data Gathering**

Phishhook is a website devoted both towards the specific activity of trading and to providing a more general place for individuals to meet online and engage in discussions. Both activities contribute to the sense of community that exists at Phishhook. Accordingly, data was gathered from a wide range of sources, representing each of these activities. The data sources fall into three distinct categories: participant observation, interviews, and analysis of publicly available community discourse. For an overview of how the sources of data and data analysis methods relate to the research questions, see Table 3.1.

**Participant Observation.** Participant observation, according to Lindlof (1995), “is a method for self-reflexive learning” (p. 4). In conducting participant observation, the researcher seeks at least some degree of *immersion* in the social life of the people she studies (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995). This immersion is essential, as it affords the researcher a window into the actual, lived experiences of the people he studies, and, accordingly, allows him to draw meanings from, rather than imposing meanings on, the lives of those studied. When a researcher steps into a social milieu, however, she necessarily changes that environment. These “reactive effects,” however, prove telling and, as such, should not be avoided or controlled. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) argue that “relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place” (p. 3). For the participant-observer, there are clear tensions between the roles of being a member of a social milieu and being a researcher of that milieu. While these tensions certainly may be productive, in order to understand their effects, however, it is first necessary that the researcher clearly articulate his position within the social scene as participant observer.
I have been involved, at a marginal level, as a tape trader since January 2001. At the time I began my research, after writing the proposal, my bootleg collection stood at 27, placing me clearly below, but rapidly approaching, the size of collection which distinguishes a beginner (or “newbie”) from more experienced traders.¹ Throughout the course of my research, my collection has grown to 183 shows as of this writing. As such, my participant observation promises to provides two valuable insights into the tape-trading community: first, as a description of how “newbies” are socialized into the community, navigating its new social structures; and, second, to characterize the nature of direct communication between members in the negotiation of trades.

My participation as a member of Phishhook is somewhat more limited. When I began my research project, my intention was to investigate the broad collection of live music traders on the Internet as a diffuse social network. In the process, I discovered Phishhook and decided to use the list editor to store my growing collection. My decision to narrow the focus of my research to Phishhook as a case study was informed by my observations of Phishhook struggling with its identity as a community on the discussion boards. I participated little in such discussions, and have continued to keep my participation on the discussion boards at a minimum.

Accordingly, my involvement at Phishhook is divided along the two facets of activity. As a trader, I used Phishhook to store my collection and, for the duration of my research, set up my own traders. At this level, I participated in various levels of trading activity, from “groveling” for a Blanks & Postage trade (B&P), to conducting numerous trades (approximately 40 set up through Phishhook itself), to offering several B&Ps as well. These activities have provided me with the range of experiences which characterize the nature of trading at Phishhook.

I did not actively participate on the discussion boards, however, beyond posting for trades or occasionally contributing to a discussion thread.² This minimal participation was, for the most part, unintentional; I simply chose not to use my free time engaging in conversations on the discussion boards. When it came to discussions about “community” and the state of crisis pervading Phishhook, however, my

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¹ There is no “magic number” that draws a bright line between “newbie” and experienced trader; often, that line is set by an experienced trader who will set his or her definition of “newbie” in defining their rules for dealing with beginners or in their attempts to assist them in beginning a collection. At this point in my research, I would estimate the line to be collections of 35-40 recordings.
² For example, I posted in response to a p-hooker asking which albums by Frank Zappa he should buy.
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RQ1b</td>
<td>Interpretive focus on the nature of dyadic relationships embedded within the network</td>
<td>Comparing responses to questions in an attempt to discern patterns of relationships between traders</td>
<td>Traders who engage in frequent transactions because of mutually-supportive interests</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RQ2a</td>
<td>Descriptive focus on trader’s perception of the make-up of fellow community members</td>
<td>Comparing responses to determine the perceived scope of the community</td>
<td>List of countries in which a trader has had trading partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RQ2b</td>
<td>Interpretive focus on the ways in which traders learn and internalize values and norms, as well as how they attempt to shape what values and practices the community should adopt.</td>
<td>Thematic analysis to discover repetition in assessments of both values and practices, as well as the rationales for those values and practices</td>
<td>Discussion of what brands of CDRs are acceptable for trade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RQ2b</td>
<td>Interpretive focus on the meaning of traders’ experiences</td>
<td>Thematic analysis to find patterns in rationales and rewards for being involved in trading</td>
<td>Stories about getting involved in bootleg trading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Public&quot; Discourse located on:</td>
<td>RQ2b</td>
<td>Interpretive focus on the function of &quot;community&quot; within community discourse</td>
<td>Analysis of the meaning, function, and discursive employment of &quot;community&quot;</td>
<td>Use of &quot;community&quot; as a justification for trading rules on a personal web page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>RQ2a</td>
<td>Interpretive focus on the manner in which values and practices are discussed in public forums</td>
<td>Thematic analysis to discover repetitive patterns in the ways values and practices are accepted and in the ways such values and practices are debated</td>
<td>Message board discussion of preferred recording media</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
decision to minimize participation was more intentional, allowing me to observe the discussions as they unfolded, without influencing their direction.

Additionally, much of my “observation” was asynchronous in nature, as I went back through discussion threads over a six-month period. In doing so, I was able to “observe” – in detail – interaction that occurred on Phishhook well before I even knew of the site, let alone had decided to research it. For these discussions, my delayed presence as a participant observer afforded a vantage point on the social scene which could in no way affect the constitution of that scene as it unfolded. Accordingly, participant observation allowed me a window into the private communication between members in the trading process that would not have been possible, while offering as unobtrusive a vantage as possible in day-to-day community interaction on the discussion boards.

**Interviews.** Interviews were solicited from traders in two manners. First, I asked every p-hooker that I traded with at the conclusion of our trade if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Second, I posted a general request twice each on the discussion boards General Discussion, General Discussion – Moderated, and Audio CD Trades. General Discussion and Audio CD Trades were selected as they serve the two general activities at Phishhook – trading and discussion – and carry the highest traffic of posters on the site. General Discussion – Moderated was selected since, during the period in which I conducted my research, this board was the location for much of the debate over the “community crisis.”

Twenty-six interviews in all were conducted via e-mail. The first ten interviews followed an initial interview schedule (Table 3.2). This schedule was originally designed before the scope of the study was narrowed down to Phishhook. Interviews conducted with this schedule were conducted as pilot interviews, after which the schedule was modified (Table 3.3) for use in the remainder of the interviews. Respondents answered the questions as replies to the original e-mail and were then asked to clarify or expand upon answers in subsequent e-mails.

**Public Discourse.** Discourse generated by Phishhook members is publicly available and archived on the Phishhook server. As previously described, the discourse publicly available at Phishhook fits into one of two categories: personal lists and discussion boards. Each category required its own strategy of data

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3 Although my vantage point certainly constitutes the social scene as it emerges through my research.

4 I conducted eight additional interviews as a part of my course work for a course in qualitative research methods. The final paper from that class draws methodological comparisons between e-mail and instant
TABLE 3.2

INITIAL SCHEDULE OF QUESTIONS

(As presented below, the form of this schedule is as it will be for interviews conducted via e-mail. Interviews conducted over asynchronous instant messaging services will follow the same general structure and content, although the specific wording and length of the questions will inevitably vary.)

1. Please provide the following information about yourself:
   - Age:
   - Sex:
   - Location:
   - Length of trading:
   - Approximate size of bootleg collection:
   - Musical interests:
   - Approximate number of people you've traded with:

2. How would you characterize the tape-trading network? Please describe your perceptions of the size of the network, the types of people trading (age, sex, location, etc.), and the types of music exchanged.

3. How do you communicate with other traders? Do you use different methods for different purposes (for example, email to negotiate trades with individuals and message boards to request trades)? What are they?

4. Please describe how you got involved in trading, and what it was like to learn the trading process.

5. How did you develop your standards for trades (for example practices, quality of recordings, quality of media, etc.)?

6. Please describe two trades you have done, one “good” and one “bad.” What made the trades either “good” or “bad”?

7. How is trust established in the trading network? How do you let trading partners know you are trustworthy? How do you know if a trading partner is trustworthy?

8. What are your views on the ethics of tape trading?

9. What is your understanding of the legal status of tape trading? How does that affect your trading?

10. Please describe your most unusual trade.

11. What online resources do you use most often? For what purposes? How important are they to your trading?

12. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
Table 3.3

REVISED SCHEDULE OF QUESTIONS

Please type your responses to these questions in the space below each question. Feel free to use as much space as you like. At the end of the questions, please feel free to add any comments or suggestions you might have - your input is welcome! Thanks again for your participation.

1. Please provide the following information about yourself:
   - Age:
   - Sex:
   - Location:
   - Length of trading:
   - Approximate size of bootleg collection:
   - Musical interests:
   - Approximate number of people you've traded with:

2. How would you characterize the tape-trading network at Phishhook? Please describe your perceptions of the size of the network, the types of people trading (age, sex, location, etc.), the types of music exchanged, and the general "feel" of the scene.

3. How do you communicate with other traders? Do you use different methods for different purposes (for example, e-mail to negotiate trades with individuals and message boards to request trades)? What are they?

4. Please describe how you got involved in trading, and what it was like to learn the trading process.

5. How did you develop your standards for trades (for example practices, quality of recordings, quality of media, etc.)?

6. Please describe two trades you have done, one "good" and one "bad." What made the trades either "good" or "bad"?

7. How is trust established in the trading network? How do you let trading partners know you are trustworthy? How do you know if a trading partner is trustworthy?

8. What are your views on the ethics of tape trading?

9. What is your understanding of the legal status of tape trading? How does that affect your trading?

10. Is there anything you would like to ask me?

11. Please provide e-mail addresses for any other traders who you think may be willing to participate.
1. Personal Lists. In sampling personal lists for analysis, I tried to achieve a sample\(^5\) that would be simultaneously practicable and near random. To do so, I selected approximately every 50\(^{th}\) personal list from the alphabetized collection of lists on Phishhook. This collection is stored under the link “Lists,” and provides links to every users’ personal page, according to the letter of the alphabet which begins their login name. Logins were arranged in either single- or double-width rows. Links to letters where logins were arranged by single-width carried approximately 24 lines (and, accordingly, personal lists) per page, letters arranged by double-width rows contained 12 lines (personal lists). To achieve a consistent sample, I hit the “page down” key twice for single-width row, four times for double-width rows, and added two rows in each case to determine the personal list to be sampled.

This process did not achieve a random sample for several reasons. First, structurally, the rows did not split exactly according to hits of the “page down” key (the numbers presented above are averages). Thus, it was impossible to reach the exact 50\(^{th}\) list. Secondly, Fishhooks choose their own login names, and often do so by making some reference to their favorite band. This skews the alphabetical distribution of login names, and thus personal lists. For example, “phish-” was used to begin many login names, creating a higher number of “p” entries than might typically be expected.

Despite these problems, however, the sample was nevertheless varied, providing access to the range of personal lists. While the exact 50\(^{th}\) personal list may not have been reached, the errors were on both sides of 50, making the sample average out. Additionally, there is no reason to suspect that reaching the 49\(^{th}\) or 51\(^{st}\) message would have made any difference in the resulting sample. As for the alphabetical distribution of login names, again, there is no reason to believe that such distribution would significantly skew the sample. Login names were based on a wide number of bands (such as the Grateful Dead and Widespread Panic), songs (such as Phish’s “You Enjoy Myself”), or song characters (such as Phish’s “Fluffhead”). There is no seemingly inherent relationship between choice of login name and the discourse generated on a members’ personal list, other than the actual contents of the bootleg list. Personal list pages, however, were not analyzed for the bands and shows they contained, rather, the messages included by the trader in addition to the actual recordings were the focus of analysis.

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\(^5\) The methods used to sample the data sets are reproduced in Table 3.4.
Table 3.4

DATA SET SAMPLING METHODS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Source</th>
<th>Sample Method</th>
<th>Sample Size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Interviewees were selected via two methods:</td>
<td>26 total interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. At the conclusion of each trade I conducted while acting as a participant observer, I asked each p-hooker if they would be willing to participate in an e-mail interview.</td>
<td>were conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. I posted a request for interview participants twice on each of the following public discussion boards: General Discussion, General Discussion – Moderated, and Audio CD Trades.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Lists</td>
<td>Lists were selected from the alphabetical collection of lists stored on Phishhook. To achieve a sample that was both practicable and near random, approximately every 50th message was selected by using the “page down” key and selecting the message at the bottom of the screen.</td>
<td>448 personal lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion Boards</td>
<td>Discussion Boards were retroactively monitored over a six-month period and discussion “threads” were sampled to select approximately every 50th thread in the manner noted above for personal lists. Exceptions to this method are noted below. In addition, a keyword search on the term “community” was conducted for each of the following boards, except for General Discussion – Moderated.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General Discussion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Due to the heavy volume of the General Discussion board, I sampled approximately every 125th thread by hitting the “page down” key 5 times and selecting the thread at the bottom of the screen. To achieve a manageable sample, the “community” keyword search was conducted over a three month period, from December 1, 2001 to March 1, 2002.</td>
<td>148 total threads;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>39 from “community” search</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• General Discussion Moderated</td>
<td>58 total threads,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All messages from the inception of the board on February 6, 2002 until the end of data collection on March 1, 2002 were selected.</td>
<td>including all references to “community”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Audio CD Trades</td>
<td>134 total threads;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>21 from “community” search.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• B&amp;Ps and Grovels</td>
<td>110 total threads;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 from “community” search.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Technical Trading Help</td>
<td>66 total threads;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9 from “community” search.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
2. Discussion Boards. Discussion boards were monitored – retroactively – from September 1, 2001 until March 1, 2002. Discussion topics, or “threads,” were sampled by a process similar to that used for personal lists. Depending on the discussion board, threads were listed in either single- or double-width rows. Messages from single-width boards were selected by hitting the “page down” key twice and adding one row; messages from double-width rows were selected by hitting “page-down” once and adding one row. Again, the process only approximated random selection, but generated a sample sufficient to convey the range of discussion occurring on Phishhook’s public boards.

Not every discussion board was selected for monitoring. The “Audio CD Trades” board was the only board specifically devoted to setting up trades that was monitored. The SHN, analog, and DAT boards were not monitored for two reasons. First, they carried nowhere near the volume of messages on the Audio CD Trades board (although the SHN board was rapidly growing in volume). Second, cursory observation revealed that the interaction on these boards was not significantly different from that on the Audio CD board. The “Trees and Vines” board was not monitored in detail, as interaction on this board is primarily limited to the public structuring of various music distribution schema.

Threads were also selected by one final process. In order to gain insight into members’ various understandings of Phishhook as a community, a search for the word “community” was conducted on each of the following boards: General Discussion, General Discussion – Moderated, Audio CD Trades, B&Ps and Grovels, and Technical Trading Help. In this search, every thread in which the word “community” was used was returned. Threads then read to reveal which uses of “community” were relevant, to ensure that the discussion was about Phishhook in particular, or trading in general. Uses of “community” that included discussions of venues or other titles (such as “Community Center”) were excluded.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were not analyzed separately according to their original source. Rather, they were treated as one diffuse text. Each data set was analyzed through four separate readings. I briefly outline this process below; a more complete description is offered in Box 3.5. In the initial reading, the data were examined for the emergence of broad patterns and themes. In the second reading, the data was roughly coded according to the patterns and themes identified through the first reading. The third reading
identified and classified specific and representative examples of each category, which were then collected together in a notebook. The notebook was then subjected to a fourth, close reading, with an emphasis on similarities, variances, and discrepancies within each category.

Specifically, data was analyzed in terms of the emergence of patterns of behavior and patterns of discourse. Patterns of behavior were identified and analyzed with an eye towards answering Research Question One, by teasing out the primary structural characteristics of the trading network at Phishhook. Answering Research Question Two was the general goal of seeking the emergence of patterns in member discourse in order to interpret members' experiences of Phishhook as a community. The two foci, however, were not exclusive, as patterns of both behavior and discourse served to inform both the structure and the sense of community operating at Phishhook.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 3.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>IDENTIFYING KEY THEMES</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**First Reading:** Each data set (discussion threads, personal lists, and interview transcripts) was read to begin identifying emerging themes and patterns. During the course of the initial readings, themes (such as “bad traders” or “spread the groove”) were recorded in a notebook.

**Second Reading:** Each of the themes identified through the initial reading was assigned a particular color of highlighter or pen so that they could be easily identified. For example, in the threads analyzed from the General Discussion – Moderated board themes were coded according to the following color scheme: explicit references to “community” were highlighted in orange, references to community values in green, references to Leonard in yellow, critiques of Phishhook in blue, solutions to the crisis in pink, and alternative solutions advanced by “opponents” were underlined in red. The color scheme varied according to data set, as different themes emerged in each. Additionally, during the course of the second reading, emergent themes (such as the metaphor of “discussion board” vs. the metaphor of “community”) were assigned new colors.

**Third Reading:** The third reading identified themes that may have been missed because they emerged late during the process of the second reading. Accordingly, by the end of the third reading, every theme had been identified in each data set. Additionally, during the third reading, particularly representative examples of each theme were identified and collected together in one notebook.

**Fourth Reading:** The notebook was then subjected to a close reading, looking for thematic patterns, variances, and discrepancies across the data sets.
CHAPTER FOUR:
STRUCTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF PHISHHOOK

The research questions offered serve to divide the analysis of Phishhook between structure-related questions and “community”-related questions. Certainly, as suggested by Turner (1967) these are not separate questions. Rather, they are fundamentally interdependent. Nevertheless, they speak to different, but complementary, qualities of the social collective. Accordingly, this chapter addresses itself primarily to answering the set of questions under RQ1, attempting to the structure-related characteristics of the community at Phishhook.

Membership

Phishhook users generally refer to themselves as “p-hookers,” though some abbreviate this to “hookers.” In interviews and on discussion boards, p-hookers estimate the size of their community at roughly 26,000 members, although such an estimate is tentative at best. Trader One commented, “I don’t think that the actual population of the community is quantifiable, members drop in and out of circulation.” Accordingly, p-hookers estimate that, at any given time, approximately only 2,500-3,000 members are active.

The fluid nature of community membership at Phishhook makes drawing accurate conclusions about the characteristics of p-hookers at best extremely difficult, if not outright impossible. Accordingly, the best that can be done is to ask p-hookers their perceptions of the makeup of their fellow p-hookers. Examining such perceptions may prove even more important than painting an “accurate” picture of the community’s demographic characteristics, since as Anderson (1991) puts his now-famous argument:

In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (p. 6)

While Anderson is viewing community from a nation-based perspective, his argument here is crucial: people feel a part of a community when they imagine a collective to which they are, in some way, connected. Thus, individual p-hookers’ perceptions of the membership of Phishhook shed light into the
collective which they choose to label "community." In fact, the fluidity of membership makes the sense of community emerging from Phishhook all the more remarkable, as the members continue to imagine themselves a community in the face of membership flux.

**Perceived Community Demographics**

Although one trader described Phishhook as simply a “big network of all ages, professions, races, and mood-swings” (Trader Twelve), most have a fairly detailed vision of who their fellow p-hookers are. While certainly not every p-hooker perceives a common demographic vision of Phishhook, the patterns of their perceptions are remarkably similar. Viewed in terms of size, age, gender, geographic distribution, and musical interests, p-hookers paint a fairly consistent picture of Phishhook’s demographic distribution.

**Size.** As mentioned above, estimates of Phishhook’s total population range from 26,000 to 30,000, with 2,500 to 3,000 members active at any given time. The important perception members hold in common about Phishhook’s size, however, is that it is growing. The rate of growth is often attributed to the “internet and email making communication fast and free, and with the fact that digital recording has made it possible to copy music quickly without the loss of quality” (Trader Seven). The increase in size is perceived as a potential threat to the community – and, as will be seen later – blamed in part for the loss of community “feel.” Trader Eighteen commented that “the scene is morphing as we are getting used to the sites size increase. There are more disagreements & growing pains now than when I first came on.” This perception of growth and its attenuated problems is common among p-hookers.

**Age.** P-hookers perceive the age distribution of their fellow traders as relatively varied, but concentrated among members in their 20s and 30s. Trader Eight remarked that “the age varies as well there are 15 year old phish fans and 50 year old dead heads trading.” The general consensus on age is perhaps best summed up by Trader Fifteen, who contends “the feel is that of a college music scene with a few older members, a few married; but the overwhelming feel of the site is probably ‘college’ aged.” While members perceive – and welcome – a diversity of age groups at Phishhook, they also recognize that, for the most part, they belong to a common generation.
Gender. While members note variety as to the ages of p-hookers, they are nearly unanimous in their perception that this is a male-dominated community. Responses such as “most of the traders I have traded with are males” (Trader Two) and “I believe more males inhabit the general discussion board” (Trader Fourteen) are typical. Trader Eleven, a woman, commented that “it seems to be more of a ‘guy thing.’ I don’t trade with other women very often.” One trader estimated a “50 to 1 ratio of guys to girls” (Trader Twenty One), an estimate which my experience closely approximates as well: out of over 50 trades conducted on Phishhook, I have traded with only three women. Again, while women are certainly welcomed, the perception of gender unity also serves to illustrate to p-hookers their commonality.

Location. The geographic distribution of traders seems to be far more varied than either age or gender. While some traders perceive the p-hookers to be primarily concentrated on the East Coast (which they may well be), members tend to reference the widespread – even global – distribution of traders at Phishhook and in general. Traders describe the community as “global” (Trader One) and “scattered across the entire world” (Trader Nineteen). As Trader Fifteen commented, “the internet has truly offered a chance here for the music community to move beyond borders.” Here, the diversity of traders is overcome only by their common interest – trading music. The triumph of interest over geography serves again to highlight the commonality shared by p-hookers: nobody is a member of Phishhook by accident, as might be the case for a geographic community – all are members because they choose to associate with people who have similar interests.

Musical Interests. While the name of the site, Phishhook, might lead prospective users to perceive of the site as a place where the trading of Phish recordings dominated, the actual musical interests of community members ranges widely. Phish, to be sure, appears to be the most traded band (followed closely by the Grateful Dead and Widespread Panic), at Phishhook there “seems to be a large variety of music that is being traded” (Trader Eleven). The bands traded, however, seem to cluster around the “jamband” genre. Trader Seven remarks:

For the most part, people tend to trade music from “jambands.” This is probably due to those bands’ willingness to let people record their shows, their emphasis on improvisation, and the fact that their setlists differ from one concert to the next.

While jam bands may be the primary focus of trading activity, they are by no means the sole focus, and many traders’ “collections consist of everything from Heiroglyphics to Coltrane” (Trader Seventeen).
This diversity, however, has its boundaries. Several traders remarked on music trading as a hobby for “people who are looking for an alternative to main-stream music” (Trader Seven). As such, mainstream and pop music are not heavily traded, and, to a degree, are frowned upon:

The type of music exchanged is varied and ranges from Bluegrass to Heavy Metal, Jam band to serious Folk. The music would best be identified as adult in content as opposed to the “Ken and Barbie pop” Spears, Nsync artist types who are, in a community that tries to be pretty open minded, truly disliked with a passion as are any of the members who might be involved with this type of music. (Trader Fifteen)

Accordingly, while musical diversity is present – and valued – at Phishhook, that diversity clearly has its limits. *Music serves to unite p-hookers together, and wide ranges of musical tastes are accommodated, provided they exist largely outside of the “mainstream.”*

Spheres of Interaction

The field of interaction at Phishhook.com consists of three different sub-fields of interaction: private interactions, public interactions, and a “bridge” field, combining both private and public interactions. Members utilize different spheres for different purposes and to different extents; each sphere is serves an important role in the functioning of the Phishhook community.

*Private Sphere*

The ostensible organizing interest of Phishhook.com is essentially a private interaction: the trading of live concert recordings. A trade begins when one trader contacts another, requesting that they trade recordings. *Communication during trades is conducted almost exclusively via e-mail* – every interview respondent named e-mail as their primary method of communication when conducting trades. As one trader (Trader Seven) put it, “I usually communicate with people via email. It’s easy to keep the person you trade with in the loop by sending a few emails telling them you sent their discs out or that you got the ones they sent.” E-mail represents the fastest, easiest way to negotiate and follow up on a trade with an unknown partner in a distant location.

Contact is initiated primarily as a response to a post that a trader has made on one of the various public “channels” or after a trader has conducted a search for a specific show. The initiator then sends the potential trading partner an e-mail that generally (1) explains *why* that person is e-mailing, (2) *what,*
specifically, the trader is interested in, and (3) where the trader who has been contacted can find the
proposer’s list of concerts available for trade. A typical initial contact message might look something like:

From: trader@trader.com
To: danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: trade?
Date: Fri, 01 Mar 2002 23:23:38 -0800

I saw your web site and I would love to trade with you!
Check out my list (the address is below) and let me know if there's anything
you're interested in. If you don't see anything you like mabey1 we can set up a
B+P or 2:1 trade? Hopefully we can work something out.

From your list I would be interested in the following:
Alison Kraus & Union Station: 9-2-95 NJ
David Byrne: 1-19-02 Austin City Limits

Thanks,
Trader

http://www.phishhook.com/lists/traderslist

In this example, I was contacted by a trader who had discovered my “list” of concerts by conducting a
search for Allison Kraus & Union Station, in an effort to trade for the show as a birthday gift for his
girlfriend. This request is approximately average in terms of length and amount of information conveyed,
as the details included in such messages vary greatly.

From that initial message, a trade will be negotiated with attention to: what concerts will be
exchanged, the number of discs each show contains (trades are generally conducted on an equal, 1:1 basis),
and various other details such as the types of disc to be used. These details will be illustrated in greater
detail below as a part of a larger discussion of community norms. Once the details of the trade have been
agreed upon, the traders then exchange their physical addresses. The exchange of addresses marks a
significant transition in the trading event, signaling the end of negotiation and the consummation of the
trading relationship: once a trader has a partner’s address, he is obligated to follow through with the trade.
The strength of the exchange of addresses as a sign of a deal can be seen in Interstellar420’s comments on a

1 This spelling error is consistent with the original e-mail. Errors in spelling, punctuation, and grammar are
commonplace in the trading community, whether in e-mails or on public discussion boards. In order to
preserve the “feel” of the original messages as much as possible, I have reproduced such errors without
explicitly referring to them as such.
discussion board\textsuperscript{2} dealing with another trader, writing: “Let me know if we are entering into a new
agreement. I will send you my addy, and stuff again!” (112). Often, this will be the end of direct
communication between traders; most traders, however, prefer that contact is kept after the exchange of
addresses, with notices being sent by both parties when discs are sent and when they are received.

While all trades follow this general practice, traders’ performances vary as to the richness, or level
of personal information revealed in communication throughout the course of the trade. The following
excerpts reproduce e-mail communications that occurred in two separate trades I was involved in: Box 4.1
illustrates a trade, from start to finish, that is largely instrumental in nature, with little personal disclosure;
Box 4.2 illustrates a trade with a much higher degree of personal information shared. The trade in Box 4.1
is largely instrumental in that only the minimum information necessary to allow the transaction is shared by
the participants. In Box 4.2, the participants share much more information, about the trade and about
themselves as well. Neither of these transactions are typical, instead they represent a continuum of the
level of richness in e-mail communication during the trading process. The typical trade would fall
somewhere in between these extremes.

In order to facilitate the negotiation of trades, Phishhook provides a “list editor” which allows
members to keep track of their collection and view others’ collections as well. These lists are then stored
on Phishhook’s server under the member’s user name, or “login.” These logins are created by the members
themselves and typically reflect something about their musical affiliations (for example, a fan of the band
Phish, might name himself “PhishPhreak2002”). Not all members store their bootleg list on Phishhook;
these members are given a “black login” which they can use to participate on the bulletin boards. In
negotiating trades, these “black logins” will direct prospective partners to their off-site list, whether it is
located at another similar web site, on their personal home page, or as an attachment that they e-mail.

The vast majority of Phishhook members, however, use the list editor function to store their
bootleg list. Members frequently cite the list editor as the reason they joined Phishhook in the first place.
Phishhook member stopgo, for example, argues that “Phishhook seems to be the most user-friendly site to
store a list, and the number of users probably grows pretty quickly, and that rate of growth is probably

\textsuperscript{2} Interstellar420’s comment is certainly atypical as it occurred in a “bad trader” discussion where he and the
trader he had accused of cheating him worked out their differences publicly; almost all exchanges of
addresses are private.
EXAMPLE OF "INSTRUMENTAL" E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

From: Dan Lair
Sent: Sunday, February 24, 2002 12:11 PM
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: trade

How do – Saw your post, I’d definitely be interested in trading w/ you. I’d like Whiskeytwon 3/25/98 (1) and Uncle Tupelo 5/1/94 (2). Take a look at my list www.phishhook.com/lists/sayche and let me know what we can work out.

