When Social Norms Fail

Brianna Dym

University of Colorado, Boulder
Boulder, CO

brianna.dym@colorado.edu

Casey Fiesler

University of Colorado, Boulder
Boulder, CO

casey.fiesler@colorado.edu

Abstract

Within online communities, social norms that both set expectations for and regulate behavior can be critical to the overall welfare of the community--particularly in the context of the privacy and safety of its members. For communities where the cost of regulatory failure can be

high, it is important to understand both the conditions under which norms might be effective, and when they might fail. As a case study, we consider transformative fandom, a creative community dedicated to reimagining existing media in subversive ways. Due to the vulnerability of many members, this community has strong, longstanding norms to keep its members safe. Through an interview study with 25 fandom participants, we investigate this complex array of implicit norms that have been largely effective over time, but have also begun to break down. Catalysts for these breakdowns include value tensions between sub-communities and an increasing presence of outsiders, though most prominently, we identify a disconnect between the norms the community needs to support and the design of the platforms they occupy.

Author Keywords

Social norms; collaborative work; online communities; privacy; safety; fandom.

Introduction

Social media platforms and applications are often constructed with an ideal user or community of users in mind. However, platforms can be appropriated by communities that then use the site in ways the developers might never have imagined possible or planned for [5]. Though these communities may not have control over the design of the site, they can at least form their own social norms around behavior and

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for third-party components of this work must be honored. For all other uses, contact the Owner/Author.

GROUP '20 Companion, January 6–8, 2020, Sanibel Island, FL, USA

© 2020 Copyright is held by the owner/author(s).

ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-6767-7/20/01.

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3323994.3369881>

interaction. When functioning well, social norms as a community-based regulatory mechanism can have more staying power than externally imposed rules and can cultivate an even stronger sense of community identity [4]. However, though norms can hold powerful sway within communities, their enforcement is still largely limited to modeling desired behavior [6] or publicly shaming wrong-doers [1]. Therefore, even strong norms can fall short of the enforcement capabilities of formal policy or moderation. In the context of community safety, the potential for harm from regulatory failure is high. In order to support prosocial online communities that can promote their own health and safety, it is important to understand both the conditions under which both norms might be effective, and when they might fail.

Background

We situate our research within transformative fandom, a creative community focused on consuming, creating, and sharing fanworks, which are writing, art, or other media based upon existing works—e.g., the continuing adventures of Harry Potter or Captain Kirk. Though geek culture and fandom are becoming more mainstream, transformative fandom and its associated activities are still traditionally more separate and private than other fandom spaces [2].

Transformative fandom existed long before it migrated online, taking form in newsletters, stapled-together zines, and self-organized meet-ups. Community members developed norms toward how to interact with fanworks, as well as norms regarding pen names and copyright [4]. These norms form core values that govern transformative fandom, and have stayed with the community as it moved online. These core values are so integrated into the community, they informed the design

of the fanfiction site Archive of Our Own, a platform built by members of transformative fandom for their community [5]. Fandom is also a space for subversive and critical responses to media and representation, and the community includes a very large percentage of LGBTQ members, who have real concerns about their safety and privacy [3]. Prior work has explored the strength of social norms in fandom, including those around secrecy [4], and our goal with this work is to examine more deeply the role that those norms serve in preserving community safety and individual privacy.

Methods

We recruited participants from sites associated with transformative fandom, mainly Tumblr and Twitter. In our recruitment post, we asked for volunteers who were at least 18 years old and were interested in discussing privacy and ethics within transformative fandom. We responded to participant volunteers on a first-come, first-serve basis, recruiting 25 people total.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via voice chat or instant message depending on the interviewee's preference. Interview questions focused on exploring rules, etiquette, and norms. We also asked participants about specific strategies they used for protecting their privacy. Following transcription, we conducted a thematic analysis of the data (Braun & Clark, 2006), discussing and converging on emergent themes.

A majority of our participants identified as female. Of our 25 interview participants, 21 identified as LGBTQ despite our recruitment material not emphasizing a particular minority group, though this tracks to known demographics in fandom [3].

Results

Throughout our interviews, participants consistently identified the same norms that they see as vital to fandom. These largely involved privacy protection (e.g., do not “out” other fans), protection from triggering content (e.g., tag your work with appropriate warnings), protection from harassment within the community (e.g., pay attention to those tags and “don’t like, don’t read”), and protection from outsiders and amplification of content (e.g., don’t re-share content outside of fandom). Despite the prevalence of these norms, participants also identified moments when norms came into conflict, or were violated, often at the risk of someone’s privacy or safety.

