

INTERGROUP COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES:
AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICANWX.COM

by

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Abstract

Social Identity Theory has long held that group affiliation plays a predominant role in how we interact with others and the types of communication strategies that we deploy. Traditional scholarship on Computer Mediated Communication maintains an excessively interpersonal focus, detracting from its ability to theorize intergroup communication and conflict. This research study, conducted at the Internet bulletin board Americanwx.com, investigates the role that group identity plays in the everyday discourse of online message boards. In an ethnographic study spanning the course of 8 months and thousands of exchanges, research found that the structure of message boards themselves is implicated in the formation and maintenance of groups, and that once formed, groups tend to act in a manner that is consistent with Social Identity Theory.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Natalie Pennington. All of this would not have happened without you. I also could not have accomplished anything without the support of my family, Justin and Sarah Green, my fellow graduate students at Kansas State, Karen and Cindy, and members of the debate team.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

At first glance, Americanwx.com (American Weather) is a rather unremarkable website. The layout itself is bland—a drab blue color punctuated by a variety of links and very little of the multimedia features which characterize the World Wide Web of 2011. Because American Weather is a forum for discussing the weather, most readers of this study will never visit it. Academic researchers and those interested in Internet marketing will almost certainly ignore American Weather and many other boards like it, preferring to study more flashy (and lucrative) social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. Despite this, every single month there are over 100,000 posts on American Weather, where thousands of people are meeting, learning about the weather, and developing intense social bonds *and* rivalries. The members of the website see it as an important component of their lives, using it as a platform for creating and maintaining friendships and networking as professionals, but also as an avenue for the expression of group bias and petty competition.

I became a member of this community over a half decade ago, attracted to the idea of learning more about the weather, a topic which had always fascinated me. As I became more socially involved in the community I saw that group rivalries were a mainstay of posting behavior. Every region seemed to be in competition with another for snow, thunderstorms, drought-ending rains, and mild temperatures. Groups in the off topic section battled for control of the posting agenda, and every member seemed to be a member of a “crew”. After browsing numerous threads about the website’s yearly conferences, what I found most interesting was the way in which people who had met and interacted with one another and maintained close personal ties could exhibit opposite behavior towards one another when they viewed that person as being

a member of a rival group. As my curiosity about the conversational dynamic present at American Weather intensified, so did my motivation to one day study the groups at the forum as a long time participant and observer of the board dynamic.

The timing for such a study is fortuitous, since it has emerged at a time when researchers of computer mediated communication (CMC) are questioning assumptions about whether viewing interactions on the Internet via an interpersonal lens is sufficient to understand the way that communication functions in the digital environment (Utz, 2003; Postmes and Baym, 2005). In their viewpoint, the most problematic aspect of how communication scholars study CMC is in assuming that communication on the Internet can best be explained by interpersonal theories of communication, despite the fact that empirical and interpretive evidence demonstrates that interpersonal relationships are not the basis for group communication (Utz, 2000). Therefore, in order to fully examine the ways in which communities operate in a virtual setting, it is necessary to conceive of CMC not only along interpersonal lines, but also along intergroup lines. Much like in the offline world, virtual communities interact with one another at an intergroup level, and within communities themselves there are smaller subgroups that interact as groups rather than as collections of individuals. In short, group identification shapes interaction on the Internet and these phenomena cannot be reduced to individual psychology (Turner and Reynolds, 2003). Support for this explanation of why people drift towards groups can be found in the social identity literature. People tend to classify themselves into social categories as a way of ordering an uncertain world. Identifying with a group gives the individual a systematic means for defining themselves and others within a given social environment (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). This is especially true when discussing communication in virtual environments, where personal identity is less salient and anonymity can serve to enhance social identification with a group.

Because of the lack of face to face communication and the uncertainty of online environments, people have significantly less cues to work with and less ability to discern differences between themselves and others—both of which serve to tip the scales away from atomized individual behaviors and towards group behavior (Utz, 2000). Is there more to the story of Internet communication than what interpersonal theories of communication can tell us? The answer told by American Weather is a resounding “yes”. Interpersonal communications, while relevant to many situations of online interaction, still break down in the face of the pressure created by the uncertainties of the online environment and the structure of forums such as American Weather itself. As shown in this project, social identity is just as important as individual identity, and on American Weather, which group you belong to is just as salient to how others communicate with you as any other personal attribute.

Given the reality of group communication in virtual communities such as American Weather, it is prudent to apply group communication theories to online environments. Social Identity Theory (SIT) provides a basis for describing online communication. SIT is a social-psychological theory of group behavior that was conceptualized decades ago as a way to describe political and social ethnicisms such as the tensions between French Canadians with the rest of Canada and the plight of African Americans, it is now being used in a variety of contexts to describe group behavior (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Although originally conceived of as a theory for offline encounters, SIT is now being applied to online contexts ranging from online videogames (Utz, 2003) to virtual debates between Israelis and Palestinians (Ellis & Maoz, 2007) and online communication by Black Americans (Hughey, 2008).

