

Genre and Internet: Characterizing effective forum posts

Technological communication has undergone a revolution in the past decades, an unprecedented level of speed and development that defines the current zeitgeist. The internet has gone from obscurity to commonplace to essential in the eyes of the public, and today's language, learning and entertainment are now entangled in the Web.

As the internet becomes more ubiquitous in modern society and people use it frequently day-to-day, the exploration of rhetoric across this new means of communication is necessary. Indeed, there has been a large amount of academic research into the effects of social media, the style of writing developing on these platforms, and the relationships to texts and discourse outside of the digital realm. Yet many parts of the internet remains vastly unexplored academically, dismissed as frivolous or lacking in substantial content for analysis, despite mass usage by the public. Specifically, public internet forums are a widely used and viewed sphere of discussion that lack real scrutiny rhetorically. This text, then, seeks to typify the style of language and argument used on internet forums, to define the genre of online posts.

Defining internet genre

To first define genre within an online environment, a grasp of genre theory must be established. Genre is a construct that classifies language and rhetoric according to audience, style and effect. Texts that have similar purpose and audience are often structured similarly to produce the same argumentative and emotion effect on the reader, and belong to the same genre of writing. Carolyn Miller defines genre as a recurring rhetorical action for a specific situation and context. Genre is not a constriction upon language, and is "distinct from form," (163) as it is not a definition of a style of writing, but arises as an apparent strategy that suits a specific goal, and reoccurs as an effective means of accomplishing the rhetoric's purpose as argument. Eulogies would be a recurring genre – the language choice, rhetorical structure, audience and

purpose is similar across multiple instances, and they can be typified into a single genre; other examples would include news articles, academic papers, personal letters, commercials, and business minutes.

An issue with genre classification is that being too stringent on rigorous definitions and inflexible in use limits writing and fails to serve as a purposeful distinction that aids analysis. The other extreme results in a similar failure – if the genre is loosely defined, the classification is meaningless as it is too generalized to help for any specifics. To address this, Miller claims that a meaningful genre claim must have three characteristics: Multiple works must share language, presentation, and implication, there must be similarities in audience and lexicon that still separate it from other writings, and, most importantly, the genre must serve some purpose in improving the effectiveness of the rhetoric (164). A genre stands as a working synthesis of strategies that occur across similar pieces.

Marcy Lassota Bauman applies Miller's rules of genre analysis to the digital realm, explaining how the rapid advance technology has introduced new genres to language. The internet's writings are characterized by three major facets (273): unrivaled ubiquity to other methods of communication which makes text more accessible to readers, variable time constraints as text can be dynamically altered and augmented, and an enormous amount of multivocality as internet users interact with each other. Bauman then applies genre analysis to internet posts in computer-assisted learning communities – I will be using a similar approach to analyzing public forum posts.

The role of antecedent genre

Genres, as a construct that is defined by reoccurrence, are greatly influenced by their past usage. Kathleen Jamieson argues that "In rhetorical transactions . . . the past may abide as a

living presence.” (406) The connotations and implications from previous iterations of a genre shape the tone and message of newer instances. The antecedent uses of a genre “are capable of imposing powerful constraints” (414) on rhetoric, and must be considered in analysis.

The question arises as to how this affects the genre of internet posts. Previous studies applying genre theory to a digital environment have determined that consideration of the prior genre in analyzing internet posts give a better understanding, as the internet developed communicative methods that mirrored existing technologies (e-mail instead of physical mail, imageboards instead of bulletin boards, news websites instead of newspapers). In a computer-aided academic context, Norm Friesen noted how internet posts “of this form [are comparable] with its generic antecedent, the letter.” (172) The basis for his analysis relies upon considering internet posts an epistolary rhetoric.

One may then conclude that the internet does not create new genres, but instead serves as a new means of expressing older genres. Michael Spooner & Kathleen Yancey voiced this in debating the genre of e-mail, stating that “. . . the new device is bent to the old rhetorical purpose . . . that’s why most electronic communications are simply reproducing extant genres of writing instead of creating new ones.” (270) Postings on the internet mimic their antecedents (like letters) as the new technology mimics the past genre to accomplish a similar purpose. The constraints upon the audience and capability, Spooner & Yancey argue, are enforced on the Internet as well – as of the time of their writing, 90% of Americans did not own a modem and thus could not access internet writings. There is a conclusion that even if there were new genres for the digital realm, they have not fully developed yet as the technology is too novel and experimental. This conclusion may have been applicable in 1996, but two decades later the widespread availability of the internet and its continued use calls its current truth into question.