Take care,

Dan

From: <trader@trader.org>
To: “Dan Lair” <danlair@hotmail.com>
Subject: Re: trade
Date: Sunday, 24 Feb, 12:24:57 -0500

Dan,

I’d like your Van Morrison 08/14/99, Suzanne Vega 1993 and Pink Floyd 07/02/77. Here’s my address:

Terry Trader
5555 Pine Avenue
Buffalo, NY 55555

From: Dan Lair
Sent: Sunday, February 24, 2002 12:38 PM
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: Re: trade

Sound great!

My address:

Dan Lair
825 Hazel #1
Missoula, MT 59801

Thanks for the trade,

Dan
BOX 4.2

EXAMPLE OF "RICH" E-MAIL COMMUNICATION

From: Tommy Trader <trader@trader.org>
Reply-To: trader@trader.org
To: danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: Trades
Date: Fri, 1 Feb 2002 12:03:33 -0800


Tommy

From: Dan Lair [mailto: danlair@hotmail.com]
Sent: Friday, February 01, 2002 1:30 PM
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: Re: Trades

How about those shows for Son Volt 11/19/1999 and David Byrne & Richard Thompson 2/24/92? My address is

Dan Lair
825 Hazel #1
Missoula, MT 59801

I should be able to bum them tomorrow or Monday…

Thanks kindly,

Dan

From: “Tommy Trader” <trader@trader.org>
Reply-To: trader@trader.org
To: “Dan Lair” danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: RE: Trades
Date: Fri, 1 Feb 2002 14:12:03 -0800

Sounds like a plan. I should tell you the Byrne/Thompson show does have an analog generation in it, e.g. sbd>dat>cass>cdr. I can’t hear the difference (too many Dead concerts) but some people can. If that makes a difference let me know; otherwise I should be able to mail on Monday.

My address is:

Tommy Trader
5555 Pine Avenue
Anchorage, AK 5555

Tommy

From: Dan Lair [mailto: danlair@hotmail.com]
Sent: Friday, February 01, 2002 4:16 PM
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: RE: Trades
No worries. I'll be mailing on Monday

Thanks,

D.

From: “Tommy Trader” trader@trader.org
Reply-To: trader@trader.org
To: “Dan Lair” danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: RE: Trades
Date: Mon, 4 Feb 2002 10:24:47 -0800

Dan, as I was burning your discs over the weekend I noticed that the Byrne/Thompson discs were really pretty short and that they would both fit on one 80 minute disc. So I did that and then, since that would only be three discs, I included a Jay Farrar 2000 Bristol, England solo show that I really like. Hope that's ok with you. The discs went out in this morning's mail. Let me know when they arrive and if there's any problem with any of the shows.

Thanks for the trade,

Tommy

PS: My oldest son went to school at Missoula for two years and loved it. He decided after that he wasn't into school anymore so he and his wife bought 8 acres of land outside of Haines, Alaska, and built a cabin there. From the pictures I've seen, Missoula is a beautiful place.

From: Dan Lair [mailto: danlair@hotmail.com]
Sent: Monday, February 04, 2002 4:38 PM
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: RE: Trades

Tommy –

Sounds cool, thanks for doing that. I just put your discs in the mail, missed my chance on Saturday. Missoula is a fine place, for sure. Actually, my best friend who got me into trading moved last summer from Missoula up to Anchorage. Hoping to get up there to visit this summer, always wanted to go to Alaska...

Thanks for the trade and take care,

Dan
growing too.” The editor provides a template with which users can enter their name (or login), e-mail address, and provides space with which traders can indicate their availability for trade as well as any “trading rules” they might have. Then, users can enter in each of their recordings, or “shows,” and provide information on each show: date, venue, source, number of sets, media, number of media, and any notes the user might have about the show. This template allows for consistency across users’ lists; an example of a typical list is provided in Box 4.3.

Members use these lists to choose which discs they would like to receive in the trade, and use the information provided about each show to inform those choices. Accordingly, while these lists are public (they can be accessed through a “search” function, where users can look for a specific show), their primary use is to facilitate the private negotiation of the trades that constitute the heart of the activity at Phishhook.

“Bridge” Sphere

While the communication which occurs during the trading process is private, several “bridges” between the public and private spheres exist to facilitate the initiation of such trades. These “bridge” areas are found on many of Phishhook’s discussion boards and are comprised of two broad categories: boards used to initiate trades, and boards used to structure the mass distribution of recordings through methods other than trades.

Trade Boards. The boards that are used to initiate trades are divided according to the type of media traded: Audio CDs, .SHN (Shorten files)\(^3\), DAT (Digital Audio Tapes), and Analog (Cassette). Each of these boards allow the user to post a message that will be available to the public (only Phishhook members, however, can post messages). Messages will appear with the member’s login in orange; users can click on the hyperlink and be taken to that member’s list where they can find their e-mail address and initiate private communication to negotiate a trade.

Like any discussion board, users here can reply to messages directly on the board, in public view. On trade boards, users will frequently do so with messages echoing the now infamous line of “you’ve got

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\(^3\) .SHN, or Shorten files, are a new and increasingly popular method of trading concert recordings. They allow users to treat music files as data files and, accordingly, can be either downloaded (without the sound loss problems attenuated to the mp3 format used by programs such as Napster — users refer to this as “lossless compression” or traded on data CDs. These files must be converted into .WAV, or audio files before users can play them on stereo equipment, although they will play over computer systems.
Greetings, one and all!
Welcome to my CDR trading list. Have a look around and see if there is anything you would always up for trading! Right now I'm looking for HQ Widespread Panic, Phish, Phil & Friends, Rc Hunter, Jerry Garcia, Rusted Root, Grateful Dead (as always), Uncle Tupelo, Willie, Son Volt, Tweedy, Jay Farrar, The Jayhawks, and pretty much anything else. I will do B&P's if I have time ask and I'll let you know. Chances are that I will if you only ask for one show. Now for the techn

- ABSOLUTELY NO IMATIONS, COMPUSA, MEMOREX OR ANY GENERIC BRANDS! IMHO suck, and I have never had any luck with them (I occasionally have problems extracing from them brands). I generally stick to Sonys, Fujis, and TDKs. Right now, I'm using Sony 60 min. discs.
- Please extract shows to your hard drive using Exact Audio Copy. This has pretty much becon standard, and it is how I extract all my shows.
- Please use DAO when burning. This is how I burn all my discs. Two second gaps do not mak happy camper.
- I send discs in either those neat little Case Logic sleeves, or in jewel case trays. I never send jewel cases. That just gets way too expensive. Please send me your discs in a similar manner.
- In the package that you send to me, please, and this is important, include setlists, track listing other info pertaining to the discs on a separate sheet of paper. This is what you will get from me expect the same.
- Please do not write anywhere on the discs.
- Please do not stick anything to the discs (i.e. those little yellow Post-It notes.

That's about it for the fine print. Be sure to check back often as I am constantly getting new shc Happy trading!

"One For Woody" (Allen Woody Tribute Concert)
http://www.phishhook.com/lists/radioboy
5/6/02
mail” to indicate that they have sent a private e-mail, and that the trader should check their messages. On these boards, discussions rarely occur beyond these instrumental replies to requests for trades. Below, I focus specifically on interaction on the Audio CD Trade Board for two reasons. First, it is by far the most frequently used board. Second, the interaction which occurs there is largely replicated on the other boards as well: the process of requesting trades seems to differ little according to the media used.

1. Audio CD Trades. When traders initiate a thread on the Audio CD Trades discussion board, they do so explicitly to find trading partners. Users adopt several different strategies in soliciting trades. Most commonly, users post looking for a specific band or a specific show (53% of the 113 requests sampled). An example of this strategy is seen below:

Author: rew
Topic: ISO Panic 10-31-01, 11-01-01
posted November 07, 2001 18:32
registered: June 2001

let set something up if you have either of these. E-mail me.
peace
rew

The second most common strategy (17%) is to post “extra” discs that a trader is trying to get rid of. These may be discs that a trader has accidentally burned two copies of or inadvertently received duplicates of in trading. Traders will also often post shows stored on their hard drive as “extras” because they are easy to burn, or, as Trader Ten discussed: “To really get things going I burn one of my more popular shows like Hendrix or Tool and then post extras and the responses are amazing.” “Extras,” accordingly, can be either real or manufactured, but the effect is the same: the trader posts with a specific show that they are willing to trade.

Generic requests (12%) represent the third most common strategy for soliciting trading partners. Here, the trader posting will simply express their willingness and interest in setting up any trade. Two variations are frequent: the “new spindle” post and the “weekend trade” post. In each case, whether they have a new spindle of CD-Rs4 or simply free time over the weekend, traders here are indicating that they are willing and ready to set up at least one trade (and often more). These types of requests differ in their flexibility and openness, but also seem to generate less responses – frequently they are threads without

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4 Traders generally buy their CD-Rs in bulk, most often on “spindles” of 50 CDs.
113 threads were analyzed according to the type of request posted and the appeals used in those requests. The threads from this board sampled through the "community" keyword search were not included in this analysis, yielding the 113 threads discussed here.

Types of Request:
- 53% of initial requests were for a specific band or concert
- 17% of initial requests listed an "extra" disc that the trader would like to trade
- 12% of initial requests were "generic," simply stating an individual trader's desire to trade
- 8% of initial requests were for particular genres of music, such as "jambands"
- 4% of initial posts listed "bad traders"
- 4% miscellaneous posts

Appeals Used in Requests:
- 42% of initial requests used some form of qualifier, expressing willingness to trade beyond the specific request
- 33% of initial requests made some sort of appeal to the generosity of potential trading partners
- 21% of initial requests made some disclosure of personal information, such as why the trader would like a particular band/show

public replies (although this certainly does not mean they have not received private replies to negotiate trades).

In between the specific and generic request for trades lies the last strategy for initiating trades: the request by genre (8%). Here, traders will simply post the type of music that they are seeking to trade. Most often, the genre requested will be "jambands," but jazz, hip-hop, alt-country and classic rock are also frequently sought in such posts.

Across these types of requests, traders employ three different types of appeals to augment the requests: qualifiers, appeals to community values, and personal information. Most frequently, traders add some type of qualifier to their specific request (42%), expressing their willingness to trade beyond the band or show they have listed. A typical example is moe_gasm’s appeal: “looking for a trade or two… I want phil and friends or moe. or anything at all. peace” (15). Secondly, traders will make an appeal to other traders’ generosity (33%) with expressions such as “I would be grateful” or “Please help.” Such expressions are important in that, as will be argued below, they begin to transfer the economic exchange of
commodities into more a meaningful exchange of gifts by acknowledging the contributions made by the other party to the trade. The third type of appeal that traders will use in their requests involves disclosing personal information (21%), as illustrated by Dividedsky02:

hey, im looking for any and all Ani Defranco, it’s for this girl whos heart im trying to win. so if anybody could help me out, charity trades if you will. thatd be great. thanks a lot.

P.S. shes really hot.

These appeals are not mutually exclusive, but are not often used in concert with one another – messages posted on these boards tend to be short and to the point, relying on only one type of appeal. The appeals to generosity and inclusion of personal information are especially important in the formation of community, as they serve to intensify the connection between trading partners.

2. B&P’s and Grovels. While the Audio CD Trades discussion board is certainly representative of each of the channels organized according to media traded, another of the trade boards merits attention for its own unique features. The B&P’s and Grovels board is a space on Phishhook specifically devoted to “newbies,” or members who are new to trading. On this board, members who have collections of recordings offer up B&P’s (blanks and postage trades where the “newbie” sends blank CDs and a postage-paid envelope in exchange for bootlegs) to new traders who have few or no recordings with which to trade. Alternatively, “newbies” on this board “grovel” for B&Ps, asking for the help of more experienced traders in building their collections.

“Grovels” are slightly more frequent on the B&P’s and Grovels board (42% of the 95 threads sampled). Catstevens offers a typical grovel:

Hey whats up
I’m looking to get more Keller Williams and/or Cat Stevens
Anyone willing to help me, it would be greatly appreciated
Email me please, Trader@trader.net
Peace
Damian.

Catstevens makes an appeal to the generosity of Phishhook members; such appeals are very frequent, used in 63% of the grovels sampled. Grovels also include personal information as an appeal as well (53%), with

Ellipses are often used by members in e-mails and discussion board posts. To preserve the “feel” of their discourse, when I use an ellipses, I will designate it as (...) to keep my abbreviations separate from the original punctuations.
### Box 4.5

#### B&Ps AND GROVELS

95 threads were analyzed according to the type of request posted and the appeals used in those requests. The threads from this board sampled through the “community” keyword search were not included in this analysis, yielding the 95 threads discussed here.

**Type of Initial Post**
- 42% of initial posts were “grovels” from newbies
- 35% of initial posts were B&P offers from traders
- 15% of initial posts were requests for trades
- 4% of initial posts were requests for information
- 4% were miscellaneous posts

Of the posts which were Grovels:
- 63% made appeals to traders’ generosity
- 53% included some sort of personal information, such as why the newbie wanted that band/show
- 5% used neither sort of appeal

Of the posts which were B&P offers:
- 77% offered specific shows
- 48% stated the specific rules governing the offer
- 43% included some sort of personal information, such as why the trader was making the offer

Statements such as “saw them for the first time on sat. and was blown away. hopin and kind person or two wouldn’t mind hooking me up a couple phat shows from this fall or summer” (franklinwilliams). The two types of appeals are not mutually exclusive, and obviously are often used in concert – only 5% of grovels used neither sort of appeal.

