Getting to Know You:
Using Hostility to Reduce Anonymity in Online Communication

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The complex relationship between language and identity has been exhaustively examined. However the relationship between language and anonymity—which may or may not be identity's *doppelgänger*—remains under theorized. Scholars addressing computer-based communication often treat anonymity as almost binary (communication either lacks social cues or "identities" are disclosed). These scholars argue that because many Internet messages "lack" social cues, computer-based communication will likely be hostile (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986; Tannen, 1998; Thompson & Nadler, 2002). This assumption leaves anonymity ill-defined and underestimates the amount of personal information that appears in naturally-occurring, online conversation (Walther & Burgoon, 1992; Cherny, 1999; Baym, 2000; Lange, 2003; Tannen, 1998; Herring, 1996a, 1996b). The claim that hostility stems from anonymity in online encounters is problematic because it fails to account for the myriad non-hostile interactions that routinely occur between anonymous speakers on the Internet. Further, this claim cannot explain why "hostility" often erupts between people who know each other well on- and/or offline.

Through an examination of sequences of real-time, written conversation, this paper argues that participants use linguistic resources such as so-called "hostility" and accusations of flaming to reduce anonymity and co-construct certain facets of interlocutors' identities. By revealing more information about their own and their interlocutors' identities, participants seek to situate themselves favorably vis-à-vis their interlocutors in local techno-social hierarchies. For instance, if a participant can provoke another speaker to demonstrate that he or she actually knows little about a certain technology, then the provocateur can successfully show that he or she is more of an expert than is the other speaker. Participants arguably use "hostility" and "flaming" to perform their identities as high-status members of imagined communities of "like-minded" technical experts (Lange, 2003).

For our purposes, hostile messages or "flames" may provisionally be defined as mean-spirited attacks of other people or ideas and concepts proposed in talk. Yet what constitutes a "flame" is hardly straightforward. As O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) point

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out, previous research on flaming is often flawed because many determinations about whether a message is a flame have depended upon the perspective of an outside observer, such as a researcher or coder. What may be considered a "flame" from the researcher's point of view may not be considered a flame from the perspective of one or more of the interactants (such as the sender and receiver of the "flame"). As we will see in the data below, third-parties may vigorously disagree on whether something is a flame. Further, a person who sends a "flame" may try to re-key the message to claim that the message was not intended to be a flame, even though it contained pointed criticism of the receiver of the "flame." The goal here is to explore what a particular message (whether or not anyone labels it a flame) is doing within a given interaction. Rather than assuming that "flames" result from "anonymity" (which itself is a problematic concept as discussed below) this paper argues that "flames" (and flame claims) are often used in specific ways to accomplish social purposes. Examination of detailed sequences of talk provide a window into identifying these social purposes and understanding their larger social ramifications.

The data discussed here examine sequences of talk said to contain hostility or "flames." The sequences were recorded from real-time chat logs taken from two communities (which I will call Community A and Community B). I was a participant-observer in these communities during a two-year ethnographic study. In these communities, participants could role-play as fantasy characters in interactive text-based story-lines and games. Both Community A and Community B also had what participants referred to as "real-life chat channels" in which community members discussed a number of topics relevant to their on- and offline lives, including computer technology, current events, film, comments about their characters, and other topics. The data is taken not from the role play sequences but rather the real-life chat and commentary about technology that often prompted arguments. In both communities, many of the participants either belonged to or aspired to be in the computer and networking industries. They often exchanged opinions and advice about technology in an effort to assist and mentor one another. Notably, participants often used these chat sessions not only to help others but also to engage in performances of technical ability by boasting about their technical prowess. The goal of these performances was to achieve high status among their technical peers.

Performances of technical ability and subsequent audience responses play a crucial role in co-constructing micro-level identities. In this framework, levels of identity and anonymity are performed and negotiated through talk and its uptake. Yet knowing information about interlocutors' macro-level identities (which exist outside the conversation) does not predict the character of the interaction nor the perception of identities negotiated within talk (Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991). Similarly, following Brubaker and Cooper (2000), this paper argues that identity is not something that people "have" but is rather micro-interactionally constructed in complex ways. Brubaker and Cooper argue that "how one identifies oneself—and how one is identified by others—may vary greatly from context to context" (p. 14). Rather than seeing identity as something that one "has" prior to an interaction, we can use their ideas about "identification processes" to examine the interplay between and consequences of internal and external identifications. Combining these models, we see that participants use tactics to propose certain relational aspects of identity for themselves and their interlocutors. These identification tactics are micro-interactionally negotiated in that proposals of identity aspects must be ratified or rejected in the subsequent uptake of a particular proposal. As Brubaker and Cooper rightly point out, "self- and other-identification are fundamentally situational and contextual" (p. 14).

