

The 9/11 Decade:
Social Imaginary and Healing Virtual Community Fracture

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Abstract:

The initial events of 9/11 broke upon the awareness of people who turned first to traditional media for information, then to their networks of distant others when traditional media could not meet their needs. This study looks at two online community groups on Usenet. Though other technologies have supplanted Usenet to some degree, it provided a vibrant means of asynchronously connecting people interested in online discussion. As community members expressed their shock and horror, they also acted out the process of repairing the radical fracture to their virtual communal identity. The process by which they enacted this repair embodies a *social imaginary*, and is generally called “community repair”. This study finds that the process of community repair is very much driven by the culture inherent in the sodality represented by the participants to each newsgroup, reflecting the values that participants have communally agreed to hold valuable.

Keywords: 9/11; Community Repair; Social Imaginary; Usenet; Virtual Community

Résumé:

Les premiers événements du 11 septembre ont été révélés à ceux qui ont tourné vers les médias traditionnels en premier lieu pour leur information, ensuite à leurs réseaux d'autrui éloigné quand les médias traditionnels ne pouvaient pas combler leurs besoins. Cette étude observe deux communautés en ligne utilisant Usenet. Bien que d'autres technologies ont supplanté Usenet à un certain degré dans l'intermédiaire, en ce moment il était encore un moyen dynamique de se joindre à des gens intéressés à des discussions en ligne de manière asynchrone. Pendant que les membres de la communauté exprimaient leur état de choc et d'horreur, ils ont aussi démontré le processus de réparation de la fracture importante qui s'est vécue à leur identité virtuelle collective. Le processus par lequel ils ont établi cette réparation incarne un *imaginaire social* et est généralement appelé une "réparation de communauté". Cette étude démontre que le processus de réparation de communauté est incité par la culture inhérente de la solidarité représentée par les participants de chaque groupe de nouvelles, ce qui reflète les valeurs convenues par les participants.

Mots-clés: 11/9; Communauté Virtuelle; Imaginaire Social; Réparation de Communauté; Usenet

As the ten-year anniversary of September 11, 2001 (9/11) approaches in 2011, retrospectives address, in many ways, the human need to commemorate significant dates. In the practice of newsworld tenth, twenty-fifth, fiftieth, and hundredth anniversaries of major world events are most commonly celebrated. Such celebrations—or perhaps “remembrances” when the occasion is sombre as in the case of 9/11—serve important community functions by framing and interpreting events as part of a cultural mythology or social imaginary (Thompson, 1984).

What is often hidden inside such commemorations are the uncertainties and social processes—many of them mass-mediated—that marked the early hours and days of the event. As part of looking back over the last ten years, this paper returns to some early discursive moments which, if not emblematic, are representative and illustrative. As mediated cultures evolve, tracing them through particular theoretical lenses can provide useful insight into present events and possibly a means of projecting into the future; though prediction is a risky enterprise.

This research lies within the realm of mass communication, though it necessarily draws on perspectives in sociology, new media and cultural studies. Mass communication research can be extensively hybridized, so it is necessary to situate the theoretical stance in the general ground. The main theoretical point around which this paper is organized is the concept of the “social imaginary” (Thompson, 1984). The social imaginary explains how cultures coalesce. It says nothing about a minimum (or maximum) size for a culture. A few people, a neighbourhood, a country—culture is not unitary, but everyone participates in multiple cultures. Some may be more nuanced than others.

The social imaginary is not original to critical sociologist John Thompson, but he has done considerable work tracing the development of the concept. Thompson says it is not an

ideology per se, but rather a framework on which we build a common understanding within social or cultural groups. This framework defines our expectations and roles in the group, and serves to gather together the concepts and images that we agree have meaning. Thompson is concerned with how virtual or mediated cultures embody social imaginaries, and what effects that embodiment has on the people involved.

Explicating the social imaginary is a three-step process which Thompson calls “depth hermeneutics”: first the researcher sets out the general social and technical conditions of the culture; then notes the communication passing among the participants; and finally applies a theoretical understanding to unpack the deeper, perhaps hidden or unacknowledged meanings within the communicative process. This is a useful tool for studying online communities, because much of what might pass as nuance in face-to-face communication must be explicitly narrated in a textual environment. This highlights what might otherwise be missed in a way that creates a relatively long-lived archival record.