Besides the benefits of looking at virtual communities through a group behavior lens, the approach taken to group communication by SIT scholarship naturally lends itself better to

Internet communication than to offline communication. First, SIT sees group affiliation as being based upon an individual's *perception* of affiliation. There are no litmus tests for group membership. Quite simply there are no actions, no encounters, and no shared ideas that must be had before one can be considered a group member. Whereas this definition of groups sometimes is met with criticism in offline environments due to SIT's de-emphasizing of material acts, it is perfectly suited to virtual communities where face to face interaction is not seen as a prerequisite for relationships (Ashforth and Mael 1989; Utz, 2000). Secondly, the nature of online bulletin boards is such that they are organized around a specific topic of interest, whether that be the stock market, sports, gardening, politics, religion etc. Because of the variety of topics and lack of a need for geographical proximity, it is much easier for people to conceive of themselves as members of a group, since they are only a few mouse clicks away from finding themselves a group built around interests that are salient to them. This is in contrast to offline communities, which require both shared interests and geographical proximity to function.

Social Identity Theory provides a robust framework for categorizing and explaining the communicative behaviors of groups in a virtual community. The cardinal assumption of SIT is that when there are two or more groups present they will define and evaluate themselves in comparison to the other group(s). In SIT there are three categories of actions that groups and individuals acting as group members take in order to define themselves and navigate their way through the online social milieu. The first set of actions is called *individual mobility*.

Individuals can always leave to join up with another competing group, providing a way for people to freely identify or un-identify with a given group. This has the potential to happen quickly in online settings, where people face few barriers to changing their affiliations. If someone does not like something the group is doing, they can identify with a competing group

either within that community or they can join another community built around the same salient issues (Tajfel and Turner, 1986).

The second set of actions that can be taken within a group are actions called *social creativity*. Group members seek to enhance the positive distinctiveness of their group by altering and redefining the elements vis a vis other competing groups. Social creativity allows a group to change the dimensions of comparison, attribute new values to the group, and even change the out group to which the in group is compared, allowing groups to morph depending upon what it needs to maintain a positive comparison versus other groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Social creativity is ubiquitous in virtual communities. For example, fans on a sports board may change the metric by which teams are compared by choosing to emphasize or deemphasize a certain statistic. On a politically-oriented bulletin board backers of a politician will frequently change the “talking points” that they use to support their candidate or reject another, especially as their favored side transitions into or out of power.

The third and final strategy taken by members of groups is labeled *social competition*. Social competition is when groups decide to shift from comparison with other groups to outright competition with them in a struggle for tangible assets like resources and less tangible goods such as online social capital (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). In virtual environments this manifests itself in a variety of processes, from competition over moderator elections to competition between online communities for a finite pool of posters and intellectual talent. In fact, SIT indicates that in online communities—and face to face communities for that matter—the general population will likely fracture into smaller groups who will compete with one another to some degree. The mere existence of groups ensures intergroup conflict (Ashforth and Mael, 1986).

Americanwx (American Weather) is an online forum whose primary purpose is for weather hobbyists and experts to gather and talk about weather in the United States. Established in 2010, it is the successor to the now-defunct weatherboard called Easternuswx, which itself was a successor to a previous board hosted at wright-weather.com. Although the URL of the community has changed multiple times, there is a core of several hundred individuals who have persisted as the websites have changed, leading to a sense of continuity in the community that one would not expect given the fragile histories of each of the individual boards that the community has populated. Users of American Weather range from teenage weather hobbyists to meteorologists and forecasters working in both the public and private sector. As of February 2011 American Weather has over 5,000 members and 500,000 posts (Board Statistics, 2011). Although discussion of weather phenomenon is the main reason why the forum exists, there are sub forums at the website dedicated to a variety of “off topic” discussions, including sports, politics, and hobbies such as photography. This site represents a primary example of both the structure and prominence that is afforded to online communities, and allows for the following research questions regarding intergroup communication in online communities:

RQ1: How does the structure of the American Weather forum affect intergroup communication on the site?

It is important to answer this particular question because in order to develop an account of the importance of intergroup communication in virtual communities, the first step will be to measure how it occurs, and how the inherent structure of having an online community with sub-forums lends itself to intergroup communication. My second and final research question involves SIT’s three strategies of intergroup activities described above:

RQ2: What roles do individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition play in communication patterns of members of the American Weather forum?

Consistent with Utz's (2003) call for more research that attempts to replicate the findings of SIT theory in virtual communities beyond the gaming communities that she studied, I apply these three sub theories of SIT to American Weather. This is valuable because it provides another test of SIT (a theory borne out of offline sociology) and its applicability to malleable and shifting virtual communities, and as shown, American Weather is a prime example of a thriving online forum. It also serves as an example and invitation to other scholars to focus on the role that the structural elements of an online community create groups and ferment conflict. Taken as a whole, these research questions work together to map out the influence of social identity on group communication and the strategies undertaken by groups as they compare to and compete with one another in the Internet's ever-growing virtual communities. Not only that, but this study will gather more evidence on the interaction between CMC and intergroup theories of communication by providing another detailed case study on the presence of these phenomena in a large virtual community, providing yet another clue to understanding their importance.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

There are a staggering number of people logging onto the Internet. A recent estimate of the number of worldwide Internet users is approximately 1.8 billion people, which is roughly 26% of the human population (Miniwatts, 2010) is logging on, a number that continues to increase every day. With the fastest growing areas of users happening to coincide with countries with large and still largely offline populations such as China and India, the worldwide trend towards increased Internet usage will only continue to accelerate. Despite the often-mentioned “digital divide” and lack of computer access (and literacy) by many, by 2030 almost 4 billion people will have Internet access (AMD, 2010). As previous technological advances have repeatedly demonstrated, innovation in technology often spurs the proliferation of new and divergent forms of communication.

