

Communities of Conflict or Conversation?

Online Discourses in a Web-Gallery

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 1999 a web-site containing the work of the Swedish artist photographer Elisabeth Olsson was published on the web, (www.eccehomo.nu). The 12 pictures displaying Jesus Christ in a homosexual context, had previously travelled across Europe leaving a trail of public debate and strong feelings. The website was built by researchers at Laboratorium, and a research project monitored all interaction during the first 6 months. The site received extensive mass media attention resulting in approximately 200 000 visitors during the time of the study. Each exposure of the site in national or international press resulted in significant short-term peaks in the access log files. For example the article in the culture section of "Wired news" (Kriz, Wired News 1999), within 1 hour resulted in 3000 hits on the start page.

2. THE ECCE HOMO WEB GALLERY

The site-design was inspired by a gallery metaphor, with separate rooms/pages for each photo (fig. 1). Each room had commentary texts by the artist explaining the biblical context of each picture, music selected by the artist, and material documenting the artistic process.

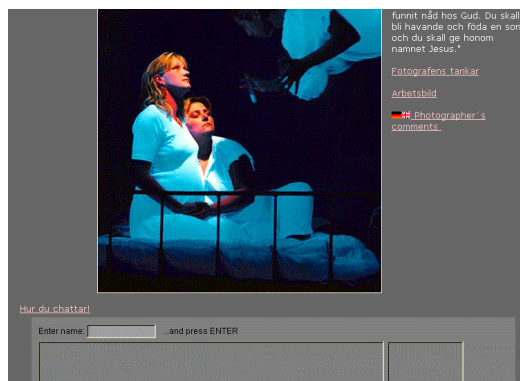


Fig 1. A Picture from the web gallery. (E. Olsson)

The site also hosted an application that enhanced each room through support for real-time communication and visual awareness on how the spectators moved from

picture to picture as well as displaying the number of current visitors in the gallery. The following transcript indicates the conversational style of communication that dominated the (rare) occasions of brief chat-activity.

Anne:	What do you think of this picture, Soren?
Johan:	<enters:>
Soren:	Actually, I don't really like it, what do you think?
Anne:	Why don't you like it?
Soren:	and what do you think Johan?
Johan:	Maybe you can find too many messages in it?
Soren:	The motive and the text are OK, but artistically ,, naaa!!
Johan:	The picture feels a bit "too much" for me..

A section of the gallery contained a threaded discussion forum enabling visitors to engage in debates. The discussion forum was from the first day boiling with activity. Postings with strong opinions on homosexuality, moral and religion dominated the entries. The following example is an extract of a thread labelled *"There was so much fuss about these innocent pictures????!!!"* [all entries are translated from Swedish]

<p>-----Posted by John Smith on July 14</p> <p>How can you say that they are innocent? They are insulting caricatures made by an "artist" without any shame :-(</p> <p>-----Posted by George on July 14:</p> <p>The only one here without shame, is you!</p> <p>How dare you insult the people who have different believes in Christ and God than you? You disrespect Elisabeth Ohlsson and everyone else you disagree with! You ought to be ashamed of yourself!!</p> <p>-----Posted by John Smith on July 14</p> <p>There's absolutely no reason for me to be ashamed. Have you ever studied The Holy Bible to see what it says about homosexuality?</p> <p>-----Posted by Laura Iskora on July 14</p> <p>Have you ever studied the Bible too learn what it says about how to treat the next person?</p>
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A traditional website can be viewed as textual and graphical traces of human activity with little or no support for mutual awareness amongst visitors (Sørensen et al 2000). The support of mutual awareness amongst website visitors can potentially serve several purposes. The actions of others can support direct or indirect social navigation, (Dieberger & Höök 1999), support collaborative work, and form the basis for virtual communities or other forms of online discourses (Erikson 1997).

3. CONVERSATION AND CONFLICT

The web gallery was created in order to give the visitor an experience of an information space and to support on-line communities around the exhibition. As illustrated by the two examples above, there were obvious differences between activities in the distributed chat-areas and in the discussion forum in terms of both style and contents. The web site hosted 2 fundamentally different on-line discourses (Erickson 1997).

The chat-logs reveal discourses of extremely short duration where participants were not able to demonstrate significant mutual relations or other social characteristics of a community (Erickson 1997). Paradoxically, the visitors chose to visualise their presence and participated in conversations, presumably because they felt they could gain from interacting with others, perceiving others as integral resources of the web-site. Initial analysis indicates that conversations more frequently occurred when more than 10 users visited the same picture, supporting the argument of a necessary "critical mass" for on-line discourses to occur (e.g. Bradner et. al. 1999). In addition to a critical mass of participants, the initiation of a discourse seemed to be highly important, i.e. "breaking the ice". This was supported by the results of experiments where researchers initiated a conversation among co-present users simply by entering a neutral opening phrase, inviting others to join. This strategy was often, but not always successful in triggering short conversations.

In the discussion forum, a profoundly different on-line discourse manifested itself demonstrating several of the characteristics of a community. This "community of conflict" rapidly was established formed by strongly opposing sub-communities based on opposing views on moral, religion and homosexuality. New contributors were indirectly socialised into one of the sub-groups. The socialisation process seemed to unfold in a fairly uncomplicated manner based on recognition of who was attacking and who was applauding the entries. The traditional characteristics of a social community of standing up for each other were frequently observed. The strong views formulated by the opposition seemed to strengthen the "bonds" within a group. Perhaps, more surprising, there were also significant signs of all members contributing to common patterns of use. There were several entries and thread-segments negotiating the shared set of norms and forms for the mutual communication. This is according to Orlikowski and Yates (1994), a typical feature of communication within a community, here observed in a community of conflict.

Comparing the two distinct types of interaction, there are several contextual factors of importance. The debate

forum could be perceived as a communication tool for convincing others. It became instrumental in forming a community of conflict because of the contentious topic and because it was possible to use it for asynchronous preaching to a community. It captured, as opposed to the chat function, both dynamic and static aspects and represented history, chronology and continuity of the community. The discussion forum seemed mainly to be driven by participants from either religious groups or homosexuals. There were obvious political motives behind the debates. Perhaps the debates would have been different if the group of participants mainly had been art historians, photographers or artists? The chat rooms did not support preaching. Here there was no audience and no memory since previous discussions were not stored. As opposed to the persistent threaded discussions in the debate forum, the chat rooms enabled ephemeral meetings around pictures (Schmidt & Simone, 1996). Because of placement and functionality, it was obvious to discuss individual pictures in the gallery rather than professing morale to an audience and there were little incentive to re-visit. The debate function changed continuously and therefore offered a reason for re-visits. The chat function emulated the quiet civilised discussions between friends wandering around a physical gallery, discussing each picture. The threaded debate forum can be likened to a combination of agitated confrontations at picket lines in front of art galleries showing controversial art with the angry debate in the readers columns of newspapers.

4. REFERENCES

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