That archive presents an opportunity to return to some past events in some ways to read the echoes. Historical review in this way helps to clarify the process of meaning-making as it applies to the events of September 11, 2001. Living memory is a significant store of information, and will continue to be until after the fiftieth anniversary, when persons who were alive on 9/11 will rely increasingly on childhood memories rather than adult memories.

We have an advantage in the present moment. We have easy access to news reports and amateur video, recorded telephone calls and, especially, archived postings to virtual communities reflecting immediate reactions to the events. Whether such things will survive another 40 years is debatable, but we can still feel the raw emotions of many people—an experience in contrast to other events of importance, where documentation has laid unknown for decades.

This study revisits the immediate reaction to the 9/11 attacks in two different virtual communities. The groups were chosen because they both have international membership, they both depend on the same technological infrastructure, their members are of roughly equivalent ages, and they share a similar language. The only really significant difference appeared to be that one was a group organized around a commercial product available to anyone, while the other was organized around a heritage culture only open to those with a genetic connection.

The communities were chosen primarily for their cultural cohesiveness. Both communities seem to embody social imaginaries—rhetorical spaces in which the cultural aspects of the virtual community are worked out in process. On both groups, discussion of the central topic of the group took centre stage. At the same time world events, sports, politics and other topics garnered a fair share of attention. A robust culture is multidimensional. Another hallmark of a culture is that participants will turn to others in the group for support in times of stress. The stressor may be of an individual nature, such as a death in the family, or it may be a radical fracture threatening a number of people or groups.

The use of discursive practice to repair damage felt by the group as a whole is very much part of a social imaginary’s operation. According to the operating charters of the two discussion groups in this study, neither had any thematic connection to events away from their stated topic. Nonetheless, the study shows participants in the groups turned to each other to assist, to support, and to comfort on the individual level while simultaneously narrating the actions that strengthened and healed the culture.

In the taxonomy of Usenet, the communities or “newsgroups” are designated in a hierarchical fashion as “soc.culture.scottish” (SCS) and “rec.motorcycles.harley” (RMH). Participants are widely dispersed geographically in both groups, with a concomitant dispersal

according to time of day. They access their forum in “waves” corresponding roughly with time zones (or perhaps more accurately, with the free time available for online activity once other needs of the day are met). Late-night participants in the UK and Europe may still be online to interact with early-rising participants in eastern North America, who may themselves become the night owls when interacting with their friends to the west.

The Online Discussions and Their Context

The discussion threads in this analysis were chosen after a search of the newsgroups’ archives using Google™ Groups. The search identified the earliest thread in each group that ran out to more than one or two responses. The choice was made on the assumption that extended collective engagement with a particular thread indicated an effort to conduct a conversation, rather than simply post a pronouncement or update without expecting explicit participation.

Because the events of 9/11 were covered extensively, the discussion on RMH immediately incorporated the day’s events. As the day progressed the terror attacks became the only topic of discussion. The selected thread is the first found by a Google™ archival search on RMH, limited to 9/11. It is the first extended conversation and contains 121 separate posts before the end of the thread on September 12th, 2001. Participants to the thread are identified numerically in the order in which they posted comments. Some posters commented more than once.

The first message posted assumes a particular ideological stance; poster 1 immediately got on board with a question that both invited discussion and set out their position:

Should George W. nuke (sic) the mideast (sic) regardless of the loss of innocent lives?

(Poster 1, message posted to RMH)

The purpose of the question could be read in two ways: to foster a discussion of whether the U.S. should immediately launch an overwhelming response, or to set out Poster 1’s position and invite anyone who agrees with them to chime in. One reading invites comment, the other invites only a certain kind of comment that can rapidly grow and silence dissenting voices. The next poster, judging by the timestamp on their message about 20 minutes later, was watching their computer as closely as they were watching their television:

Ex-secretary of defense, Casper Wienberger (sic), was just interviewed. He said somethin' (sic) along the lines that retaliatory plans for this type of event are firmly in place. It won't be pretty.