As the examples below illustrate, interlocutors use hostile tactics to propose certain relational aspects of identity. The hostility is meant to provoke a response that contains resources that the provocateur may use to prove that he or she is relationally higher on a particular techno-social hierarchy than is his or her interlocutor. The examples below show that such hostile posturing routinely occurs between people who are not anonymous to each other. In this context, hostility is more productively understood as a deliberate tactic that interlocutors use for social purposes rather than as an inevitable outcome of "anonymous," computer-mediated communication. We will explore how interlocutors use hostility and accusations of flaming to: 1) reduce anonymity; 2) co-construct certain critical aspects of interlocutor's identities; and 3) reify certain local techno-social hierarchies.

1. Theories of Anonymity: Previous Views and New Directions

The claim that anonymity encourages online hostility prompts a deeper analysis of the concept of anonymity. Tannen's (1998) discussion succinctly outlines the oft-cited assumption that anonymity is typically the source of "technologically enhanced aggression." Although Tannen certainly does not suggest that friendly communication is impossible online, she does see a general tendency in which computer-mediated communication encourages verbal aggression. Tannen states that "flaming" (which is problematic to treat in an *a priori* way as stated above) generally results from the anonymity of message senders and receivers. Ironically, Tannen also points out that certain social characteristics are discoverable online. For instance, "flaming is almost exclusively practiced by men, rarely by women" (p. 250). In one case, a man's female gender masquerade was detected principally because of his acceptance of agonism in debate. In this example, information about a person—specifically, their stance toward the acceptability of a certain form of communication—was revealed in talk. In this case, the stance in question was linked to the man's sex. If we can detect information about someone, such as their stance towards acceptable forms of communication or their probable biological sex, then it is arguably true that at least a certain amount of anonymity (or probability of a certain level of anonymity) is reduced between speakers during a conversation. It is a contradiction to state that within so-called anonymous online encounters certain aspects of identity are discoverable.

This contradictory claim prompts several important and fascinating theoretical questions. For instance, how do we know that online hostility is driven by anonymity rather than gendered dispositions, if men are the ones who routinely "flame"? If one part of a person's identity (such as sex) is detectable (and in many online situations much more than sex is revealed) then how do we know that it is anonymity rather than some other factor that prompts hostility? In certain contexts, it is plausible that knowing something about the other person may actually increase the likelihood of hostile interaction, such as when a teenager comes to know that he is talking to a younger child rather than to a respected elder, such as a teacher. Further, if talking via a computer typically leads to increased "flaming," then we would expect women to flame just as rampantly as men once they arrive at the electronic frontier. Such a practice would make sex less easily detectable in certain online contexts. Yet according to research by Herring (1996) that Tannen (1998) quotes, women have not generally adopted flaming behaviors.

Tannen (1998) states that the Internet "ratchets up anonymity" (p. 239). This turn of phrase correctly implies that anonymity is not binary. Anonymity is more fruitfully considered as existing on a multi-faceted spectrum with parameters that depend upon the particular social circumstances of local interaction. Anonymity is rarely explicitly defined in social science research or passionate treatises about supposed anonymity-driven aggression in online talk. Yet although definitions are not made explicit, it is possible to detect some of the assumptions that are smuggled into research about anonymity's role in provoking online aggression. Many discussions about anonymity imply that anonymity means knowing "who someone is," implying that identity is something concrete that exists prior to a conversation. These definitions also often presume that knowing someone's identity means knowing specific biographical information such as names and addresses.