Methods of analysis

As this text seeks to analyze the genre of internet forum posts, various forum posts must be collected, dissected and discussed – however, due to the mass quantity of instances available, one must impose restrictions to filter posts to those of substance. Internet posts range in nature and purpose, and many posts are flippant or too brief to contribute to a deeper, ongoing discussion. There are also many posts that receive little recognition by the community, either due to lack of quality, irrelevancy, or simply random chance. This elimination will be achieved by examining a post's acceptance and contribution to a general forum's community. Posts that receive many "likes," positive approval through votes, or multiple replies will be considered greater additions to the collective voice of the community.

Additionally, the discussion of posts is important, to show the multivocality of internet forums – a single approved post is not enough to show a forum's full context, but a debate or conversation with multiple voices joining in better define the community. This can be done similarly to the approval – posts with large threads of replies are better contributors to the community, and will be examined as indicative of a typical successful forum post.

Finally, the issue of incivility must be addressed, as internet posts are commonly notorious for degrading into insults, "flaming," and other behaviors not conducive to a productive commentary. Addressing this, Thomas W. Benson provides an example of analyzing rhetoric in spite of fierce language and polar opinions, on the early internet bulletin boards Usenet and Netnews. He writes "Although obscenity does not turn up in all political discussions on Netnews, it is a common rhetorical maneuver," indicating that incivility is not just common but expected in most internet posts. In spite of the attacks, he claims "substantive arguments were advanced . . . the tone of the debate actually moderated somewhat even as the issues

became somewhat clearer, perhaps suggesting a motivating force in the general culture . . . that encourages participants in open debate to seek completeness and some degree of reasonableness . . .” (373) One can then conclude that in a well-approved post in a community, incivility is not an issue in analysis, as there is substance to the post to have such approval and discussion; the community has a sort of sub-conscious aim to at least appear rational. In addition, as modern forums are usually moderated to prevent severe disregard for reason, incivility will not pervade and detract from the successful discussions.

The internet posts examined in this text are selected from a variety of forums on differing topics - the goal is to analyze forums in general, and not be slanted by specific styles to a unique one. In addition, the sheer quantity of possible posts mean that a chosen few that best exemplify generic forum genre have been isolated for analysis. In addition, statistics from various forum’s usage data were retrieved to give an idea of the forum’s age and size.

Audience of internet forums

An important consideration of a genre is the audience at which the rhetoric is aimed towards, as this is a determining factor in a given genre’s purpose. Internet forums as a whole cover too general a topics and thus the audience is no specific group. Forums can range from discussing entertainment and media, like Digital Spy or Rotten Tomatoes, to crime, with sites like Web Sleuths, or politics. In several cases, like with larger forums Reddit and Something Awful, there is no set topic at all, and the object of discussion and discourse varies from thread to thread and subforum to subforum. What is unique about online forums in terms of audience is the scale of the audience and participating members – while other methods of communication may have large audiences (televised broadcasts, magazines, or published novels), the mass scale of an internet audience combined with the ability for new voices to rapidly join dynamically and

mesh with the existing rhetoric of a thread separates internet forums from previous forms of rhetoric.

Seen below is a table quantifying the size of some larger internet forums. While in many cases their size is due to the age of the forum (dating back over a decade in some cases), the amount of registered users and sheer quantity of threads and replies gives an idea of the scale being discussed here.

Lifetime usage statistics of popular internet forums

Forum name	Year formed	# of registered users	# of threads	# of posts
Something Awful	1999	194,629	2,628,812*	63,237,156*
Reddit	2005	At least 3,333,750**	73,150,000***	725,850,000***
Digital Spy	1999	Not available	Not available	73,300,000
NeoGAF	1999	168,336	732,730	98,265,587
Rotten Tomatoes	1998	Not available	10,977	514,372
IGN Boards	1996	1,261,907	5,736,010	115,627,749
Newgrounds	1995	Not available	1,136,945	21,268,420
Offtopic	2000	89,040	287,610	10,105,776

Data obtained April 14 2016 from the respective sites

*Not counting archived threads and posts

**Number of unique logged in users by IP on April 13 2016. Reddit does not publicly display total number of registered users.