Value Tensions Between Communities

When describing norm violation within fandom, participants often pointed to a tension between community members, or between sub-communities, in which people debated what values fandom should hold and how those values should be enforced across the community. One participant describes people violating the common norm “don’t like, don’t read”:

Of course, we all [find content] where we're like, "Okay, that's unhealthy," or "I think that's abusive." [B]ut that doesn't give you the right to go and police other people because then it becomes a question of who watches the watchmen? Who is deciding what is pure and what isn't? (P23)

The tension our participants describe between policing undesired content and letting people enjoy what they want is the result of differences in values between sub-communities and individuals. These resulting differences lead to tense situations in which people are harassed for

their activity in fandom, disrupting fandom as a safe space normally free of harassment. In addition to encountering threats from within the community, participants also described a tension between participating in fandom and fearing that their content would be amplified to broader public spaces where not only might there be value differences, but their work would be taken out of context.

Community Outsiders Misunderstanding Norms

Participants also cited fears over what might happen if their content were amplified outside of fandom by journalists or academics taking fan content and locating it elsewhere. Several participants stated fandom is not for the “public.” It is contextual to its community. However, fandom is also situated in public online spaces, meaning data can be repurposed by third parties. Because accessing fan communities is as easy as visiting the right site, participants recounted instances when reporters would remove data from fandom without considering the consequences of broadcasting it elsewhere. One participant described their actions: “people come into the community, they parachute in, they don't really look around, and they leave” (P5).

Participants most often recommended that researchers and journalists ask permission to use fan content outside of fandom. Participants encouraged work about fandom to normalize the community in broader public perspectives.

Platform Design Versus Community Norms

Despite fandom existing independent of any one platform, the digital space it resides on can still influence

the community. Fandom's norms and the ways in which they break down represent gaps between the community's needs and the platform's affordances. Currently, much of fandom's social media activities occur on Tumblr. Participants described how past platforms clashed with social norms (e.g. [5]) as well as how Tumblr's mechanics work against what the community needed.

Tumblr is a site where tags are important for finding content and do not have a good on-site way of being monitored...If you are a user who doesn't have a blacklist [mod installed], then you are seeing everything that goes on your dash, regardless of what it is. (P14)

Tumblr's heightened visibility comes from an "all or nothing" approach to content management that leaves users with few options for privacy controls. Users can make their content private, but cannot make their posts visible to any community members as a result. In opting out of Tumblr, nonuse can be harmful when its communities are an important safe space for vulnerable populations, such as LGBTQ people who cannot find community elsewhere [3]. Norms are in place to preserve safety, but when a platform cannot support those norms, safety becomes tenuous. By understanding why these norms break down, we can better understand how large communities interact with digital spaces and consider better ways to support community norms.

Conclusion & Future Work

These preliminary findings show how social norms are only as effective as when people follow them. If someone breaks a norm, then there is not a good method for protecting people from the resulting damage. In future

work, we hope to outline how researchers and designers might consider supporting social norms within communities to enable more positive and safe interactions online.

References

- [1] Lindsay Blackwell, Jill Dimond, Sarita Schoenebeck, and Cliff Lampe. 2017. Classification and Its Consequences for Online Harassment: Design Insights from HeartMob. *PACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 1, 24: 1–19.
- [2] Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson. 2012. Identity, Ethics, and Fan Privacy. In *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*, Katherine Larsen and Lynn Zubernis (eds.). Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 38–56.
- [3] Brianna Dym, Jed R Brubaker, Casey Fiesler, and Bryan Semaan. 2019. "Coming Out Okay": Community Narratives for LGBTQ Identity Recovery Work. In *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 3, CSCW, 28.
- [4] Casey Fiesler and Amy S Bruckman. 2019. Creativity, Copyright, and Close-Knit Communities: A CaseStudy of Social Norm Formation and Enforcement. In *Proc. ACM Hum.-Comput. Interact.* 3, GROUP, 24.
- [5] Casey Fiesler, Shannon Morrison, and Amy S. Bruckman. 2016. An Archive of Their Own: A Case Study of Feminist HCI and Values in Design. In *Proceedings of the 2016 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems - CHI '16*, 2574–2585. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2858036.2858409>
- [6] Joseph Seering, Robert Kraut, and Laura Dabbish. 2017. Shaping pro and anti-social behavior on twitch through moderation and example-setting. In *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM conference on computer supported cooperative work and social computing*, 111–125.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank our participants and the transformative fandom community for volunteering their time to speak with us. We would also like to thank the people who provided us invaluable feedback on this work: Jed Brubaker, Mikhaila Friske, Katie Gach, Natalie Garrett, Aaron Jiang, Anthony Pinter, Morgan Scheuerman, and Jordan Wirfs-Brock. This work was partially supported by the National Science Foundation (NSF) project award 1704303.