B&P offers represented 35% of the threads sampled. Most often, traders offered specific shows for B&P trades (77% of B&P offers). Even though most B&Ps offers are for specific shows, the manner in which they are offered differs greatly. An offer from RobbyD420 illustrates many of the different elements of B&P offers:

```
I just got done w/ mid-terms and I figured since it’s been such a nice weekend, I’ll do a b&P for the first three people who e-mail me the right answer to this question, not post! EMAIL me trader@trader.com w/ the prospective answer. If U made it, i’ll email u back and u go bananas on my list.

here goes: What was the name of the last big Battle of the Revolutionary War where victory over Britian was won???
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6 "Newbies" here refers exclusively to new traders, not traders who are simply new to Phishhook – many traders become members of Phishhook with extensive collections and trading experience.

7 The remaining posts were requests for trades (15%), requests for information (4%) and miscellaneous posts (4%).
RobbyD420's offer is not typical, but it serves as an excellent illustration as it contains many of the different messages used by those offering B&Ps. First, it contains several rules for how the offer is to work (e-mailing rather than posting replies and answering a trivia question to be accepted); 48% of the offers sampled included some reference to rules. Additionally, the above offer includes some personal information explaining why the offer is being made in the first place; 43% of offers included such information.

Unlike the trade boards, where most traders responding simply send private e-mails to the original poster, on the B&P's and Grovels board, “newbies” responding to offers will generally do so on the board itself. The reason for this is simple: “newbies” are thus able to manage the offers themselves, navigating who is “in” or “out” on any given offer. For example, in response to a B&P offer where a trader has offered up several “extra” shows to newbies, RH Cohen replies in a subsequent post: “Since the other guy is basically clearing house, I’ll take the rest (the les and the 2nd copy of the phish). I use JVC’s if that’s good by you. Tell me if your gut with that… RC” (18C). Accordingly, the discussion threads on this board tend to be longer and self-managing – traders negotiate in public to efficiently manage the offers. In the process, p-hookers demonstrate a remarkable facility for managing complex interactions between multiple parties, relying on cooperation rather than a central organization.

The interaction which occurs on the B&P’s and Grovels board is important for several reasons. First, the relative parity between “offers” (35%) and “grovels” (42%) signals the high value that Phishhook members place on giving to new members – one of the values which ultimately helps to create the community “feel” that members speak of. Second, the significant presence of “rules” in such offers (48% of all offers) demonstrates the importance of this board in teaching “newbies” the norms which govern trading interactions. The discourse on the B&P’s and Grovels board serves to simultaneously reproduce both the social structure and the community values operating at Phishhook.

Trees and Vines

The Trees and Vines board serves the second purpose of the sphere bridging public and private interactions by providing a public trading structure from three types of distribution systems: trees, vines, and weeds. Each of these structures are designed to spread one show quickly to large numbers of traders.
Trees. A tree begins when a trader, generally one who possesses a show with some interest (a rare show, a particularly high quality copy of a show, etc.) makes a post expressing his willingness to organize a trading tree. Called a “seeder,” this person attempts to create a distribution structure by requesting that those interested reply with specific information, generally: name, e-mail, location, media, and willingness to serve as a “branch” who will copy show for a number of “leaves.” “Leaves” may, in turn, be asked to serve as branches as well. An excellent example and explanation of a tree structure is provided by Yamar:

Seed: Dave

1.1 - Tim
1.1.1 - AJ
1.1.2 - Glen
1.2 - Chris
1.3 - Steve
1.3.1 - Alice
1.3.2 - Alex
1.3.2.1 - Leonard

OK, in the above scenario, Dave has the original copy of the show. Based on the above structure, Dave would be responsible for making copies for Tim, Chris, and Steve. Upon receiving, Tim would then be in charge of making sure that AJ and Glen would obtain copies. Chris (having no names directly under him) would be cloning the show for no one. And as you’ve guessed, Steve would then be copying the show for Alice and Alex. Lastly, Alex would then be responsible for getting a copy to Leonard.

Once the hierarchical structure of the tree is set, the show is efficiently distributed to a potentially large number of traders.

Vines. Vines are also a method of a public distribution structure, but unlike trees, they are not hierarchical. Rather, vines are organized in linear fashion, beginning again with a “seeder” who has a show they think would attract interest. Once the “seeder” posts their intention to begin a vine, interested traders respond with their addresses. The “seeder” then sends a master copy to the first trader to post, who will make a copy of that disc and then send the master to the next trader. Once the vine reaches its end, the last trader either returns the master or a blank disc to the seeder. A variation on this structure is the permavine, which has no planned end – the last trader simply waits until a new trader places their address at the bottom of the thread.

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8 “Seeders” in this sense are not to be confused with those who transfer shows from their original recording (usually on a DAT) to a widely tradable medium, also referred to as “seeders” in the trading community.
Weeds. Weeds are the least structured of the publicly structured distribution system. In a weed, the “seeder” sends a free copy of a show to two people, each of whom send in to two more people, and so on. When weeds work, they spread music very efficiently; they seem to rarely work, however. First, they are hard to monitor – there is little room to check that traders are holding their end of the bargain and fully distributing the show. Second, weeds often devolve into vines as confusion over what constitutes each is common. Accordingly, while weeds certainly have a presence as a method of structured distribution, at Phishhook, members rely far more often on trees and vines as structures.

In each of these structures, communication is relatively instrumental as traders check in to see where the show is along the distribution process and to manage any problems with the distribution. Additionally, these structures serve to place pairs of traders in private contact with one another to manage their portion of the overall structure. The interaction which occurs on the Trees and Vines board, while more public than those previously mentioned, is largely instrumental and private and remains largely confined to the organizing interest of Phishhook: trading. Nevertheless, they serve to demonstrate how p-hookers are able to efficiently and collectively organize large scale distribution schemes through cooperation.

Public Sphere

Interaction expands beyond the interest of trading alone in the public sphere: here, interaction extends to a wide range of interests, from interests allied to trading to interests shared in common by Phishhook members to wide-open discussions. Three discussion boards define this sphere: Technical Trading Help, General Discussion, and General Discussion Moderated – An Experiment. In each of these, members interact at length and in great detail on a wide array of topics, issues, and interests.

Technical Trading Help. This discussion board is the place where members go to ask (and answer) questions about trading. The process is by no means simple, and members here turn to one another for advice on how to navigate issues relating to software, hardware, and other trading-related issues. Software issues are predominantly discussed on this channel (46% of the 57 messages sampled). These questions primarily surround Exact Audio Copy (EAC), an “extraction” program which reads CDs and stores them on a user’s hard drive as exact clones which can then be used to “burn” copies of discs using a
57 threads were analyzed according to the type of request posted and the appeals used in those requests. The threads from this board sampled through the “community” keyword search were not included in this analysis, yielding the 57 threads discussed here.

Of the topics discussed in the sampled threads on the Technical Trading Help Board:
- 47% dealt with software issues, such as Exact Audio Copy
- 21% dealt with hardware issues, such as which CD burners worked the best
- 18% dealt with general trading issues
- 7% dealt with issues of media quality
- 4% dealt with issues surrounding the taping of shows
- 4% were miscellaneous posts

burning program. Hardware issues (such as questions regarding what type of burner to purchase) are somewhat less common (21%), as are questions about the trading process in general (18%). Threads on this board tend to be short lived (mean: 3.1 responses, median: 2 responses, mode: 1 response), with questions being asked and answered relatively quickly and efficiently. Even though the discussions on this board are short lived, they demonstrate the willingness of p-hookers to readily share their technical knowledge of a wide array of issues with fellow traders.

General Discussion Boards. Both “general discussion” boards exist as places where members can deviate from the discussion of trades and trading – and interaction on these boards follows essentially the same patterns.9 Discussions here are wide ranging, from discussions of trading issues, to discussions about music in general, to topics seemingly unrelated to the ostensible purpose of Phishhook, ranging from “Who’s your favorite Simpson’s character?” to “15 Days Since I quit smoking.”

Discussions of music are, not surprisingly, the most common on the general discussion boards. Many of these discussions are about specific bands or performances. For example, after seeing the band Big Wu and being somewhat disappointed with their performance, iUhookie began a thread asking: “My question is, is Wu one of those bands that’s either REALLY on, or REALLY off on any given night?” 19 p-hookers responded, with opinions split between those who held that Big Wu’s shows were always good

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9 The difference between General Discussion and General Discussion – Moderated is, as the names suggest, the presence of moderators with the ability to remove unwanted discussions. This distinction will become much more important below, as the Moderated board emerged in response to the sense of “crisis” within the community.
and those who found the band to be “on-and-off.” Many of these traders asked IUhookie what the setlist for the show he saw was, to see if the songs played had any influence on his opinion.

Other music related posts are more general, revolving around opinions on a wide array of music topics. One such typical discussion revolved around the question “Does listening to a studio album freak you out sometimes?” posed by a trader who was listening to Steely Dan’s AJA. In the lengthy discussion which followed, traders expressed opinions which shed light on the reason they enjoy trading live concert recordings. Bigdumbox, for example, wrote:

Yea, the Dead ruined me. I gravitate so heavily toward live music now. One problem area is when I’m looking to purchase some music from a band that I’ve never heard before and I get sucked into buying one of their live albums right off the bat; this if often NOT the best way to be introduced to a new band. A lot of times it helps to have heard many of their shows in studio form to really appreciate the live versions. That being said…. gimme more LIVE TAPES

As such discussions evolve, traders share their opinions about the interests – music and trading – which have brought them together at Phishhook. These discussions serve the purpose of further highlighting members commonly held deep interest in music.

“Off-topic” discussion are frequent as well, with p-hookers sharing thoughts and opinions on a wide range of topics. A post soliciting advice on how to pass a drug test yielded eleven responses. 14 p-hookers responded to a trader who posted an article written by a retired Air Force colonel about “America’s War on Terror.” The thread “What Blood Type are You?” received 24 replies, most w/ p-hookers listing their blood types and how many pints they have donated (flying_92, on the other hand, simply replied “red and squishy”). P-hookers clearly use the general discussion boards to discuss topics ranging widely beyond the organizing interest of music.

Whether topics are “on” or “off,” however, the discussions that ensue are highly interactive as members actively engage each other’s comments in their discussion. An excerpt from a discussion on the humorous “off-topic” thread “Who would win in a fight: Abe Lincoln or Mark Twain” (which yielded 36 responses) illustrates the interactive nature of these discussions:

dazzmand: “Mark Twain, no Q about it. He seems like a real scrappy guy. Shortness prevails in fights, better balance and all.

Civilian2b: “Yea but lincoln had a helluva left hook.”

Recordings, regardless of the media they are on, are often referred to as “tapes” – a remnant from bootleg trading’s pre-digital origins.

70
RaulDuke: "I don’t know... Abe has the reach and he’s a tough S.O.B. Twain might be able to get inside on him though. If I had to, I’d take Abe in a split decision."

In the example above, members are clearly building their responses upon the comments of others, engaging in a mutual process of, in this case, creating humor. *This level of engagement is typical of the interaction on general discussion boards, demonstrating that members don’t merely state their opinions, but actively engage with other p-hookers as well.*

The diversity of discussions certainly contributes to the community “feel” as will be seen below. Trader Five described the general discussion boards as “a place where people get together and talk, kind of like you do with your friends, it is just done online. Lots of people make buddies real quickly and some go to shows together.” Essentially, these boards provide meeting places for people to share ideas on a wide array of topics and form friendships as well.

Both types of discussion board in the public sphere of interaction, Technical Trading help and the two general boards, are characterized by many-to-many communication on a wide array of issues. The interactions that occur here are seen by any who wish, and can be equally participated in. *Accordingly, they serve a vital role in creating and maintaining both the system of norms and the values which constitute Phishhook as a community.*

**Key Network Characteristics**

This study by no means purports to advance a traditional network analysis of Phishhook. Conducting such an analysis, due to the relatively fluid nature of membership, would prove extremely difficult at best and, at worst, incorrect. Nevertheless, by using concepts central to network analysis, a general picture of Phishhook’s network characteristics can be drawn from observing members’ interactions. Accordingly, “roles” and other traditional network terms are used below in a loose and selective manner, in order to paint a general picture of the network operating at Phishhook. Doing so affords a window into the social structure underlying what its members term “community.”
Network Roles

Roles at Phishhook are relatively undifferentiated. Presumably, since all traders engage in basically the same interactions, whether in private trades or public discussion, there is no need for a complicated division of labor: the tasks performed by members are relatively uniform. Accordingly, roles are primarily divided according to member’s trading experience. By experience level, traders fall into one of three categories: “newbie,” trader, or “retired.”

Newbies. Newbies are those members who are new to trading in general, not simply new to Phishhook. These are people who (1) have few or no recordings in their collection and, thus, are (2) in the process of learning the “ropes” when it comes to trading. In traditional network terms, newbies are largely isolates, or actors with “no links, or relatively few links to others” (Ferris, 1995, p. 45). As such, newbies are faced with the tasks of building collections, relationships, and an understanding of the network’s operative norms and must rely on the kindness of others. “Grovels” for B&Ps reflect this need:

AlexPhish: Hey all
I am new to the Phish trading community and am looking to set up my first B&P. Any kind soul who wishes to work out a B&P email me at newbie@newbie.org or post below and I’ll get back to you....
THANKS IN ADVANCE!!!!
Alex

Newbies tend to communicate to the network at large carefully, with deference and respect in an effort to establish themselves as members of the community.

Newbies play a prominent role in the analysis that follows, for it is in the process of socializing newbies that the norms which structure interaction on the network emerge. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) argue:

Since newcomers are learning the ins and outs of what to do, they often ask questions and make mistakes that reveal, through their own ignorance of them, the implicit knowledge and skills that most long-time members take for granted (p. 115).

Despite their relatively isolated and, in effect, helpless roles in the network, newbies play a crucial role in the maintenance of the community – a role that, as will be seen below, traders are highly sensitive to. The socialization of newbies provides the mechanism by which the social structure and values are reproduced.
Traders. The vast majority of p-hookers simply serve the role of “traders,”\(^\text{11}\) engaged in the day-to-day activities of the community: trading shows privately and responding to discussions publicly. Traders are distinguished from one another largely by their levels of involvement: some trade more frequently, some post more frequently, some frequently do both. A few traders play a more distinguished role in the network as “stars,” or actors who are “highly central to the network” (Brass, 1995, p. 45). Specifically, these traders (most prominently p-hookers Yamar and Philandlinda) position themselves as “newbie friendly,” consistently offering assistance and advice to new members of the group.\(^\text{12}\) For the most part, however, “traders” occupy a relatively homogenous and somewhat invisible role within the network.

Leonard. One role within the network stands out: the role of Leonard, a network star if ever there was one. Leonard is the owner and creator of Phishhook, who runs the web site. Leonard plays a prominent role at Phishhook, both as a participant who is seen on the discussion boards, acting as any other p-hooker, and as a figure with god-like control over the board. Members are keenly aware of Leonard’s presence and position and openly acknowledge that “it’s his house!” (wizjp). For his part, Leonard attempts to play both roles evenhandedly, as evidenced by his statement “some of the actions I take on this site will be made solely by me. Others are made as a result of perceived popular opinion.” Leonard’s attempts to remain balanced, as will be seen in the discussion of the community “crisis” below, are relatively successful. Nevertheless, the fact that he owns the web site and operates it at his own time, energy, and expense is a fact never far from the surface: any community that exists at Phishhook is one that could be taken away easily at Leonard’s whim.

If Leonard is a god-like figure, however, he represents a god who would rather watch his own creation unfold than meddle in its affairs. Trader I, for example, feels that Leonard adopts a rather laissez-faire posture towards the community he hosts on his servers: “leonard is a great guy, but I think he’s kinda afraid to make too many waves, he doesn’t want to take responsibility for the community created, just wants to let it have a place to be, I think.” Accordingly, Leonard does not play as dominant of a role as might be expected in terms of structuring the social scene. While he certainly posses the ultimate power to

\(^{11}\) “Traders” is not a term used by p-hookers to describe a network role; rather, I have chosen it to describe the general nature of the role played by the vast majority of members.

\(^{12}\) The traders mentioned above are frequently seen inviting newbies into their “Adopt-a-Newbie” program, an off-site program designed not to introduce new traders to Phishhook, but to the basics of the hobby of trading in general.
shape Phishhook in any way he wishes, he is very reluctant to use that power, and p-hookers recognize that reluctance. P-hookers often refer to “Leonard’s wishes”: that discussions should be relatively civil and not be devoted to drug use or other illegal activities. Beyond expressing these wishes, Leonard adopts a hands-off role to Phishhook, but the fact that members refer to “Leonard’s wishes” when discussing which behaviors are and are not acceptable on the discussion boards illustrates that the role Leonard has adopted may have unintended consequences. Leonard’s role, then, lurks deep beneath the skin of Phishhook’s social structure, a kind of bottom line influence on behavior that will rarely be exerted – at least directly.

Network Ties

The ties that are formed between network members at Phishhook vary greatly. Some relationships are based solely on one trade and dissolve once the trade has been completed, some evolve over the course of several trades before dissipating, some transform into lasting and meaningful bonds. Again, while painting a technical picture of these ties is beyond the scope of this study, the differing categories of ties can nevertheless be described in general using traditional network analysis concepts.

Frequency and Stability. The duration of ties between members can be classified into three broad categories: one-shot, short-term, and long term. One-shot relationships last for the duration of one trade, and then the tie resolves. Such dissolution may be due to a bad trading experience (discs not sent, poor quality of show, speed of trade) or simply due to lack of common interests.13 Short-term relationships are common – people tend to continue trading with the same partners. As Trader Eleven commented, “when you deal with people you’ve traded successfully with before, you know the outcome is going to be good.” Stories of lasting relationships which have developed are not as common, but certainly circulate. Trader Nineteen described one such relationship:

I made a trade with a young man from North Carolina about a year ago. He had never traded with anyone before and I picked his name up from a web site where he had posted a wished-for show which I had. I Emailed him that I had the show and sent my list. He owned one or two shows only so I said I would trade for them. He mentioned an additional show by a performer who was his wife’s favorite. He decided to trade a show he wanted for this one for his wife. I told him I would send the additional show as well and we could make it up later on. That was a couple of years ago and he and I continue to trade regularly. It was a good trade because I not only developed a positive

13 I, for example, am not likely to continue trading with a trader who’s collection consists almost exclusively of bands like Phish and the Grateful Dead – while I like those bands, I prefer greater diversity and choose to continue relationships with traders whose collections are more eclectic.
relationship with someone but I helped him get started in a hobby that I love and now he does, too.

While most of the ties between traders seem to fit the short-term relationship category, taken as a whole, the ties between traders clearly vary greatly as to the frequency of interaction.

**Direction and Symmetry.** As ties between traders vary according to frequency and stability, so do they vary between direction and symmetry. In trading relationships, ties are relatively symmetrical – trading partners generally treat each other as equals (trades which are unequal are frowned upon in the negotiation stage, although one partner may freely choose to go beyond the negotiated trade). In relationships between newbies and traders, however, the ties are clearly asymmetrical. As mentioned above, newbies must rely on the kindness of others since they are unable to directly return the favors granted them. Accordingly, the reciprocity implicit in the tie between trader is generalized to the community, such that newbies often acknowledge their obligation to future newbies with statement’s such as this made by Hossimo: “I would be grateful for any B&P help. I have two incoming shows on my ‘oneyeaphish’ I am hoping to expand it rapidly so I can give it back to the community with b&p offer.” By displacing reciprocity to the community as a whole, a general symmetry of ties is maintained, even if the specific relationship is imbalanced. *This symmetry promotes the sense of generosity that pervades Phishhook and is essential in sustaining the trading network.*

**Strength and Multiplexity.** Ties between p-hookers vary greatly as to their strength and multiplexity as well. Certainly, the majority of relationships formed are largely instrumental, based on the economic transaction of concert recordings. But the relationships extend beyond such exchanges. Along4theride describes Phishhook as “a place to meet cool people and exchange shows, ideas, and thoughts” (73). Relationships extend beyond the site as well, with constant references to p-hookers “hooking up” at concerts and developing friendships – stories of a few marriages circulate as well. And while marriages are certainly exceptional relationships, traders frequently speak of meeting up with others who are in towns that they happen to be visiting. Trader One wrote that one person he traded with “even invited my wife and I to stay at his ranch if we ever go to Australia.” The variety of ties between traders provides a basis to form robust relationships which transcend simple economic exchanges and can form the robust relationships which help provide the “sense” of community.
Summary

P-hookers view themselves as a largely homogenous group in terms of age, gender, and musical interest, although they recognize and celebrate what diversity exists in their community. Similarly, the roles which members occupy within the network are relatively undifferentiated, save for the amount of involvement a trader chooses to give in the socialization of newbies. The relationships which develop from this relatively similar mix, however, prove to be quite diverse, in traditional network terms. Relationships between traders at Phishhook certainly are dominated, initially, by economic transactions, but members certainly allow their relationships to transcend such interactions. The ability for p-hookers to develop robust, multiplex relationships plays a crucial role developing the sense of communitas experienced by the majority of p-hookers.
CHAPTER FIVE:
COMMUNITY-RELATED CHARACTERISTICS OF PHISHHOOK.COM

The structural composition of Phishhook is characterized by a relatively homogenous group of individuals who are able to develop robust relationships that extend far beyond the simple trading of concert recordings. This structure forms the basis of, and is in turn formed by, the system of norms and values which characterize the field of interaction at Phishhook as a community.

Patterned Interaction: Community Norms

Any social system operates according to a set of norms and rules, both formal and informal. Phishhook is no exception, and operates according to a complex system of norms and expectations. Trader One remarked, “I was surprised to find out how structured the ‘rules’ of trading are.” These norms can be classified according to the behaviors they seek to regulate. Thus, norms at Phishhook operate in two broad senses: technical and behavioral. Technical norms are aimed at governing the details of the trading process including issues such as software, hardware, and other minute details. Behavioral norms, on the other hand, aim to govern the quality of the interactions between members, influencing how they treat one another.

P-hookers explicitly recognize both types of norms as important. This recognition is demonstrated in a thread begun by dragon813gt entitled “PHISHHOOK SHOULD BE MORE WORRIED ABOUT THIS THAN KICKING PEOPLE OFF OR D_H13:

(. . . .) What bothers me more is the reputation of Phook trades is in the shitter. I have seen a lot of posts on numerous lists saying don’t trade with anyone at Phishhook. It seems that we have been branded as bad traders. We trade poor quality shows (snap, crackle, pop), rip people off outright, and don’t reply when emailed (. . . .). All in all it seems that we are shitty traders. I for one am pissed off about this. I remember when the Hook was the place to come and get high quality shows from.

In the very lengthy discussion that follows, most traders don’t agree with dragon813gt’s assessment of Phishhook, but do recognize that he brings up an important problem: maintaining the strength of a normative system of common practices. Allgoodthings29, for example, responded:

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1 A reference to the member who goes by the black login Dick_Hertz, whose behavior figures prominently in the “crisis” discussed below.
I do my best to educate folks who inquire about trades and stuff on the standards we’re trying to keep up. I try to explain the HOWS and WHYs to them in hopes that they will see the point and we can preserve this stuff and spread it to folks who enjoy it.

While members overwhelmingly found Phishhook to be a community of “good” traders, they also, like Allgoodthings29, recognized the importance of norms in maintaining that reputation.

Technical Norms

The technical norms operating in the Phishhook community seek to define a common body of trading practices. Such norms are essential in that they directly influence the quality of the recordings that circulate within the exchange network. DanielShay, responding to a trader who asks if he should transfer his analog recordings to CD for trade, argues:

Never trade something that you have transferred from analog for personal use. So many people in our community don’t care what the source info is (Dewd... its just tunez!) that even if you let them know beforehand, they won’t care and certainly wouldn’t give the same consideration to a different trader.

Here, DanielShay acknowledges that a set of norms certainly can’t guarantee perfection because not everyone will comply. Implicit in his argument, however, is the understanding that a strong set of technical norms directly influences the quality of product traded, regardless if traders choose to follow the norms that should govern their behavior or not. To maximize the quality of recordings which circulate, then, p-hookers have developed a long set of norms governing the technical issues surrounding trading.

Disc-at-Once Recording. Of all the technical norms operating at Phishhook, by far the most universally accepted is that prescribing Dist-at-Once (DAO) recording. This mode of recording is available on most available CD burners and, unlike Track-at-Once (TAO) recording, does not place two-second gaps in between tracks, as are typically heard on studio recordings. Instead, DAO mode writes a CD all at once, rather than track-by-track.

Traders find this feature essential: live performances, unlike studio albums, aren’t punctuated by gaps and silences. Accordingly, if a CD is recorded TAO, the natural “flow” of the performance is interrupted. As Trader Eleven put it:

The DAO vs. TAO thing I got right away, because I had always gotten good quality, DAO stuff, so when I got the TAO show... I was pissed. It definitely takes away from the recording. I get into this groove when I listen to music and when you have that 2 second gap between songs, it totally breaks the groove.
More bluntly, in a complaint voiced on the General Discussion Board, Dan implored:

PLEASE STOP SENDING ME TAO AND GENERIC DISCS, I WON'T SEND THEM TO YOU, DON'T SEND THEM TO ME. THEY ARE SHIT. I DO NOT WANT ANY TYPE OF CLICK, POP, RESET OR ANY INTERRUPTION TO THE LIVE FLOW OF MUSIC.

Trader Eleven and Dan, in different manners, clearly explain the frustration with recordings which are TAO. The preference is simply one for quality, and the norm is so strongly held because compliance is so simple: virtually all software burning programs offer this feature\(^2\) – it is simply a matter of turning the feature on.

*Exact Audio Copy.* Exact Audio Copy (EAC) is software program used to “extract” music from a CD to a user’s hard drive. Users then “burn” this CD to a CD-R using a burning program.\(^3\) This process (including “burning”) is usually referred to as “extracting,” as opposed to “disc-to-disc” burning, where a software program stores information from the source CD in a temporary file before burning it to the new CD-R. Yamar explained the difference between extraction and disc-to-disc burning on the Technical Trading Board:

( ... ) I *never* burn disc-to-disc. The reason is that burning directly is the #1 way to introduce flaws and errors into you newly made copy. Most traders request/require that you extract the music from an audio disc to your hard drive (most often using the free program EAC – Exact Audio Copy) and then burn the copy from files on your hard drive. This is important to do because even if you don’t get audible errors on the newly made copy, the tracks burned disc-to-disc are rarely exact matches to the original on a close inspection level (using a WAV file editor for comparison).

EAC is expected of traders at Phishhook because it guarantees that copies are exact clones of the sources. Traders argue that EAC provides this guarantee because unlike any other software program – for extraction or for burning – it checks each CD for potential errors. As one trader told me while negotiating a trade\(^4\):

*to me; EAC is a must! even if you don’t really notice it.*

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\(^2\) And, if a trader has an old burning program that does not support DAO, several can be downloaded for free. Some older CD burners, it should be noted, do not have DAO capabilities, however.

\(^3\) The most commonly referenced burning programs are CDRWIN, Feurio!, and Adaptec EZCDCreator. While p-hookers have their preferences between these programs – and certainly discuss those preferences – there is no normative expectation that any of these “burning” programs be used.

\(^4\) I was not an EAC user before this encounter – I had seen the name of the program floating around, but had not paid much attention to it. I became an EAC user simply because this trader would not trade with me if I didn’t use EAC; he had some shows I was very interested in and so I figured that I would give EAC a try. And while I didn’t notice any appreciable difference between EAC and the configuration I had been using, I found the interface easy enough and simply adopted EAC to conform to the community norms.
it's currently the best ripper out there. mainly because it checks each questionable sound up to like 60 some times. for example, I've taken badly damaged discs and burned a clean copy by using eac. sometimes it might take a few hrs. but it's worth it, when the disc is scratched so bad that it's worthless and u can't listen to it. and EAC has many other options, that are worth having.

This trader's argument reflects those commonly made in the community: EAC is viewed as simply the best program for reproducing audio CDs. As Trader 20 argues, “It's important to keep the music as pure as possible, and EAC is the only extraction tool that double checks everything.”

Such claims, however, are hard to verify. When EAC is lauded, claims are made without pointing to sources that might prove them true. Despite this lack of verification, however, the prescription to use EAC persists with normative force. The success of this norm seems to stem from several factors. First, the program is free – so choosing to adopt this community practice exacts little investment from traders, save an initial time commitment to download and set up the program. Secondly, the norm of EAC use is visible, ubiquitous, and largely unchallenged, so users seem to simply adopt the practice in absence of arguments not to.

Media. The most discussed norm at Phishhook governs the use of high quality media. In this context, media refers simply to the brand of CD-R used by traders. Traders divide media into two broad categories “high quality” (often abbreviated HQ) and “generic.”

There is no clear line between “high quality” and “generic,” but several slightly different divisions are invoked. Some traders simply derive their distinctions according to brand name: discs manufactured by HP, Mitusi, Sony, Fuji, and TDK (and occasional other brands such as Verbatim) are considered HQ, other brands are not. Others, such as EyesOfTheWorld draw the lines geographically: “I believe that any disc made in Japan is a Taiyo Yuden disc." Any disc made any Taiwan or Mexico is considered inferior in quality.” These discussions are often quite technical, with claims made about the type of dyes used by various manufacturers and the effects of those technical production processes.

Other traders base their arguments about disc quality based on personal experience. For example, mthreek argues: “I've been using Imation for about a year without the slightest problem. They have been incredibly consistant with any playing and/or burning device, at this point would not think of changing.”

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5 This time commitment, however, can be significant for some – configuring EAC to work properly is the most frequent topic of discussion on the Technical Trading Help board.
phishmarisol8, on the other hand, contends: "I have had nothing but problems with Imations. They won’t extract right on my computer, and I have seen several with pin holes in them." Both traders draw on their own experiences in an attempt to explain why they use – or don’t use – certain media brands.

Ultimately, there is no commonly accepted answer to the question of media quality. Dragon813gt posted a lengthy reply to the above discussion of Imations, which appears to be well researched, and argues:

Nothing is proven with discs in any way at all. No one disc is better than another. Most of the claims of superior discs are just that, claims. But we all have the right to choose which brands we want to use and receive when it comes to trading.

Dragon813gt’s claim points to the ultimate normative force of the media discussion: it is not so much the quality of the media that is at stake, it is the choice made by traders which persuades people to choose certain discs. Trader One sums this sentiment up well, stating “most of my standards for media brand formed because other people required that I use “good” media … to avoid any conflict I use generally accepted media.” Trader One’s experience is typical: high quality media predominate, regardless of their supposed superiority, simply because that’s what traders use and expect others to use as well.

While media, EAC, and DAO are the most discussed technical norms, others operate with significant normative force as well. One such norm is the prescription against using recordings which have been, at some point, converted into mp3s, expressed well by LucyOnTheRun who asked a trader to “Do the trading community a favor… Don’t offer the mp3s for trade. Keep them for your own use.” Traders don’t want mp3-sourced material because sound is lost during the compression process that makes the file easy to transfer online. Others include: no writing on discs7, sending discs in bubble rather than fiber mailers, and using some sort of protective sleeve for the discs. All of these norms are presented, and as will be seen below, adopted relatively uncritically, creating a common set of practices among the traders at Phishhook.

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6 Taio Yuden is the largest CD manufacturer in Japan and is granted, by many traders, the status of being the only producer of high quality CDs.
7 Two reasons are given for this norm. First, some users simply have their own personal preferences as to what should be written on discs in their collection, or simply want to ensure legible handwriting. Other users contend that the use of markers on a CD surface will eventually break down a disc and render it useless. This claim is essentially unverified, much like those for the superiority of EAC or certain media
Behavioral Norms