***Number corresponds to statistics reported at the end of 2015

With this data, and the nature of internet forums, three separate ideas concerning the audience and availability of forum threads can be discerned:

1. Internet forums have an audience comparable in size with popular publications. This shows a distinct difference from what previous analysis has concluded with internet posts, that it is too unviewed or too similar to the structure of antecedent genres (letters, journals) to be a separate classification.
2. The availability of rhetoric across the internet is greater than any antecedent genre.

Previous studies have placed internet use at low percentages, but the current availability of the internet renders most data online more easily accessible than printed works.

3. Participation in internet forums is in many cases available to any registered user, a process that is usually free and fast (involving little more than providing an e-mail address). The barriers on contribution to discourse are less restrictive than those for previous public-sphere publications (for example, providing a voice in a published magazine or novel normally requires validation through a publisher and editor).

The evidence displays a clear uniqueness in audience for internet forums that is not covered by previously defined genres. Even across other internet rhetoric, like blogs or social media, the internet forum is different from the former in the participation of many voices in one single discussion (as opposed to a blog, where voices contributing to the same overarching discourse are separate), and the latter in pseudo-anonymity as well as depth and style of the text.

Style of forum debate and discussion

The strategies and rhetorical devices employed by forum participants should display a typified similarity across posts if there is a genre for the text. While the generality of internet forums makes it difficult to analyze specifics, as well as the sheer scale in number of voices and incivility present in some cases, there are key strategies that can be found among the more persuasive, effective comments. One can see this with a given specific example (see Appendix A). Amid several posts, these users were carrying on one argument among many in a controversial thread. One specific strategy for argument sticks out as it appears often throughout the entire thread – when debating a user’s point, a leading question is usually posed to get them to either qualify or concede part or all of their position. The tone of this can vary from genuine curiosity for explanation or valid retort (as seen by Liamc’s second post “Surely . . . can be considered?”), to using the question as leverage against one’s position (as seen in SomTervo’s post “Have you used a VR device?”). This strategy can be seen as “safe” to use – asking a

question is not an inherently wrong action, although if the question is significantly loaded it may anger the opposition, but still serves to scrutinize a position or draw out flaws in a stance.

This tactic can be seen on other forums as well, as seen in this response to a discussion of the ending to the movie Inception:

<zakign> "I think this is "ambiguous" because there is debate about three key things: 1. Most important, what was Cobb's totem and how did it react at the end? 2. The rules of the world and whether they make sense. 3. The film's themes and symbolism. Since you say the ending is so clear, want to spell it out for us? ;)"

(Steve_Zissou)

Here, once again, the poster uses questions to debate another position without giving an explicit counterclaim – this prevents attacks on their position while placing the other side into a forced defense. It is “safe” rhetoric, designed to prevent scrutiny while still giving an opinion.

One might argue that this is merely a specific rhetorical strategy, used across multiple instances but not indicative of a generic post – after all, one could easily find many popular discussions that do not share this tactic. However, this tactic is an explicit case of a more general trend of successful internet forum posts. As I have mentioned the “safeness” of the use of questions to debate, further analysis of posts shows that this goes even further to the language used, even in outright rebuttals. The previous examples have evidence of this: Liamc uses language like “could” instead of “will,” as well as “surely” and “I’m not sure” to give uncertainty. This language qualifies his position to seem more moderate, tolerant to the opposing viewpoint, despite taking a stance against it. In a similar vein, zakign uses “I think”

and an emoticon to dispel the more confrontational implications of his final question, with the same strategy to appear as the rational, considering voice.

To further demonstrate, the text will analyze another discussion that exemplifies these tactics (see Appendix B). In a large thread of a large forum, this was the top conversation, and it is clear all voices are attempting to sound like the voice of reason, despite their views conflicting or agreeing with whom they are replying to. Despite directly opposing someone's argument, youlleatitandlikeit uses "almost" and a parenthetical to qualify his argument, conceding parts of his point to appear more moderate despite having the evidence to solidly confront the previous statement. DjangoSpider uses "I think," "it's very possible," and other uncertain language to accomplish the same goal. The final post demonstrates how dynamic altering of posts effect discussion, as ocelotalot is able to qualify his statement after completely opposing the previous poster.