One such example of a new form of communication that has developed as the Internet has matured and gained more users is the online message board. Online message boards are sometimes referred to as “forums” or “bulletin boards”, but all have the same essential structure, allowing multiple users to discuss ideas in a threaded format (VBulletin FAQ, 2011). Initially, online message boards began as a way for scientists and early adopters of personal computers to remotely discuss topics in only a raw text format (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003; Wood & Smith, 2001). Today, the format of these boards have now become full of media to stimulate the senses, advertisements, and to the surprise of many of the early Internet skeptics, a remarkable amount of interesting and lengthy discourse amongst anonymous people on just about any topic. People not only visit online message boards for a hit and run as they move from page to page, they now remain on message boards, sometimes for hours at a time, forming

virtual identities, friendships, and all the other traditional elements of a community. A recent study conducted by Nielson, the company made famous for tracking television habits, concluded that the average American adult spends 142 minutes per day on the Internet (Hess, 2009). The numbers are even more staggering for youth in the 8-18 age range. The Kaiser Family Foundation conducted a longitudinal study of youth media habits, finding that youth are increasingly becoming Internet-dependent (Rideout, 2006). Moreover, the amount of time people spend online is increasing. A recent report found that Americans are now spending 13 hours a week online, a rise of 121% over the last five years (Ashwin, 2011). Furthermore, Internet advertising firm Admob found a six-fold increase between 2007 and 2009 in the amount of people accessing the Internet from mobile phones (Keating, 2009). People who access the Internet using these mobile devices are spending even more time online, an average of 19 hours per week (Ashwin, 2011). Cumulatively, these studies demonstrate that the Internet is playing an increasingly important role in the lives of many people throughout the globe.

Just as the 20th century's introduction of radio and television created interest by communications scholars in media studies, the 21st century's growth in Internet access has created a similar push to study computer-mediated communication in hopes of clarifying not only what similarities and differences it has with its counterpart, face-to-face communication, but whether the potential differences also create different effects as well. The next section focuses on describing the core assumptions of scholars who research computer mediated communication and a brief history of their research before moving into a discussion of the dominance of the interpersonal lens of CMC and its failure to fully capture the texture of online environments such as Internet forums.

Computer Mediated Communication

Wood and Smith (2001) define computer-mediated communication, or CMC, as the study of human behaviors maintained or altered by the exchange of information through machines. Central to the study of CMC is a basic assumption shared by most of its scholars: communication in computer-mediated contexts is different than other forms of communication. CMC has characteristics directly and derived from the use of computer technologies, and it demands specific attention because of the way in which it has the ability to modify human interaction without the need for physical presence (Wood & Smith, 2001). For instance, the development of Internet technologies has allowed people to collaborate simultaneously on documents across continents digitally without the need for clunky and immobile fax machines, fall in love without ever having to meet one another, debate politics on message boards with strangers from across the country, and maintain relationships without the need for physical presence or temporal immediacy. Although previous technologies may have made each of these things possible to some degree, no technology has made it easier to do all of these things within a short span of time on a single machine. Even more important is the way in which the Internet is directly implicated in many of the social transformations that are currently taking place throughout society. As a result of the Internet, media convergence is occurring, social identities and boundaries are being reshaped, and geographical boundaries are being transcended (Markham & Baym, 2009).

Computer-mediated communication has existed for over five decades, dating to 1960's era Department of Defense computer projects, which eventually formed the Internet's predecessor, Arpanet. What started as a top-secret defense project quickly turned into a new way to communicate. Researchers found it convenient to send notes via the network they had created

between their computers, inaugurating email. By the 1970's Arpanet had blossomed into the Internet, and private citizens were logging in and exchanging rudimentary messages with one another (Jones, 1995). After the 1970's the growth of the Internet and increasing amounts of people using personal computers led to a steadily increasing amount of computer mediated communication. By the time the 1990's closed the world was considered to have entered the Internet age, where access in the developed countries was widespread and rapidly growing.

The massive increase in people using online forums to communicate with one another led to similarly prolific increase in scholarly interest. At first, many were skeptical of whether lasting bonds of community were even possible in an online environment. At first, many commentators were skeptical of whether relationships with sufficient intensity and texture to form the lasting bonds of community were even possible in an online environment. This first wave of CMC scholars understood CMC as being primarily task-oriented and impersonal—a new tool for exchanging data but not something that would revolutionize the way average people communicate (Utz, 2003). An exemplar of this skepticism can be found in the March 1997 issue of *Computer Mediated Communication Magazine*, in which Frank Weinrich wrote:

What I want to ask is this: How far can mediated contacts constitute community? I believe they cannot. You may get to know other people through CMC, the Net will provide the means to maintain contact and interconnections between people and organizations. But they won't constitute communities because CMC cannot substitute for the sensual experience of meeting one another face-to-face. Trust, cooperation, friendship and community are based on contacts in the sensual world. You communicate through networks but you don't live in them (online).

The crux of Weinrich and others' arguments about CMC relied upon the idea that such communication was always inherently alienating, and that without physical bonds it is impossible to imagine a community existing. These early articles on CMC all concluded that even if some bonds did form, online environments couldn't be considered communities by definition regardless of what functions those bonds served (Wilbur, 1994; Parks and Floyd, 1996; Foster, 1997; Calhoun, 1998).