Each of the norms above applies to specific things that a trader uses or does in the process of trading, governing technical aspects of the activity. A broader set of norms operates as well, governing the general behavior of community members. These norms are both instrumental in that they produce behaviors essential to the exchange network, and communal in that they serve to produce behavior which orient traders to one another in ways which transcend a mere economic relationship. Five such norms are clearly in operation: honesty, communication, legality, reciprocity, and positiveness.

Honesty. When traders list their "trading rules" on their lists, they frequently invoke the simply phrase "Be Honest" or some variation thereof as one of their rules. Andytaylor, on his rules list, for example, expects "just be honest trader, if I like ya, I will probably continue tradin w/ you". On his list, bertwsp writes "I am always as honest as possible when it comes to scratches, glitches, pops, fuzz, etc. And I expect the same in return before trading." One trader, after initially agreeing to a trade with me, sent a subsequent e-mail once he remembered an error on one of the disc he was to copy, writing:

I forgot to twll you on the beefheart disc at the start of the disc there are some clicks that last for about 1 second but everything else is fine it does detract from the recording at all. I thought that you should know. Email me if there are any probs.

And while there are certainly dishonest traders within the network, p-hookers experience a remarkable level of trust within the community — comments such as "trust is just assumed" (Trader 14) and "it’s amazing the trust in the community" (Trader 10) are frequent. In this way, references to “honesty” serve as both prescription and description, as traders simultaneously encourage honesty in others and recognize the honesty which pervades the community.

Communication. Like “honesty,” “communication” is frequently invoked as a normative statement by p-hookers. Their notion of “communication” is relatively uncomplicated - here, it simply means “contact,” or, more specifically, “contact throughout the course of a trade.” DownSouthPanic lists communication as a trading rule, asking traders to:

brands, making the first reason much more understandable. The reason behind the norm is largely irrelevant, however — the vast majority of traders simply do not write on discs, regardless of the rationale. Such errors are common on discs, whether introduced as some contend through disc-to-disc burning, or simply existing on the master. Traders do expect, however, to be warned ahead of time about such glitches. I have similar experiences: in the time I was conducting my research, I engaged in about 50 trades exclusively through Phishhook. I received every trade. Of the 6 trades I conducted off-site, I did not receive discs in three of them.

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Keep in contact throughout the entire trade. This is really key to a great trade. If there are any problems, email me and let me know. I am a busy persona and am very understanding when it comes to things that may arise throughout the course of a trade.

DownSouthPanic echoes the common sentiment on Phishhook that simply keeping in contact will avoid conflicts and resolve any problems early. Accordingly, traders commonly ask both parties to send e-mails when discs are sent, received, or whenever any problem arises throughout the course of the trade.

Matt_NCC sums up the community sentiment simply: "Communication is the most important element in trading."

Reciprocity. As mentioned above, reciprocity within the trading network is necessary, but extended. Newbies enter into the community as a result of the kindness of traders – and in turn are expected to fulfill their obligation, eventually, to some future newbie. Recognition of the norm of reciprocity can be seen in both B&P offers and newbie grovels. In a B&P offer, tela13 recognizes her normative obligation to the community, writing: “Hi there. Well the time has come for me to teach all that I have learned from this great community. I am willing to take on one shn newbie.” In a grovel, slogear writes: “hello kind souls I am new to the trading scene and need help getting started to contribute to this beautiful community. Any B&PS are appreciated and I will definitely return the favor (KARMA) Thankx fo yo time. Joe.” These two messages illustrate the progression expected as one moves from the role of newbie to the role of trader: *p-hookers, once they are able, are expected to contribute back to the community in the form of helping newbies the way they were once helped themselves.*

Legality. While the exact legal status of trading is somewhat confusing, traders expect that others operate according to the law, or at least their understanding of the law. Trader Nineteen reported: “I think most traders are appreciative of the taping policies of musicians and respect them.” A link to Phish’s trading policy appears on Phishhook’s home page as a baseline for guiding legal conduct and serves to structure the rules for trading on the site. As trader Lumpy puts it in the rules section of his list: “Trading live music is a privilege, not a right. Abide by the rules and we will all be able to spread the good vibes.” P-hookers clearly understand the *importance* of trading legally.

What is less understood is the legal *status* of trading. According to the law, trading is only legal when (1) no money is exchanged, or any other type of profit realized, and (2) the artists have given permission for recordings of their concerts to be made *and* distributed. Trading of any other materials is
illegal, although the RIAA explicitly states they are not interested in, and will not prosecute, such violations – provided no profit is involved.

Certainly, some community members are aware of the exact legal status of trading. Several interview respondents indicated that they understood the legality of trading, echoing comments such as Trader 17’s statement: “If the band allows fans to tape at shows then those shows are tradable. I think its great all the way around. As long as no one is selling them I have no problems with this.” Trader 18 recognizes the importance of this legal understanding, claiming: “I only collect shows from bands that allow trading. People who trade other artists are endangering our community......” Some community members clearly understand the legalities of trading. Significantly, however, those understandings were articulated in response to interviews\(^{10}\) – messages about trading’s legal standing in community discourse are far more rare.

The general understanding which pervades the community is half correct. Traders are very clear about what is illegal. The communal understanding of illegality revolves around two issues: money and copyright. Trader Two sums this understanding up:

My understanding is that you can trade all you want as long as you don’t make a profit and its not something that’s commerically available. I just follow those guidelines and don’t worry about that (....) Tape trading is completely legal as long as there is no money involved and the music which is being traded doesn’t have a copyright. Traders understand that studio albums are not to be traded – and that understanding extends to official releases of live recordings as well, something you can buy like a Dick’s Pick or Live Phish.\(^{11}\)

Trader Two, like the majority of p-hookers points to profit and official releases as illegal. In their understanding of what is illegal, traders are absolutely correct.

When it comes to understanding what is legal, however, p-hookers are somewhat less clear. The above understanding of what is illegal tends to be viewed as the sum total of what recordings circulate illegally. Thus, Trader One articulates the community’s common understanding of legality:

My understanding is that is legal to trade non-copyright protected recordings. It is illegal to sell these recordings (under copyright law)\(^{12}\) and it is illegal to trade copyrighted

\(^{10}\) And even in interviews, only five respondents correctly represented trading’s legal status.

\(^{11}\) Dick’s Picks and Live Phish are a series of recordings released by the Grateful Dead and Phish, respectively, on a periodic basis. When such a recording is released, traders are typically informed by others that their recordings are no longer legal to circulate. Trader 19, for example, reports that he has “taken some of is shows out of circulation when they’ve been released commercially, e.g. “Dick’s Picks.””

\(^{12}\) Actually, copyright law does not enter into the equation, as, technically, concert performances are not copyrighted.
material. As long as no profit is made by either party, then the trade is legal. I completely avoid trading with people who offer to do 2 for 1 or offer to sell CDs.

Here, what is not clearly illegal is transformed to become legal. The ethos which regulates the general community understanding of legality is thus *don't trade copyrighted material and don't make a profit.* This ethos, however, provides an incomplete – and inaccurate – picture of trading’s legal status.

This understanding allows traders to continue trading bands, even if they know the artists are opposed to the taping and trading of their performances. Traders are certainly aware of artists’ opposition to taping and trading. Trader Ten, for example, states “Robert Fripp I know would frown on my King Crimson collection." Traders negotiate this contradiction by separating the activities of trading and taping. Trader 14 argues:

If a performer comes out and says, I will not allow taping of my performances I certainly respect that and leave the taping gear at home. But if no one records the show from the audience and the sound person allows a patch, that is not my fault. That is the fault of the performer for hiring a crew that does not follow their rules for the concert.

Once trading and taping are separated as activities, their legal status can be separated as well. In a discussion on legality in the General Discussion Board, cdr trade articulates the common understanding that “TRADING is not illegal. SELLING is illegal as is TAPING.”

The normative understanding of legality, then, is that you are generally free to trade unreleased material, regardless of whether or not it is authorized, provided you are not making a profit. While this understanding may be partial and incomplete, it is enforced quickly and vehemently by p-hookers. When a potential violation revolves around the first half of the understanding, unreleased materials, responses tend to be mild and informative. Raincooker2, for example, responds to a trader looking for a particular Grateful Dead show by writing: “11-1-85 has been officially released by GD Productions. You shouldn’t be fishing for that one. The official release sounds earthshatteringly superb, and I recommend you pick it up.” Mistakes regarding official releases are made easily, and members tend to simply inform other p-hookers that they material they are looking or trying to trade should no longer be traded.

When money or profit is the issue, however, the community reaction is far more severe, as this is the issue which members perceive to be the most threatening. In the following exchange, a trader posts on

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13 Traders can be confronted with this knowledge sometimes in the very recordings they trade. Recently, I received a Frank Zappa show which begins with an announcer reminding the audience that “no taping is allowed.”
the B&P’s and Grovels board an offer as “a way to help all you Newbies.” The offer is simple – he will sell his collection at what he terms the price of spindle of CD’s. The following responses illustrate the voracity with which the community responds to those who seek, or could be seen as seeking, a profit:

miketrades: since this offer is illegal – it violates phook policy and phish policy – i hope y’all turn this tool into kevin shapiro. i know i have.
eclispedterrarin
THIS IS TOTAL BULLSHIT. fist off spindles of 50cds are at the MOST 19.99.. and I could honestly care the fuck less if you were asking a dollar per 50.. this is WRONG and will not be tolerated.. (....)
Just because you need money for law school does not give you the right to completely violate all rules of free trading. You could ruin all of our hobbies.
jeffstapes225: man, your head is so far up your ass, I can see it coming out your mouth. Having over 300 shows on you list, you should’ve known long ago that this bullshit is not tolerated here or anywhere……
claybum (. . .) The root of my problem was I needed to get a FRICKIN JOB and lay low on the fun stuff that was eating up my money. I suggest this guy does the same and keep his music and preserve his karma and quite giving the message to newbie that is ok to sell the music that is freely given to us by the artists.

This reaction is atypical in its length and intensity, but clearly illustrates the manner in which the community responds to illegal activity. While the common understanding of illegality is not correct, it is enforced as if it were, indeed, the law.

**Enforcement of Norms: System of Social Control**

While each of the above norms operate to different degrees, members at Phishhook have developed a number of means to ensure that these norms are effectively communicated and enforced. The growth of Phishhook as a community testifies, to some extent, to the success of this system. As Trader Ten humorously commented: “I’m really amazed at how it all holds together. It’s completely based on trust and when you’re dealing with bands like Phish and the Dead you come across a lot of chemically induced people but it all works.” The system of enforcement by which “it all holds together” can be classified according to Ellickson’s (1991) system: first party, second party, and third party.

**First-Party Enforcement.** Clearly, members are concerned about the behavior of others and, accordingly, conscious of their own behaviors, as evidenced by the prevalence of “rules” sections on individual traders’ lists. The attention to one’s own behavior begins with the generosity of others – traders
are able to trade in the first place only because of the goodwill of those whose generosity, through B&P trades, has helped them get started. Trader Seven commented:

I was very grateful that these people would share their music with me and didn’t expect anything in return. I read everything I could about etiquette so as not to take anybody for granted. After a few trades, I pretty much knew what I was doing.

Trader Seven’s care to make sure that he conformed to “etiquette” is common – members, as a general rule, take care to act ethically towards one another. Dailydead, in response to newbie who felt that he had been wronged in a trade, wrote “the trading community is one of the most giving and ethical groups I have ever been a part of.”

Members not only take care to ensure that their own behaviors conform to community standards, but also speak frequently of taking preventative measures to avoid potential problems. Traders look for “signs” when they are about to enter into a trading relationship. Size of collection and amount of detail provided on lists are commonly referenced as signs to look for, indicating the trustworthiness of a trader. SoManyRds argues, “might sound a little snobish, but I don’t trade with folks with a few shows on their list...and info on what they use, source.” Others, such as Trader 19, look to the way that traders represent themselves in e-mails, and are warned off by short messages, lack of personal information, and spelling errors. Positive signs, such as honesty about flaws in recordings, are also afforded careful attention. Trader 13 sums up the effectiveness of this preventative approach, commenting:

I really believe you can sense someone through their “voice” online. Honesty is always important. If there is a flaw in a show that you are trading, let the person know. When you do this is shows that you are honest. I have people discouraging me from getting a certain show from them because it is not very good quality. This shows they are looking out for you. If you do the same, you’re passing the torch. It is based on the honor system. It works pretty fucking well for the most part, considering how many people trade online.

The success of Phishhook as a trading community is clearly due in large part to the self-enforcement measures of members, monitoring their own behavior and watching for warning signs in the behavior of others before problems arrive.

Second-Party Enforcement. Traders also enforce community norms through the contracts they enter into in e-mail negotiations for trades. For the most part, these contracts are implicit: in trades, members negotiate details such as the disks to be sent, media to be used, whether or not set lists or cover art will be included, and the date on which discs are to be sent. Such agreements, as mentioned above, are
sealed by the exchange of addresses. For example, in a trade I participated in, the contract was concluded with the e-mail:

Sounds good, Dan. I'll get your 9/1/94 out by wed. also. Are Fujis ok?
later
Trader
PO Box 5555
Denver, CO 55555

Such contracts provide the basis by which members hold one another accountable during trades and any problems are generally resolved in private communication. Box 5.1 illustrates a typical example of an e-mail exchange in which a problem is privately resolved. Here, the breach of contract is explained, discussed, and ultimately resolved. This process is typical of second-party enforcement between traders—most discrepancies are resolved privately and unseen.

Third-Party Enforcement. Phishhook members also communicate and enforce norms publicly, in front of the community at large. Like first-party enforcement, where members both monitor their own behavior and actively filter the behaviors of others to prevent problems, third-party enforcement involves a preventative process (socialization) and a punitive process (sanction). In other trading circles, stories circulate of traders turning to official authorities in response to “bad traders.” One story, for example, tells the story of a trader who tracked a “bad trader” down from his e-mail address to the dorm he lived in at a Midwestern university. The trader then turned the “bad trader” in to the university’s Dean of Students for committing mail fraud. I did not encounter such stories at Phishhook, however. Instead, p-hooker seem to rely on more informal, implicit means of enforcement.

I. Socialization. As was discussed in the previous chapter, traders are quite serious about socializing newbies into the community. Traders have two options available to socialize newbies: direct or indirect socialization. A discussion on the B&P’s and Grovels board reproduced in Box 5.2 clearly illustrates these different strategies. CUphish441 adopts the direct approach, describing in detail the norms which operate at Phishhook for the curious newbie. In doing so, CUphish441 provides dmb head with a template to follow to ensure that his activities will be received well by other p-hookers. This strategy is certainly effective: Trader Twenty, reflecting on the socialization process commented that “once the trader

14 I no longer trade the show in mention without first telling my potential partner of the problems which were brought to my attention.
BOX 5.1

SECOND-PARTY ENFORCEMENT VIA E-MAIL

From: Trader trader@trader.org
To: danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: Re: miles trade
Date: Tue, 19 Feb 2002 16:50:50 -0700

Dan, got the discs today. What’s up with the TAO?

From: “Dan Lair” danlair@hotmail.com
To: trader@trader.org
Subject: Re: miles trade
Date: Tue, 19 Feb 2002 16:55:40 -0700

Which disc is TAO? That is news to me. Let me know and I’ll double check and fix it or at least send you something else to make up for it. Sorry about that, I had no idea. Thanks kindly, Dan

From: Trader trader@trader.org
To: danlair@hotmail.com
Subject: Re: miles trade
Date: Tue, 19 Feb 2002 19:30:20 -0700

Both discs are TAO.
I think the problem is that at some point both these shows were converted from TAO to DAO which permanently encodes a small click between tracks even if it gets rid of the 2 second gap. Reburning probably won’t help. What this does is ruin the flow of the show. I just wanted to make you aware of this so that you can note this for future trades. This kind of thing happens there is not much anybody can do about it other than note it and not trade the show as DAO. 7/17/86 is just a bad show the gaps are large and in between 3 and 4 and 4 and 5 it seems like large chunks of songs are missing. I can’t put these shows up for trade as DAO. All I ask is that you note this on your list so no one else gets this unexpectedly.

You don’t need to replace the shows I just wanted you to know,
Trader
SOCIALIZATION STRATEGIES

Welcome!!! The first thing you probably want to do is take the Lilliwhite sessions off of your list since I'm pretty sure that that is not tradeable material. If you've got a burner then life will be easier for you once you get some b&p's and what not. Look at other people's lists for their rules and what not.

This site is used by many people trading live performances of many many artists. You may be wondering "huh? trading?" However, this is how things work around here. As a newbie, a few people will probably hook you up with some shows to begin with, then you accumulate Phishhook trading list with which you can trade copies of the shows you have for mo shows. Also B and P's are VERY important, especially as a newbie, like yourself. A "B and P" stands for "blanks and postage." With these, someone will offer you a show, as long as you send the blank discs in with an extra, self-addressed, stamped return envelope. After, you have accumulated a sizeable list, 10+ shows, you can go out and trade more on your own, without being as reliable on other Phishhookers. In case you are wondering, EVERYTHING is done through the mail. You give traders your address, and they can send you stuff. And, yes, sometimes people will rip you off, but that's just the risk you take... it rarely happens in such a great community, but you must trade with trustworthy people, who you will begin to meet. If you do get burned on a trade, all you can really do is notify the of Phishhook about the bad trader so we can also be careful about not trading with them, but NEVER label someone a bad trader unless you have not received your stuff within 1 month of when the trade began, but do try to give people the benefit of the doubt.

Basically, our trading rules are:

1) No generic discs. I only accept Fuji's, TDK's HP's, Sony's, etc...  
2) Please burn DAO (disc at once).  
3) No writing on discs.  
4) Please send discs in sleeves  
5) Please use bubble mailers.
learned you didn’t know much, they invariably would let me know what was expected and I followed their lead."

Of the two strategies, the indirect socialization strategy employed by kerr420 is far more common. Kerr420 points to a specific example of expected behavior (legality) and then points the newbie to look at others’ rules and adopt them. Johnbrook, in a discussion about media quality on Technical Trading Help adopts a similar strategy, writing: “If you plan on trading seriously, then you’ll definitely want to know what the better brands are. Everybody has a preference, but after a while you’ll notice a few common brands among traders. Choose those and keep with them [emphasis added]” Such statements are normative at two levels: (1) in the specific practice mentioned, in this case that there are certain brands of media that are to be used, and certain brands that are not to be used; (2) at a more general level, teaching newbies to look at patterns in the practices of other traders and adopt their behaviors accordingly.

This second strategy seems to be more effective. Traders consistently remark that they develop their own standards and expectations by mimicking those of others. Trader 20 “pretty much copied other traders practices, and (...) learned along the way that there are reasons for each one of them;” Trader 18 recognized that “there are certain standards that the community as a whole embraces. These are all good idea’s so I, like many others, adopted them.” This uncritical adoption of norms by simply adopting common patterns reflects that of adopting the rationales behind such norms as media quality and legality in the first place. The process is simple, for certain, and effective, in that it quickly reproduces a social structure based upon a consistent set of practices that traders can expect to operate in their relations with one another.

2. Sanctions. P-hookers are certainly not shy about taking action when they feel they have been wronged. The term ubiquitously applied to those accused of dishonesty is “Bad Trader.”15 This term is generally applied to those who commit the most egregious violation of norms, not returning their end of a trade, although it will sometimes be applied to those who send shows of horrible quality.16 Traders will quickly gain reputations as “Bad Traders” if they violate their agreements – as Trader Eleven commented, “from what I’ve seen, if someone rips someone else off, word gets around.”

15 Interestingly, a few p-hookers, such as Z on his personal list page, refer to them as “Bad Traitors.”
16 Most minor infractions, such as writing on discs or sending a show which is borderline quality (like the exchange illustrated in Box Three, appear to be dealt with in private e-mails.
The primary means by which members are “outed” as bad traders is a practice known as the “Bad Trader” post. A Bad Trader post is usually placed on the Audio CD Trades board, where individuals go to set up trades, although sometimes they are found on the General Discussion Boards and in B&P’s and Grovels, as well. In these posts, a trader generally names the bad trader(s), along with any aliases, e-mail addresses, physical addresses, or other identifiable interests. In the posts that follow, other p-hookers will either confirm, or counter, the “bad trader” claim, telling of their experiences with that trader. Below, I walk though portions of a particular thread begun by tye. This discussion is not typical – usually Bad Trader posts are confined to one or two traders at most. Included in this discussion, however, are the elements which characterize Bad Trader posts in general.

Tye posted this thread on the Audio CD trades board at a time when bad trader posts seemed to be proliferating. The thread began:

**tye:**

I WAS GOING THROUGH THE PAST COUPLE DAYS THREADS AND I STARTED TO MAKE A BAD TRADERS LIST FOR MYSELF AND THOUGHT YOU GUTS SHOULD BE AWARE OF THEM ALL BUT ONE (JUMBOCHILLIN) DID NOT GET ME PERSONALLY BUT I THOUGHT YOU SHOULD KNOW.

[tye then lists 13 names/addresses]

IF YOU HAVE ANY MORE NAMES PLEASE POST THEM HERE SO WE CAN TRY TO GET ONE LARGE LIST OF ANY BAD TRADER LETS SCREW THEM OVER FOR ONCE

In total, to this post, there were 47 responses: 27 listed new bad traders, for a total of 32 bad traders. To begin with, posters simply listed names, and details explaining why the persona was a bad trader.

As the thread continued, two strands of discussion emerged: vigilantism and positive responses. The vigilantes would give an address of a bad trader, followed by comments such as “anybody living by him, fuck with him,” “this guy ripped me off, send this sucker some shit too,” or “go to shopathome.com and sign these fuckers up for some stuff.” There is no way to verify whether or not such actions were taken. But these threats were made in a publicly available forum, sending a double message to would be

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17 I do not reproduce login names here since, even though these comments were made in a publicly available forum, they clearly hint that illegal actions may have been taken in retribution. Such actions could be serious – while I never heard any such talk at Phishhook, in other trading circles rumors circulate of traders who also happen to be hackers retaliating against bad traders by sending them computer viruses.
bad traders: if you fail to make good on trades, not only will your reputation be slandered in the online community, but you may face negative repercussions in the “real” world as well.

The other strand of discussion emerged in response to such vigilantism, urging caution and restraint in labeling traders as “Bad Traders.” Skeets, for example, cautions:

Hi.... I know your intentions are good but if you haven’t been burned personally by the people on you list I would just caution everybody before you put someone on this list to make 100% sure of your facts before you do. Yes there are many bad traders out there but there are also many that have been labeled bad traders due to illness, family problems, and other problems in life... My point is just don’t overeat without knowing the facts first.

Others, such as Gingeet, posted sentiments such as “I just wanted to say thank you to everyone who has come through and helped spread the grooves, aside from a few bad apples this is one sweet bag of fruit (just trying to offset the bad karma in here).” These voices represent the portion of the community which tries to stay away from Bad Trader posts.

Another method in which those who are concerned about the vigilantism involved with Bad Trader posts is the use of the GoodTradeBrigade. The GoodTradeBrigade is a login managed by a few p-hookers like any other trading list, only here, instead of listing concerts, names of traders who have been nominated at least three times by their fellow traders appear. Trader Five describes the process by saying:

if you trade with people and they think you’re a good trader, they recommend you to the Good Trade Brigade. It’s a good thing to have this seal on your web site, for it means that you are trust worthy. You don’t really know other than that unless someone else has traded with them before.

Here, traders who comply with – and exceed – community norms for trading have a chance to build a positive reputation in the community.

Ultimately, the use of both positive and negative sanctions serve as third party enforcement mechanisms to ensure that community norms are followed. Trader Ten remarked “it’s amazing the trust in the community,” a sentiment continually echoed by p-hookers. The effectiveness of this system of creating, communicating, and enforcing norms has created what sportyspice calls “a wonderful opportunity to connect with people from all over, and the ability to trade with ease and confidence despite the fact that nothing is ever 100% full proof.” Traders are well aware that not everyone at Phishhook conforms to the norms the community places – but, as a general rule, they feel confident that the vast majority of members will act in accordance with the community’s wishes.
This confidence creates the core of the community: a field of interaction definable by common and predictable practices which serve to build a sense of trust between members. As a community of practice, Phishhook provides a structure where members can engage in trading relatively free from worry about their efforts being reciprocated. In this sense, what Turner would call structure or Douglas “grid” serve as a foundation around which communal feelings can freely develop. It is to this building of communitas we turn next, exploring the values which pervade interaction at Phishhook.

Shared Belief: Community Values

Music, as the organizing interest, is central to Phishhook, both in name and in practice. Members find the site as a result of trading live concerts. Music is the most frequent topic of discussion. And music is present in the name of the community as well. The centrality of music — and its importance — is summed up by Trader 13, who commented:

What is apparent overall at Phishhook is a deep love and respect for music. Music brings to many strangers together; a strong bond¹⁸ is created through music, whether it is at a live performance or on a discussion board.

Music, as the central interest at Phishhook, serves to unite members in a common purpose: at some level, love for music is what brings members to Phishhook in the first place.

This shared love of music serves as the basis for elevating music beyond simply an organizational rallying point; instead, “music” becomes the source of values shared by the community. In this sense, “music” is linked directly to the genre of music around which the site was organized and is traded most frequently: “jambands.” An outgrowth of the hippie spirit embodied by the Grateful Dead, the values which come from the music to the community tend to be “positive in nature.” Spiralight defines Phishhook as:

a place where people who share a love for music could come to share music and information. This community emulates the spirit of the band(s) it was designed around. We all share one important attribute — we love music and we love to share that music, be it live, recorded or in a message board. Opinions are welcomed and counter opinions are healthy. Instigators and hecklers are not welcomed. The defy the premise of phishhook. We all got way more than we expected from phishhook,¹⁹ it has blossomed into an eclectic site to share music and musical opinions. Dick Hertz is an instigator, which means he is a person who lashes out at others for the sole purpose of bringing everyone

¹⁸ Presumably, Trader 13 means to write “bond” here, rather than “board.”
¹⁹ Spiralight invokes a theme commonly struck by p-hookers, who describe coming to Phishhook simply to store their list and trade shows, but find “way more than we expected.”
around him down. He thrives on hate, controversy and conflict. These are behaviors are counter intuitive to the music we embrace.

By juxtaposing the music to the negative behaviors of some at Phishhook, Spiralight illustrates the way in which p-hookers view music as transcending simply the interest that brings them together. Music, rather, serves as the wellspring of values which shape the community.

The source of the particular music shaping values at Phishhook lends itself, at face value, to the simplistic conclusion that Phishhook is an extremely liberal site.20 P-hookers, on the other hand, deny this claim. In a thread entitled “Whats up with Phish fans being so liberal …..,” p-hookers respond, vehemently, countering the claim that one particular ideology dominates the scene. These response attempt to establish a view of p-hookers (and Phish fans in general) as, in the words of wizjp “maybe not liberal; just a bunch of free thinkers.” Instead, p-hookers view themselves as a diverse and tolerant group. This sentiment is expressed clearly by segal420, who writes in response to the question above:

I think the fact that phish, as well as many of the bands that are mentioned on this site, appeal to a politically diverse community says something about the power of the music and the community that has emerged out of it. so rock on everyone, be you left, right, center, or something else. take care all.

P-hookers take care to explicitly reject the label of “liberal” or “left,” arguing instead that Phishhook is a place that welcomes members of all political leanings.

Instead, p-hookers articulate the set of values that bind them together as largely apolitical, focusing on diversity, tolerance, and respect. Describing these common values in response to the question posed in the thread “Do our musical preferences constitute a religious identity or political affiliation?,” tela 13 writes:

I think that the diversity in this community is enough to prove to anyone that not all “phisheads” are the same. But, I do believe that despite the differences in religious or political beliefs, we all have a general belief in being good to one another. Unfortunately many people who do not understand Phish and other jambands and their fans, think that we are all just a bunch of liberal, smelly, hippies who only care about music and drugs.

The positive vision invoked by the simple phrase “being good to one another” pervades the atmosphere at Phishhook, shaping a sense of community.

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20 And certainly some p-hookers wish this were the case. Muzack, for example, writes “I’m so sick of this right winged bullshit. I thought a phish discussion board would a place where I wouldn’t have to deal with this.”
This imperative is viewed as being derived directly from the music itself. Phinding.Phun, describing those whose behavior at Phishhook she finds offensive (in response to tela13's comments above), writes:

and then there are the few that I tend to stop and think...why are they here? why do they like this happy hippy music if they act so entirely different from the message? why are these people who DON'T believe in being good to each other attracted to a community like this? and why do they have to act disruptive and aggressive?

I have "a general belief in being good to one another," and try to act on that belief through my daily life, and that belief radiates from most of the hookers that I've had the wonderful chance to meet.

The common value system that emerges from the music, then, is one predicated on an essentially positive world view, emphasizing the apolitical virtues of tolerance, respect, diversity, and caring.

This value system gives rise to twin obligations that are placed on community members: "spread the tunes" and "spread the good vibes." Both of these phrases are frequently invoked in both members' personal lists and throughout discussions on the board. Several variations occur on each theme. The "spread the tunes" theme is described alternately as "help spread the music" (ducktree) or "Listen, Enjoy, and Keep Spreading the Music!" (Phishbait). "Spread the good vibes" is sometimes expressed by statements such as "keep sharin' in the groove. Peace" (DogLog2k) or "peace and dank nugs" (dankmon420). These variations, however, still point to the same general theme, that both music and the "feel" that goes with the music are important, and should be passed on.

What both themes share in common are two features: first, that they derive, in some respect, from the music and, second, that they convey an obligation to "spread" to other people. Of the two, "spread the tunes" is more instrumental, referring here to the music itself, and the obligation that members have to make sure that recordings of live concerts circulate widely. "Spread the good vibes," however, operates at a broader, referencing the "feel" (or "vibe") that emanates from the music, compelling others to act towards with another in accordance with the values of the community.
“Spread the Tunes”: Exchange Network as Gift Exchange.

Clearly, the items exchanged in the trading network are commodities: physical objects with relatively equal value\footnote{Even though some recordings are certainly more rare than others, rarity is rarely accorded value in trades. Instead, trades are viewed simply in terms of the number of discs required for each show, and make equal according to those numbers.} which are exchanged in negotiated and equal transactions. But the trading of recordings is not just an exchange of commodities: traders consistently give more, give something of themselves, allowing their transactions to transform the simply economic. Accordingly, these exchanges, take on the qualities of gifts as well, as they become inalienable from the giver (Mauss, 1969).

The transformation of the exchanges between members from commodities to gifts has been explained, in part, above in discussions of both B&P’s for newbies and the technical advice that traders freely share. In B&P trades, for example, the exchange is nowhere near equal. At a simple level, the transactions are equal: newbie sends trader blank discs, trader returns the same number of discs with recorded material on them. The more experienced trader, however, engages in the B&P as an action of both goodwill and extended reciprocity: somebody did them a favor once in providing them with the recordings that started the collection, now they return the favor. Nevertheless, it remains a favor. Accordingly, the B&P transaction takes on the character of a gift transaction – and the generosity involved is self-repeating. \textit{It is precisely the expression of goodwill in receiving a B&P trade that prompts the newbie to return the favor to some generalized other once they have established themselves within the community.}

The information exchanged on the Technical Trading Help discussion board is also an act of gift exchanged, based upon a generalized goodwill. At this board (or, for that matter, on any discussion board where advice is given about trading), those with knowledge share their experiences and opinions with others. Certainly, there is some level of self-interest in such discussions on the part of more experienced traders – traders know that influencing the practices of newcomers has an indirect influence on the quality of shows they receive by affecting the quality of shows in general circulation.

Nevertheless, advice seekers view such responses as acts of generosity. Jimmyisoff\textsuperscript{2}camp, for example, writes: “I also wanted to say thanks to all the people who take the time to help us less technically minded folks negotiate the new high tech trading world of shn and vcd, the community wouldn’t be the