(Poster 2, message posted to RMH)

While not expressing an explicit agreement, at the same time this poster supports with reference to supposedly expert opinion a contention that a dramatic response will be made to the attacks, and that plans for such a response have in fact been made and held in readiness. Posters 3, 4, and 5 also did not respond to the initial question, but offered up a summary of emerging reports about the attack on the Pentagon. The original question was then revisited in an oddly prescient statement:

Not that I condone warfare, but after this, I think we should remove 3/4 of the Middle eastern [sic] Governments, starting with Saddam.

(Poster 6, message posted to RMH)

At this point, a jumping-on-the-bandwagon response from participants to the discussion would be expected. “Piling on” is an identified online discussion tactic, encouraged by the nature of textual online interaction (Hays, 2010). Agreement is unseen unless it is narrated, despite the spiral of silence effect inherent in the social pressure to agree. At this point, an interesting comparison is raised between the events of the day and the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbour. The comparison turns not on a similarity in the manner of the attacks, but rather in the relative lack of reliable information as to other factors:

Just as it was after the Pearl Harbor attack, one thing is for sure, which is that this event is going to be used as an excuse to motivate the desire for vengeance among the citizenry of this country, and because it's too premature for the facts to be known beyond a shadow of a doubt, if ever at all, I urge you all not to jump on the bandwagon until more is known about the whole thing.

(Poster 7, message posted to RMH)

A feeling begins to emerge from some participants at this point that Poster 7 is making some sense; that in a crisis people should put their differences aside and work for the common good. Still, the work of the common good is assumed to be violent:

I'm on your side with this one Bud. This is no time for a pissing contest in here or in America. . . . My guns are cleaned and ready though.

(Poster 8, message posted to RMH)

A comment by another poster that “the chains holding back the dogs of war have been cut” (Poster 11) looks like macho posturing and may fall in line with the sentiment expressed by Poster 8. The comment goes against the prevailing wind of opinion, however, leading to the remark, “Poetic, but premature” (Poster 12). The opinion leaders were beginning to weigh in with their pronouncements:

[I]t's too early to discuss this...let's focus on protecting ourselves and saving as many lives as possible first. Let level heads prevail. Once we find out who the hell did this, we should retaliate in the most forceful manner imaginable.

(Poster 13, message posted to RMH)

Even though the opinion leaders pointed the conversation in a particular direction, it is still evident that not everyone participating in this discussion agreed with them. At the same time, disagreement is expressed in terms of incomplete agreement rather than outright disagreement, and a more hard-line response to the terror attacks is presented as a corollary to the not-quite-agreement:

Obviously a nuclear response is unwarranted. There should be no attempt to bother with the terrorists, either. The sponsoring nations of these activities, however, should be made wards of the world's nations by reducing their ability to produce anything but dry turds to zero. There needs to be a tactical cleansing of friendly governments. Remove all power plants, transmission lines, bridges, dams, airports, military bases, and then start food lines for the innocent citizens who never wanted this from their governments.

(Poster 18, message posted to RMH)

The door having been metaphorically left open for divergent opinions, another poster suggested that a “demonstration” be made in the form of a small nuclear device exploded in “as remote a region of Afghanistan that can be found” (Poster 21, message posted to RMH). At the same time, the poster suggested the U.S. government should summon representatives of Islamic countries to the U.S. and give them seven days to reach “immediate, permanent peace agreements with Israel;” evidently the countries supposedly supporting and condoning the terror attacks would then get the message that they should “clean their houses of terrorists and Islamic fundamentalists, or face the full military power of retribution from the United States” (Poster 21).

There were two immediate effects of this rather wishful post. One was that Poster 21 was immediately informed they were a “bleeding idiot” by one of the earlier opinion leaders. No other posters in the Google™ archived thread appeared to defend Poster 21, and likewise the poster does not appear again among the 121 posts in the thread (at least, not with the same name or email address, if at all).

The other effect of the post was to inaugurate a lengthy discussion of the similarities between the world situation at the time of the U.S. entry into World War II and the world situation as it stood then in 2001. Poster 21 had referred in their post to the Japanese government being cowed into surrender by a demonstrated willingness on the part of the U.S. to use nuclear weapons. Briefly, the group turned away from virtual sabre rattling as one of the opinion leaders placed an interpretation of history as a foundation stone for rationalizing future military action:

The US did the right thing, and I think mostly to the benefit of the Japanese in the long run. There were jumps they couldn't take to the modern world, without destruction of the caste system, and we did that for them. Life is more stressful, but there are routes now for every Japanese citizen to get an education and become successful.