Views such as Weinrich's may have held sway during that period, but as the 1990's progressed Internet usage was picking up steam and computer technologies were rapidly developing, allowing for message boards and Internet sites in general to rapidly change the amount and diversity of content provided, leading to even more rapid growth across the medium. In 1995 there were 16 million Internet users. By the year 2000 there were over 300 million users. In the span of 5 years Internet traffic had increased by over 1900% (Miniwatts, 2008). As bandwidth increased, richer media and customizable options replaced the simple text-only bulletin boards. The age of message boards, social networking, and Web 2.0 had dawned, and the face-to-face contact that Weinrich had so adamantly defended as the basis of community had begun to seem increasingly less important. In the mean time, more sophisticated studies and the maturation of online environments led researchers to become more convinced that communities, or something akin to them, were being formed all over the net as people got used to talking to each other on a prolonged and systematic basis. One crucial finding that helped explain why earlier studies had failed to detect the formation of relationships via CMC was that online relationships tend to take longer than face to face to coalesce, due to a lack of peripheral source cues (Wood and Smith, 2001). Studies conducted in the early 90's that had seemed to prove that CMC was ineffective at developing interpersonal relationships had tremendous methodological

flaws in that most of them were experimental designs that never tested prolonged CMC correspondence, instead choosing to focus on fleeting, single encounter exchanges as the basis for making generalizing claims about the nature of online interactions (Wood and Smith, 2001).

Studies on user preferences for face-to-face or online contact were redone, and the skeptical results that seemed rock solid during the middle of the decade began to become cloudier. Researchers began to find that people's preference for face-to-face contact was waning as they spent more time in online environments and developed a familiarity with communication in an online context. Willson (2006) suggests a possible reason for why face to face had become less essential for the development of social bonds: The development of online technologies had taken correspondence which would normally be subject to physical constraints (think snail mail) and replaced it with the near-instant gratification of email, instant messages, and the experience of clicking the "view new posts" button on your favorite message board. In fact, Willson concludes that CMC might actually be in some ways more appealing to many people because communication that is largely oriented around reading a text is best at filtering out noise, actually allowing for relationships with more intensity than those that take place in real space (2006).

Despite the increased popularity of the Internet, and although many studies have been conducted on general Internet habits, scholars have given relatively little attention to the usage of message boards in particular. One reason offered as to why this is the case is structural: Many of the disciplinary journals, editorial boards, and reviewers lack(ed) expertise in Internet research, leading to a wide variety in the quality of scholarship and a scattershot approach to the research that has been published. Furthermore, many of the existing studies of digital environments were conducted by marketing research groups with an eye towards evaluating Internet activities in terms of their potential for advertisers and industry. Places on the Internet where a relatively low

amount of commercial activity occurs such as message boards are not given the same attention as other areas, mainly because on most message boards there is an expectation by users that the discussions in the forums themselves will be of a non-commercial nature. Messages that do take a commercial tone are oftentimes marked as “spam” and deleted (Pitta & Fowler, 2005). In a world where research funding and grant money is oftentimes linked to the commercial applicability, message boards are relatively low on the totem pole.

Even though they constitute a relative backwater in studies seeking to describe the marketing potential of websites, message boards are a sufficiently large enough phenomenon to be worth investigating, because the number of users and the persistence of their usage indicates that many people are using online forums as venues for more than just gathering information. The largest online message board, *Gaia Online*, now has almost 27 million users (Big Boards, 2010). If this message board were a country it would be the world’s 45th most populous out of 192 sovereign states (Nations Online, 2010). If *Gaia Online* were a state or commonwealth, it would have as many electoral votes as Texas and be a political juggernaut. But *Gaia Online* is only one of many large boards on the Internet. Over 50 online forums sport membership bases of over 1 million, with 106 having 500,000 or more members (Big Boards, 2010).

Beyond questions of the volume of traffic on these boards, there are other reasons for viewing the activities being conducted in these online spaces as having significant social relevance. Internet forums have moved past the formative stage where they were seen as insular spaces where discussion occurred without necessarily affecting anything beyond the boundaries of the forum itself. Many have argued that virtual environments such as those found on Internet message boards have become communities unto themselves, performing many of the same functions of offline communities (Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1995 Foster, 1997; Thomsen &

Straubhaar, 1998). On any given message board one is likely to find many of the same things one would find in an offline community—the chats with neighbors previously conducted in backyards, living rooms, and even on the phone are now being supplemented, if not replaced with online gatherings filled with anonymous “friends” from places both near and far.

In reaction to this burgeoning phenomenon, CMC scholars began developing the characteristics of what makes for a “virtual community.” In the book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Rheingold (2000) defined 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 relationship in cyberspace” (xx). It is important to note that the characteristics noted in offline communities, including physical proximity and a manner of acting that is consistently observable, are not a part of this definition. However, the Internet is relatively new terrain and many of the theories and explanations that we have of communication in a CMC context largely are derived from offline observation of face-to-face communication, creating many questions about the applicability of these theories to new online environments.