Yet simply not knowing someone's name does not mean that a conversation is completely anonymous. Such an assumption is not grounded in a theoretically robust conceptualization of anonymity. Marx (1999) offers a useful starting point for questioning such assumptions by outlining at least seven different types of identity knowledge. These types include things like pseudonyms, behaviors, and social categorizations that may or may not be linked to a specific name during a particular interaction. As Marx states, "Being unnamed is not necessarily the same as being unknown" (p. 101). In certain circumstances, simply knowing someone's name may actually not reduce interlocutor anonymity in a theoretically meaningful way. Whereas, knowing quite about a bit about the person's behavior, preferences, and social inclinations might reduce interlocutor anonymity significantly, even if the participants do not know arbitrary biographical information about each other. For our purposes, anonymity can be defined as a state in which there is a lack of characteristics that distinguish one individual from another. Such a definition suggests that a very wide potential spectrum between anonymity and identity exists. Given that such a wide anonymity/identity spectrum is possible during social interaction, a specific level of anonymity cannot be assumed simply because the interaction takes place online. As Tannen (1998) correctly explains, subtle information—such as one's meta-linguistic stance towards what constitutes proper methods of social interaction—is often detectable in online conversation.

Since information about participants' identities is routinely revealed (or more precisely co-constructed) during talk, we can conclude that very few, if any, online social encounters exist in a state of pure anonymity. In order to claim that anonymity causes hostility online, researchers would have to investigate not only what specific level of anonymity exists in a particular interaction but also, what level of anonymity and what specific types of missing biographical information increase the likelihood that interactions will be hostile. Complicating the task is that the list of potential identity markers and their combinations are vast and change across and during interactions (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991). Researchers claiming that anonymity provokes online hostility would need to begin their analysis by addressing even more basic theoretical questions, such as: What is anonymity and how do we know we "have" it within a given interaction?

2. Social Uses of Hostility that Reduce Anonymity

These complex questions suggest that a more productive approach to understanding online hostility is to understand the social role that it plays within particular cultural and linguistic contexts (Goodwin, 1990). The hypothesis here is that interlocutors deliberately

use hostility to reduce anonymity within a conversation. Using hostility often prompts interlocutors to respond to specific social challenges so that all present may learn more about their interlocutors' expertise and abilities. Although in certain situations interlocutors may try to disguise their full abilities and knowledge to satisfy certain local social conditions, in many cases it is not to their advantage to do so. In responding to so-called "hostile" challenges in technical discussions, interlocutors often try to reveal information that will facilitate favorable comparative judgment of their techno-social knowledge, so that they may attain a high place within real and imagined techno-social hierarchies.

In Example (1), we see how Jack uses criticism to prompt a response from Brian. Jack's goal in using this argumentative posture is to show that he, in contrast to Brian, is an expert on the proper use of online expressions. We will see how Brian both colludes with Jack's identity performance as an expert yet interrupts Jack's performance by claiming that Jack's criticism was socially inappropriate. These accusations demonstrate that hostility is not a reliable *a priori* category.

Example (1) from Community A

1 [Brian] HEH, I like Ray's new title
2 [Jack] why do you always do heh in caps?
3 [Bert] heh
4 [Brian] because it implies that HEH is funnier then just a regular heh. :P
5 [Jack] no, it's just lame
6 [Jack] funnier than a heh is lol
7 [Jacob] I still say this thing is...is amazing!
8 [Gil] Use false words.
9 [Gil] 'Krunk'
10 [Brian] fine..
11 [Gil] That's just krunkin' unbelievable!
12 [Brian] heh, I like Ray's new title
13 [Jack] that's knuts!
14 [Gil] Krunkin' aye!
15 [Jack] kanuts, rather :P
16 [Brian] how that, mr. I Have To Be Percise On Internet Lingo?
17 [Jack] that's good.
18 [Brian] hi leo
19 [Leo] hola
20 [Jack] heh, you get pissy too easily brian :P
21 [Bert] lol