(Poster 28, message posted to RMH)

The rationalization of possible future actions was not long in arriving:

Bomb them back to the stone age, don't let any vehicles in or out of the country, no humanitarian aid unless the people capitulate completely once their government, infrastructure, economy, military and agriculture were utterly destroyed.

(Poster 33, message posted to RMH)

The discussion at this point and subsequently follows an identifiable trajectory. The events of 9/11 delivered a strong shock to the community group of RMH, a shock compounded with each news bulletin. Comparisons to the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941 were inevitable, since accepted American histories frame it as a surprise attack on a nation not already at war with the attacker (e.g., Garfield, 1969; Prange, Goldstein & Dillon, 1982). In contrast to immediate news coverage of the Oklahoma City bombing perpetrated by Timothy McVeigh (when the attack was at first popularly suspected to have been conducted by “Islamic extremists”), in the case of 9/11 the Middle Eastern nationalities of the terrorists were confirmed in relatively short order from passenger lists and other discoveries. With the accepted framing of the U.S. entry into World War II firmly in mind, participants to this discussion jump to the conclusion that the American military will launch an immediate and overwhelming offensive against the “aggressors”.

Setting aside the diverse nationalities of the victims of 9/11, the attacks were framed on the newsgroup as an attack on the physical nation of America, its people and its supposed moral values. Any possible response was thus cast as necessarily unilateral, overwhelming, and ultimately of such horrific magnitude as to “bomb back into the stone age” the presumably mostly-innocent residents of any Middle Eastern country with any connection to the events of the day. The discussion benefited from the intervention of the poster who suggested the “demonstration” nuclear bombing. That post triggered an explicit performance by several opinion leaders, demonstrating how newsgroup participants “should” view the present events as well as presenting an interpretation of historical events that would justify punishing the group or groups responsible for the 9/11 attacks.

An absence of public rebuttal of the appraisal of the atomic bombings of Japan being ultimately good for that nation points to a neo-conservative post-World War II historical revisionism that claims absolute right for the actions of the U.S., and by extension to current events justifies unilateral action to “right” the “wrong”. A newsgroup formally dedicated to Harley-Davidson motorcycles should not be viewed as a source of unbiased political insight. It is useful, however. This thread was selected to illustrate how the group went about making sense of a radically shocking external event that did not relate specifically to motorcycles, yet provided a venue for the performance and imagination of the social group. Communities reveal their nature most clearly in reaction to stressful events (Rothenbuhler, 2001).

Though certain historical perspectives are not challenged, and although participants in the discussion hailing from the U.S. tend either to agree with the political positioning of the opinion leaders or recast their public statements to more closely approach agreement, there were challenges raised to the emerging consensus. Two posters living well outside the U.S.—one in Spain and one in Scotland—expressed their feelings in ways that suggest they did not completely agree with the sodality. The tone of their comments, however, indicates that they share the community’s values to some extent:

I've suffered myself enough intolerance and will never think of doing unto others what I do not want them to do to me. But still, if it's his faith that makes a terrorist commit such terrible acts, it's only fair to use it against him.

(Poster 87, message posted to RMH)

[T]he UK has a better record of this [type] of operation with our experiences when withdrawing from "The Empire" when counter terrorism measures had to be

used. We don't have as many big sticks as you guys and have had to do things differently. Maybe take some advice from your friends before deciding.

(Poster 109, message posted to RMH)

This thread started with a question asked from a particular ideological position, the title "Opinions on what the U.S. should do?" notwithstanding. The question was not "what should the U.S. do?" or "what should the international community do?" but rather "should the U.S. use nuclear weapons as part of a unilateral military response?" The community revealed by the discussion that follows is something like a small town in the U.S.: opinions vary little across a narrow range, and ultimately a violent response to provocation is the only response acceptable.

Under the leadership of a few individuals that position is rationalized and members of the sodality who are not perhaps in complete agreement couch their arguments in terms that show a respect for, and desire to fit in with, the group's stance. Self-identified nationality of the members is almost exclusively American, with a few Canadians, even fewer citizens of the UK, and one from Spain. Hardly a globalized conversation, when dissenters are reduced to expressing disagreement as merely incomplete agreement.