These questions of applicability are largely because of the tremendous structural differences between face to face and computer mediated communication that necessitate caution when applying theories built to describe the offline world. Rafaeli, in the inaugural volume of the *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* explained five structural differences, which distinguish on and offline communication. The first is packet switching, which refers to the way in which, unlike technologies such as the telephone, computer mediated communication is typically routed in smaller pieces through networks instead of relying upon a linear transmission channel. The second main difference lies in the multimedia capability of the Internet, which can

combine voice, video, text, and sounds into a rich tapestry that is qualitatively distinct from other technologies. Interactivity further distinguishes computer mediated from other forms of communication, in that unlike channels of mass communication there is a back and forth element. Fourth, elements of time are distorted in the online world. Users can choose to interact either in a synchronous or asynchronous manner. Finally, Rafaeli notes that the Internet is marked by a form of hypertextualism, which challenges the traditions of linearity found in conventional texts (Newhagen and Rafaeli, 1996). Although these five elements of CMC described above are not necessarily exclusive with some previous communications technologies, no other technology exhibits all of these characteristics, making CMC unique relative to other forms of communication. Beyond structural differences between online and offline communication, there are cultural norms about these forms of communication that further distinguishes them from one another. For instance, many forms of online communication are seen as being less formal than their offline counterparts, leading to the presumption that online forms of communication could be less serious or meaningful (Morley & Parker, 2009).

Not only is the structure of online communication and the cultural assumptions about it different from offline communication, but virtual communities pose their own challenges that make them difficult subjects with which to apply theories that were built for face-to-face communication. For instance, what was once accomplished via non-verbal communication in offline settings not only gets replaced with emoticons and colored fonts, but also is a function of different social and temporal norms. Anonymity further complicates communication in online environments as communicators seek ways to verify the intentions of others and seek contextual clues as to the meaning and purpose of communication. Furthermore, social capital, defined by Huysman and Wulf (2004) as the network of ties of goodwill, mutual support, shared language,

social norms, social trust, and sense of mutual obligation that people derive value from can be based on entirely different elements in a virtual community. In a virtual community social capital can be based upon things like a person's post count or "reputation points", unlike offline communities where factors like class and identity more visibly come into play. Discussions are structured by their presentation in "threads" instead of the looser way conversation can occur offline. Furthermore, unlike many offline communities, virtual communities built around message boards allow just about anyone with the appropriate technology the ability to access the community, meaning that there are virtually no boundaries by which participants can use to form a collective identity (Ward, 1999). Because of these differences there is a substantial need for scholarly work that seeks to clarify these distinctions and create or modify our existing theories to account for the unique realities of online communication.

The Interpersonal Perspective

As the study of CMC continued to develop, one crucial realization that was made was that online environments are not experienced in a uniform manner. The way that people relate to one another on an interpersonal level while online can be broken into three broad categories. The first category is the impersonal perspective. The impersonal user reacts to the lack of source cues present in online communication in a negative manner, leading them to feel a sense of alienation when relating to others in a virtual environment. Impersonal users' communication style is short and formal, and they tend to be more quiet and anonymous. These are the type of people who have significant difficulties forming meaningful relationships with others online (Wood and Smith, 2001).

The second category of user is the interpersonal user. The interpersonal user communicates easily in an online environment and is more than capable of forming relationships

with others whereby both sides self-disclose, allowing for enough information to leak out such that it makes up for any lack of source cues due to a lack of proximity. The interpersonal online communicator makes up a sizable chunk of people using message boards. Parks and Floyd (1996) found that over 30% of the people that they had surveyed had formed highly developed relationships with online acquaintances (Wood and Smith, 2001).

The final groups of Internet users are looking for hyperpersonal communication. These people are not only comfortable using the Internet, but prefer the social environs of the Internet to real places. The promise of greater control over non-verbal elements, having the choice to only interact with people predisposed to having a favorable impression of them, and having more time to carefully script their thoughts, are all reasons why hyperpersonal communicators would prefer online interaction (Wood and Smith, 2001). Hyperpersonals come in multiple flavors, ranging from those who prefer the anonymity and mediation so that they can act out identities that are not their own, and those who are by their nature shy, socially awkward, or introverted.

Intergroup Communication

Much like the offline world, interpersonal communication is not the only type of communication that occurs in virtual environments. In addition to approaches that categorize the way people communicate as individuals; it is equally necessary to analyze the ways in which individuals engage in group communication as a phenomenon in itself and not as a derivative of interpersonal communication. Unfortunately this is something that is rarely done in CMC scholarship, which has impoverished our understanding of online communication; missing the potential influence that intergroup communication has upon virtual communities (Utz, 2003).

Intergroup communication occurs when either party in a social interaction defines self or other in terms of group membership (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares, 2005). There are many

different ways in which scholars have theorized intergroup communication, but all theories of intergroup communication begin with a set of common assumptions: First, when people communicate, they rely upon a variety of cues which guide the tenor of that communication, one of the foremost being the groups that people are believed to belong to. In other words, in a situation where we have incomplete information about the individual we tend to use the groups that we think they belong to guide the way in which we communicate with them (Giles, Reid, and Harwood, 2010). A simplistic example of this would be a scenario in which we encounter someone with whom we have very little personal information except for the knowledge that they belong to the Republican Party and the National Rifle Association. Now take that same person but this time they are a Democrat and a member of an environmental organization such as the Sierra Club. Anyone familiar with American politics would probably communicate in a different way with this person based upon these group cues, showing the power that group identity has in shaping the way in which we approach communication between two or more individuals.

