

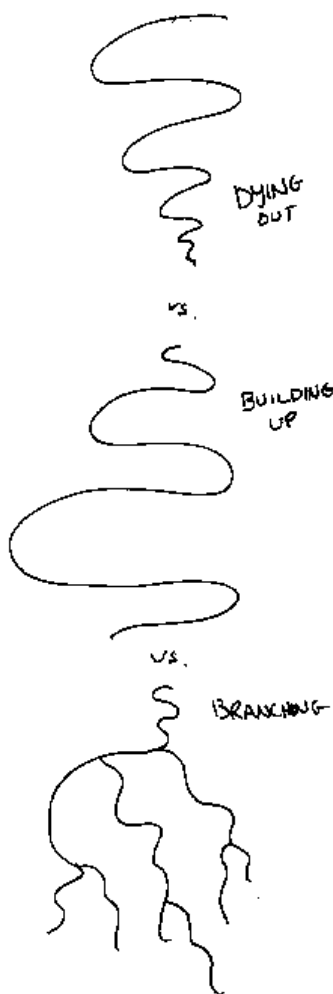
## Analysis of a newsgroup - some random thoughts on soc.support.transgendered...

Unfortunately, there's not a single type of interaction in Usenet. If you look at alt.homosexual.lesbian, there's practically no interaction or conversation. Instead, individuals are posting messages where no one responds. Most of these messages are links to porn sites or other forms of spam. Compare this to soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian -bi, a moderated newsgroup where users converse with one another, sharing stories and responding to others' questions and thoughts. While some groups are for conversation, other groups are purely for questions/answers, such as most comp groups. Some information groups, such as alt.support.srs form a conversational community around the questions.

For the purpose of this assignment, i am looking at soc.support.transgendered (SST from here on), a group dedicated to supporting transgendered individuals since the early 1990s.

Like many of the groups in the soc hierarchy, SST has a great deal of conversation and discussion, ranging in topics from issues related to the charter to a thread of individuals upset over Google's takeover of dejanews and virus warnings. Most of the folks on SST seem to know each other, at least virtually, for quite some time. There are inside jokes, comments about each other's attitudes and habits, and acknowledgements to finding friends in this group. For example:

"Diane is not a troll. She is a long term post-op ... but she is also someone though who judges others harshly for what comes down to, IMO, things she sees as weaknesses in them."



There is a tight-knit crew of individuals on SST, folks who post frequently and refer to one another. This group of individuals contributes most of the "conversational" threads. By this, i mean the threads where there is a dialogue back and forth, usually prompted by nothing other than simple comments or events on the web. A lot of these conversations end up in discussing one another, with individuals making remarks about each other's habits. Often the starting point of these conversations is someone making a comment that others feel is hateful or politically incorrect - this seems to aggravate everyone else into responding. Another section of posts consists of mostly first time posters asking a question to the group while members of the community respond. Very rarely does a request for help go unanswered.

The conversations form three different patterns - either they start out really heated and then die out through commenting on one another, or they build up in strength based on some original posting that was not very strong (these conversations are often still going or stop because people are repeating themselves), or they form branches and the branches die out over different amounts of time.

Because a large section of the SST community knows one another, there is a great deal of posting that is content-free, trying to exhibit some level of interaction that exists in real life. For example,

> And some of us still hang around to watch you ladies go at it. ;)  
<cough> <blush> <g>

and

{snippety snip}  
Yaaaaaawn... smacks gob with lips

Much of this type of posting comes from a few individuals who seem to present themselves through both content and non-content types of messages. This both lightens the environment and allows for transitions or the end of various threads.

As a tight-knit community, many of the posters develop an identity, formed through



their posting style, the types of comments they make about themselves and the comments that others make about them. Since there are only a dozen very active participants, it's pretty reasonable to start to get to know them as a community. They also seem to be the biggest contributors to keeping the community together, by fighting the fires when other posters get upset with each other, are offended by "sarkastic" remarks or feel as though other posters are intentionally egging members on. Jokes fly and small amounts of teasing begin in order to help calm the mood when there is a tense discussion, quite like real life behavior. This is possible because there is a core community and everyone else is on the peripheral.

Interestingly, although there are regular posters with consistent posting styles, few give real information about themselves, either through their header information or through any signature. Many of the posters post through deja or no-spam type accounts. There is a sprinkling of AOL and free accounts, and a very small number of theoretically valid .com accounts. A few of the regulars indicate themselves through their .signatures, either by relating themselves to various service websites or by giving their website or ICQ information. Only a few add quotes or other miscellaneous to their .signature.

SST represents a very close online community of individuals connected through a similar real life experience, addressing their concerns and issues related to that issue as well as general life experiences.