Because its participants do not have to account for or re-evaluate a particular political positioning in the presence of a broadly multicultural audience, RMH becomes an insular community; friendly and accepting to those who desire to join according to the expectations and sedimented traditions of the group, but nonetheless a community somewhat suspiciously holding itself apart from contact with otherness and regulating itself with stringent internal controls against the possibility of departure from its insular cultural values.

There are several reasons why RMH can be viewed as an online or "virtual" social imaginary. First, there is a socially constructed culture present on the newsgroup. Second, members of the group place importance on verifying each other's online identity performances with reference to physical markers and IRL meetings. Where such are not immediately available, participants will accept the word (or performance) of a trusted third person that certain indicators have been verified. Third, participants to RMH undertake to repair fractures to the cultural framework, and work toward socially-constructed reimaginings of their culture in response to new developments. Fourth, IRL events explicitly intended to enhance community-building efforts between RMH participants are also posted back onto the newsgroup in a certain style, in which core group values are reiterated and reinforced. Fifth, when stressful or traumatic events (such as 9/11) threaten to overwhelm psychologically people who also participate on RMH, those people turn to the online community for support, comfort, counsel, and the opportunity to talk through their feelings with like-minded others.

That they appear to do so in preference to or instead of turning to possibly more geographically close family and friends supports the interpretation that some benefit is being realized from participation in RMH and related activities. Finally, times of stress to a community are also times when people "pull together" and elect to set aside their differences in order to strengthen the community in the face of the present challenge as a conscious choice (Depew & Peters, 2001; Kolko & Reid, 1998; Rothenbuhler, 2001; Zelizer, 2001). On RMH, participants not only pull together, they narrate the fact online so it is unmistakable.

The rituals enacted on RMH as part of the social imaginary have several sources. Some of the rituals, particularly those that go to the specific performative aspects of a biker identity construction, are drawn from media representations as strips of reality (Appadurai, 1996). Rituals of bonding or community may also be drawn from such media representations, but are also taken

from learned bonding rituals practiced in bars and taverns. The overall tone of the community is set by a socially constructed self-identification as “The Virtual Bar & Grill” or as “The First Biker Bar in Cyberspace”.

Nor do all social imaginaries on even the relatively low technology foundation of Usenet develop in the same ways. When the foundation of technology is essentially the same, it is the cultural dimensions that determine how the social imaginary develops (Thompson, 1984). The newsgroup SCS is a case in point. Participants with the same types of mediated images and technological infrastructure at their disposal arrive at a different type of imagined social group.

As on RMH, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 generated waves of shock on SCS. What occurred mid-morning in New York and Washington, around the time of the first cup of coffee after arriving at work in the central part of the U.S., and about the time of the last cup before leaving for work on the West Coast took place in the latter part of the afternoon in the UK. What many people in the U.S. (including the author) missed in transit to their workplaces played out in horrifying colour during several overseas SCS participants’ regular media-viewing time.

As an occasional participant to SCS and a media scholar teaching a reporting class scheduled to meet the morning of 9/11, I was immersed in the coverage of events not only for my own information, but also in order to see how news flowed around or in spite of gaps in telecommunications networks or repetitive network news coverage. This particular thread was chosen because it represents the earliest sizable thread in reaction to 9/11 on SCS. Again, thread length equates to interest or engagement with the topic of each thread in this study. As in the RMH thread above, posters are identified numerically in the order of their appearance.

The response and the immediate conversation underscore the difference in philosophical perspective between RMH and SCS, and likewise reflect the more diverse cultural background of SCS participants when compared to those on RMH. The originator of the selected thread lives in Canada.

God help all those poor people in this attack. One of the Trade Centres has now collapsed. (...) I think we had all better start praying.

(Poster 1, message posted to SCS)

Another poster in Canada, and several in the U.K. and the U.S immediately answered this post.

I pray for all those innocent people, sickening, all those lives lost.

(Poster 3, message posted to SCS)

The other tower's gone down. I can't begin to imagine how many people were in there.