In line 1, Brian comments that he likes the new title that Ray has given to his online character's name. He begins his statement with "HEH" typed in capital letters. "Heh" is often used in online conversation to signify either laughter or mild amusement. In line 2, Jack asks why Brian "always" does "heh in caps." The level of anonymity between Jack and Brian can be analyzed in terms of macro-interactional information that each party brings to the conversation, as well as the micro-interactional aspects of identity that are co-constructed using linguistic resources observed in the conversation. During my two-year

fieldwork period I observed numerous interactions between Jack and Brian, who had sustained online contact with each other over the course of several months. As Kendall (1998) observed, such contact over time leads to a type of "pseudonymity" in which online participants clearly know something about each other, although they still refer to each other by pseudonyms and may or may not know specific personal details such as real names and addresses. When online participants expect certain types of identity enactments from others (much as we expect consistency in face-to-face identity enactment), such interactions "cannot be characterized as anonymous, since people generally know quite a bit about each other" (p. 119). Kendall states that in some cases, even pseudonymity no longer describes the level of intimacy between participants, since online names can begin to function more as nicknames, rather than pseudonyms, of people who are friends or at least, acquaintances.

Note that Jack himself alludes to a Jack/Brian state of familiarity rather than pure "anonymity" or even "pseudonymity" in his claim in line 2 that Brian "always" does "heh in caps." Whether or not Brian "always" exhibits this behavior does not challenge the fact that some basis of familiarity of Brian's behavior is required for Jack to make a convincing claim. A brief examination of my logs of the prior month's conversations shows that in fact Brian did use the "HEH" form at least seven times on three different days (although he used "heh" many more times over the same period). That Brian has just typed "HEH" in capital letters provides evidence of at least one instance of the behavior that Jack criticizes.

Jack makes his case using observations from past conversations as well from the current interaction. From the immediate conversation, Brian displays information about himself, which is that he codes "HEH" as an acceptable way of speaking on the Internet. Used in this context during this conversation, Brian's unproblematic use of the word "HEH" provides Jack with visible evidence that Brian displays a certain stance towards the use of "HEH," a stance which for Jack situates Brian as having a lack of knowledge about proper forms of Internet talk.

When Brian responds to Jack in line 4, note that Brian does not deny the behavior (which would have potentially reduced the potency of Jack's claim of knowing Brian's behavior). Rather, Brian defends himself by explaining that "HEH" is "funnier than just a regular heh." In line 5, Jack counters Brian's argument, saying that Brian's behavior is "just lame," a move meant to establish Jack's identity as a person who is more knowledgeable than is Brian about normative online behavior. Arguably, Brian is actually following one traditional online communicative escalation of using capital letters to signify increased intensity of an expression. Yet, Jack challenges this explanation in order to show that Jack is more knowledgeable about correct forms of online talk. In line 6 Jack explains to Brian that the appropriate symbolic escalation of online mirth proceeds from "heh" to "lol" (which stands for "laughs out loud").

Over the course of the next few moves, Brian both colludes with, yet simultaneously objects to, Jack's proposed alignment of identities. In line 10 Brian capitulates to Jack's correction by saying "fine." The word "fine" is often used when speakers wish to indicate that they are ready to end an argument, but do not necessarily agree with their interlocutor's position. In line 12 Brian revises his talk and re-writes "heh" in lower case letters. He further seeks Jack's approval in line 16 with the question "how [*sic*] that, mr. I Have To Be Precise On Internet Lingo?" Applying the framework put forward by Jacoby

and Gonzales (1991), such a move reveals Brian to be a person in need of approval and Jack to be a person capable of bestowing that approval. Brian's moves thus confirm Jack's expertise and co-construct Jack's identity as one who has comparatively more knowledge about normative Internet practices than does Brian. At the same time however, Brian uses a turn of phrase that criticizes Jack's objection as inappropriately precise or picky. Brian's question to Jack in line 16 levies an implied criticism that Jack has inappropriately attacked Brian's method of self-expression. In response, Jack accuses Brian in line 20 of getting "pissy too easily," and adds an emoticon signifying a person sticking out their tongue. These exchanges attempt to re-key the tone of the accusation as playful rather than as hostile or critical. Brian's accusation of Jack's inappropriate hostility and Jack's attempt to re-negotiate the perception of hostility demonstrates that hostility is not a reliable *a priori* analytical category of social behavior but is perceived and negotiated across and within particular social interactions for specific social purposes.

Brian's accusation of the inappropriateness of Jack's attack arguably has nothing whatsoever to do with the pure "anonymity" of the participants. Although they may not have known specific personal details such as names and addresses, they had, at the very least, regular contact with each other for several months. A much more plausible explanation is that the hostility was an outcome of micro- and macro-level knowledge that Brian and Jack used to create relational identities. For instance, both were understood to be teenagers. Yet Jack was known to be older. Researchers have shown that "children display an orientation toward age as an indicator of relative power and status" (Maynard, 1985, p. 18). It is certainly plausible that Jack might be more emboldened to jockey for social position knowing that he is talking to a younger teen.