The second common assumption of intergroup communication is that people have a *personal identity* and a *social identity*. Personal identity is the perception of the person as a unique individual with particular traits and social identity is the perception of the person as a member of particular groups with unique attributes (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares, 2005). Whereas personal identity is salient for interpersonal communication, group identity is the basis for intergroup communication.

Before going too far in discussing groups, it is necessary to first define groups and other related terminology. According to Webster's online dictionary, a group is "a number of individuals assembled together or having some unifying relationship." Groups exist from the small scale to the large, from small circles of friends to large demographic groups like "men" or

“senior citizens.” Groups only exist to the extent that people find meaning in them. One way that this is accomplished is via a process of identifying ingroups and outgroups. Ingroups are the groups that we feel we are part of and outgroups are the opposite; groups we feel as if we do not belong to (Giles, Reid, and Harwood, 2010). Intergroup communication is largely shaped by reference to these ingroups and outgroups, as they are the basis for many of the interactions we have in low information settings involving strangers.

Originally much of the scholarly work associated with the study of groups qua groups originated not in communications departments (or their predecessors), but within the post World War II work of social psychologists that were interested in the extreme intergroup and de-individuating processes that resulted in the Holocaust (Giles, Reid, and Harwood, 2010). It was not until the 1970’s that communications scholars began to pick up theories of the group and apply them to communication phenomena, leading to a variety of communications theories that attempt to describe intergroup communication (Harwood, Giles, and Palomares, 2005). Modern intergroup communication theories are now applied to a variety of contexts, ranging from communication between different cultures, different gender and sexual identities, intergenerational communication, and even in inter-organizational communication. Despite the emergence of intergroup theories of communication and the increasing frequency with which they are being applied to offline encounters, there still exists a dearth of research into the intergroup aspects of online communication (Postmes and Baym, 2010).

Chapter 3 - Method

Research Design and Justification

No experimental design or model can artificially create community in a way that is analogous to the organic way that it emerges in online (or offline) environments, and many of the most crucial elements that create bonds in online settings are not capable of being captured by quantitative data. Because there are substantial differences between offline and online settings in the type of information available to make meaning out of the text, the study of communication in online environments requires an interpretive lens. Forms of content analysis that don't involve the participation of researchers themselves fail to richly describe online settings because they are incapable of capturing small context clues and demand the removal of any insight that cannot be duplicated by another observer, leading to an oversimplified account of virtual community. Other traditional research tools such as surveys fail to produce a rich and interactive account of the way that online interactions occur (Thomsen & Straubhaar, 1998).

Because of the deficiencies of experimental and quantitative approaches, the appropriate approach for studying the communication present in virtual communities is an approach utilizing virtual ethnography and content analysis to create a contextual understanding of the ways in which intergroup communication plays a role in defining online community. Virtual ethnography has over time had a variety of meanings depending upon the scholarly context. While ethnography has traditionally been a tool of anthropologists, in more recent times it has been a method used across many diverse fields, from sociology to economics, including the discipline of communication studies (Dominguez, Beaulieu, Estalella, Schnettler, & Read, 2007). For the purposes of my research, virtual ethnography involves techniques of participant

observation coupled with a reflexive approach that recognizes that meaning and social bonds in a community are constantly negotiated by its participants.

Defending ethnographic approaches against all potential criticisms is beyond the scope of this work, but it is important to note that many of the traditional criticisms and limitations of ethnography are eliminated or reduced when applied to virtual ethnography. Besides the obvious cost and time benefits of conducting online research instead of offline research, O'Connor and Madge (2003) detailed many other benefits in a discussion of the methodological benefits of online interviewing. First, one of the issues that frequently arises during ethnographic research is the perception of a hierarchy between the researcher and the researched, based either upon demographic markers such as race, gender, class, or education. Rather than exacerbating the issue, online ethnography actually promotes a less hierarchical flow of information since many of the social cues contributing to the sense of hierarchy are removed from the picture. Second, online ethnography allows for all parties to be frank and to the point with one another, since they are less likely to feel the same degree of awkwardness and embarrassment that could occur in face to face encounters. Furthermore, the a synchronicity and lack of a need for physical proximity present in online discussions allows for more flexibility in interaction between the researcher and research subjects, reducing some of the immaterial costs associated with offline research.

In order to best utilize the strengths of virtual ethnography, I have chosen a virtual community, hosted at Americanwx.com, which I have been a long-standing member of. I have been involved as a participant in this virtual community for over five years, and am member number 22 out of over 5000 on the forum. Far from being a source of significant bias, my lengthy stay in the community means that I met the standard of “prolonged engagement” that

Lincoln and Guba (1985) set out as being essential for ethnographic inquiry. My time spent in the virtual community of American Weather has enabled me to learn the “rhetorical codes”, which are the meanings and constructed realities that have been embedded into the communication and actions of members. This long-term exposure gave me the benefit of understanding the context and history behind many discussions, which is something that an outside researcher would have to spend a considerable amount of time learning in order to minimize the risk of misinterpreting an exchange. Not attending to the history and context would be devastating to the validity of a study of any given online forum, since many postings contain veiled allusions or references to past threads (Thomsen, 1998). Finally, most message boards develop their own “pseudo-dialect” of abbreviations and jargon that only an experienced participant could decode, necessitating that the researcher be someone with a long-standing presence in the community. Taken as a whole, the process of being embedded allows for the co-creation of meaning, leading to a deeper and more reflexive understanding of the forces at play (Rybas & Gajjala, 2007).