(Poster 4, message posted to SCS)

The time stamps on the posts indicate that the posters had gone nearly immediately to their computers in response to the news. Turning immediately to SCS happened perhaps in preference to, or possibly concurrent with contacts with others who may have been both geographically closer and easier to converse with in a synchronous manner. That posters turned directly to the computer illustrates here, as it does on RMH, that a strong sense of community is felt (by some posters, at least) and that some benefit or comfort is derived from the feeling of membership in

the community and the sharing of tribulations with others on the newsgroup. Times of extreme stress pull members of a community closer together, even if temporarily, into the work of sustaining the community in the face of the threat.

The community response to the news broadened shortly after the thread started, with an American poster bringing a deeper immediacy to the sense of tragedy:

I have at least one acquaintance who works in [the World Trade Center]. Several buildings here in Los Angeles have been shut down as a precaution. This is just awful.

(Poster 9, message posted to SCS)

After approximately two and a half hours, the same poster had more news:

I am please (sic) to report that my acquaintance is alive and well. [The acquaintance] works in the second tower that was hit (near the top floor!), and was in the lobby when the plane hit the first tower. [They] got out.

(Poster 10, message posted to SCS)

To which another poster replied:

Thank goodness for one more little bright spot in an otherwise dark day. On another group that I subscribe to we were all worried today because one of the posters is a pilot with United. Thank goodness [the pilot] too was OK.

(Poster 12 message posted to SCS)

The last comment illustrates several things. First, posters to SCS treat other members as an extension of their IRL connections with friends and family. There is no apparent reason why anyone in Canada or the UK should care that an acquaintance of a poster in the U.S. might have been killed in a terrorist attack, save that the poster felt it was important enough to bring to the group's attention and likewise important enough to provide an update. Although participants to SCS were relieved to hear the news that the acquaintance (and, later, another pilot known to another poster) had survived, the case of the acquaintance who escaped from Tower 2 underscored both the sheer coincidence of the escape and the impossibility that over 3,000 other people had been so fortunate.

Another observation of this post in particular is that the poster refers to another discussion group to which they are subscribed. The author's recollection of 9/11 is that major television and radio news networks were not providing updates to information in a sufficiently timely manner to satisfy the desire to know what was happening. Information simply could not be developed quickly enough to provide up-to-the-minute updates because of the magnitude of events and the security concerns attendant upon them. Many of the networks with a presence in New York and Washington, D.C. were providing live raw video, but with no analysis and interspersed with recaps of what was already known along with video clips of earlier events.

The attacks in New York disrupted a major portion of the telecommunications network along the east coast of the United States, which not only complicated the emergency response on the scene but severely impaired the flow of information out to the greater world. Additionally, major news outlets on the Web were swamped with an overload of hits to their sites from people

looking for updated information—many to the extent that servers had been taken offline completely—and the sheer volume of traffic flowing on the Internet combined with the gaps blown in the system on the East Coast to lower data transfer speeds almost to a standstill.

The result was that people who wanted to hear any news whatsoever turned to informal networks of friends and family, whether via telephone or with their computers (utilizing electronic pathways and resources that were not swamped in the emergency). Each person who acquired some piece of news no matter how apparently inconsequential, anecdotal or unverified then passed it along through their own informal networks.

Even when the only picture of the day's events was mostly unclear, SCS posters abroad began to wonder and speculate about what the American government's response would be. Not without some reason for trepidation, as seen from the tenor of the comments posted in the parallel thread on RMH, and likewise with uncertainty based on the widely reported actions and words of a politically conservative U.S. President who had been in office just less than a year. The greatest fear was that in panic or rage the Commander in Chief would launch an overwhelming and possibly misaimed attack:

What do you think the chances of US nuclear retribution are? I'd far rather die with a blade in my belly or a bullet in my chest than having my tissue melt.

(Poster 17, message posted to SCS)

Subsequent posters pointed out that traditionally the nuclear option was considered the tactic of absolute last resort, while another pointed out that:

The USA assisted by the UK has bombed the shit out of soooo many countries. Viet Nam - Cambodia - Iran - Iraq - Lybia [sic] - Palestine et al.

(Poster 21, message posted to SCS)

This poster does not contribute to the argument other than to support a contention expressed by several posters in the U.S. and abroad that President George W. Bush was unpredictable to the point of mental instability.