Qualification to soften positions and diffuse backlash before it arises appears common across any successful, well-liked post in large-scale forums. This can be seen to aid discussion even on divisive topics, as displayed in Appendix C. Once again, there is a large amount of qualification to MrHoot's post. Rather than directly oppose his opponent's argument with his own stance, he explains his stance while giving small concessions to possible critiques and flaws, in order to deflect criticism of his position. His statements "There is certainly . . ." and all but the ending to his edit serve as antitheses to his claim, so that he appears as one who has taken into account all viewpoints. In a controversial debate, appearing as the rational moderate makes his stances, regardless of their actual content, seem more agreeable.

Defining the genre

At this point, while the audience and rhetorical strategy of internet posts has been established, the question if internet forum posts constitute their own genre remains in question. From what genre entails, it is a working synthesis of rhetorical strategies to improve the efficacy of communication. There are three main facets of public internet forum posts that have been shown:

1. Internet forum posts are a widely used and dynamic sphere of communication.
2. Effective debating tactics rely on safe scrutiny and deflecting criticism.
3. Well-received posts make an attempt to appear moderate and well-considered.

One can see that there is a synthesis of these strategies: Posts on an internet forum make a subtle attempt at mass appeal, as they are accessible to an incredibly large audience. An extreme position is less likely to garner appreciation and support from a forum's participants at large, so successful posters portray their positions as less radical, more qualified and careful in word choice to draw attention and approval. This accomplishes the post's goal of being noticed and accepted among a massive pool of voices.

The question arises as to how the forum posts differentiates itself from antecedents. The simple answer is provided by the nature of the post, and how it is unmatched among older genres: Older genres are not as dynamic, multivocal, or widely distributed in the same way that a digital writings are, and this affects the rhetoric used, especially in consideration of the larger audience.

This characterization of the genre of forum posts matches Miller's criteria for a successful genre claim. Successful forum posts follow similar style to achieve a similar goal: Appeal to the audience at large. The language of forum posts is difficult to typify due to the

different topics of discussion but follow the same purpose of attempting to qualify and moderate ideas. Finally, these strategies promote the efficacy of the rhetoric by bridging the differences the reader may have, seeking approval through a show of concession and rationality. If one accepts the purpose of the post is mass appeal, the strategies the most responded and observed posts use work to accomplish this goal.

The nature of writing on the internet is inherently shaped by the technology – its enormous scale and capability renders it far different than previous advances in communication, like the telephone. This effect extends as far as the shape new genres from antecedents: The forum post may extend from the letter's style, but can no longer be characterized the same way. Spooner & Yancey, while reaching the conclusion in 1996 that the internet brought no new current genres, did state that e-mail (and by extension, internet writing as a whole) is “pre-genre,” (267) rhetoric that has not yet evolved to the point of separating itself from its antecedent. In observation of the internet decades later, one can see the progress of internet communication, and how it has developed into a realm separate from those before.

Appendix A

<Liamc723> "'VR is not a gimmick being pushed down consumers' throats by any particular company's intent to capitalize on success they've seen elsewhere. VR, rather, is firmly a part of the future of technology in every sense (and for every sense...), and should any of the current lineup of VR devices not take off in widespread adoption it won't change the course the technology is headed in. Facebook, Sony, Valve, Apple, Google, Samsung, and just about every other notable tech company has placed VR firmly in its sights, in some cases to a staggering degree that we've only seen the tip of publicly, and beyond the giants we have countless hardware and software startups going all-in on VR to push its boundaries. VR is not the only future, but it is a definite aspect of our future.' An opinion I don't share. The jury is still very much out. Motion gaming was seen as the big future with the Wii, Move and Kinect five or so years ago, and now it's dead. I'd be careful saying it's definitely in our future, because this could just be another failure in the peripheral space."

<anexanhume> "Motion gaming isn't dead. Its novelty has worn off, but most importantly, it needs more technology maturation. Would you say VR is dead because the Virtual Boy failed?"

<Liamc723> "Of course not, technology has come along an astronomical amount since the 1990's so I don't think the Virtual Boy can even be compared to the current Rift/Vive/PS VR line-up. I think the PS VR has the best chance of making it big due to its price, but all these devices have a lot to prove, especially with the price of the Rift and the Vive. I'm watching Giant Bomb's live stream of the Oculus Rift's launch games and nothing so far seems to really be enhanced by a big degree by VR. But gaming is the only thing that is using it at the moment. Surely it needs to do well in this space, and get a lot of devices in people's houses before non-gaming applications can be considered? This is the proving ground for VR, and if it doesn't succeed here then I'm not sure if I can see it moving into different spaces."