More importantly, hostility was a deliberate tactic used to establish and/or reveal more information about the other interlocutor. Jack used criticism to organize the micro-social world containing Jack, Brian, and others who might be observing how Jack and Brian negotiate for higher status within the community (Goodwin, 1990). Hostile posturing and accusations of hostile posturing had specific social purposes in this interaction. Both Jack and Brian tried to reveal themselves as competent (in Brian's case) and/or an expert (in Jack's case) on appropriate forms of online talk. Deliberately invoked by interlocutors who were not purely anonymous to each other, "hostility" (as interpreted by Brian but ultimately denied by Jack) was used to reduce anonymity between speakers and facilitate the co-construction of relational identities within local techno-social hierarchies.

Example (2) is excerpted from a very long debate about the merits of operating systems, specifically Linux, Unix, and Microsoft Windows. Such debates are frequent in Community B and online (as well as in many face-to-face) technical communities. Participants try to establish their identities as experts by extolling the virtues of their preferred operating system while vigorously attacking the opposition's weaknesses. The goal is to co-construct their interlocutor's identity as comparatively less expert on specific technical matters. In Example (2) we see that Max, who supports Windows, tries to expose his criticizer, Victor, as insufficiently knowledgeable about Windows to criticize it. During the course of the exchange, different interlocutors levy and negotiate a series of claims of hostile intent to accomplish specific social purposes.

Example (2) from Community B

1 Victor says, "You are right, Max. Autoexec and config are out of date. They

aren't used. If you install and look at Win NT 4.0, you will see that MS was trying to get rid of it back in '96 as well as now. Those things should be in the control panel. Also, more than likely, 16-bit is now toast entirely."
Victor says, "Meant techies channel."
Ben uses SunOS, and it's faster, more stable, has better memory management, etc...
Matthew says, "It's probably one of the other *nix's."
Max knows he is right.
Ben says, "There is no 16 bit code in WinME."
Sean says, "Victor, that doesn't answer the question."
Max did not need to to confirm this. :P
Max wants you to explain how Windows handles configs now that they're gone.
Ben says, "Who, me?"
Alexander says, "Why, Max?"
Matthew says, "Open Linux is getting close to being like Windows."
Victor says, "It's all in the control panel. The only DOS you will see is an emulation to make it more compatible with th 32-bit programs."
Terry yawns as you people obviously don't know that much about windows and yet you seem to have a lot of opinions about it.
Alexander says, "Why do you want him to explain that?"
Austinsays, "sun is not always faster"
Sean says, "*SHADUP*"
Max says, "He claimed to be a Windows expert, Alexander."
Austin is not getting into that flamewar.
Matthew says, "Open Linux, IMHO sucks."
Terry grins at Austin
Ben says, "Not always, but usualy. :P"
Matthew says, "Maybe it'll work correctly in the future."
Ben uses both, and prefers SunOS/Solaris.
Alexander says, "So, basically, your purpose is flaming him... taunting him...and/or making hostile remarks and innuendos in his direction?"
Max says, "How is asking him to explain something about windows a flame?"
Ben hehs.
Max believes you're being quite hostile, Alexander. :P
Alexander isn't being hostile, Max.
Max is asking him to prove his "superior" windows knowledge by explaining the main feature WinMe adds over Win98.
Alexander is simply trying to decide whether or not he wants to register a formal complaint to the admins against you. (:
Ben says, "The main feature in WinME is rewritten .vxd's. :P"
Max says, "Based on what, Alexander?"
Max says, "Because I support Windows and ask people to prove their knowledge that they claim to have?"
Max says, "Or is it because you were offended by being proven wrong?"
Alexander says, "Based on your hostile aggression against him (your intent, not necessarily your words)."
Victor says, "Both of you shut up for a second."
Max has no hostile intent.
Max says, "If I was hostile, I'd be threatening people. :P"
Sean says, "He's not being hostile, Alexander."