Participants and Setting

Since my research question is about the prevalence and implications of intergroup communication in online communities, it was necessary to select a suitable online community in order to understand the dynamics at play. American Weather fits this role well. It is neither a small board with low activity nor is it one of the mega boards like Gaia Online that were discussed earlier. As a whole, it is rather unremarkable and normal as far as message boards go, making it a suitable target for research.

Additionally, unlike bulletin boards that are geared towards attracting certain competing interest groups, such as sports or political boards, American Weather is a general interest board

over a topic, the weather, which is not inherently combative or partisan. This is an important consideration when studying intergroup phenomena because groups and individual identification with groups are more likely to arise organically rather than being imported in as they would by sports fans or political junkies.

American Weather is also of sufficient size to have a diverse population in terms of many demographic factors. The board's 5000 plus users range from age 13 to age 74 and represent 47 different states and 10 countries. Not only is the board of sufficient size, but there are threads which contain meticulous demographic records which are accessible to my research. Unlike many other forums, data on location, member age, and even in many instances, occupation are all accessible. The software used by American Weather, IPB 3.0, has detailed member profiles, a private messaging system, and a robust search function, which all greatly improve the amount of information that can be gathered.

For many years now, the community associated with American Weather and its predecessor boards has held both official conferences and informal get-togethers, leading to a unique mix of relationship types across the board. While some members post in anonymity, many other know each other personally as a result of meeting on the board. Because of these dynamics, it is the ideal site for examining questions of how structure relates to the formation of groups and the ways in which groups interaction is comprised of strategies predicted by social identity theory.

Procedures

From November 2010 until July 2011, I spent my time monitoring posts on the board for signs of intergroup communication activities which were consistent with SIT, including individual mobility, social competition, and social creativity. In order to do this, the groups that

were subject to intergroup analysis needed to be established and defined; for this I used a process consistent with Glaser and Strauss' (1967) guidelines for constant comparison coding. By observing the forum over a prolonged period of time and attempting to categorize different forms of intergroup communication based upon attributes such as form, function, and content, the approach taken by this study has provided a rich description of the virtual community that is present at American Weather (Thomsen, 1998).

Although there is no formal requirement that my research include informed consent, the users of American Weather were made aware of my ongoing project before my research questions were even formalized (Appendix A); as a member of the community already, I believed it was important to let them know. In an effort to establish the type of rapport necessary for successful ethnographic inquiry, I made sure to make participants aware that I was conducting research on communication issues in online communities and using the forum as my site, I believe this was necessary for me as both a researcher and a member of the community for them to know. I did not go into immense detail on the specific forms of discourse that I was studying, since I did not want to change the way that people interacted with one another while around me, but made an effort to answer reasonable questions about my research so as to assuage any fears about my intentions, no one from the board protested use of the site for study. In addition to the post that was copied into Appendix A, I also had numerous backchannel conversations with parties who were interested in my research. I was never contacted by anyone who objected to my research.

Data Analysis

A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the content of the posts saved from American Weather. More specifically, constant comparison coding (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002)

was used to make sense of the data as well as make theoretical conclusions regarding the messages. This approach was the best choice given that “one of the great strengths of qualitative studies is what happens in the field can directly feed back into the process of analysis” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002, p. 223). This is especially true given that as a member of the board, I was able to early on identify groups and label posts as such when observing them. An added benefit of the constant comparison between posts allowed me to draw conclusions based on the connections between the data as it was recorded, e.g. determining what posts together were instances of social competition vs. social creativity (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002). While not all posts from the board were saved, an average of 2 hours each day over an 8 month period of time was spent observing interactions on the site allowing me to watch interactions unfold and determine which were intergroup vs. interpersonal in nature. No instances of interpersonal interactions were saved for analysis, as the purpose of the study was not to see how members treated each other on an interpersonal level, but rather in terms of groups. Therefore, it made the most sense to only sample from those interactions as a whole.

Each poster was assigned a pseudonym (Poster A—Poster DD) to protect his or her identity within the computer files saved. All of the data was transcribed into a single word document based on interaction type and group affiliation. Through out the data gathering process, the data was read through comprehensively at the end of each week, to get an idea of what commonalities existed, and to begin to analyze and note consistent trends/ideas in the holistic document. Early in the study, based on the notes gathered, an initial set of codes (Appendix B) was created as a result of the constant-comparison *open coding* (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) where in trends were established through participant use and management. In the initial open coding, 17 codes were identified as different groups that existed on American

Weather as a result of structure. Once this was complete, the field notes and codes were assessed again, focusing specifically on those codes produced to consider similarities and congruence. This series of focused coding led to 3 final codes that were representative of the initial categories produced; while there were 17 groups, each group fell into one of three categories of larger group identification purposes—weather interests, member tags, and regions.

In addition to coding for group identification types and noting how the structure of the board led to the creation of these groups, I also did a read through of the data set to determine what of the intergroup communication interactions were instances of individual mobility, social creativity, and/or social competition. Posts were labeled as such and separated for further analysis into understanding the context of each interaction. I was the only one to code these interactions, a move which was justified because secondary coders with intimate knowledge of the board were not available.