<SomTervo> "Have you used a VR device? I'm betting this is another instance of the classic situation I've seen countless times in the last year: - somebody says VR will fail/is a gimmick/is flawed, or as you say "X game isn't enhanced by it" - person is asked if they have tried it - person admits they haven't actually tried it - blowing a massive depressurisation hole in the happy bubble of their argument, because there's no way you can understand how [expletive] infeasibly powerful VR can be until you've tried a few games on it" (EviLore)

Appendix B

<Birdman10687> "Yep. This is all part of the system. I mean even a cursory examination of our political system makes it pretty obvious how effective of a control mechanism it is. And it makes it obvious why money is able to buy elections."

<youlleatitandlikeit> "Really? If this election process shows us anything, it's almost the complete opposite: Trump continues to lead the Republican primary, despite every effort by the party operatives to stop him. Jeb Bush raised an unholy amount of money, and it did nothing for him. Despite having \$150+ million at his disposal, he finished dead last in nearly every race. Although behind, Sanders is managing to hold on to a race where where he's raised around half of the funds of his opponent. Trump is spending very, very little money on his campaign compared to all of his competitors. Both sides of the party are more energized about non-established "outsider" candidates than they are the assumed favorites. The Republican Party would love it if Kasich was winning (sure, they'd prefer a social conservative like Cruz, but they're terrified of nominee Trump). The fact that a Republican party favorite isn't winning shows that sometimes, the political system is very much outside of anyone's control."

<DjangoSpider> "I think this election is definitely proving to those people who've been in control for a while (left, right and center) that the power they thought they'd have for years (if they just voted how "the party" was aligned) can dissipate if they really, truly don't look out for the people. The fact that 2 candidates (Trump, Bernie) on the opposite side of their political parties are gaining this much traction, and getting this much love and attention is pointing out that an actual, real change is imminent. I think it's very possible that if the Repubs stop Trump from being the candidate, he'll run Independent. And if Bernie somehow wins out the rest of the primaries and miraculously gets close to a nom, and the Dems block him, too? I think Bernie would consider it, too. Can you imagine a ballot with Clinton/Trump/Kasich/Sanders?"

<ocelotalot> "That would be disaster for everyone as it almost assuredly would go to the house of Representatives to select the president. Edit: well probably good for Kasich." (DrWeeGee)

Appendix C

<aeolist> "the attackers in paris were european citizens committing crimes on their home soil. i'd be willing to bet the same is true here. europe has problems with isolated and marginalized communities that lead to extremism. this isn't syrian fighters invading you, this is your own people doing this."

<MrHoot> "Let's be honest here, this isn't just european citizens who suddenly decided to turn on their countrymen. The [sic] There are definitively problems within communities, from first or second wave immigration, and influenced by a lot of outside propaganda and recent immigration waves. There is a culture clash. Most of the time largely ignored but if you're from or around these communities you can easily acknowledge rampant anti-semitism, fear of apostasy and a reductionist view of women and even other foreigners. Hell a hilarious news in Geneva (a city who's very open to immigration in general, due to it's proximity with France) where a muslim community demanded that the girls from the school nearby do their exercise inside during the summer because they considered their gym wear "indecent" and an affront to their religion. There is certainly a part of right wing extremism that also us in the western part of switzerland are trying to fight as a whole (and we recently

repelled some very right wing referendum). But not to acknowledge that there are distinct problems and incompatibilities with a subset of Islamism, which is increasing due to the recent events, is disingenous. And America doesn't have to deal with that mostly because it can pick and choose it's refugees for once. And that the countries it has in it's neighbourhood share largely the same cultural heritage. EDIT: I do understand your point that "It's a problem that started on your own soil, not necessarily coming from abroad". And i'm not advocating for the cutting altogether of immigration. Switzerland already has stricter border control and even more immigration laws anyway. But I don't think that the problem stems entirely from our own soils, or how we treat subsets of migrants who are established here. There are outside influences unrelated to Europe's policies" (mehrmantrout)

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