same without y’all.” This comment is embedded within a post where Jimmisoff2camp lists a number or resources for people to learn about VCDs, ultimately fulfilling the extended reciprocity placed upon him by the kindness of previous others. At a broader level, however, this post is demonstrative of the broader implications of the norm of reciprocity. By exchanging “gifts” in addition to simply commodities, members fulfill and perpetuate the sense of extended reciprocity that allow them to “spread the music,” both in terms of content and process.

The generosity and reciprocity implicit in the call to “spread the music” is further created by two practices common to p-hookers: the inclusion of extra discs in trades and “mailbombs,” packages sent to traders randomly, not as a part of a negotiated trade.

*Extras.* While trades are negotiated on an explicitly equal basis to navigate the norm of legality, members are under no obligation to keep such trades equal. Occasionally, traders will exceed the contract they have negotiated. Trader 20, for example, explains: “Many times, I include an extra show, or receive an extra show. Those trades are even better. It’s nice to give more, or get more, than expected.” Due to the surprise nature of such extras, reciprocity inevitably becomes extended. Since a trader cannot return the favor immediately to the trader who has given them an extra show, they simply do the favor for someone else, in an entirely different trade. Accordingly, like B&P’s, the process becomes self-sustaining because the reciprocity is extended.

This act of generosity remains connected to the community’s value system through the imperative of “spreading the tunes.” Trader One commented:

> I’ve found that as my collection has grown, I’ve become less and less concerned about keeping trades even, I try to outdo the other trader a bit. It’s a pretty common tendency I think. It becomes more about the trade and enjoyment of the music then about making sure you get as much as you give.

In sending extra discs as a part of a negotiated trade, members are able to preserve the legal status of trading negotiating equal transactions, while at the same time engaging in gestures of goodwill. *These gestures, tied to the imperative of “spreading the music,” foster a spirit of giving and goodwill consistent with the values espoused by the community.*

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22 Video Compact Discs, an infrequently traded medium, containing video footage of concert performances, typically as mpeg files that can be viewed on a personal computer.
23 For example, on trader to whom I had sent an extra disc replied “Got the discs today! thanks for the extra show!!! Now its my turn to bomb somebody.”
Mailbombs. Another practice by which p-hookers “spread the music” and, in the process, foster the positive values of the community is the “mail bomb.” As defined by Logan in the thread “*MAIL BOMBS* for those winter blues,” “a mailbomb is when somebody randomly sends you a package. It is great getting packages in the mail filled with great music when you’re not even expecting it.” In mail bombing, a trader simply finds the address of another trader and sends them a package filled with discs that they might like.

The practice of mail bombing occurs either randomly, with traders just finding addresses and sending packages, or in a semi-organized fashion. Some form of organization appears to be more common. In the thread mentioned above, for example, 63 trader reply to the original posts with their addresses, and traders simply choose from addresses listed on that thread. Reciprocity, again, is extended. In a thread entitled “detailed instructions on how to get a mail bomb in here,” crackmc responds to a trader, whom he “bombed” and has asked for crackmc’s address so he can return the favor, writing:

Skwotch: my man, there is no need for you to bomb me at all. I just want you to turn that shit up when you play it. Like I’ve indicated, others have more than ‘gotten me back’ for all of those who can’t. I don’t do it for the return fire anyaw....

As with the other practices mentioned above, the process of “spreading the tunes” is imbued with generosity and the reciprocal burden of that goodwill is extended to others.

This generosity, again, is explicitly connected with the call to “spread the music.” Crackmc’s comment above implies this burden; 420bluegrass makes the connection more explicitly:

i personally see it as a duty to spread tunes freely since scot was nice enough to supply the means for free, i make it so the end result is phookerX gets music for free. spin the wheel. i never really trade anymore. (. . .) its just sharing for the sake of sharing. and i tell you what, i’ve received quite a number of shows over the past year and change, enough to build a solid collection of music. nothing is ever really spoken in terms of shows or numbers of discs. (. . .) this wonderful revolving library that i currently have is completely in thatnks and in honor of selfless kind people passing along good music because they took the time to care about something else.

Mail bombing represents perhaps the most extreme form of generosity exhibited at Phishhook. In accordance with the values operating at Phishhook, generosity implies reciprocity, even if that reciprocity must be extended rather than direct. Through this process, p-hookers, by “spreading the music” simultaneously shape and reinforce they positive values they view as central to their community.
“Spread the Groove:” Friendship and Social Support

As discussed in Chapter Four, p-hookers frequently develop relationships that extend beyond Phishhook itself, illustrating how the relationships between members transcend the economic interest of simply trading recordings. Stories of p-hookers meeting at concerts, opening up their homes to fellow p-hookers who are travelling, and even getting married speak to the ways in which p-hookers create bonds which are multiplex and meaningful. Clearly, p-hookers view themselves as something more than simply trading partners.

That “something more” is most evident in the ways by which Phishhook functions as a system of social support for members. While the discussions occurring on the site are wide ranging, the frivolous discussions of issues such as “Who would win in a fight: Axl Rose or Dave Matthews?” are counterbalanced by far more serious discussions about issues significant to the lives of p-hookers off of Phishhook. In providing social support to one another, p-hookers reflect – and “spread” – the positive values they espouse as a community.

Music as Social Support. Mail bombs are often more than simply random packages spread sent from one trader to another. Often, they are organized explicitly as a form of social support to spread cheer and goodwill – “good vibes” – throughout the Phishhook community. For example, the previously mentioned thread “*MAIL BOMBS* for those winter blues” was begun by Skeets01, writing: “Hi... Let’s spread some cheer thruout the phishhook world and send out a few mail bombs... Post your address here.. Whoever can get involved, feel free!!! ©” In all, this thread generated 71 responses, 63 of which where members including their addresses to be included in the “bomb.” In these responses, members frequently discussed why, specifically, receiving a mail bomb would cheer them up. Moe_gasm1, for example, wrote “yea i got the winter blues BIG time... really bummed out bout some shit. a mailbomb would rock. ill send one out to one of you luky phookers. peace.” JunkoPartner requested “Hey Guys! Please send the bomb to my Girlfriend (nothing harmful) ~ she is 600 miles away and that will keep her similing until we can see each other again. Thanks and peace, Chuck.” In this thread, and others like it, p-hookers organize the practice of mail bombing to serve as a form of social support, no matter how small, attempting simply to make other p-hookers feel better.

Who originated the thread and enjoys the reputation of being Phishhook’s most noted mail bomber.
Mailbombs are also used in very specific cases, directed to one (or a few) person in particular. A telling example is that of a thread posted by dubba_pos_CDr entitled “P-hookers unite! Please Read!!! and help keep this up”[25]. Here, dubba_pos_CDr writes that his fiancee has just been diagnosed with cancer and asks:

Anybody who can and would like to send her a mailbomb, or anything... please do. She has always been one to give selflessly and she really values the importance of doing so.

(....)

I am going to keep a list of everyone and everything on my listpage. So just email me and I will get back to you on Monday. Thank you so much in advance and thanks for letting us be a part of this community.

This request immediately received 18 replies offering to “bomb” the fiancee, half of which offered messages of support in addition to the gift of the mail bomb. Knockneedman, for example, wrote:

I know what its like bro, I lost my cousin who was closer than a brother to me. Anything I can do to help, and take your pick of my very limited selection. I suggest the Mule one though, because of #9 (“Soulshine” w/ Greg Allman). This song has gotten me and my friends through all kinds of shit. Peace.

Here, the “good vibes” being spread are to one person in particular, and music is viewed as a way to help someone through a difficult struggle. Whether the mail bombs are directed to one person or more general, however, they share in common the belief that spreading music freely does more than spread music, it also spreads the “good vibes” that members see as so closely associated to their music.

Discussion as Social Support. P-hookers do not limit themselves, however, to sharing music as social support. They actively take advantage of the discussion boards to discuss their lives and problems, sharing advice and support freely with those in need. The problems discussed are wide ranging. One thread, begun by Sasquatch and entitled “15 Days since I’ve had a cigarette” received 48 initial responses. Some messages were traders who had quit, or were in the process of quitting themselves. Lostsailor wrote: “It will be one year on April 1st. Nobody believed me when I said I was quitting smoking on 4/1. I was smoking 2-3 packs of Camel Lights a day. Now I smoke a ¼ oz and cheew a box of toothpicks a week. Good luck everyone!” Others simply offer their encouragement, such as KingCustecan, who wrote: “I never started, but to the kids on here that are quitting, good luck. I hope you stick w/it and never go back.

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25 “Upping” is a process by which p-hookers post messages at the bottom of a thread to bring it back up to the “top.” Threads are ordered on discussion boards according to the most frequent post – accordingly, when people stop answering the thread, it drops back and eventually moves into back page archives.

26 A substantial number of p-hookers refer to themselves, and other p-hookers, as “kids.”
Cigs are just nast (IMHO).” This thread continued well over a month, with members posting their progress and encouraging messages of support.

Another instance of social support on Phishhook is particularly telling. Januszak began a thread “home from the hospital again….”, writing:

and waiting was a nice package from wizjp, thanks man, totally appreciated…..
got in monday morning after i had difficulty breathing all night sunday. they found that
the tumor is now pressing against the top chamber of my heart causing me to be short of
breath…
if its not one thing its another.
i could also have blood clots forming in my lungs, so they have me on blood thinner. i
have to give myself shots. now i haven’t done that since i kicked heroin back in 92 so its
bringing back some rough memories….
thanks for all the emails and all from everyone, i really do appreciate each and everyone
of them.
( . . . )
keep on going folks, and try to show some compassion…
later,
keith

Within three hours, Januszak had received 14 responses offering love and support, ranging from simple “Get Well Soon(s)” (KeepsBreakinDown) to longer messages. 420bluegrass, for example, wrote:

hey keith—
i hope you’re feeling a little better and all that...stay strong on the inside my friend… and
ask for more meds…you’ll be hearing from me again soon…keep the positive vibration
going as can be—keep on the up and up.

420bluegrass offers support with language that directly reflects the values of the community, illustrating the connection between music and “good vibes” that pervades Phishhook.

Additionally, the tenor of the responses make it clear that this is an ongoing conversation, with Januszak updating people on the progress of his cancer and that he has developed friendships with many p-hookers who are concerned about his struggle. Marshy1234, for example, asks “keeeeeeeith!!!! did you get brians email? we want to come visit…obviously only when you feel up to it. we’d love to see you!!! get better!” Other responses refer to a “Nurse Karen,” with users using playing sexual innuendoes off of each other’s posts, joking with Januszak about his relationship with the nurse. What emerges from the discussion is a sense of a group of friends genuinely concerned about their fellow p-hooker and his struggle against cancer.

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27 And is still continuing, although the volume of posts has appreciably declined.
28 It is unclear whether this character is real or entirely fictional.
Such messages of support on Phishhook are not confined simply to members who have already established relationships. Rather, individuals are welcomed to post their problems in front of the group. In one thread, “Alright guys, I’m breaking down here,” Gitpicken prefaces his post with the comment “I know this may not be the place for this, but I love this community.” He then proceeds to describes the problems he is having with his girlfriend, asking for advice. One of the responses, offered by Flyhiou, demonstrates the general attitude of p-hookers: “this is what is great about this community; this is the place for this.” Flyhiou illustrates the view that Phishhook is more than simply a place to discuss and trade music – it is also a place where members feel they can turn to one another for support in times of distress.

What is significant about each of these instances of members seeking – and receiving – social support at Phishhook is that they occur, by their nature, in public. Certainly, as relationships develop between p-hookers in private, some communication about members’ lives is likely to happen in private emails. When these discussions occur in public, they are seen by any p-hooker who wishes to click on the thread, where they can view members acting towards one another in a caring, compassionate, positive manner. The public nature of these discussions, then, reinforces both the positive values of Phishhook and the message that Phishhook is a place where members are welcome to seek support.

Summary

As a community, Phishhook is characterized by a dominant set of values which espouse an overwhelmingly positive world view, emphasizing respect, compassion, tolerance, and diversity. Members are expected to act towards one another with these values in mind, creating a positive and supportive environment. This vision stems directly from the “music” which ties members together. Phishpheather perhaps best summed up the way the values at Phishhook operate, writing that “this is a site for people to trade music and the good vibes surrounding music. Positive and constructive…. these two ideas in action will take you a long way.” These values, while held as central by members of the community, are not universally held at Phishhook.
Crisis in the Community

In late 2001 and early 2002, a growing sense of crisis manifested itself on the discussion boards. Some p-hookers were acting towards others in ways which ran counter to this system of values: “flaming” bands and other members, posting inflammatory threads, and generally acting in a way viewed by the majority of p-hookers as contrary to the “positive” values the community was based upon. Comparing the “old” feel of Phishhook to the “new” feel, sportyspice wrote:

But there was a different vibe. There was a much more positive feeling about it all. new users are certainly welcome, as is change. But this change, I feel is for the worse. The different vibe is the heavier sense of negativity. If you don’t feel that way, well, then that is your perception. And that is fine. But I think enough of us do feel that way to honestly take a hard look at what is happening. I love the Hook. But part of what I loved about it was the ability to come here and not get angry, not feel insulted, and not see crude behavior.

Sportyspice’s comments echo a widely held – and voiced – concern among p-hookers: the “good vibes” which once dominated the scene are in severe danger, and Phishhook is under threat because of it.

This threat specifically endangers the sense of community that exists at Phishhook. Iphish1, for example, writes:

Phishhook in the beginning when I joined was a community and we hardly had to ever deal with assholes like. I used to spend a lot more time here but now I just feel like I am wasting my time, with all the bashing and assholes trying to ruin everyone’s fun. It seems kinda lame to have some kind of moderation but in reality it seems like the only way to bring peace to this once community of open minded individuals.

The weakening of the implicit norm of “positiveness” and accompanying value system is viewed by p-hookers as an explicit threat to their community. Not surprisingly, then, it is in their discussion of this crisis that members most clearly articulate their visions of their “community.” By arguing about the nature of the threat and the appropriate response(s) to it, p-hookers ultimately demonstrate how they make sense of the values and norms operating in their social system as deserving of the metaphor “community.”

Defining the Crisis: Negative Behaviors

When hookers talk about the threat to their community, they, like sportyspice above, lament the “negativity” which they perceive to have crept into public discussions. Members view this negativity as
jeopardizing the “good vibes” which once pervaded their community. Describing the negativity present currently on the discussion boards, Phinding Phun argues

that may be the way things appear now, but that is not how this site used to be, there we plenty of discussions about religion, politics, death, different music, books, and every kind of “taboo” discussion that used to go on here, its when people began to come pop into a thread to say things like “you’re wrong” or “you suck” or whatever that those kinds of “touchy” discussions took on the negative connotation that they now have…people used to be able to discuss things without having some sort of moral judgement thrown in and without the namecalling and knee-jerk reactions that now cause those threads to turn into the train wrecks and bashing things that they become now...

Negativity and contention have come to dominate the discussions on the boards, which were once much more positive and supportive, goes the p-hooker line lamenting loss of community.

This negativity is viewed by p-hookers to be self-perpetuating, much in the same way that kindness and generosity helped spread the positive “vibe” in the first place. The “train wreck” syndrome demonstrates the way in which negative behaviors function to encourage degeneration into further negativity. Occasionally, longtime p-hookers will post that they are leaving Phishhook due to this negativity. As these members drop out of circulation, negativity takes on even greater force with the removal of a more positive role model.

Negativity breeds further negativity, fostering frustration among community members. Dane describes his frustration, which is typical of that discussed by many p-hookers:

Lately, and this is just my opinion AND NOTHING MORE, you cannot post anything without a. someone taking offense, b. someone misunderstanding you, c. someone just trying to pick an argument. I really enjoy coming here to make my hobby of collecting and trading music fun and somewhat organized. I used to look for posts to reply to, organize b&p’s, and set up trades. Now, it really isn’t worth replying to a lot of threads in the case of arguing.

Dane’s view is not uncommon, and speaks to the reasons why many p-hookers say they visit the discussion boards less frequently (or abandon them altogether), instead simply using the website as a place to set up and conduct trades. In this manner, negativity serves to drive the social organization from a feel of “communitas” back into one that’s structure-dominated, as the norms governing trading still apply, but without the overarching “positive” values attached to them.

29 “Train wreck” is a term frequently used by p-hookers to describe a thread which initially was moving along “positively,” in accordance with community values and is subsequently “hijacked” and transformed into a negative discussion.
30 Such qualifiers as “this is only my opinion” are frequent as members try to express their thoughts on the community crisis, while avoiding being flamed for doing so.
Exemplifying Negativity: Dick_Hertz. One character in particular illustrates the rising negativity on the Phishhook discussion boards and, indeed, serves as the lightning rod for the community’s anger: Dick_Hertz. Dick_Hertz is the login name of a p-hooker who is labeled by most p-hookers as a troll, posting negatively on discussion boards and watching what happens. The innuendo in his chosen login – a “black” login, meaning he has no list stored on the site – is indicative of his behavior on the boards: inflammatory. Dick_Hertz is open about his intentions to stir the pot for his own enjoyment, posting on one thread:

this is probably the most hypocritical board I've ever been on which is why it is more fun. Many of you only want to hear echoes of your personal opinions and when that doesn’t happen...... panties get bunched. Maybe this place is more to some of you than it is to me.

His stated purpose to irritate and challenge p-hookers, Dick_Hertz frequents the discussion boards, “bashing” bands such as Phish and criticizing members other p-hookers in an inflammatory manner. Dick_Hertz is by no means the only person listed by p-hookers as what Trader 14 termed “trouble makers,” but he is certainly the most prominent. Accordingly, he is frequently referenced whenever p-hookers point to the negative behaviors they view as threatening. For example, lphish1, in a thread entitled “My opinions on the current status of Phishhook,” wrote:

I find it absolutely ridiculous that people like Dick or any other assholes are aloud to stick around here. I actually don’t find his/their posts to be the worst thing about his/their presence here. He/she is setting a tone for some people to feel that bashing and negative remarks are a normal contribution to this site. Which is why I feel we have so much negativity on the hook today, because even though there are a lot more people on here then when I first joined, there was a total sense of a friendly positive community and it seems to have been destroyed.

lphish1 speaks again of the cycle of negativity which attacks the positive values of the community, pointing to Dick_Hertz as the archetypical destroyer of community. His presence, for many p-hookers, provides a way to highlight unwanted behaviors – to a large extent, Dick_Hertz serves as a symbol – the embodiment – of “the problem.”

Responding to the Crisis: Articulating a Community Action

P-hookers trying to maintain the values and the sense of community they once felt respond to the crisis in many different ways. Certainly, some view the problems as simply cyclical – douquette, for example, asks “does anybody remember Crackstar2, matthanson, mishaharrell, or robgrooves?.”
referencing past “trouble makers” to remind p-hookers that their community has never been a perfect, entirely positive place. Others, such as SoManyRds, speculate that Phish’s hiatus\(^3\) has left Phishhook members without a common purpose: “Dude… Hiatus makes people mad. So therese nothing left to talk about…ie ‘My band rocks, your sucks.” These arguments, however, appear to be rejected by the majority of p-hookers, who actively seek to protect and promote the sense of community at Phishhook.

While p-hookers are certainly looking to respond to the behaviors they view as threatening to their community, by no means are they agreed upon the most appropriate response. P-hookers widely debate the merits of different approaches to resolving the community crisis, and, in the process, define what they understand their community to be. This discussion occurs throughout the boards on Phishhook, but can be most clearly illustrated by following in detail one particular thread that reached nearly 150 messages in length.

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**General Discussion – Moderated**

In response to the growing sense of crisis in the Phishhook community, Leonard, the owner of the site created a new discussion board, called “General Discussion – Moderated (An Experiment), on February 6, 2002. He began discussion on the board with a thread entitled “If you build it, hopefully they won’t come….” The thread initiates a discussion with a post from Leonard, stating:

> The fact is that online communities have had rules of conduct for a long time. The Usenet group alt.hackers., for example, required that a person hack Usenet (a minor hack) in order to get their post up, and with each post the author had to offer up an original hack. This helped to lower the signal-to-noise ratio of the group.
> Other newsgroups and mailing lists were moderated.
> Well, maybe the time has come for phishhook to finally see some controls. This can be a testbed.
> My only plans right now are to create some moderators for this board. Moderators would remain anonymous and would have the power to close threads. Threads would be closed when the conversations became unfriendly, was against my wishes,\(^3\) or was somehow inappropriate.
> Closing threads should not be done based on opinions expressed, but could be done based on the way that opinions were expressed.
> Moderators should not reverse a decision by another moderator. (I should be able to though.)

\(^3\) In the fall of 2000, Phish announced that they would go on an indefinite touring hiatus, allowing band members to pursue other projects. “Phish Return” rumors frequently circulate on the discussion boards.

\(^3\) While seemingly autocratic, Leonard, in other threads, has made his simple “wishes” well known. He prefers that no discussion of illegal activity – primarily drug use or trading which violates Phish’s trading policy – occur on his web site.
What about other control techniques? What about requiring people to offer up a B&P
everytime they start a new thread, or everytime they post? Any other ideas?
Leonard.

What follows is a lengthy discussion, over several weeks, about the merits of Leonard's proposal and alternatives. Below, I rely primarily on this particular thread to preserve the general flow of the arguments; however, I occasionally draw on other threads occurring in the same context (the moderated board) as they splinter off into sub-arguments about particular solutions and proposals.

Throughout the discussion, p-hookers primarily debate the merits of four alternative (but not necessarily mutually exclusive) solutions: ignoring users, requiring B&P offers, moderating discussions, and banning offenders.

Ignoring users. Of the four most discussed responses, the idea of simply ignoring offenders is by far the least intrusive. “Ignore” advocates advance the simple argument that ignoring “trolls” will make them go away. Slickbiz, for example, contended that “the best solution IMO would be everyone ignoring these trolls, let them offend you, who gives a damn. All they want is to piss people off and if everyone just ignored them they would find some other place to cause trouble, I’m sure.” Echoing similar concerns, Guyute123300 asks:

As a side note, is it possible that a lot of the problem lies in our inability to just let these people go away? We get so worked up (I am just as guilty as anyone) when someone says something contrary to what we feel, and all we’re doing is fanning the flames. Why not make an honest attempt to ignore these people, and not post on their threads, and not respond to negative things they post and see if they just walk away?

Advocates of this position echo the commonly invoked theme in internet communities: “don’t feed the trolls.” By responding to negative threads in a negative manner, members simply reinforce the reasons that offenders are acting up in the first place. Citing past experiences at Phishhook, spcwngrlr sums up the effectiveness of ingoring offenders, writing “ignore the trolls and they’ll go away. Where’s misha, oatmealstout, beauness, etc???”

Some p-hookers, however, argue that ignoring offenders is not a practical solution, even if it is ideally effective. In an argument frequently quoted by other p-hookers, leonard contends: “In the real world I can walk away from somebody’s ugly, annoying face and never have to see it again. On phishhook, I have to see your posts all over the place. There is no way to get away from you.” P-hookers certainly have the ability to ignore threads initiated by offenders such as Dick_Hertz, which they can expect
to be counter to the “positive” vibes the wish to encounter. What they cannot ignore is when a “positive” thread turns into a “train wreck,” and becomes dominated by negative posts. They may choose not to respond, but nevertheless have run unwittingly into the negativity they sought to avoid.

When they encounter such negativity, many members feel that it is incumbent upon them to respond. Wizjp illustrates this sentiment, writing:

I found out last night that I am not the only one who tries to ignore the negative crap and can’t. I call it car wreck syndrome. I wish I could…. but I’m only human. And when I see someone ripping on something, hell anything I see worthy of a defense, I gotta do it. Unfortunately, the people who posted in the first place are just looking for a fight; which means they win.

Fully aware that by responding to negative behaviors they only further encourage them, p-hookers such as wizjp illustrate the problem with simply ignoring offenders: if they ignore them, community values will be violated. Accordingly, p-hookers generally agree that ignoring offenders is an important step in solving the community crisis but that, alone, it is not enough.

Requiring B&Ps. The next least intrusive measure proposed was to require, in some way, users to offer up Blanks and Postage trades every time they initiated a thread (or, as some p-hookers proposed, every time they offered a post.) In the early stages of the argument, this idea received substantial support. The primary reason for this support was due to the explicit connection between the solution and the twin obligations to “spread the music/good vibes” placed upon members by the community’s value system. Todzzzz, for example, wrote:

My goal in joining the hook, was to receive, and spread music. In the past few months, thetrees & vines board has grown greatly. I would love to see a B&P offer from everyone who just wants to start a discussion about any thing. To me, it’s all about the music and the community we share TO SHARE THE MUSIC!!!

By requiring B&P’s in order to participate in discussion, advocates hoped that they would be able to “weed out” the undesirable elements who did not subscribe to the community’s values and subsequent obligations. The theory operating for these members is that if a p-hooker is willing to invest the time and energy to conduct a B&P, then they will be far less likely to act in an antisocial manner on the discussion boards.

This proposal fell out of favor relatively quickly, for practical reasons. Several members posted that they agreed with the idea, but were concerned about its practicality, echoing the concerns of FluffFEE, who argued: “I think it’s a good idea. I’m not so sure a b&p every time you post/make a thread. That might just be too much.” Others, such as Sasquatch, argued that such a regulation may well eliminate
members who are not a part of the problem, writing: “My burner isn’t working, and I can’t afford a new one. The B & P idea would in effect ban me from Phishhook.” Accordingly, the proposal to require B&P offers in order to post quickly fell from the argument. *The initial support received by the proposal, however, serves to demonstrate the importance of the community’s connection to music, and the twin obligations which stem from that connection.*

**Moderation.** Of all the proposals, the slightly more intrusive step of moderating the discussion boards (of which the board where this thread occurred was, as implied by the name, an experiment) generated the most debate and, largely, the most support. Advocates of moderation echoed the sentiments of lil, who argued:

> Moderate away! I think the only people who will truly be upset are the ones who antagonize. Me? I have nothing to hide……And if moderators help to bring back the sense of community that I felt here when I joined a year and a half ago then I’m all for it. I don’t feel that phook has become bad. It’s just not as cheerful anymore. I’ve met so many people in the last year because of this place and also made a lot of internet friends. I’d love to see it get back to the old way.

Moderation is viewed as a way to control the behavior of offenders in an attempt to bring back the “sense of community.” While there was certainly debate over the exact makeup of a moderation system, on this particular thread there were few dissenting voices to moderation.

Other discussion threads, however, contained interesting challenges to the idea of moderators. Typically, these p-hookers were firm advocates of simply ignoring offenders, and felt that moderation itself posed a threat to the open, positive feel of the community. Exemplifying this position, Wilson420 argued:

> I’ve found that assholes generally go away if you ignore them. Frequently, Ignoring them results in behavior that makes them even easier to ignore (……) A good lesson for me, but the education process gets old quickly, plus I have better things to do with my life. If I want to learn better human relations skills with a bunch of other fucked up people. I come here for fun (……) A community which requires a moderator to make sure everybody behaves themselves is a community I want no part of (……) Perhaps its time to simply ignore those we have helpless disagreements with, instead of having pointless arguments long after civil discussion has ended.

Other p-hookers, like Wilson420, expressed similar concerns about moderation. Having someone directly regulate others behaviors, at face value, seems a negative way to enforce a vision of positive values.

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33 The essential questions debated about moderation included: who would be the moderators, would moderators be anonymous, and what rules (if any) would be spelled out as to when moderators would take action.
Even moderation advocates agreed that such action was not desirable and, to some extent, counter to community values. Mudd, for example, wrote: "As unfortunate as it is, I think it’s time to put a few moderators in force. We have all been saying all this time we can police ourselves, but that is obviously not true.” Moderation advocates illustrate again the positive values that they feel are central to the sense of community at Phishhook. Even in accepting the negative method of moderating discussions to eliminate undesirable behaviors, moderation advocates reinforce the importance of values such as tolerance, diversity, and respect that are essential to the "good vibes" which characterize Phishhook's sense of community.

**Banning Offenders.** Of the four most discussed options, banning the offenders was by far the most drastic action considered. The solution is a simple one: find the offender, eliminate them from the web site, and the problem is solved. wsp33, for example, argued:

> It’s obvious that there are a few people that only come here to break balls. Banning IP’s may not be what you had in mind, but there are a few that have not contributed to anything other than intentionally and continuously pissing people off.

Advocates of banning troublemakers base their arguments on efficiency and outrage. The offenders are viewed simply as people who ought to lose their privilege to participate in the community once they have transgressed severely.

Banning is certainly an extreme action, and the severity of the action is also seen as an advantage. Forcibly removing members from the community, the argument goes, would serve to demonstrate – very explicitly – what behaviors are and are not acceptable to would-be trouble makers. paulondrums articulates this view, arguing that “if they were just downright trolls and troublemakers then they should be banned (...) in order to show this community what will or won’t go.” Banning then becomes not simply a punitive measure, designed to punish (and eliminate) offenders, but also serves as a preemptive message, a form of social control to restrict the behavior of posters in advance.

Opponents to banning stress that drawing the line between offenses serious enough to warrant banning and less severe offenses is incredibly difficult. Additionally, they contend that banning abusers is likely to be ineffective, as they would simply be able re-register under a new login or, if IP addresses were banned, use one of several freely available programs which can disguise an IP. Others stressed that banning also seems to run counter to the “good vibes” values of the community, which would tend to
suggestion that even the worst offenders can change if they can be reached by the community “vibe.”

phinding_phun, for example, argued that banning doesn’t allow those causing trouble to realize what they are doing and actually CHANGE... there ARE a few people I’ve seen who came here mainly to start trouble, but realized that this place IS special and that they WANTED to be a productive and valued member of the community and CHANGED their behaviors and the way they communicated with other hookers... THAT is VERY special, to me, and it seems a shame to permanently ban those few who might be “redeemable.”

Here, banning is viewed as a remedy that is worse than the original problem. It runs counter to the “good vibes” central to the community’s values system and also calls into question the power that those “vibes” possess to govern members’ behaviors in the first place.

Advocates and opponents of banning alike articulate a common vision of community in their arguments. Whether offenders should be excommunicated or brought back into the fold, what emerges is a clear sense of the positive values which are viewed as essential to the community at Phishhook.

Ultimately, none of these solutions have been adopted in response to the crisis. But the volume of the debate illustrates the care and concern with which p-hookers approach their community. While there is certainly disagreement as to the appropriate response, there is certainly an overwhelming sense that something needs to be done to preserve the sense of community. A post from noteateet illustrates the general sentiment towards the crisis:

I simply don’t feel any sense of community anymore when there’s so much bickering, negative energy, and lack of respect of others. I used to attempt to teach people that they should try to behave better here on the ‘hook – that we strive for a better way. I’m afraid I’ve give up. Too many people don’t want to listen, and too many just don’t care. Too many believe this to be their private soapbox, or believe them to be a wrecking ball of other’s thoughts and opinions. I’m sorry to see it like this, knowing what it once was. (...) Something’s got to give if this community is going to survive its growing pains.

This sentiment is quite common; while p-hookers may not agree – or even know – what needs to be done, they agree, in general, that a crisis exists and something must be done about it.

The recognition of a community crisis, ironically, may help to entrench the vision of community seen by those fighting for Phishhook. mateo, for example, described the discussion occurring about solutions, posting:

I’m just jumpin’ on the bandwagon, stealing others ideas. kinda coole to see the flood of positive responses...
this place is a treasure.
a sanctuary, where people (usually) know what I’m talking about.
Viva la hook!

The thread generating most of the discussion, “if you build it hopefully they won’t come” managed to refrain from devolving into a “trainwreck” for nearly 100 posts, a remarkable length compared to the majority of discussions occurring on Phishhook at the time. The synergy felt by many p-hookers in this discussion prompted a sense of hope, echoed in sportypice’s comment, “the fact that we are even discussing this shows me that it is still a community worth fighting for.” In participating in discussions about solutions to the perceived crisis, p-hookers articulated their vision of their “community” and helped create the momentum necessarily to actively work to maintain that sense of community.