52 Max says, "Alexander is just trying to find a way to squelch the opposition."
53 Matthew says, "They should realy develop DOS emulation for
54 WindowsME so you can play it within Windows."
55 Ben says, "Get a boot disk."
56 Victor says, "There is not point to arguing over this. Max has not hostile
57 intent from wht I'm seting. He is just trying to figure out wheather or not I
58 know what I am saying. Alexander, you need to get off his case since it will
59 only cause problems."
60 Alexander says, "Hostility doesn't necessarily have to be violent. It can
61 simply be meanspirited mockery."
62 Robin says, "Alexander, I dont think he's being hostile...he's just being as
63 closed minded as the rest of us. ;)"
64 Alexander says, "Which is what I see coming from you with consistency."

Prior to the exchange, Victor indicated that he was familiar with install procedures for Microsoft Windows. However, Victor's performance of his technical knowledge gave off what sociologist Erving Goffman (1959) would call inadvertent signs that belie Victor's performance. Specifically, Victor gave off signs to Max that Victor was not the technical expert on Windows that he claimed to be. In lines 1-4 Victor tries to respond to Max's original question. Max's question was meant to challenge Victor's performance as a technical expert on Windows. Such technical challenges, or in Goffman's terms "performances" of identity, ideally should be addressed immediately or the performer risks (at least temporarily) being exposed as a poseur rather than being accepted as a technical expert on the topic in question.

As he explains in line 24, Max's method of deflecting criticism on Windows by interrogating the knowledge of the criticizer is a socially-accepted form of debate for many technical experts. Whether we as researchers feel that this constitutes hostility is an open and interesting question, but it is important to attend to whether or not interlocutors themselves code behavior as hostile. In Alexander's view, Max's question to Victor constitutes a "hostile attack." In lines 15 and 21, Alexander asks why Max demands an explanation from Victor about Windows install procedures. In lines 31-32, Alexander accuses Max of "taunting him…and/or making hostile remarks and innuendos in his direction." In lines 39-40, Alexander becomes more aggressive, threatening to register a formal complaint against Max. One interpretation of these accusations is that Alexander sees Max's tactics as toxic to the local social community. Presumably, Alexander wishes to reduce Max's hostile posturing and ensure smooth interaction in the online social group.

Max denies that his intent toward Victor was hostile. Further, in line 35 Max counter-accuses Alexander of being hostile to Max. However, Max ends his claim with the emoticon of a person sticking out his/her tongue, which often indexes a state of playfulness or teasing behavior. Max challenges whether Alexander is criticizing Max to ensure smooth interaction online. In line 45, Max asks Alexander if he is making threats because he disliked being proven wrong about his preferred operating system. In line 52, Max accuses Alexander of levying claims of hostility against Max in order to squelch opposition to the preferred local operating system, which for many in the group was Linux. Max accuses Alexander of levying claims of hostility for specific ego-centrically-motivated social purposes: to avoid public embarrassment at being proved technically incorrect about the superiority of Linux over Windows.

Different interlocutors attribute varying levels of hostility to Max's questions to Victor. Although Austin calls the interaction a "flamewar" in line 25 and Alexander criticizes Max for "flaming" Victor in lines 31-32, other participants support Max's claim that he was simply following standard cultural precepts of testing knowledge rather than being "hostile." In line 51, Sean tells Alexander that Max is not being hostile. In lines 62-63, Robin argues that Max has not been hostile, but rather just as "closed minded" as the rest of the group, once again reifying Max's form of debate as a commonly-accepted method for expressing technical opinions. In lines 56-59, Victor himself—who was the original target of Max's knowledge tests—supports Max's style of discussion, saying that Max did not have hostile intent and that Alexander is actually not acting within the proper community norms and therefore should "get off [Max's] case." That Victor himself, as well as several others in the conversation come to Max's aid, leads credence to (but does not necessarily prove) Max's assertion in line 52 that Alexander's threats were motivated to suppress unwanted information rather than to ensure smooth social interaction.