Having come to the online community for support in the face of the initial shock, in the days following September 11 discussants in the thread turned to speculation about what the U.S. or world response would be. Poster 17's question above struck to the heart of what troubled many participants, eliciting a lengthy subthread discussion alluding to President Bush being "crazy", "a redneck", "a puppet" and other pejoratives. One poster supplied some needed perspective with a commentary on the actions of another youthful U.S. president facing a crisis less than one year into his term of office:

Long before you were even a twinkle in your Mother's eye . . . (1962) I was home in Scotland visiting my family with the two children that I had at that time. While I was there, there was an incident now known as The Cuban Missile Crisis.

At that time many people made the same kinds of comments as those above about John F. Kennedy! 'He's so young.' 'He's a hot-headed Irishman.' 'He'll have us embroiled in World War III.' You get the picture. Did it happen? No! Because the

US president has many advisors in situations like this and I'm sure that now, as then, their advice will be taken.

(Poster 46, message posted to SCS)

The focus of the group at this point shifts away from a process of coming to terms with the initial psychological shock generated by the attacks on posters wherever they learned of them. Looking solely at this thread, the impression is that the shock passed quickly, as the trend of the thread moved on. That may or may not be the case, but in the investigator's anecdotal experience world media were saturated with news and commentary regarding the attacks, and once media informants had figured out how to frame the story within the conventions of newsworld the general storyline entered a more predictable trajectory (Lule, 2001).

Understanding of the magnitude of events likely preceded the passing of the sense of psychological shock for most participants. A striking feature of this thread in contrast to the parallel thread on RMH is that where participants to the discussion on RMH evidently were satisfied to have discussed the attacks long enough to have allowed opinion leaders to establish themselves firmly, participants on SCS continue their discussion under this subject heading beyond that point, so long as there seems to be something related to talk about.

The group next turns its efforts toward the work of healing a fracture to the community. Participants to SCS, held by charter and by commitment to fostering discussion of Scottish cultures wherever they may be found, find themselves sharply divided by national loyalties, rather than united by a common cultural bond. On the one side, American posters who claim all right of retribution on behalf of their nation because the attacks were carried out in the U.S.

I don't know who we are at war with, even. But we are with somebody and they are going to pay. I, and most everyone I know, are basically in the lead, follow, or get the hell out of my way mood. It doesn't even matter who the leader is.

(Poster 132, message posted to SCS)

On the other side of the conversation, internationalists who point out that the U.S. is relatively inexperienced as a nation at being the subject of terror attacks.

It would sadden me greatly to see the USA attempt to run this show for there are people outside the borders of your great country who have much more experience and the World (sic) needs their experience. Don't lead us, join us. By all means take the initiative and organise an international anti-terrorist organisation but please do not attempt to dominate it.

(Poster 44, message posted to SCS)

The effort to heal the community fracture continues through the majority of the posts to this thread accessible on Google™. Although there are some hard feelings expressed in several cases, the participants to this discussion on SCS seem less likely to focus on retaliation for tough talk directed at them online than participants to the equivalent discussion on RMH. The reason for this is likely the difference between espousing a loner's life on the margins (even if that is only a romantic concept) and taking part in a community whose members value heritage, family and tradition.

National political differences remain apparent in the discourse, but some hard-line proponents of massive military action on the 11th and 12th begin to change their positions slightly on subsequent days. In the end, those taking an active part in the discussion seem to agree that some action needs to be taken to redress the attacks and hopefully suppress future tragedies—action on a multinational scale, carefully directed at known suspects, under the auspices of the United Nations. What seems most feared is a headlong rush on the part of a single nation to start a large-scale war against shadowy terrorist groups. Poster 81 on September 15th, 2001 pointed out, “Surgery needs a scalpel not a shotgun”. This rapidly became the group sentiment and another poster echoed the thought:

Small international anti-terror units could succeed. The USA, even supported by a few allies, going in mob-handed will only cause thousands more bin Ladens and an un-winnable situation.

(Poster 86, message posted to SCS)

Poster 81 is a frequent poster on other threads whose email address is in the U.K., and poster 86 is a well-respected member of the group who lives in Scotland.