Opposing “Community”

The vision of Phishhook as a community is certainly predominant, but by no means exclusive. While those labeled “troublemakers” or “trolls” are easily vilified by p-hookers who view such behaviors as contrary to the community, these opponents explicitly articulate a vision of Phishhook that is quite different, and serves to illustrate why they act in ways which many p-hookers find offensive. This opposite vision of Phishhook takes the form of three distinct, but related arguments: that p-hookers are “too sensitive,” that Phishhook is a “discussion board” rather than a “community,” and that there is a marked difference between “real” and “online” worlds. In responding to these arguments, “community”-minded p-hookers further articulate their vision of their community.

Critique of Sensitivity. The use of the term “good vibes” by p-hookers to articulate the system of community values belies a certain utopian impulse among those who imagine Phishhook as a community. This vision is certainly not held by all members who store their lists on the web site or participate in discussion boards. The intensity of the sensitivity critique certainly varies. Havemercy, for example, writes

I am just wondering what they are afraid of and how they would let a negative response to an opinion of theirs over a computer make them scared. I understand why you a want the P-hook to be a lollipops and gumdrops communal atmosphere but I think some people are too sensitive.

Expressing understanding of the utopian impulse, Havemercy nevertheless questions the sensitivity of p-hookers, implicitly questioning whether the reaction to the community crisis is perhaps overblown.
Others are nowhere nearly as mild in their critique. Among those labeled as “troublemakers,” p-hookers are frequently “flamed” as a group for their positive and sensitive outlook. For example, in responding to Leonard’s proposal of moderated boards, Wolfmans writes:

The whole idea is rather overly concerned with the Phishhookian PC be Nice at All times crap that has sooo taken the color out of this place anymore…. It’s the Same Old Shit, Just a different thread anymore…
Everyone is so quick so Literally suck the genitals of the man who owns this place that any new idea or expirement he has they love. Now he SHOULD do what he wants to. IT's his site, PERIOD, I just don’t have to like it. And for certain, I won’t take a bite out of it and smile right back b/c it’s the Cool phishhookian thing to do. And wuite frankly anyone who really believes in all this crap really needs to grow up a bit and go outside more.

The aggressive tone of such critiques is in itself an example of the behaviors which many p-hookers point to as the cause of the community crisis. Nevertheless, such the tone of such messages is also probably a result of the adversarial relationship that members such as Wolfman have placed themselves into with regards to the Phishhook community.

“Community” advocates respond to these critiques by relying on the values that characterize the “good vibe” they wish to maintain at Phishhook. 420bluegrass, for example, argues in response to the “PC” critique outlined above:

people are acting like 6 year olds when their mom tells them they can’t ride their bike around the block, or cross the street. its like people here are just realizing their freedom of speech for the first time and are unable to contain themselves, nor willing to see that there is a proper time, place, and attitude for how we interact with others… the amount of direspect on this board is truly amazing and the idea that treating someone with repsect is PC or ass kissing is even sadder…

This response is typical of p-hookers replies to the critique of sensitivity. The implicit message of such responses is that there is nothing wrong with such sensitivity, and that the care and respect that such sensitivity implies create exactly the “good vibes” that p-hookers want in their community. Accordingly, 

sensitivity becomes a virtue to be embraced rather than a valid critique of the community.

Discussion Board vs. Community. A second critique offered by “community” opponents is that, ultimately, Phishhook is “nothing more” than a discussion board. Few, if any, of those labeled as “troublemakers” refer to Phishhook as a community. Instead, they commonly rely on the metaphor of “discussion board” to describe Phishhook. Foamy2001, for example, writes:

Get over yourselves. Phish is a band, you are a music fan, and this is a web site. If you don’t dig negative posts, don’t be a part of that discussion… there are 100’s of other topic
for you to spend your time on. (... ) don’t assume that you know what’s best for the
“community” read the posts and move on w/ your life...

Foamy2001, and others (notably Dick_Hertz), view Phishhook from a fundamentally different lens, and
their actions are structured accordingly.

By using the metaphor of “discussion board” rather than “community” to describe Phishhook, the
“troublemakers” zero in on “discussion” and typically justify their actions under the rubric of “freedom of
speech.” Kevbo, for examples, argues in line with “freedom of speech,” contending:

Out here in the real world we have to learn to get along with all sorts of people. Some of
whom don’t even agree with us! What I do is stay away from the people I don’t like
whenever possible. I am kind to my friends and hope they come back for more.

Here in America different opinions are allowed to coexist. If you want Big Brother, go to
Afghanistan. Just don’t be surprised if they don’t make you king.

If Phishhook is nothing more than a “discussion board,” then members have no responsibility towards one
another; rather, they should be allowed to speak freely, even if that speech is negative, or “flaming.”

As is to be expected, “community”-minded p-hookers take issue with the “discussion board”
metaphor and its use of “free speech” as a justification for antisocial behaviors. Noteeater, for example,
points out the central role of the “discussion board” metaphor in the community crisis, writing:

People stopped listening to others that were trying to keep the community together. It’s
the start of the downfall in most societies.

Anytime now, someone will comment about that last sentence, “Dude, it’s just as
discussion board!” And, my point would be proven even further.

“Community,” on the other hand, carries with it a sense of responsibility towards others that governs our
interaction. For p-hookers, that responsibility is shaped by the “good vibes” stemming from the
community’s values. The metaphor applied to the social collective directly shapes and reflects the way
that its members act towards one another.

“Real” vs. “Online” Worlds. The final argument advanced by the “troublemakers” contesting
Phishhook as a community is by making a clear distinction between the “real” and “virtual worlds.”

Espousing this view, cdrtrade argues:

The “internet” IMO is a fake world with no race/religion/sex or whatever. I know a few
of you but I don’t KNOW you. I’ll say whatever on here because I don’t care if any of
you like me. I’m here to trade and I have no problems doing that. I don’t care what I am
called. I don’t care if you call my mother a whore. Why should I? No one here really
knows me.
From my posts you'd think I was the biggest fucker alive. Well, if you really knew me, you would think otherwise. Some of you try coming off as the nicest people in the world and in fact, some of you may have bigger problems than most.

I find it shocking how easily people are offended by someone they don't know. This might sound childish but "sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." This board is just a bunch of words. Don't worry about it.

Cdrtrade's comments are typical of "toublemakers" who view the online world as fake. If the online world doesn't "exist," then the people online don't exist, either – accordingly, any sense of mutual responsibility is eliminated, or at least severely mitigated.

P-hookers who feel a part of a community expectedly contend that the online world is no different than the real world and that, even if they are not the same, the effects of what happens online are nevertheless "real." Invalidsync, for example, argues:

This is real life. When a post is condescending, bitterly sarcastic or just plain mean, it affects the reader negatively. When you hurt someone's feelings on a discussion board, it is real. When you make someone feel good with a post it is real. Maybe if people started treating this like "real life" the phook would be better off.

Invalidsync, and other p-hookers who view Phishhook as a community, see real people with real identities and, accordingly, are aware of how their interactions affect others. Such mutual obligation is not necessary if the identity of others is, as cdrtrade and others claim, "fake." Leonard advances this argument further, contending:

People who make the claim that this isn't real life are kidding themselves. This is as real as me sending you a letter in the mail, as real as me calling you on the phone, and as real as talking to someone in person. The post you are reading right now isn't generated by a computer, it is a reflection of the thoughts of the author and is therefore real. The effects that a post has on the reader are real as well.

The fact is, this is a community just as your neighborhood is a community. And in your neighborhood there are certain implicit standards of behavior. The same thing exists here. You can try to fit it, or you can leave.

Leonard's argument is not important only because it is ultimately his view of what Phishhook is and should be that will influence the future direction of the site; it also expresses the view of p-hookers who experience Phishhook as a community. For them, their fellow p-hookers are every bit people in the real world, connected together by their common interests at an online site. Viewed from this perspective, community is every bit as real online as it is in the real world, and they expect others to act accordingly.
Summary

As we have seen, p-hookers strongly identify their social collective as a community. Certainly, this label is contested by some members of the site, but these alternative visions of Phishhook are quickly and strongly rebuked. The field of interaction at Phishhook is structured by a complex set of norms which provide for predictable interactions between members, and these interactions are colored by a system of values which promote a strong sense of connection between group members. Taken together, the norms and values operating at Phishhook serve to create a community among the vast majority of community members. And while the threats to that community are real – and keenly felt by p-hookers – their collective response to those threats not only further articulates the members' sense of their community, but also demonstrates that, no matter how uncertain the future, a strong community exists at Phishhook that members are willing to fight to maintain.
CHAPTER SIX:
DISCUSSION

Understanding This Case

Despite perceived threats stemming from negative behaviors, it is clear that — at the minimum — a substantial portion of p-hookers perceive and describe their interactions with one another at Phishhook as unquestionably being community. In their discourse, p-hookers use "community" in three distinct fashions: "community" as the exchange network itself, "community" as a collection — and the bond between — similar, connected individuals, and "community" as a pattern of anticipated and reviled behaviors. These uses of "community" are not consciously employed by p-hookers, rather they are the discursive patterns that emerge from members' regular activity at Phishhook.

"Community" as Exchange Network

The first way in which members use "community" in their discourse on Phishhook is simply to represent the social structure of the trading system as an exchange network. This use of "community" is applied to both the activity and the object of trading. For example, referring to the objects traded within the network, Astro99 in response to a discussion of legality, sarcastically replies "man it would be a shame to lose all the aerosmith in the trading community." Describing the activity of trading, Phido, on the Audio CD Trades discussion board posted "Well—I've been away from the trading community for about 6 months now and I am now in need of some new tunes." These comments are typical of this first usage of "community," using the term discursively to describe the exchange network itself. "Community," in this sense, functions in much the same way as Cheney (in press) identified the "market" functioning discursively to describe the place where social bonds develop in the process of economic interactions.

Two important understanding emerge from this usage of "community": the implicit recognition of a social structure governed by operating norms, and "community" as a place into which one must "step in" to gain membership.

Community as Governed by Norms. The behavioral and technical norms operating at Phishhook serve to structure the field in which p-hookers interact. By using the term "community" to function as a description for the exchange network, p-hookers implicitly draw these norms together into a common
collection that serves to govern members' behavior. vsp, for example, on the Technical Trading Help discussion board, when asking the community about adding "fillers" to .shn discs, writes: "Do people usually do this, or is it frowned upon in the trading community?" Here, "community" operates explicitly as a description of the network where music circulates. Implicit in vsp's use of the term, however, is an understanding that that circulation is governed by an identifiable pattern of norms.

This pattern of norms, in turn, serves to characterize the field of interaction between members, outlining acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, and the explicit and implicit consequences for each.

"Community" functions discursively as a label which can be placed upon these norms collectively to define the social structure in a recognizable way for members.

"Community" as a Place to Enter. The second way in which "community" functions discursively when used to describe the exchange network itself is to draw boundaries around a place into which members must "enter." This theme is commonly invoked by newbies in their "grovels" for B&Ps. In one such grovel, for instance, Donnelld writes: "Would anyone help me out with a large or even small CD B@P on any bands so I can get in with the CD community." bearphishin4485 wrote: "Hey all, I'm new to this trading bit, so I'd appreciate it if you could bring me into the community." In this manner, "community" is viewed as a place into which one must gain entrance – and, at Phishhook in particular, entrance is gained only by the goodwill of members already present.

Community as Collection of Similar Individuals

The second discursive use of "community" by p-hookers is to describe Phishhook as a collective of similar individuals who meet and form meaningful relationships with one another, transcending the economic interaction of trading exchanges. Demonstrating this usage of "community," Irie writes:

I met the most wonderful person, my best friend Rosebud through this site ( . . . ) Is this a community. Hell yea it is. I have met so many great Hookers. So many. And yet there is still so many more I would love to meet.

( . . . )
I love you all.

1 "Fillers" are additional material added at the end of a show to fill leftover space on the disc, usually from the same artist in roughly the same time period.
Here, “community” is viewed as a place where meaningful, multiplex relationships form. Sportyspice echoes the sentiment, writing “being able to transpose the relationship from here into real life, that is something quite special.”

The development of multiplex relationships fosters a sense of connection between members. The examples of generosity and social support characterizing the relationships between traders demonstrate how this connection quickly translates into the “good vibes” set of values held by the community and the twin imperatives “spread the music/good vibes” that emerge from those values. This connection is clearly illustrated by Dragon813gt, who responded to an inflammatory comment from Dick_Hertz by writing:

We all share a common love. It’s impossible in the real world to find 25,000+ people in one place that love the same things. And it goes way beyond music. We as a community tend to share the same hobbies as well as beliefs. Maybe if you had something positive to contribute every now and then we wouldn’t get pissed off. But you never do. If you’re not here to help spread the music to the masses then there is no need for you to be here. It’s a simple as that.

“Community” then, as a collection of individuals, describes like-minded people, with similar values and a common mission. In this sense, “community” functions discursively to characterize the qualities of the interactants in the community field, in addition to their interactions.

The differences between these discursive uses of “community” are distinct, but certainly not mutually exclusive. Rather, the interconnections between the two serve to describe the field of interaction which p-hookers perceive as a community. In a Thanksgiving B&P offer, for example, super_fly writes:

I was thinking of how thankful I am for all the good music and good ppl in this community so I’m letting five ppl get a three disc B & P each.
Happy Holidays
John.

Here, John/super_fly not only uses “community” in both senses, but implicitly illustrates the strong interconnection between the two. “Good music” circulates in the community because of “good people”; and, in line with the connection of Phishhook values with music, the people are good, in some respect, because of their connection with the music.

“Community” as Control, Governing Behavior

The two discursive uses of “community” described above are abstractions used to characterize Phishhook as a field of interaction. In the third usage, “community” is abstracted a level further, being
consciously or unconsciously employed to govern the behavior of members. This third usage is by far the most frequent use of the term "community," from Tubemans’ questions “Has our community been invaded by assholes?” to slipgru’s more positive statement on his list “I’ve been here a while now and I’ve been blessed by the kindness of this community.” Each of these uses of “community” carries an implicit message about what behaviors should occur within the field of interaction. Accordingly, “community” can be used both to prescribe and proscribe certain behaviors.

“Community” As Proscription. When referencing behaviors, p-hookers frequently use “community” as a constraint on behaviors viewed as contrary to community values and norms. Secan, for example, asks newbies:

If you don’t understand something about trading, do some research. Don’t pollute this community with inferior recordings. Ask someone if they can help you out w/a few shows and go from there, it really isn’t that hard to get some quality stuff quickly.

Here, “community” is employed as a defense against certain behaviors. Much like the “invaded by assholes” comment above, the command “don’t pollute this community” implores members not to act against the community’s values and norms – the “community” is viewed as something that is, in essence, pure, but that purity is threatened by the antisocial actions of the few. These examples are typical of p-hookers use of “community” to proscribe unwanted behaviors.

“Community” as Prescription. P-hookers also use “community” positively, in an effort to encourage pro-social behaviors as well. “Community” is often used to describe the people who have generously given to help others, fostering the sense of reciprocity which extends generally back to the community. Jon_in_mempho, for example, writes:

Hey all,
The phishhook community has been great in helping me get my collection started, and when I get my first show back I’m looking forward to returning the favor to other new guys.

Here, “community” functions to stress the obligations that members have to one another as a result of the generosity that pervades the community. Members are expected to engage in pro-social behavior precisely because the field in which they interact is a community.

The three uses of “community” in member discourse at Phishhook serve to first describe, and then govern, the interactions between members. By establishing a common set of practices governing interactions, connecting people together under a common value scheme and purpose, and, finally,
governing the behaviors expected up members, “community” functions discursively to define the field of interaction at Phishhook. The clash of the metaphors “discussion board” and “community” illustrates the discursive force of “community”: none of the members who described Phishhook as a “community” were described as “trouble makers,” and none of the “trouble makers” used the “community” metaphor. In this sense, the use of “community” reflects Sennet’s (1980) observation that all social bonds can seen as enabling and constraining. “Community,” then, can be viewed as a discursive tool to shape the field of interaction by simultaneously discouraging unwanted behaviors and encouraging desired behavior.

An objection that might be raised to the frequent occurrence of “community” in members’ discourse at Phishhook is that such a label is overly self-conscious, with members explicitly seeking to claim a label that, in fact, may not reflect their social collective. Indeed, “community” seems to occur in discourse far more frequently at Phishhook than it does in the outside world. There are several answers to this question. First, due to the nature of the “crisis” at Phishhook, members are using “community” more frequently in their discourse, as the “troublemakers” are explicitly attacking that metaphor as a justification for their actions. Secondly, p-hookers are aware of the broader debate over whether community can exist online. Many of the arguments made by those who view Phishhook as a “discussion board” reflect these larger arguments, and occasional theoretical discussions occur about the meaning of “community.” With members experiencing their group as a “community,” it is not surprising that they would want to lay claim to the term.

Finally, members are keenly aware of the precarious status of their community. Phishhook is run by the generosity of Leonard, who, at several times, has publicly considered shutting down the site out of frustration. Aware of this possibility, members consciously refer to themselves as a community in an attempt to solidify their status in Leonard’s eyes. Noteeater, for example, argues

Many people continue to get a lot from this community. For them, please don’t give up. Do whatever you must do for your own sake. After all, Leo, when it’s all said and done, it’s still your board. While you have chosen the high road (as usual, I might add) of asking opinions from the community, you don’t have to. You can dictate what you like, and everyone will accept it and move on.

If Phishhook is a “community,” rather than a “discussion board,” the people and the relationships they have formed simply matter more – and this appeals to Leonard’s vision of Phishhook as a community as well.
Implications for Other Related Social Domains

The nature of Phishhook as a field of interaction can shed light on the ways in which norms and values are shaped in other online communities as well. Norms are formed within the network through the observation of behavioral patterns and the ultimate adoption of those patterns by new members. LaValle (1994), as previously noted, contends that “in the social system, an actor’s behavior has value (also) as a form of knowledge, because it communicates acceptance of a particular pattern” (p. 4). At Phishhook, members explicitly point to behavioral patterns as important tools for socializing “newbies” into the trading community.

This use of patterns has several implications. First, the system of norms at Phishhook entrenches itself as a system because members, when pointing to a particular norm implicitly associate that norm with the broader collection of norms operating. Goffman (1971) describes this process, writing:

This tendency of individuals to read acts as symptoms gives and important expressive or indicative quality even to acts of a quite substantive kind, carrying as they do evidence of the actor’s general relation to a rule and, by extension, his relation to the system of rules of which the one in question is a part (117).

Norms are seen by participants as inherently connected; at Phishhook, for example, DAO and EAC are intrinsically associated, with members seeing one norm operating and, ultimately, adopting the other. This process is further entrenched when traders tell newbies — explicitly — to look at the standards of others and adopt them.

Secondly, this process of reproducing norms as a system is strengthened in an online context. Behavior online, as opposed to the “real” world, leaves textual traces that can be readily observed. In the “real” world, discovering of patterns of norms may take some time: continual observation of interaction is required to begin to notice such patterns. Online, however, many of those patterns remain as textual artifacts of behavior. A newbie who has been told to “look at what others are doing” need not fumble blindly for a while, attempting to trade and observing patterns of behavior in the process. Instead, they may simply look at the publicly available lists of traders, where “trading rules” provide readily visible illustrations of the norms operating within the community. “Surfing” through such lists makes such behavioral patterns readily apparent. The public and asynchronous nature of much online communication.
makes the discovery of patterns of behavior operating in an online community readily accessible and
identifiable.

A second implication for online communities stems from the process of knowledge production in
such communities. At Phishhook, members seek to understand trading through the knowledge they gain
from other members. When they encounter patterns of knowledge, they accept such patterns as “truth.” In
some cases, this acceptance is relatively innocuous. When members treat certain media brands as
inherently better than others, for example, they do so simply based on the prevalent opinions of other
community members. Whether or not these opinions are correct has negligible effect. Drbrent, at one point
in the Technical Trading Help board, writes: “I would venture a guess that 75% of the people who have
brought plextor drives have done so because it’s ‘the drive’ to own. I bet most didn’t look at specs, or
couldn’t tell you why plextor is a better burner.” In these examples, phookers simply adopt the opinions
of others about the technical issues of trading, and then treat those opinions as “facts.”

Such knowledge production is not resigned to simple technical trading issues, however. The same
process applies to traders’ understandings of the legal status of trading. As discussed above, the
predominant view operating at Phishhook about the legality of trading is that as long as the material doesn’t
have a copyright and no profit is made, it’s fair game. This impartial understanding serves to place traders
at legal risk, however minimal. Even though the RIAA states it won’t take action, traders who exchange
unauthorized recordings are still engaging in illegal activities. This process of the reproduction of
incorrect and potentially dangerous knowledge points to a darker side of online communities – it is this
essential process that makes, for example, pro-anorexia communities so dangerous. By treating the
opinions circulating in online communities as objectifiable knowledge, members of these communities may
unwittingly subject themselves to a host of risks.

A third implication of this study for online communities is the nature of a community as a field of
interaction. Such a perspective provides a valuable theoretical lens from which to view online
communities. At Phishhook, for example, the field in which social interaction occurs is shaped by a system
of technical and behavior norms constraining interaction, in conjunction with a system of values which
serve to promote “positive” qualities of behavior between social actors. What emerges is a community
where individuals have a strong sense of both how they should and should not interact.
This community emerges from the interaction of members. Through the process of conducting trades, socializing newbies, and engaging in discussions, p-hookers simultaneously create and shape the system of norms and values which govern the interaction of community members. Wilkinson (1991) writes:

From the natural flow of the interaction process, community emerges, and the fact of its existence, whether or not celebrated in communion, affects the social processes that follow its emergence. Community, therefore, is a natural disposition among people who interact with one another on various matters that comprise a common life. (17)

Community at Phishhook emerges as both (1) the exchange network itself, and the norms operating, and (2) the collection of like-minded individuals, and the values system emerging from that collection. In this sense, both structure and communitas work together, as Turner (1967) suggests, to shape “society.” Accordingly, the master symbol “community” is sometimes granted with the discursive power to govern the social processes of group or organizational members.

Implications for Network Society

While academic debate continues over whether or not “community” is an appropriate name for online social collectives, the fact remains that such organizations – whatever their label – exist. Castells (1996) writes: “The emergence of a new electronic communication system characterized by its global reach, its integration of all communication media, and its potential interactivity is changing and will change forever our culture” (p. 357). Online social organization is here, and the fact that members choose to define their collectives as “communities” has several important implications.

This particular case highlights the importance of such online communities in relation to the questions of copyright law and intellectual property protections that are likely to dominate the early years of the Internet era (Herbeck and Hunter, 1998). As discussed above, the community at Phishhook has produced an opinion which is reified with legal standing that is, essentially, incorrect. This understanding, while enforced vehemently by community members, is rarely questioned. The efficiency with which such an understanding is produced, and the strength with which it is maintained, brings up important questions
in an environment where traditional intellectual property laws are being continuously challenged in new ways.

A second important implication of this case for network society is its demonstration of the manner in which multiplex relationships can develop in an online community. Online communities are typically referred to as “communities of interest.” This, in fact, is one of the critiques offered of “community” as a metaphor for online groups. Phishhook, certainly, is a “community of interest” organized around the trading of live concert materials. But the wide range of topics discussed, from the frivolous to the serious, and the multiplex and meaningful relationships that form in the process, illustrate that such organizations can transcend their ostensible organizing interest. Despite the fact that the medium is somewhat less rich than face-to-face communication, online communicators are nevertheless, as Walther (1996) argues, able to communicate on an interpersonal level through CMC.

Accordingly, online communities may be more than simply collections of people sharing their common interest. Rather, they represent Wellman’s (1979) “Community Liberated,” possessing the classic elements of community, but in an entirely new context. As a relatively new social form, the online community serves as an alternative to the more traditional forms of community articulated in the “Community Lost” and “Community Saved” arguments. While such communities certainly organize around common interests, it is clear that they possess the potential to transform those interests and serve as a place where people form deep and meaningful relationships in new contexts.

From this perspective, community is not a linear description of a social collective as a thing which either is, or is not, a community. Instead, the “community liberated” argument suggests that there are different kinds of communities that can be characterized in multidimensional fashion, much as Brint (2001) suggests with his articulation of Durkheim’s variable approach to community. Wilkinson (1991) writes that “the interactional approach concentrates on an aspect of community that persists in modern society while other aspects appear to be losing their distinctiveness” (p. 2). The interaction occurring in online groups such as Phishhook illustrates that behaviors traditionally associated with community do occur online. Online communities, then, are not simply places where people share a single, common interest: they are places where people interact in ways characteristic of “traditional communities as well,” meeting friends, having fun, discussing diverse ideas, and supporting each other through difficulties.
Implications for Theory

This case has important implications for both social exchange theory and community theory as they apply in an online context.

Social Exchange Theory

Certainly, the exchange system operating at Phishhook is a generalized exchange system, with extended, rather than direct, reciprocity. Two types of “gifts” are exchanged: material (CDs) and informational (advice). Both of these “gifts” are exchanged publicly. When a trader offers a B&P, they do so in public on the B&Ps and Grovels discussion board. When a trader offers advice, they do so publicly as well, usually in the Technical Trading Help board. Newbies, who are the recipients of such generosity, then, not only receive these “gifts” directly, but also see the prevalence of such acts. Traders as well see their fellow traders giving generously. Accordingly, the obligation of extended reciprocity is not invisible: members see others explicitly returning contributions to the group as a whole, which helps to create a strong sense of a mutual, generalized responsibility. This responsibility is likely to be especially strong in online communities, where the interactions between members are often visible to all.

This public visibility is a unique advantage of online communities. When the exchange system breaks down, however, the same lack of restraint that produces “flaming” and other antisocial behaviors, creates a dangerous set of twin responses: vilification and vigilantism. The frequency and length of “bad trader” threads demonstrates how quickly some p-hooker are willing to vilify those they feel have wronged them, often in quite harsh terms. Additionally, the threats of physical action by others against traders (sending viruses, messing with “bad traders” who live in one’s physical community, signing them up for “free stuff,” etc) poses a serious problem. Because of the certainty with which uncertain information, such as who was wronged in a private trading contract, is construed as knowledge, the risk is great of actions being taken against innocent others. The sense of vigilante justice which pervades “bad trader” discussions illustrates that the exchange accounting systems employed in online systems may not possess the breaks that they would in the “real” world, potentially jeopardizing community members.
Community Theories

Clearly the members of Phishhook – as well as many other online social collectives – experience their organizations as “communities.” There is little doubt that a “sense of community” exists. Community theorists who lay claim to a geographic base of community, however, contend that a “sense of community is not enough.” Wilkinson (1991), for example, argues that “people who think of themselves as a community do not necessarily constitute a community, unless they also live and act together in a local society” (p. 3). This bias stems from the fact that, in a locality, people necessarily interact with each other in multiple manners. Wilkinson and others see community as bounded in a territory where people continually are forced to interact because of proximity.

The bias of this argument is that “territory” and “geography” are inherently linked. “Territory,” however can exist online as well. Phishhook, for example, represents a bounded cyberspace. All of the activities occurring at Phishhook are, in some way, linked to the address www.phishhook.com, whether it is a discussion occurring on one of Phishhook’s public boards, or traders simply using their personal list on the site to negotiate a trade. Within those general boundaries are several definable spaces (i.e. the discussion boards) where members are able to interact in multiplex manners, not simply confined to the interest of trading. Viewed from this perspective, Phishhook as a case illustrates how community theory can begin to escape from the geographic bias, by conceiving “territory” and “locality” in new lights.

Interaction occurs online within a bounded space, and provided that interaction remains multiplex and diverse, geography ceases to become a necessary element for bounding the community as a field of interaction.

Implications for Practice

The research behind this study reveals important implications for the further study of online communities in two areas: the practical concern of conducting interviews and the broader concern of ethics as a participant observer in an online setting.
Conducting Interviews

As previously established, interviews have been infrequently used in previous studies of online communities. This infrequency is likely due to the simultaneous ease of accessing the discourse generated by an online community and the relative difficulty of accessing such members for face-to-face interviews. Nevertheless, interviewing the members of an online community is important in accessing their understandings of their community, as well as their opinions about issues which may be important, but not central to community life (legality, in the case of Phishhook).

In conducting interviews for this study, I was surprised at the willingness of community members to participate.Originally, I had anticipated that members would be reluctant to be interviewed because of the questionable legal status of trading. Only one interviewee, however, expressed any such concerns. P-hookers who I personally contacted responded willingly to interview requests, with approximately 60% agreeing to interview. There is no way to assess the acceptance rate of the requests posted in general to the web site, however, the members that responded did so with willingness and enthusiasm.

Conducting the interviews, however, proved to more difficult in practice. Because e-mail interviews are conducted asynchronically, probes are not immediate. As a result, it is difficult to establish a conversational “flow.” Accordingly, most of the interview respondents provided short, incomplete answers without a lot of rich information. Subsequent follow up e-mails failed to produce richer responses, presumably because the tone of the interviews had already been set. In face-to-face interaction, on the other hand, in-depth answers can be reached by immediate probing questions. This difficulty might be compensated for by conducting interviews online synchronously, using instant messaging or “chat room” services.

Ethics of Observation

The asynchronous nature of online communication also raises important ethical concerns relating to participant observation. While my presence as a participant observer conducting research at Phishhook was certainly not hidden, presumably only a minority of participants were fully aware. P-hookers I traded with were aware of my research as I asked them to participate in interviews; certainly some members saw my posts requesting interviews as well. But not every p-hooker participating on the boards saw those
messages, if they didn’t check in during the days when the requests were made, they were likely unaware of my presence.

The ability of a researcher to dig through archives complicates the issues further. I discovered Phishhook in late January, 2002 and decided to focus my research on the community sometime in the middle of that February. Nevertheless, I was able to “observe” community life dating back to the previous September, as each discussion board is archived. In writing the results of my observations, I began to feel uncomfortable with me retroactive intrusion into the lives of these p-hookers. When they were participating in their normal activities some months ago, they could not have known that, in the future, those actions would be “observed” and subjected to the scrutiny of a researcher. Certainly, this unobstructed ability to observe behavior affords practical advantages to the researcher. However, it also points to ethical questions about participant observation that, here, I can only begin to raise.