The interaction between Max and Alexander shows that hostile behavior and flames should not be considered *a priori* analytical categories but are rather socially negotiated depending upon the specific goals and needs of local interlocutors. Max's "hostility" (as so labeled by Austin and Alexander) was arguably used to: (1) reduce levels of anonymity between interlocutors by revealing more information about Victor's (and Max's) relative expertise; and (2) use this knowledge to establish a local techno-social hierarchy in which Max is higher than Victor. If Victor wished to persuade Max that Victor knew enough about Windows to criticize it, then it arguably would be advantageous for Victor to display enough knowledge about Windows to convince Max of Victor's expertise. Victor could certainly downwardly disguise his knowledge of Windows, but to retain a level of anonymity that shrouded Victor's true knowledge of Windows would likely result in Victor quickly losing position in the techno-social hierarchy that Max used "hostility" to establish. Thus, Max's "hostility" (in Alexander's terms) toward Victor was used to reduce elements of anonymity between Max and Victor by exposing Victor's specific lack of knowledge about Windows in comparison to Max.

The interlocutors used hostility to reduce anonymity by prompting their interlocutors to demonstrate information about themselves that could then be used to co-construct relative levels of technical expertise and establish a particular status in local techno-social hierarchies. Similarly, Alexander used "hostility" (in Max's terms) to reveal an aspect of Max's character, which is that Max inappropriately used hostility to communicate with other participants in the community. In line 64 Alexander claims to see hostility coming from Max "with consistency" which suggests that a certain amount of anonymity between the speakers is removed, since during the interaction Alexander observes a sufficient number of data points to make claims about important social aspects of Max's character.

3. Conclusion

In both examples, participants deliberately used "hostility" to reduce anonymity and reveal more about their interlocutors' stances towards acceptable forms of online interaction. Importantly, the argument here is not that it is impossible to maintain anonymity on the Internet. Not surprisingly, elaborate identity masquerade has been definitively documented online (Dibbell, 1998). Of course, elaborate identity masquerade routinely occurs in face-to-face contexts as well (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1963).

Simply because anonymity is possible in certain contexts online (or offline) does not guarantee it to be so. When analyzing levels of anonymity and identity, researchers can only deal with a certain probability that the knowledge one has or does not have about someone else is true. This applies whether we are discussing online or face-to-face identities. For instance, when interacting with someone in a face-to-face context, we can only deal with a certain probability that he or she does not have particular attributes that remain hidden during our social encounters (Goffman, 1963). Anonymity is thus far more complex than has generally been assumed in research that defines "anonymity" as a complete "lack of social cues" and identifies anonymity as the main driver of "hostility" in online encounters. As the research shows here, many important aspects of identity are micro-interactionally revealed and/or co-constructed within talk in ways that quickly reduce pure anonymity between interlocutors.

Participants in online communities with sustained interaction over time typically negotiate a complex and ever-changing set of macro- and micro-interactional identity information during specific conversations. The amount of macro- and micro-interactional data that appear in interactions that researchers might label as "hostile" severely challenges the long-cherished conclusion in computer-mediated communication research that ill-defined and unspecified levels of anonymity inevitably cause hostile online interaction. Whether or not anonymity prompts hostility in computer-mediated communication is an empirical question. It is certainly possible that anonymity could prompt hostility that is subsequently compounded during the conversation and used by interlocutors to establish social hierarchies. However, the problem is that levels of anonymity and the definitive labeling of hostile behaviors are not comfortable *a priori* categories. The burden of proof lies on researchers to describe the level of anonymity present during a particular interaction, and to prove that it is in fact anonymity—rather than some other factor such as the social expectations of: tech talk, competitive negotiation tasks, gendered interaction, age differences, historic cultural precedents of academic talk on the Internet, or one of countless other factors—that drives communicative "hostility."

In future computer-mediated communication research, more productive approaches will analyze the social purposes of hostility in online conversation and explore how and why claims of hostility are levied and negotiated in local contexts for specific social purposes. By investigating social uses of online "hostility," this study contributes to the continuing investigation of the interplay between identity and anonymity and argues for a more nuanced approach to anonymity theorization. If identification processes are micro-interactionally negotiated, then understanding actual levels of anonymity can only be understood through careful examination of sequences of online interaction (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Researchers should analyze how tactics such as hostility and flaming as well as accusations of hostility and flaming during local interactions attempt to reduce anonymity in myriad ways both on- and offline. The implication for future research is that anonymity should be considered as a separate theoretical construct that is as complex as the related but different concept of identity.

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