Two mechanisms by which the social imaginary repairs community fractures appear to be at work more or less simultaneously. One, as alluded to above, is for respected members of the community to express their opinions after allowing other members to “hash it out” for a while. These posters have accumulated considerable social capital on the basis of the length of time they have participated in the newsgroup and on account of the perceived reasonable nature of their views on a variety of subjects. Though it is less important on SCS than on RMH, they are also known personally to other members of the community through a number of alternative channels ranging from IRL to the post and other modes of telecommunication.

Social capital is a result of participation in a community and in discussions or actions related to preserving or upholding the group in the face of a variety of influences that may threaten its continued existence (Putnam, 2000). These members of the community express their opinions, knowing that they possess the social capital to insure their voices will be given more consideration than those of relative newcomers. By expressing themselves on an issue they become opinion leaders, setting a tone for how the rest of the group “should” feel about an important matter. As several opinion leaders express similar views in succession, members of the group drift closer to the modeled ideal and exhibit less variance and fewer emotionally loaded terms in their responses to each other.

The other mechanism which appears to be at work (particularly on SCS) is more subtle and apparently depends more on overall group dynamics for its success than does the expenditure of social capital. One American poster expressed a strong viewpoint quite at variance with what was beginning to emerge even early on as the group norm:

Within the nations of peace and law, Law [sic] should prevail. It is the feeders of the killers, the armers of the killers, the lovers of the killers, Yes, and even those children who know nothing except preparing to become the next generation of killers that must be eliminated.

(Poster 145, message posted to SCS)

There was very little direct response to the poster. The comment, though authored chronologically toward the beginning of the thread, was placed near the end of the accumulated posts in a Google™ threaded display, indicating that the post did not attract respondents. Although Usenet is asynchronous, all participants eventually saw most of the responses posted in the thread. Certainly within a few days, given the speed of response to other posts in the thread from places as distant as Tasmania, every poster had seen the comment and had the opportunity to respond before the last post to the thread on September 16th, 2001.

That none apparently chose to do so suggests a second mechanism of community repair, which is for members of the group apparently not to respond to dramatically divergent viewpoints. Had the poster continued to comment from their initial position, it is likely they may have faced more formal sanction such as shunning or a public rebuke from another member. Apparently, however, from the archival record the poster took the hint. Posts that end up at the end of the Google™ default thread display tend to represent a collection of odds and ends, posts that did not generate significant subthreads of conversation, and as apparently in this case, posts that were accorded a dose of silence on the part of the community.

Conclusion

At several points in both groups, participants were observed thanking other participants for taking some action: posting pictures to a website, citing a particularly rare record, expressing hope in the matter of a missing acquaintance. Although participants can be cutting in their opinions they also acknowledge the pressures of the moment that lead them to make unfair characterizations. The pictures of these groups that emerge from these discursive moments are of an open and diverse community, SCS more than RMH. With some exceptions, members accept newcomers who honestly wish to participate—with some reservation until they show that they will stay around and contribute to the discussion, but they are not dismissed out of hand.

Technologically, Usenet was and is similar to Twitter, though there are differences. Many of the interactions posted to Usenet pre-figure later conversations on Twitter, though without the 140-character limit. Given the times, one significant difference is the use of smartphones to access online services—a development still mostly in the future in 2001. The Usenet threads are most interesting for what they illustrate about the role of new or alternative communication technologies in the formation, maintenance and repair of cultural groups.

When faced with a need to repair the effects of a traumatic stressor on the community, forum participants shore up the fracture. When they are forced to respond to sudden and stressful external forces, they can rely on the cultural values they have negotiated and performed to support their efforts to comfort and aid the social imaginary in recovering its equilibrium and making some sense of the apparently senseless. In doing so, they mirror the face-to-face process of comfort and support that (in many cases) was simultaneously playing out in their lives.

It is notable that these human efforts were situated in a mediated environment, and in a new way. Likewise the archival function of the Internet affects the process of memory and commemoration. Events which, after ten years, may have lost some of their immediate pain can be revisited in a depth not previously possible. Subsequent developments in technology and culture online may limit access to such a rich resource, but the very openness of the technology at this moment in time captured an intimate snapshot of the simple interactions that helped people make meaning, find understanding and comfort each other in a crisis.

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