When a researcher digs back through the archives of a discussion board, they are not actively participating in the social life of an online community. Rather, they act in this instance as what Lindlof (1995) would term a complete observer, a researcher who is in no way present to the people she is researching. While Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) contend that such a “fly on the wall” approach certainly limits the quality of the research, Lindlof (1995) sees ethical concerns with adopting such a stance:

The complete participant acts in ways that are sensible and correct within the expectations of the group being studied. This closeness usually brings the investigator to an understanding of, and respect for, the rationality of the members’ moral order. Knowing what is valued by them, the complete participant can avoid doing things that might harm their interests. But the compete observer has no identity that is explicitly recognized by the social actors under study; consequently, he or she may have little conscience about how he or she interprets their actions, or about how those interpretations are circulated (p. 149).

Lindlof poses this question in relation to the “real” world. But situations in which a researcher could act as a participant observer are few and far between, in the “real” world. Online, however,
such opportunities abound, highlighting the importance focusing on the ethics of observation in conducting online research.

Limitations

There are two primary limitations to this study. First, from a practical level, it was necessary to draw artificial time boundaries for the observation of Phishhook. There are several problems with this. First, with the constant flux of membership, any analysis inevitably focuses only on those members present during the observation period. Secondly, both the antecedents and the ultimate solution to the crisis are pushed deep into the background, and are addressed only implicitly.

The second major limitation of this study is that the specific nature of the case of Phishhook in particular or trading in general limits the generalizability of any results to online communities. Simply put, the fact that participants trade "real objects" in the "real world" places Phishhook with its foot in the door of worlds both "virtual" and "real." It is likely that the real world accountability members have to one another, due to the time, money, and energy invested into the hobby, creates a sense of extended reciprocity that is stronger than one might find in other online communities.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study of "community" as it exists online at Phishhook.com suggest several avenues that should be pursued in subsequent research. First, further research can continue to explore Wilkinson’s (1991) conception of community as a field of interaction as a theoretical lens to view online communities by examining how "community" functions to structure the ways in which members of such collectives interact. Additional research could explore when such fields of interaction in no meaningful way constitute a community, as certainly online groups exists which, even by the loosest standards, cannot rightly be labeled "community." Accordingly, viewing "community" as a field of interaction may contribute to the "virtual community" debate by articulating the line between online "groups" and "communities."

A second direction of research suggested by this study is further exploration of the issue of "legality" as it relates to intellectual property laws in online contexts. Herbeck and Hunter (1998) predict that such issues will have a high profile in the next few years, and as such the question of whether
communities such as Napster (now defunct) and Phishhook, etc. operate to insulate participants from the legal and ethical obligations attending to intellectual property merits careful attention.

Finally, the growth of online communities as a social institution demands attention beyond studies of the romanticize/debunk variety. Whether or not they are “communities” in the traditional sociological sense, such organizations exist, and are perceived by their members to be communities. Accordingly, more attention needs to be paid to the various, evolving relationships between these forms of social organization and other societal institutions. Businesses, for example, are quite interested in the concept of “virtual” community, as attested to by a spate of recent books (see Young and Levine, 2001; Bressler & Graham, 2000; and Preece, 2001). Online communities, regardless of their genuineness, are likely to become an increasingly common form of social organization; research that extends beyond simply drawing boxes around these communities, instead focusing on their relationships with existing social institutions, affords ground-floor access into the shifting structure of society in the electronic age.

Conclusion

The version of “community” that emerges from this study is not of a concept that can be applied simply and unproblematically to any social structure. Certainly, there are forms of social organization – both online and off – that can in no meaningful way be termed community. There are even such social organizations whose members call themselves “community” that are not accurately described by the term. As Watson (1997) suggests, often claims to community are essentially political claims, as groups seek to identify with the term for its powerful rhetorical resonances. Phishhookers are no exception: part of their claim to “community” lies in response to the threats that they perceive to their social collective.

The use of “community” by Phishhook members, however, is not merely a political attempt to solidify the social standing of their online group. P-hookers experience their social organization as a rich and vibrant place. A strong and self-sustaining system of norms ensures a reasonable level of reliability in trading interactions. A strong connection to “the music” anchors a common set of “positive” values influencing the ways that members act towards one another. And throughout, p-hookers interact in multiple manners – trading music, discussing topics serious and frivolous, and meeting in the “real” world – creating robust, multiplex relationships that are every bit “real.”


Bimber, B. (1996, December 3). Study: 51 million Americans have internet access. 93106 Newspaper, p. 3.

Bird, S.E. Chatting on cynthia’s porch: Creating community in an e-mail fan group. Southern Communication Journal, 65(1). 49-65.


Booth, P. (1995, September 1). Jam society: Open-ended jams, concert-tape trading and a sense of community live on in a variety of bands whose methods and marketing may remind some of the Grateful Dead. The Tampa Tribune. 20.


Telleen, S. (1998, November 2). Putting the concept of virtual community to good use. *Internet World*.


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To: Investigators with research involving human subjects

From: J. A. Rudbach, IRB Chair

RE: IRB approval of your proposal

This study has been approved on the date that the "Checklist" was signed. If the study requires an Informed Consent Form, please use the "signed and dated" ICF as a "master" for preparing copies for your study. Approval is granted and continues for one year; if the study runs more than one year a continuation must be requested. Also, you are required to notify the IRB if there are any significant changes or if unanticipated or adverse events occur during the study. Please notify the IRB when you complete this study.

Jon A. Rudbach

attachment(s)
CHECKLIST

The University of Montana
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB)

Submit one completed copy of this Checklist, including any required attachments, for each course involving human subjects. The IRB meets monthly to evaluate proposals, and approval is granted for one academic year. See IRB Guidelines and Procedures for details.

Project Director: Dan Lair
Dept.: Communication Studies
Phone: 243-6604
Signature: __________________________ Date: 10/25/01

Project Title: Virtual Community Formation in "Tape Trading" Networks
Project Description: This study aims to investigate the manner in which the online social networks (in non-technical language) organized for the purpose of trading recordings of live concert performances develop, maintain, and communicate a sense of community.

All investigators on this project must complete the NIH self-study course on protection of human research subjects.

Certification: We have completed the course — (Use additional page if necessary)

Signature: __________________________ Date: __________

Students Only:
Faculty Supervisor: George Cheney
Dept.: Communication Studies
Phone: 243-4426
Signature: __________________________

(My signature confirms that I have read the IRB Checklist and attachments and agree that it accurately represents the planned research and that I will supervise this research project)

IRB Determination:

_____ Approved Exemption from Review

✓ Approved by Administrative Review

_____ Full IRB Determination:

_____ Approved

_____ Conditional Approval (see attached memo)

_____ Resubmit Proposal (see attached memo)

_____ Disapproved (see attached memo)

Signature IRB Chair: __________________________ Date: __________
SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

TITLE: Virtual Community Formation in "Tape Trading" Networks

INVESTIGATOR: Dan Lair
Department of Communication Studies
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
(406) 243-6604
lairdi@qwest.net

FACULTY ADVISOR: George Cheney
Department of Communication Studies
The University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812
(406) 243-4426
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Purpose:
The purpose of this study is to investigate the creation and maintenance of virtual communities by members of online networks organized to trade live recordings of concert performances in order to further understand the ways in which communities develop and are maintained in a computer-mediated context.

Procedures:
If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview designed to illustrate your experiences as a member of the networks organized to trade live concert performances. Participation in such interviews, or any follow-up, is completely voluntary, and may be discontinued at any time.

Risks/Discomforts:
Due to the nature of trading live concert recordings, participation in this study may place you at a minimal legal risk where the trading of unauthorized recordings is concerned. Were the results of this research to be subpoenaed by the authorities, you may be criminally liable for any illegal activities in which you have engaged.

Procedures to Minimize Risk:
• Online interviews will be conducted with an alias or pseudonym that you may create. At the conclusion of the interview, all text will be cut-and-pasted into a word processor file and saved offline. The original transcript logs will be deleted.
• Interviews conducted via e-mail will be cut-and-pasted from the original e-mail into a word processor file. You will be given an alias and an alias e-mail address, and the original e-mails will be deleted, removing information such as ISP addresses which might identify you.

Benefits:
Although you may not benefit from taking part in this study, your participation will help enhance the understanding of how computer networks are used to create and foster virtual communities.

Confidentiality:
All records of communication, including e-mail correspondence and interview transcripts, will be stored on a floppy disk which will be kept in a locked drawer. In any report that may be published or distributed, information that will make it possible to identify a subject will be modified or omitted to protect your identity. Your name or any other identifying materials will not be associated with any records of information you provide. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only researchers will have access to the records. Pseudonyms will be used to protect the identity of participants. Transcriptions will also be changed to pseudonyms. Any resulting reports or published papers will exclude any names of participants, and any identifying details of participants will be excluded or changed in order to avoid recognition. After conclusion of the research project, all floppy disks will be destroyed and any hard copies of e-mails or transcripts will be shredded.

Compensation for Injury:

Although we believe that the risk of taking part in this study is minimal, the following liability statement is required in all University of Montana consent forms:

In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University's Claims representative or University Legal Counsel.

(Reviewed by University Legal Counsel, July 6, 1993)

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:

Your decision to take part in this research study is entirely voluntary. You may choose to withdraw at any time.

Questions:

If you have any questions about the research now or during the study, contact Dan Lair, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula, MT 59812, Phone: (406) 243-6684, e-mail: lairdj@qwest.net; or faculty advisor George Cheney, Department of Communication Studies, The University of Montana, Missoula MT 59812, Phone: (406) 243-4426, e-mail: g Cheney@relway.mont.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact Tony Rudbach, through the Research Office at the University of Montana at (406) 243-6670.

Subject's Statement of Consent:

I have read the above description of this research study. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that any future questions I may have will also be answered by a member of the research team. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I also verify that I am at least 18 years of age. This e-mail will serve as my copy of this consent form, and my reply to this e-mail will serve as my informed, voluntary consent to participate in this study.

Name
Date

(Please type in your name and date as your electronic signature, verifying your informed consent to participate in this research study.)
Communities abound in the off-line world. Cooley (1929) suggested that community may well be an inherent form of organizing for human beings. The received notion of communities as geographically-based entities (e.g. Park, 1936) carries with it the assumption of face-to-face interaction between community members. While definitions of community have certainly expanded beyond simply those that are based in localities (e.g. Calhoun, 1998), the assumption of face-to-face interaction still dominates most academic and popular understandings of community.

The Internet explosion of the mid- to late-1990s created a context where such received notions of community have become, at the least, problematic. Rheingold (1993), describing his experiences as a member of the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link, popularly known as the WELL, coined a new term -- “virtual community” -- and helped initiate an academic debate over whether online associations properly merit the metaphor “community.” As the Internet grew in popularity, so did the number of associations formed according to varying interests.

One such interest group organized around the hobby of “bootleg trading”: the trading of live recordings of concert performances. The study of such online associations is warranted for several reasons. First, these groups lie at the heart of the academic controversy over community online: not only do members frequently refer to themselves as a “community,” but their entire social organization is based on a sense of social obligation that can be considered, at least, “community-like.” Accordingly, investigation into the online organization of “bootleg” trading can contribute to the body of literature surrounding the debate over what has, following Rheingold’s lead, come to be known as “virtual community.”

Study into this online organization is interesting methodologically, as well. Most previous “virtual community” studies have relied on the discursive artifacts produced by those communities, primarily through investigations of discussion boards, web pages, and newsgroups. While many of these studies have been conducted employing participant observation (e.g. Baym, 1995; Bird, 1999), few have actually talked to the members of these “communities” to elicit directly their experiences and perceptions (Watson, 1997 is a notable exception). Presumably, this omission is due to the fact that it is difficult to track down a
population that can be widely dispersed, geographically. Paying attention to the ways in which researchers can access members, allowing them to describe their own views of the “communities” they participate in poses an interesting methodological challenge that this paper begins to address.

This second justification for studying online trading communities is the focus of this paper. In conducting research for my master’s thesis, I studied one such online community – Phishhook.com – to understand how members of an online collective come to view themselves as a community. In conducting that research, I interviewed 26 members via e-mail, and the interviews conducted here certainly contribute to the understanding of community that emerges from that study.

Here, however, I turn my eye towards the research process itself. I do so first out of hesitance to make claims about the Phishhook community from the ten interviews conducted in conjunction with this particular phase of my research project. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995) argue:

*To the extent that participants are willing and able to describe these features of social life, an interview may prove a valuable tool. . . But the ethos of fieldwork holds that in order to fully understand and appreciate action from the perspective of participants, one must get close to and participate in a wide cross-section of their everyday activities over an extended period of time* (p. 10).

In my thesis work, I engage in participant observation and discourse analysis as well as interviews, contributing to a well-perspective on the Phishhook community, attempting to triangulate the results (Lindlof, 1995). Such work, however, is beyond the limited scope of this particular paper – and the process of interviewing itself also plays an important role in such triangulation.

Instead, here, the interview-as-methodology becomes the object of analysis. This focus on methodology as object of analysis is warranted for several reasons. First, as Penkoff, Colman, and Katzman (1996) argue, “online research demands methods for data collection and analysis that are specific to the medium” (p. 3). Conducting interviews online is certainly different from conducting them face-to-face and, as such, attention should be paid to the nuances of computer-mediated interviews. This attention may be particularly appropriate when applied to studies of online communities. Paccagnella (1997) argues that while extensive methodological literature exists regarding the study of forms of online organization in the business arena, little methodological literature offer suggestions for the study of “virtual communities.”
Accordingly, a focus on online interviews investigating such a community might provide valuable methodological insights.

By turning to methodology as the object of this study, I necessarily flirt with boundaries between methodology and methodolatry. My purpose, however, is not to fetishize methodology, nor to make global prescriptions as to how to conduct online interviews. Rather, I offer my reflections on my experiences conducting online interviews, however small they may be, as a way of sparking broader conversation about how such interviews can be improved to more effectively aid the study of online communities.

Accordingly, I draw from my experiences conducting online interviews to pose tentative arguments about the nature of such interviews. These arguments serve to describe the essential characteristics of the series of interviews I conducted, both via e-mail and instant messaging services. In doing so, I point to the salient features of each type of interview, in my experience, as well as draw comparisons between the two. In the end, these arguments attempt to address the question of not only how to best conduct interviews via each medium, but when each medium is the most appropriate.

In order to do so, I begin below by offering a brief review of the computer-mediated communication (CMC) literature, as CMC is, inherently, the medium through which any online interview is conducted. Next, I discuss the methodology of this study of methodology. Finally, I tell the various stories of the interviews conducted for this study, drawing comparisons between them and highlighting the most salient portions of my experiences.

**Computer Mediated Communication**

Computers mediate the associations which people form online and, as such, are intrinsically linked with any sense of community the members of these associations might share. As Rheingold (1996) argues: “If computer-mediated communication (CMC) has a potential, it is in the way people in so many parts of the Net defend the use of the term “community” to describe the relationships we have built online” (p. 415). CMC has the potential as a community-building tool since, unlike other mediated forms of communication, CMC is “the first technology able to mimic the kinds of communication interactions typically available to members of a traditional geographic community” (Giese, 1998, p. 3). Postmes,
Spears, and Lee (1998) argue that the ability of CMC to perform these functions is liberating, and allows potential community members to transcend traditional geographic restrictions.

Broadly speaking, CMC exists within a temporal structure which is either synchronous or asynchronous (Riva and Galimberti, 1998), meaning that communication can happen either instantly between participants in “real-time” (synchronous) or may be separated by the time between message and response (asynchronous). Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garon, Guilia, and Haythornwaite (1996) offer the following typology of CMC as it exists in its “online” manifestations:

- E-mail -- asynchronous mail messages between senders,
- Discussion groups -- asynchronous discussions between members such as message boards and newsgroups, and
- “Chat” -- synchronous chat rooms, such as Internet Relay Chat (IRC). Instant messaging services such as ICQ or America Online’s AIM would also fall under this category, although they are forms of one-to-one communication, rather than many-to-many.

Accordingly, users of CMC have a variety of options at their disposal, depending upon their purposes and resources.

The effects of CMC on communicating meaning remain contested terrain. Riva and Galimberti (1998) contend that collaborative commitment of participants in the co-formulation of messages is eliminated in CMC, as is the feedback that allows the social meaning of messages to be processed immediately. Chesebro (1999), on the other hand, speculates that limited feedback may assist the processing of meaning in CMC because of its orderly nature, being simple, direct, and devoid of confusing “noise.” If anything, the research about the effect of CMC’s structure reveals contradictory tendencies. Two specific areas of the CMC literature help shed light on the nature of CMC: media richness and social presence.

**Media Richness.** The media richness approach to CMC is based upon the assumption that people distinguish between different media based upon the media’s intrinsic properties, such as warmth (Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Much early research into media richness pointed to CMC as relatively low in richness (Fulk and Collins-Jarvis, 2001), but recent research indicates that CMC may be a much richer form of communication than previously anticipated (Ngwenyama and Lee, 1997; Papacharissi and Rubin,
This research asserts a greater agency for CMC participants; Ngwenyama and Lee (1997) contend “it is through the process of enactment that people, not electronic communication media, bring about the richness that they experience in their communication” (p. 2).

Social Presence. The social presence approach to CMC, according to Walther (1996), “predicts that the fewer channels or codes available within a medium, the less attention that is paid by the user to the presence of other social participants in an interaction” (p. 7). Traditionally, social presence in CMC has been viewed from a “cues filtered out” perspective, contending that CMC has limited social presence due largely to the lack of both nonverbal and socioeconomic cues about the parties interacting (Flaherty, 1998; Chesebro, 1999, Palmer, 1995).

Other research, however, seems to indicate that CMC users do not passively accept the minimization of traditional social cues and instead invent methods of inserting new cues (Baym, 1995). Walther (1992) observed that CMC participants conveyed social information through language use, e-mail addresses, and signature files attached to the bottom of e-mails. Pratt, Wiseman, Cody, and Wendt (1999) found that e-mail users asked more personal questions that face-to-face interactions, while Werry (1995) contends that users abbreviate their language in meaningful ways through shortened spellings, acronyms, and graphic expressions of emotions called “emoticons.” Walther (1995) argues that the early research was skewed because it simply takes longer for relationships to develop using CMC.

Studying Online Methodology

Much research conducted into online communities has focused on the discursive artifacts left by those communities. Such an approach is certainly valid: due to the nature of the medium, texts are readily deposited and easily accessible, provided a concrete record of the discourse that has transpired within the community. Following the patterns of discourse, researchers have been able to map the patterns of interaction between community members demonstrating the nature of the relationships between community members and, in rare cases, their views of the “community” itself in explicit terms (see Dibbell (1993), who observed a MUD’s communal reaction to a virtual “rape.”)

What most researchers have not done, however, is talk directly to the community members themselves. This oversight is most likely due to several methodological difficulties. First, the geographic
distribution of online community members (which can, depending on the group, be global) makes meeting face-to-face for interviews prohibitive at best. The same widespread distribution of community members also makes telephone interviews financially prohibitive, leaving interviews conducted via CMC as the most viable option. Such interviews themselves are complicated by the nature of the medium in which they are conducted: interviews conducted asynchronously via e-mail lack the social presence of face-to-face interviews, and synchronous chats require the physical difficulty of typing rather than speaking for respondents, presumably resulting in shorter conversational turns between interviewer and interviewee and potentially, less rich information.

Despite these difficulties, however, the input of community members directly through interviews rather than indirectly through the artifacts of their involvement in the community would contribute greatly to an understanding of why participants apply the community metaphor to their online aggregations. Such an understanding is important, as it affords the researcher the opportunity to let meanings emerge from the participants themselves, rather than imposing particular meaning upon them. The interviews compiled for my overall study were conducted according to a set of research questions designed to investigate community members' perceptions of their community.

In this particular paper, however, I use these interviews to address a set of research questions designed to facilitate investigation of the constraints and opportunities presented by conducted interviews via CMC. The questions focus specifically on the essential qualities of interviews conducted via CMC:

1) What qualities characterize interviews conducted asynchronously via e-mail?
2) What qualities characterize interviews conducted synchronously via instant messaging services?
3) To what purposes might each of the above interview methods best be suited?

My answers to these questions, again, are designed to be tentative and exploratory. The number of interviews analyzed represents a relatively small sample, as discussed below, and, accordingly, I wish only to contribute to a further discussion of online interview methodology.

Interview Sample
For the analysis that follows, I focus on a corpus of ten interviews. I selected these interviews for analysis as they represented a second wave of interviews conducted with Phishhook members, following a series of 26 interviews conducted as a part of my thesis research. In this second wave, I modified the original schedule of questions slightly to directly ask members about their perception of Phishhook as a community. This schedule of questions is reproduced as Appendix A.

I conducted the interviews, as suggested by the research questions, using two methods: e-mail and instant messaging services. Four of the ten interviews I selected were conducted via e-mail according to the revised schedule of questions. These four were selected from eight completed interviews. Of these eight, three were eliminated (and promptly erased!) because they were filled out by minors who presumably did not fully read the consent form. Following a probably unnecessary impulse to achieve symmetry, I eliminated the fourth interview at random from the five remaining replies, to preserve consistency with the number of interviews conducted via instant messaging.

I also conducted four instant messaging interviews. Originally, seven people agreed to participate; three, however, turned out to be minors, leaving only four viable interviews. Of these four, two participants had responded to the original e-mail interviews I had conducted as a part of my thesis research. I then pulled these original interviews out, identifying them by common answers to general biographical information (age and location enabled me to correctly identify the respondents). I then compared these two e-mail interviews to the appropriate transcript from the IM interview, making the total number of interviews analyzed ten.

Situating the Interviews

In order to discover Phishhook members' perception of their community, I conducted, as mentioned above, a series of interviews both via e-mail and through several different instant messaging programs. Before discussing these interviews in particular, however, it is necessary first for me to step back and situate this particular study within my broader research project on Phishhook.

I conducted research on Phishhook as a part of – or, really, the extent of – my thesis research. This research consisted of three interrelated data sources: e-mail, participant observation, and discourse analysis. These data sources necessarily overlap – for example, when I posted requests for interviews (as I
Nevertheless, my participation at Phishhook remained limited. In the initial design of my research project, I was concerned about the reactive effects (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw, 1995) of my presence. Accordingly, I viewed participant observation as primarily a means of accessing the private interactions of p-hookers, namely trading. Viewed in hindsight, I would not have been so hesitant to fully participate, and instead followed Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw’s (1995) advice that “relationships between the field researcher and people in the setting do not so much disrupt or alter ongoing patterns of social interaction as reveal the terms and bases on which people form social ties in the first place” (p. 3). I did not, however, and so at one level, I inadvertently viewed the social life at Phishhook from the viewpoint of observer-as-participant.

My observations of Phishhook were extensive, as I monitored the public interaction between members over a six-month period. Occasionally, during this period, I did participate in several discussions. During this observation and participation, as a part of developing my overall argument for my thesis, I noticed that the majority of members at Phishhook did, indeed, call themselves a community — and I quickly began to agree with them.

This bias ultimately reveals itself in the questions I asked during the interviews for this phase of my research project. When, for example, I ask participants — explicitly — if they view Phishhook as a community, I force them to respond to the idea that Phishhook can be conceived of as a community. In doing so, I may have unwittingly forced participants into using a term they would not have otherwise. This scenario is certainly possible, but its overt likelihood is mitigated by two factors: first, several respondents used the term “community” before I did, allowing their own understanding of Phishhook to emerge first; and, second, that participants offered nuanced understandings of “community,” both as it relates to Phishhook and in more general terms, as well.

Analyzing the Interview Process

While part of this study was designed to access member perceptions of community, I also wanted to take the opportunity to examine the process of doing so. In order to allow members to speak for themselves, interviews are necessary — but in an online context, conducting interviews is a somewhat more
complicated process. The properties of the Internet which allow communities to organize around interests rather than geography are the same properties which make the traditional face-to-face interview a difficult task.

When you live in Montana, with a low population, the task is nearly impossible. Originally, I had hoped to overcome this obstacle during my trip to Denver in March of 2002 for the national debate championship. I had tentatively scheduled three interviews, one with a debate coach from California who would be at the tournament, and two others with p-hookers from Denver. Computer malfunctions conspired against me, however, as the tournament wandered hopelessly off schedule and my evenings, which were to have been free, were quickly occupied with judging debate rounds until 11:00 at night. My chance to conduct face-to-face interviews quickly evaporated.

I was left, then, with conducting online interviews as my only option. Such interviews make some intuitive sense, however. Members of online communities communicate online. And so even though conducting interviews online seemed to me somewhat more limited, the online communication between members of these groups is sufficient for them to experience “community.” If so, then online interviews should be rich enough to produce insights into that “community experience.”

Two options are available for conducting such interviews – e-mail and instant messaging. Looking for p-hookers willing to participate in both types of interview, I posted the following message on Phishhook’s “General Discussion” board:

Hello all!

Thanks kindly to all of you who helped me out a few months ago when I posted requesting some interviews… your kindness and effort is truly appreciated and has helped tremendously.

Anyway, I am a grad student in communication studies at the University of Montana, finishing up my thesis (quite soon, I hope!). I study online communities and am focusing specifically on Phishhook – a really amazing, interesting place, as I’m sure you know.

I’m wrapping up my research, and would love to conduct a few more interviews. These consist of a series of questions about your experiences/opinions about Phishhook.

What I’d like to do is:

cconduct 6-8 interviews via email
conduct 6-8 interviews via AIM or ICQ

All interviews are strictly confidential.
If you'd be interested and willing to participate, please send me an e-mail at danlair@hotmail.com.

I look forward to hearing from you and hearing your opinions about this community!

Thanks kindly in advance,

Dan Lair

I shot high on the numbers of participants, based on my observations of the way in which p-hookers post on the boards. When p-hookers offer up their extra shows in public posts, members take careful care to negotiate who gets what: once all of the CDs have been claimed, the thread tends to die. Knowing this, I didn’t want people to stop responding once they saw I had four members agree to each interview method. Operating on the theory that it’s better to have more participants than necessary, I hoped for as many responses as possible.

The responses came quickly. Within five minutes, I had two public replies and one private e-mail. Of the two public responses, one was a picture of Nikki Six of Motley Crue fame, an in-joke on the boards at the time, with a trader agreeing (in the voice of Nikki) to participate. In the other, a p-hooker simply responded to let me know that “the thesis that you’re writing is a load of shit.” Others, however, were far kinder, and by that evening, I had received 17 responses, which I figured was more than enough.

I turned out to be only barely correct, as slowly the number of traders who were willing to participate but actually could dwindled. One trader, upon reading the consent form, politely declined in the interest of not incriminating himself – the first trader to do so throughout all of my research on Phishhook. Another first quickly happened as well: a minor agreed to participate, but I had to turn him away. And then another. And another. In all, six minors had agreed to participate, and were turned away. I had made the request on a Saturday morning, rather than a weekday, which may well account for this high number of minors responding.

Left with ten potential interviewees, I narrowed them down to eight in order to maintain an equal number of e-mail and Instant Messaging interviews. I e-mailed the questions to those who agreed to participate via e-mail, negotiated times to “meet” online with those who would participate in IM interviews. The stage for this round of interviews was set.

Below, I tell the “stories” of these interviews as a means of comparing them from a methodological perspective. In doing so, I write in the manner of an autoethnography, examining my own
experiences as researcher in the process of conducting interviews. Autoethnography is a form of ethnographic writing which “incorporates feeling and participatory experience as dimensions of knowing” (Ellis, 1993, p. 726). While often devoted to narratives telling of somewhat dramatic experiences (e.g. Ellis, 1993; Crawford, 1996; Kolzer, 1996), autoethnography is by no means confined to highly emotional experience. Ellis and Bochner (1996) contend that “most of life is commonplace, so a lot of autoethnography will focus on the details of everyday life that won’t provoke these raw emotions” (p. 23).

Writing about the differences in the process of conducting online interviews via e-mail and instant messaging certainly is not likely to provoke emotional reactions. It is, however, indicative of the commonplace interactions that a researcher interested in online organizations is likely to encounter. Accordingly, an autoethnography centered around the process of conducting online interviews seems appropriate for several reasons.

First, while critics of autoethnography have charged, as Denzin (1996) writes, that such writing is “narcissistic and self indulgent” (p. 216), the approach seems particularly suited to engaging with the research process itself. After all, conducting interviews is somewhat narcissistic – the participants in such interviews are likely to receive little in return, except for their own enjoyment in discussing their personal and social lives (Trader H, for example, told me “thanks for letting me help out”). Accordingly, turning the narcissistic eye to the research process itself seems somewhat natural.

Second, such narcissism may prove helpful in refining future research. By attempting to provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of the online interview process, I hope to invite others to consider the differences between methods of conducting such interviews. As Lindlof (1995) argues, “the richness of the particular elements that are documented and the patterns or themes they exhibit allow the researcher to generalize to other cases of the same problem” (p. 57). In this way, by telling the story of my experiences in conducting online interviews, I can hopefully contribute to a further discussion of how to access member experiences of their online communities.

Interviewing via E-mail.

In many respects, the experience of conducting an interview via e-mail isn’t much of an interview at all, or even, for that matter, much of an experience. When I think of describing my experience
conducting these interviews, three words come to mind: impersonal, instrumental, mechanical. I'm sure much of this is my fault – the medium is nothing if not expedient, and expediency is tempting. And I gave in to temptation.

