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‘You’ll find lots of help here’ unpacking the function of an online Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) forum

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ABSTRACT

The paper reports on the analysis of online postings from a Rheumatoid Arthritis asynchronous forum. Despite the rapid increase of internet users, the role of health related online communities is still underexplored. In this paper we draw on sociolinguistics and medical sociology research in order to problematize the online community notion and to unpack the functions of one forum through the analysis of data from newly diagnosed users. The analysis of the threads shows that the users orient to a set of roles which include both task and rapport oriented functions. We close the paper by showing how the members contribute to the construction of a collective identity. Finally we return to the theoretical considerations raised in our paper and identify areas for further research.

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1. Introduction

The growing number of World Wide Web (www) users has brought radical changes in the way people communicate within and across spatial-temporal and linguistic borders as well as in the way networks are formed and sustained. As an increasing number of people use the internet frequently (over 80% in the UK which is our focus here according to [EuroStat, Seybert, 2012](#)), this affects the ways in which social spaces become reconfigured and the way in which information is shared and disseminated. Terms such as ‘netizens’ infiltrate the academic jargon and reflect the changing dynamics of cyberspace ([Barton and Lee, 2013](#)) while at the same time virtual communities become more prominent in most domains (and health care is a case in point). At the same time, research on the role and function of online communities for health matters and according to the perceptions of their members forms, still relatively small part of the sociolinguistic and medical sociological literature. This is an area the paper seeks to contribute to.

In an influential work Rheingold sees virtual communities “as social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” ([Rheingold, 1993:nd](#)). More recently, Herring provided a useful summary of relevant literature and identified six sets of relevant criteria. These include the following:

- 1) active, self-sustained participation; a core of regular participants; 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values; 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity; 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution; 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups; 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals ([2004:355](#))

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We find these criteria useful in allowing to operationalize the ‘virtual community’ concept.

The ‘community’ sits at the interface of theoretical and analytical decisions that researchers need to make in order to study social phenomena in context. While positivist approaches see the ‘community’ as a fairly rigid structure (which presupposes that individuals belong to different macro categories—such as age, gender, ethnicity among others), constructionist approaches understand it as a construct emerging and negotiated between members who claim/project membership. Accordingly, categories such as the ones mentioned above, are approached as dynamic, complex and situated, emergent in interaction. This approach avoids creating a rigid frame for online communities and is well tuned in with current, ethnographically informed, studies of the web. The ontological and epistemological theses underpinning positivism and constructionism have been debated in philosophy of science (e.g. Alvesson and Sköldböck, 2009). The pre-existence of structure is also debated in the critical realist paradigm (Bhaskar, 2009) which distinguishes between structure and agency, seen as distinct phenomena. Although current sociolinguistic and sociological research has criticised a top down understanding of social identity and structure, critical realism aims to usefully discuss the relationship between the situated *here and now* of interaction as well as the *before and beyond*. The critical realism paradigm is still not widely debated in our fields. However, recent research (e.g. Sealey, 2007; Nancarrow and Borthwick, 2005) suggests that “a realist perspective can help us understand the manner in which (non discursive) social structures are reproduced and transformed through various forms of ideology and discourse” (Joseph and Roberts, 2004:6).

Whether one decides to adopt this paradigm or not, it is certainly useful to take stock of the theoretical underpinning of notions such as fluidity and situatedness, both typically drawn upon in relation to concepts such as ‘community’ and its ‘identity’. It is not uncommon for sociolinguistic/logical research to aim to describe how social phenomena take place in different contexts. As critics have suggested however, when accounts remain solely descriptive this does not offer an adequate explanation of the phenomena or the implications they have in daily realities (see also Sealey, 2007).

In this paper we take a moderately social constructionism perspective and we are concerned with the role of one community as emerging from the analysis of the users’ postings. We draw on ongoing research with a patient association aiming to explore the perceived function of an online Rheumatoid Arthritis (RA) forum. We report here on our findings on the perceived roles that are claimed or projected onto this formation and the ways in which the community is constructed in the user’s postings. We pay special attention to self identified ‘new’ members and the roles they project on the ‘community’. We start by discussing how the community term is used in our two fields and we then move to illustrating how one community is defined by its members, and we pay special attention to the task- and rapport-orientated functions.

2. Community, communities and communities of practice

The community term is typically used to index a set of people grouped together on the grounds of (a) common characteristic/s. In sociolinguistic literature this is often related to a language variety the members of a community are understood to have in common or language used in a particular way, visible to its members, that distinguishes one community from another. The boundaries of the ‘community’ in relation to other broad or narrow assemblages depend on the researchers’ standpoints. The term has been used to denote large categories (e.g. women) as well as much narrower ones (e.g. the users of one forum) and variation is noted in relation to researchers’ understandings of the *scale* or *homogeneity* of the assemblages under study. Both issues have been debated in the literature; as an example the ‘speech community’ notion, used by researchers primarily concerned with linguistic phenomena, attracted criticism over the years regarding the relationship between individual agency and the group as well as the boundaries between speech communities.

Similar issues are raised in sociological literature. The widely accepted symbolic interactionist approach sees a community as what people define it to be. This social constructionist perspective emphasises that the conceptions of community are embedded in and emerge out of interaction in communication networks and information flows that serve to structure and restructure the definition of community (Hunter and Riger, 1986). In the case of health related networks, they include informal interactions between family and friends, in addition to formal communications with health professionals and organisations such as our partner, an Arthritis charity. In contrast to an early perspective where local communities were mutually exclusive and exhaustive, like a patchwork quilt, the social constructionist perspective allows for multiple communities to co-exist and to have different functions for an individual.

Furthermore, the notion of a “hierarchy of symbolic communities” (Hunter, 1974) can be helpful in determining how people may symbolically define varying levels of community depending on the context, the time and place, the activities, the interactions, and the interests that engage them. This less rigid understanding of the ‘community’ is reflected in seminal work in the socio/linguistic field too. As an illustration Gumperz and Levinson (1996:11) refer to “networks of interacting individuals” in an attempt to capture the dynamic relationship between the individual and group membership. And in the 90s Swales also uses the term discourse communities to refer to “sociorhetorical networks that form in order to work towards a set of common goals” (1990:9). In Swales’ work one important characteristic that distinguishes the discourse community from the speech community is that: unlike speech communities “a discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualification....an archetypal discourse community tends to be a Specific Interest Group” (1990:24).

Swales understanding of the community leads nicely to another construct that has been gaining grounds in sociolinguistic/logical research; that of the Community of Practice (CoffP). Wenger (1998) identifies three dimensions of a CoffP namely:

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