Once I had collected the addresses of those who agreed to participate, I sent out an e-mail to them all as a group, with the consent form and question attached. I prefaced the e-mail with the following message:

Thanks, again, for agreeing to participate. Please take a moment to read the information and consent form below. After you have read the form, please type your name and the date on the lines provided; this will serve as your electronic signature giving your informed consent to participate in this interview. The interview questions are below the informed consent form; please type your answers under each question and, when you have completed them, simply send the e-mail back to me as a reply. Again, thank you kindly for agreeing to participate. Your help is tremendously appreciated.

The process really takes minimal effort: type in a few addresses, cut and paste the consent form and questions from the appropriate Word file, click send, wait.

The responses trickled in over about a week. When they arrived, the process of processing them was equally mechanical. Initially, most of the responses were difficult to read – most mail readers react differently, and so the text of their responses came back to me in many jumbled manners. With each, I simply highlighted the text, copied it, and pasted it into a new Word file. Then formatting: delete added characters (i.e. countless "\>"s), add returns where necessary, margins, spacing.

By the time I get to reading, the interview is hopelessly disjointed. Already, several days have passed from the initial questions, to the responses, to the formatting. So I read their responses – what is unclear? what could be expanded upon? I formulate a few follow up questions, send them back. Wait. Two respondents reply to the follow-ups, two don't. The responses come back in, dragging the interviews out for nearly a week and a half. But they are "done," waiting to be analyzed for content along with the IM interviews.

Accordingly, e-mail interviews appear to be an efficient, although not necessarily effective, method of conducting online interviews. Rather than trying to elicit members' deeper perspectives, e-mail interviews appear more suited to asking more general questions. In this respect, they seem particularly suited to what Lindlof (1995) terms "respondent interviews".

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The respondent interview elicits open-ended responses to a series of directive questions... [It] resembles the traditional survey in its standardized protocol, high content comparability, and relatively large sample of interviewees. “Respondents” are rarely encouraged to expound their own notions of what is important for the researcher to know. Instead, a strong conceptual framework drives the question design and sample selection concerns of such interviews (p. 172).

The e-mail interview certainly has its advantages, as a method of reaching large numbers of online individuals and comparing their responses to one another. As I argue in greater detail below, however, this is not a particularly apt method of accessing the subjective experiences of members of online communities. For that task, the instant messaging interview seems far more suited.

Interviewing via Instant Messaging

If e-mail interviews are three steps removed from face-to-face interviews, then instant messaging is only two (telephone interviews would be one, allowing for the richness of vocal expression). While the participants may not be able to see each other’s faces and gestures, or hear the tone’s in each other’s voices, their conversation is nevertheless interactive. This interactivity poses challenges and opportunities for the interviewer, which I hope to explore by reproducing, in narrative form, the story of one of the IM interviews I conducted below.

The narrative that follows is certainly a form of ethnographic fiction (Clifford and Marcus, 1986), as I reproduce my original field notes for the particular interview below, embellished by fictitious comparisons to the previous interviews. In this way, the narrative of my interview with Trader K serves as a sort of meta-narrative to retell portions of my experiences conducting other IM interviews. The interview with Trader K was selected for several reasons. First, it was longest interview conducted (2.5 hours compared to 2, 1.5, and 1.5, respectively), and, thus, simply had the most conversation. Second, it was also the last interview conducted. Accordingly, while the reflections on the other IM interviews presented in the narrative below are fictitious, they are less so than they would be were any other interview to be selected — I certainly learned lessons from each of the previous interviews which informed how I conducted the final
Finally, the interview with Trader K contained telling examples of each of these “lessons,” making it a particularly suited narrative.

Interviewing Trader K

The interview with Trader K starts with a friendly feel. We’ve e-mailed back and forth for the better part of the week, scheduling and rescheduling before finally settling on this Saturday morning interview, and in the process Trader K’s tone has been nothing but cheerful. So I’m sure that’s influencing the positive feel I have about this interview, but in reality, I’m just guessing. I may well be reading an awful lot into a plethora of exclamation points, because when I look back at the text, punctuation seems to be the only clues expressing goodwill. I’m feeling friendly, however, and so I reply with exclamation points in return, although I stick to just one per sentence.

It’s nice to feel friendly – in two of these interviews, I didn’t know how to start. The pleasantries that would normally be exchanged face-to-face seem somehow inappropriate, here, online, with complete strangers. The word that I’m feeling, although I don’t want to admit it, is intimidated. Not a lot, mind you, but enough to make me uncomfortable – people generally don’t intimidate me, and here I am slightly afraid of how two screen names will view me if I don’t begin the interview properly. The interview with Trader H, like this one with Trader K, was much more comfortable – we, too, had exchanged a series of e-mails to narrow down the exact times. Traders I and J just told me to IM them while they were at work, we “talked” little before we began the interview. I like this degree of familiarity, however small.

I’m at my desk, cluttered with scraps of paper, books to be referenced, and CDs to be copied. I have my coffee at hand – it is, after all, Saturday morning – and while I wait for Trader K to read and respond to the consent form, I walk over to my stereo and put in a few new shows that I haven’t listened to yet: Muddy Waters from the early 80s, with the Rolling Stones, and this Traffic show which, during the course of the interview, quickly becomes one of my favorites. I’m in flannel pants, my hair is uncombed, and I’m sitting with my legs folded, reclining in my chair. This is the way to conduct an interview!

Trader K responds quickly, and we dive into the interview. I ask the same series of general questions I’ve asked before – age, location, musical interests – and Trader K fires back answers as quickly as I can ask. We’ll cruise right through at this rate.
After only a few turns, we run into typographical confusion: Trader K writes that he has been trading for “6 months seriously... dabbled with the same 10 shows for about 6 years,” which I don’t understand. So I probe, parroting his wording: “dabbled w/ same shows?” Apologetic, Trader K writes that he meant to type some, and then talks about having analog tapes with horrible sound (Trader I was apologetic, too, informing me that “the injury clause in that consent form is too funny – and you'll have to work w/my spelling typos”). Only slightly less confused, I have a decision to make as I pause before typing my reply. Ultimately, I decide not to belabor the point and move on, asking Trader K what made him get seriously into trading.

Trader K replies quickly, and we’re back on track. He’s faster than the ones before. We’re moving quickly, and the pace, even though I know it’s infinitely slower than a “real” conversation, doesn’t feel that slow – it feels like we’re almost face-to-face. The interviews with Traders I and J proceeded at a moderate pace – there’s no way to avoid “dead air,” because typing is simply not as fast as talking. And if their minds are anything like mine, the direct line from brain to mouth is much shorter than the line from brain to fingers. These two interviews seemed to drag at times, to be sure, and at times I was left waiting, wondering if another reply was coming or if I should go ahead and ask the next question. But, in general, it felt as if there was a definite progression to our conversations.

The interview with Trader H, on the other hand, was positively glacial in comparison. I’m asking questions and he’s taking minutes to respond. It’s hard to stay focused when you’re doing that much waiting: I’m checking my e-mail, adjusting and readjusting the lineup for my fantasy baseball team, tuning in to just how phenomenal the version of “Whipping Post” on this new Zappa boot is, readjusting the lineup. It’s like I’m half in an interview, half not. It’s both boring and hard. I don’t want to wander, but I’m a captive now – with an e-mail interview I could do other things – and I’m stuck at my desk, trying to concentrate, and only occasionally succeeding.

With Trader K, though, it’s different. He’s answering quickly, I’m asking quickly, and I really feel some synergy here. There’s a flow to this thing. It’s much easier to pay attention, I feel much sharper, much more present. And I’m not even having much of a problem knowing when to type a new question and when to hang back and wait for a response: MSN’s instant messaging service lets me know when
Trader K is typing a response (Yahoo's IM did as well, in my interview with Trader I) – a handy feature for interviewing!

So we're responding to another and it feels almost as if we're talking, when I'm confronted with the linearity of this medium. I want to include some personal information, too – to let Trader K know a bit about myself; I don't want to just be characters on screen in the form of questions. And so he tells me that he stumbled across Phishhook from another site and just decided to "hang around." I want to ask him why, and so I do, but I also want him to know that I stumbled across Phishhook in the exact same way from the exact same site. So I put this bit in parenthesis after my follow up (I ask "what made you decide to hang around? (that's the same way I stumbled across the hook, btw)"), but it just feels extraneous. No acknowledgment, Trader K just answers the probe, and we're off talking about the nature of Phishhook's discussion boards.

This is pretty common in the interviews, though, and it makes me feel a bit awkward each time. Trader K mentions how his wife is bored by his hobby, and I reply with how my girlfriend sometimes gets annoyed when I'm listening to a strange new show. Trader H mentions he's from Austin, and trying to connect I reply how Austin's music scene was actually one of the draws for me for a doctoral program two hours away. Trader J discusses an artist's opposition to trading, I tell him about a Zappa show I received where he tells the audience "no taping." In each of these cases, I share a little personal information, acting on the impulse I felt as if we were face-to-face. In each of these cases, no reply. Just back to the question at hand.

But at least we're back to the questions, and at least we're interacting. There's a flow to the conversation, unlike those e-mail interviews where there isn't even a conversation. And the flow is taking me from the schedule, which is fine. In the e-mails, everything I want to know is being answered, but not always well. Here, I may not be getting all the answers, but the answers I do get are rich.

I ask Trader K for his perceptions of the Hook's demographic composition. The question here is close-ended, but asks for reflection on several variables, and Trader K is understandably slower in responding. That's ok by me at this point -- the coffee is well into my system and I need a diversion as well. So I'm gone from my desk, but when Trader K has replied, MSN's telltale chime lets me know, and I rush back to my seat to respond -- I'm not going to leave him in the lurch.
Trader K allows me to ease back into the interview, offering a long response to a rather short follow-up question ("bands such as?"). As we discuss bands, he describes what he feels he has in common with other p-hookers: music. His answer is pretty simple and straightforward; I ask a follow up ("so how would you describe the general "feel" of the scene at Phishhook") and instantly regret it. When I thought of the question, I clearly saw the connection — to me, commonality and a positive feel intuitively go hand in hand. For Trader K, though, the connection is not clear, and he instead begins to distinguish between types of people on the Hook, based on their attitudes. It’s an important answer, but I feel as though I’ve lost an opportunity — we’re on to something else, now.

I felt the same type of tension in trying to connect ideas at various points in the other interviews, as well. With Trader H, for example, I “listened” to him describe the frequency with which members give each other gifts — mail bombs and freebies — and, in following up, I ask him about the role of the public “thank yous” in creating that sense of generosity. This is not the direction Trader H wants to go, however, and he returns the focus to his personal feelings towards that generosity. This was a connection that I forced, based on what I had observed in my thesis research — I sought confirmation, validation. And I flopped.

In this interview Trader K, however, we’re pretty much on track until Trader K makes this distinction between “quality people” and “snobs.” At this point, we’re about done with what would be Question 2 on the schedule and are about to move on to Question 3, but put on the breaks! This is too interesting to pass up, and we’re off on a diversion. E-mail hasn’t afforded me this flexibility.

Compared to the previous interviews, we stayed on track for quite some time — maybe fifteen minutes. In others, diversion was near immediate: Trader J, for instance, gets only as far as describing his perceptions of Phishhook’s size. He singles out members who are “very active,” I ask him about it, and we’re off. We never return to questions of his demographic perception — and I never even notice until I begin to analyze the transcript in depth. With Trader K, the diversion is more closely connected to the order of the schedule, but that’s by accident: I’ve given up any pretense of following it closely.

As Trader K elaborates on the distinction between “snobs” and “quality people,” I begin to worry about the way I’m typing my questions. I’ve asked a follow up, requesting “examples of how the ‘quality’ people’ act…. what makes them ‘quality’?” Trader K’s reply comes with “quality” in quotation marks, and
I wonder if I’ve offended him somehow; I can easily see how using quotation marks might come across as belittling. All I wanted to do was use, exactly, Trader K’s wording in asking a follow up – to try to gain insight into his understanding of his words. But there’s multiple ways to read that text, and there’s no way for Trader K to read me: am I being sincere and respectful or snobbish and judgmental? Trader K can’t see me smile, or nod, or look engaged and interested. All he can read is my words and they are, in a word, ambiguous. I worry for a moment about whether I should come right out and tell him my concerns, but decide to hold off for fear that might seem quite strange.

And anyway, it would be another distraction, a diversion from the highly linear flow of the conversation: we’re on to something else, now.

Trader K is talking about people who act negatively, and he’s talking about such behavior in terms of both trading and the discussion boards in the same virtual breath. Most traders seem to make a larger distinction between the two, so I find it very interesting that Trader K seems to be connecting them. I ask him about this connection – “so it sounds like you see a strong connection b/w those who act negatively on the boards and those who act negatively in terms of trading?” – and I quickly begin to feel that I’ve made a mistake. Trader K answers simply “yes!” and I broaden the discussion, asking him about the connection between trading and the boards in general.

It takes Trader K a while to respond to this much more open question, and while I wait, I look at the question above. There are to problems with what I’ve just asked. First, it’s far too narrow – the “yes!” answer provides more than a slight clue of this. But even more damaging, it’s so leading. It’s my connection that I’m forcing, even though I can see it in his answers above – all I’m doing here is forcing Trader K to validate my own perceptions, which may not reflect the nuances of his understanding. And what do I gain from that?

But now I’m looking at Trader K’s response to my request that he “characterize the connection b/w the boards and trading in general,” and he’s talking about the volume of trading on the site, which is not what I expected or wanted. So now I’m reflecting on the way I’ve worded the question. It’s a one-shot-deal: if we were face-to-face, Trader K would probably be more willing to ask me what I mean. Or, if he wasn’t, I could probably see the confusion on his face and offer a quick follow up. But it’s entirely possible that he thinks I’m clear, that he understands perfectly what he thinks I’m asking. And if that were
the case face to face, I could politely interrupt, if necessary, and recover the conversation’s direction. I can
do none of these things, here.

The confusion over the way questions are worded seem to make things quite sloppy, from time to
time. Trader I and I, for example, do a little textual dance over the question of whether people knew each
other in the real world before or after Phishhook: I ask “knew each other from somewhere else before the
hook or because they met on the hook?,” and receive the (confusing to me) reply “it seemed like they knew
each other in person, not just in cyberspace.” I never get a clear answer.

With Trader H, I try to ask a fairly abstract question about the centrality of “music” to p-hookers,
but I can never quite figure out the wording – I ask “so ‘music,’ then is really central to Phishhook? As
more than just something traded, I mean, if that makes sense?” Which it doesn’t, not to me now and it
certainly appears not to have made sense to Trader H the, because his answer was even more vague and
abstract than the question: “IMO…..yeah…there is sooo much music…. and it’s about that….the music,
not just one band…..but everything that made the band also…influences of music…where it takes
you….discovering new music.” And I read the answer, checked my watch, and decided simply at that point
to cut my losses. Next question.

But there’s an opportunity in Trader K’s answer to my awkwardly worded question, and when I
ask him where he fits in relation to trading and posting on the boards, for the first time I feel that I’ve been
able to guide the conversation naturally into a new topic. Now we’re talking about trading in general,
which is where I wanted to head next anyway. And there was actually a smooth transition!

We talk for quite a while about the process of trading, but when that conversation runs dry, I’m
back to my discomfort about switching topics. I want to ask about issues of legality, and I know it’s
intricately connected with what we’ve just been talking about, but the best transition I can think of is
“shifting gears…. I find these transitions awkward in the other interviews, as well. With Trader H, for
example, I push the community issue – we’d been talking for over two hours and not even discussed it. The
time wasn’t right, the issue wasn’t relevant, but I figured the interview would end sometime soon, and I
didn’t want to be left hanging. So I pushed the issue. Trader J and I are actually having what later seems
to me a very interesting discussion about learning new music, but at the time one that was somewhat
irrelevant. Instead of probing further, I’m abrupt: “and so what is your understanding of the legal status
of trading?” It is only later that I wished we’d gone further in that particular conversation. And so, like with Trader K, we’re awkwardly switch into a discussion of legality.

So we’re talking about legality, and Trader K contradicts himself. He tells me that he doesn’t have any shows from bands who don’t allow taping, but earlier he’s told me about the Morphine show he received from Trader H. Well, Mark Sandman I know was vehemently opposed to taping, and I know that any copy of a Morphine show (I have several) is point blank illegal. And I want to know what to do with this – I want to confront, explore, poke around this contradiction, but how do I do it without offending Trader K.

If we were face-to-face, I could do it. It’s not like I want to be Colombo or something, asking him subtle and non-threatening questions, one after another, until he’s trapped himself into a web of his own lies. All I want to do is understand how he’s come to view his collection as entirely legal when, in fact, it’s not. And so if we were sitting across from each other, I think my intentions would come across plainly. If they didn’t, I could correct any misunderstanding quickly. But here, again, it’s all text – and how, from words alone, could Trader K tell if I was being aggressive or just seeking to understand. I felt the exact same tension at the same point in the interview with Trader J – exposing contradictions seem rather difficult online: I’m not sure how virtual “kid gloves” can be. We’re near an hour and a half into the interview at this point, and the last thing I want to do is offend someone who’s given so freely of their time. And so I leave the topic knowing simply that Trader K is wrong, but not understanding why.

We “shift gears” again – another awkward transition – and start talking about why he’s called Phishhook a “community.” He brings up Trader H, tells me the story of how they’ve met – it’s somewhat different from Trader H’s version, but the details are similar enough. I want to know more, so I ask “and so what’s your friendship like after that?” I’m uncomfortable with the wording – it’s awkward at best – but you can’t take too long to word your questions, which would interrupt the flow. I can see that Trader K is typing his answer, and while I wait to see it, I think about how I might have worded the question differently. I never come up with an answer, which would be moot anyway. He’s answered the question as he understood it, and any opportunity to redirect the question has been lost.

We’re talking, now about “community” in general – the interview is almost over – and Trader K gives me a definition that causes me to pause: “a group of like people enjoying themselves in their
surroundings and making it work for each other.” I don’t know how to respond, the answer is so vague in so many ways; all I can think to ask, after a minute or so – I’m very conscious of time dragging – is “could you elaborate a bit?” The strategy works well – we’re off on a discussion of community, online and in the “real” world, that lasts for nearly 15 minutes, concluding the interview. We end like we began, with a real synergy. Or at least that’s how I experience it.

Characteristics of Instant Messaging Interviews

The above narrative describes my experiences at one end of a computer conducting interviews and the thoughts and feelings I experienced as I tried to conduct these interviews. In these experiences, I found myself negotiating four broad methodological challenges of instant messaging as an interview medium. From most to least technical, these challenges were: structuring questions, orchestrating questions, establishing “flow,” and connecting w/ the participant.

Structuring questions. Asking questions in instant messaging is largely a one shot deal: at the point you hit “send,” the participant will begin the process of answering. Hitting “send” is relatively final – the text arrives, immediately, in front of the participant. There are no clues that would indicate the question is at all in question – no nonverbal cues, no vocal tones that would indicate any hesitancy on the part of the interviewer, that the question might be open for revision. The participants largely see the question and begin to respond.

Accordingly, I found myself needing to pay careful attention to the way that they structure the question itself. Two considerations emerged from the narrative of my experience above: whether the question is open- or closed-end, and how the idea central to the question is worded. Close-ended questions resulted in either quick bits of information or (dis)confirmations. The effect of such questions, in my experience, was to speed up the pace of the interview. Open-ended questions, on the other hand, by soliciting deeper reflections from participants, seemed to slow the pace. Wording is also important, as it directly influences participants’ understanding of the question and, accordingly, their answers; wording influences pace as well, as there is a clear tension between wording and speed – I certainly didn’t want to wait forever to ask a question, but nevertheless found myself paying careful, slow attention as to how it is worded, as my chances for immediate revision felt severely limited by the medium.
Orchestrating Questions. IM interviews afforded me much greater flexibility than e-mail in ordering questions. Accordingly, I was able to guide the discussion according to the goals of the interview, rather than dictate the answers according to a rigid schedule (Lindlof, 1995). This created a more natural and organic feel to the interview – while I certainly felt somewhat detached when the process is slow, I also felt far more connected to the process than in disjointed, asynchronous e-mail communication. Two important considerations, however, emerged from my experiences concerning the ordering of questions: asking follow-ups, or probes, and handling diversions.

I found posing follow-up questions challenging due to timing – it was, to me, very difficult to tell whether or not a participant had completed her thoughts. Unless the IM service told me that the participant was typing a response, I inevitably asked a follow-up before the respondent finished his answer. Diversions proved far more difficult to handle – conversations wandered easily from one subject to the next, in linear fashion, making it difficult to return to previous ideas. To me, conversational turns seem to be much longer in face-to-face conversations, making it much easier to address multiple ideas in a single turn. In the short turns of these IM interviews, however, one idea per turn appeared to be the norm, making it difficult to return to previous ideas.

Maintaining “Flow”. A challenge that I encountered related to managing diversions was trying to preserve the flow of the interviews. Part of maintaining flow, it felt to me, was creating smooth transitions between topics. Often, topics are connected at a deep level, which could be explained – or at least hinted at – in ways which prove difficult in the short time available for IM questions. In the IM interviews I conducted, however, topics appeared simply to run dry, often necessitating dramatic switches in topics which felt forced, and interrupted the flow of the interview.

This sense of flow was also, not surprisingly, inherently connected to the speed at which the IM interviews took place. This speed ranged widely – while the four IM interviews I conducted covered roughly the same topics in roughly the same depth (with Trader K being somewhat more in-depth), the time it took to conduct each ranged from 1.5 to 2.5 hours. Accordingly, the pace with which questions were asked and answered varied widely, confronting me with the challenge of remaining “present” in the interview – a challenge that seems to me present, but most likely significantly less acute, in face-to-face interviews.
Connecting with Participants. Perhaps the most important challenge I faced in conducting IM interviews was attempting to connect, at a personal level, with the participants. I entered this interviews with the understanding that the structure of the social process of interviewing inherently creates a power imbalance (Taylor, 2001) which, if the I intended to get the most out of these conversations, I needed to attempt to alleviate. Lindlof (1995) contends that “the challenge facing the qualitative researcher is how to encourage self-expression and a sense of empowerment in the participant yet also achieve the aims of the study” (p. 177). The difficulties I experienced in meeting this challenge stemmed, for me, from the fact that while personal relationships can certainly develop via CMC, they are likely to develop much more slowly than with face-to-face communication (Walther, 1996).

One of the ways in which a researcher can foster that sense of interpersonal connection is through self-disclosure (Lindlof, 1995). My experiences, however, seem to indicate that such disclosures may be somewhat less effective in IM interviews than face-to-face. This is perhaps due, again, to the relatively low richness of IM communication: in face-to-face communication a respondent would likely have acknowledged my disclosure and then responded to the question to which it was connected, all in the same conversational turn. The linear nature of the IM medium – one thought, one response – seemed to make such acknowledgment difficult at best. Accordingly, I struggled to create a sense of intimacy with participants. Trying to create such intimacy, however difficult, seems important since, as Walther (1996) suggests, CMC users seek behavioral confirmation of such intimacy more intensely than in face-to-face communication.

Comparing E-mail and IM Interviews

My experiences conducting online interviews clearly differed according to the medium by which they were conducted. These differences emerge in several patterns according to the types of questions that are asked, illustrating potential strengths and weaknesses of each type of interview.

Close-Ended Questions. When questions were relatively closed ended, asking participants to provide specific, relatively predictable answers, e-mail interviews appeared to be quite appropriate. For example, when asking members perceptions of Phishhook’s demographic makeup, the e-mail interviews tended to provide more complete, detailed answers than IM interviews. The difference between the
interviews conducted with Trader J via e-mail and IM serves as a clear illustration of this: in the IM interview, Trader J used 26 words to describe his perceptions; in the e-mail interview, he used 170 words. While this example was certainly the most extreme, it illustrates the effectiveness of e-mail interviews in eliciting answers to specific, directed questions.

In addition to being more in depth, answers to such questions via e-mail were highly comparable to one another, affording me the opportunity of reliably discerning patterns among participants' answers. IM interviews, on the other hand were highly variable in terms of the responses to such directive questions. The interactive nature of these interviews often yielded incomplete answers. In the interview with Trader J mentioned above, for example, only 26 words were devoted to his demographic perceptions because, in describing the size of the network, he make a key distinction between active and inactive members. Due to the linear nature of such conversations, when I followed up on this distinction, we soon found ourselves on another topic, which led into another, which led to another: we never returned to the topic of demographics. When the questions were limited and direct and the answers relatively predictable, e-mail interviews appeared to be a more effective tool.

**Open-ended Questions.** When I asked more open questions, however, and the answers were less predictable, e-mail as an interview medium seemed more limited than IM. Answers to such general questions in e-mails tended to be vague and abstract. In the original e-mail interview with Trader K, for example, he described the "feel" of the scene at Phishhook by writing "the general 'feel' of the community is a good one. I get a lot of great emails and messages from some really cool people!!." In the IM interview, however, when I asked the same question, we began a discussion, guided by several follow up questions, about those who contribute and those who do not contribute to the community. In doing so, Trader K gave concrete illustrations of the behaviors that make the "feel" of Phishhook a good one.

In the IM interviews, participants tended to answer by telling specific stories rather than making abstractions. Trader H, for example, in explaining why Phishhook feels to her like a community, told a long story about "Phishhook Island," an imaginary escape built discursively on the discussion board over a period of several weeks. In e-mail interviews, such stories were generally only alluded to. Trader D, for example, in explaining why he experienced Phishhook as a community, mentioned "every time I see a post for support when Kenneth/jakopia got ready to go in for a round of chemotherapy, the support was there."
He did not elaborate, but simply moved on to the next sentence long example of community feel. The difference between the two examples seems to stem largely from the heightened interactivity in the IM interview: Trader H mentioned Phishhook Island in much the same way as Trader D mentioned the support for jakopia, and elaborated immediately in response to my follow up question asking her to do so. Consistently, the IM interviews produced richer answers due to the presence of concrete stories, that fleshed out the abstractions which predominated in the e-mail interviews.

**Complex Questions.** The final major difference I experienced between e-mail and IM interviews was in the answers provided for questions that contain somewhat complex ideas. Specifically, in these interviews, the complex question I refer to is “what is your understanding of trading’s legal status?” This question is complex because the legal status of trading is confused itself – the law itself is a maze, and while “legal status of trading” is perhaps the most apt way of phrasing the idea, the phrase is itself somewhat awkward.

E-mail responses to this question were markedly varied. Trader B, for example, gave a fairly complete – and largely accurate – portrayal of the laws governing trading. Trader D offered instead a lengthy and nuanced argument for what laws ought to govern trading; Trader C offered a watered-down version of such a response, saying basically “it’s not fair.” Trader A, however, answered simply: “it doesn’t affect my trading in the least. As far as I know, everything traded over phishhook (at least by me) is 100% legal.” While I had a pretty clear idea of what I wanted traders to describe, the complexity of the question clearly led to various misunderstandings, resulting in variation in terms of the direction and degree of the answers. The initial responses to this question in the IM interviews were certainly similar, however the interactivity of the medium allowed me to steer the discussion until I received a fairly accurate picture of how each trader viewing the legality of their hobby.

**Conclusion**

The observations above are by no means offered to categorically describe the differences between e-mail and IM online interviews. Rather, I offer them simply to describe my observations about my personal experiences of conducting such interviews and, in the process, contribute to a more general discussion of the interview process in an online context. There may well be no such categorical
differences, as Walther (1996), referring to the contradictory research surrounding the richness and social presence of CMC, suggests “perhaps the medium has no consistent effects – or has no effects at all – and different conditions surrounding CMC use lead to these contrasting results” (p. 4). The above observations, instead, are contingent and experiential – but may, nevertheless, offer insights into the opportunities and constraints present when attempting to research online social collectives by actually talking to members, rather than simply examining the discursive artifacts that they leave behind.

Chesebro (1999) suggested that CMC may be efficient because it effectively filters out the noise from face-to-face interaction. My experiences leave me wondering about that conclusion: in conducting these interviews, particularly via IM, I experienced an entirely different kind of noise – a personal, psychic noise. Whether it was feeling strangely intimidated (and feeling sheepish about feeling intimidated) by people I had never met before, worrying excessively about whether or not a participant would take offense to the few words I chose to type, or trying to keep myself from focusing on the effects of Barry Bond’s strained hamstring on the Giant’s play rather than the interviews at hand, I found myself challenged to deal with “noises” that I am not sure I would have confronted in a face-to-face situation.

My experiences conducting online interviews also seem to accord with Ngwenyama and Lee’s (1997) observation that the richness of a particular medium is not an entirely deterministic factor. They argue instead that the participants themselves contribute to the perception of richness, and my experiences seem to bear this out as well. While all of the IM interviews I conducted felt far more rich than the e-mail interviews (suggesting, to me, that there are at least some deterministic factors of the medium involved), the marked differences between the interviews with Traders H & K (whom I had had repeated e-mail contact with before the interviews) and Traders I & J (with whom I had had little contact at all), indicate to me the role that participants have in creating the richness of their conversations, regardless of medium.

Achieving social presence, however, proved more difficult, in my experiences. Baym (1995) suggests that users may explicitly insert more cues about themselves so that others will more fully experience their “presence.” When I tried to do so in the IM interviews, however, in an attempt to establish rapport with the participants, I felt largely ignored. Participants tended to keep answering the questions, rather than engaging in personal discussions, however brief. Accordingly, while I certainly experienced the interviewees as rather “present” (how could I not – they were giving their time to help me out, and telling
often personal stories about themselves in the process), I’m unsure about how present I was to them. Sure, they knew that I was an interviewer and I was asking them questions, but I don’t know if I connected with them in any meaningful way that would not only alleviate the power imbalance inherent in the context of an interview (Lindlof, 1995), but also show them that I was a genuine person who genuinely appreciated them taking the time and effort to share their thoughts with me. In the end, I was left wondering whether social presence could indeed be created in an online interview, simply because there is not enough time to establish a relationship through a medium by which relationships are established much more slowly (Walther, 1995).

The observation I’ve just made above also makes me keenly aware of the limitations of this particular methodological comparison. I simply don’t know what the participants themselves thought of the process – they may well have experienced me as a present, genuine person in the interviews, and it’s only my own strange insecurity about the whole process (I’m still trying to understand why I felt intimidated) that makes me feel otherwise. There are other limitations, as well – so few interviews were compared in total (it’s quite difficult to make broad conclusions from 10 total interviews), a problem that is even more acute when the medium sub-types were compared against one another. I’ve framed my observations above as tentative and exploratory, but I’m afraid that they are even more tentative and exploratory than I wish them to be.

And they may well be wrong. It could be that, with a larger sample of interviews from which to compare, e-mail interviewees tell wonderfully detailed stories. It could be that IM interviewees tend to give shorter, less thought out answers.

But that’s the advantage of offering such answers: they need not pretend to be correct. Instead, what I’ve offered is a window into my experiences of conducting interviews online via different media, from the perspective of the interviewer (much as Markham (1998) does in her book Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space). With social organizations online becoming increasingly prevalent, so will research into those organizations. And while experiences such as mine can only offer answers which are tentative at best, collectively, they may help contribute to a broader conversation about researching life online.