Chapter 4 - Findings

RQ1: How does the structure of the American Weather forum affect intergroup communication on the site?

As with offline settings, there are many different ways in which group identity and intergroup communication is expressed online. Research Question 1 deals with the ways in which the structure of the American Weather board itself may affect certain intergroup behaviors including intergroup communication. The purpose of this section is to outline the ways in which different groups arise as a result of the board's structure itself and to briefly sketch out the composition of the major groups themselves. Although the number of groups present on Americanwx.com can be counted in multiple different ways, I will detail the major ones present that are generally agreed upon by board users themselves as relevant groups. I will first discuss the groups that are organized by weather type then move to discussing the ways in which American Weather's member tag system divides posters into groups. After that I will discuss the salience of geographic regions and finally I will detail the groups that form from repeated interactions on the non-weather side of the board, where off topic discussions and cliquish behavior significantly affect the tenor of discussion.

Weather Interests

Many weather boards available on the Internet focus on a particular type of weather. For instance, two other popular weather boards cater to a specific weather audience. Stormtrack.org is a board devoted to tornado chasing with virtually no discussion of other weather events. Similarly, Storm2k.org is a board geared towards tropical cyclones. Because American Weather is a website devoted to the discussion of all weather phenomenon, one of the primary ways that

group identity is organized on the forum is by the type of weather the user prefers. Although many individuals in the community are interested in a variety of weather conditions, there are a sizable number of individuals who focus their posting efforts onto a particular weather type. Although not every user participates, intense group competition can arise because there is a certain degree of mutual exclusivity between different types of weather. For instance, those who prefer fair weather and those who prefer snowy weather end up rooting for different weather outcomes, resulting in a sense of competition between those groups. Much like fans of sports teams or partisan loyalists, the degree to which users of the board attach themselves to particular weather outcomes can result in heated arguments and a variety of other verbal altercations.

There are 4 main groups on American Weather with respect to weather preference. Arguably the largest of these groups are those whose primary interest is in winter weather, especially snowstorms. The reason this group is the largest has to do with the history of the community itself. The predecessor boards to American Weather were spawned during the 1990's as Internet usage by the public and bulletin board systems matured. Many long time users of American Weather trace their participation in online weather communities back to bulletin boards hosted by The Weather Channel and from the Usenet group ne.weather, which was largely dedicated to tracking snow in the northeast portion of the United States. The community matured, changed website addresses and hosts on multiple occasions and started to attract a more regionally diverse set of users and weather interests, yet snow remained the primary focus of many of the core posters. In fact, the threat of snowstorms still remains the number one driver of traffic to the board, which is most easily seen by comparing the number of posts made during the months of December, January, and February and comparing it to those made during the Summer

months of June, July, and August. The dominance of snow discussion is accepted by most regulars on the board, to the point where it has even been described as a “Snow Board”.

The following exchange is one that is emblematic of the way that American Weather is discussed as a place dominated by a group of posters whose main focus is snow. The exchange took place in a late winter thread involving most of the regular posters in the New England sub-forum, one of the most heavily trafficked on all of the board:

Poster A: To each is own I suppose but ...I don't see how anyone in their right mind could actually "want" it to snow again this spring. Why? I think if eyes could open and more than just cerebralize the futility, but truly understand the futility on a personal level, yesterday's heat was ...or rather would have registered in heads, a thrilling reminder of an inevitability that brings it's own form of excitements. Any snow at this point robs from that.

I mean, this teetering with literal craziness here folks. They should change the forum from The American Weather Forums to, "The Small Segment Of Population That Are O.C.D. Snow Cooks", because this has much less to do about weather, and waaaaaay more to do about hyper-compulsion for snow. The snow pack is gone outside of shade and elevations, which is more than 50% coverage obliterated down to bare Earth. Flowers are trying to knife up and buds are swelling on sugar maples. Yesterday I saw my first bumble bee of the fragile, infant warm season. I'm telling you, an outsider with no history would think snow is all that matters around here - perhaps that's just the way it goes. Snow is just one aspect of weather. Whether speaking intellectually or even from the murkier emotional points of view, sound minds would consider all aspects, embraced

equally. Otherwise, none of this has anything to do with the weather - the weather just becomes a limo service to you, a 'whether it snows or not delivery system', in actuality.

Poster B: Exactly, some of us OCD kooks like snow? Ya think? Weird write up, rather nonsensical on a weather board where the great majority are snow freaks.

Poster A: Be fair - I wasn't speaking to warm weather zealots. There isn't enough of them around to warrant that concern.

****, I respectfully disagree. You mentioned "odd post for weather board" - therein is the problem: it's not a weather board if it is so heavily and seemingly ONLY faceted in the singular and oft' coming across as irrationally obsessed with the aspect of snow to the point of neurotic. "Weather" involves everything.

This is a snow board. Hey, that's fine - just nice to know what it is one's really involved in. More power to a snow board!

Poster C: Some of us just love snow.... ANY snow, cold fresh air, the beautiful white landscape and snow laden trees, the fun of any winter wx event and overachieving even it means 4 inches versus 2 inches. It is all fun! I hate mild wx, bugs, mud, the strong oppressive sun angle etc....

And I also take a certain perverse pleasure in watching all the 'normal' people bitch and gripe about snow in late March and April. LOL and saying I told you so.

You are right about me not being truly multi-dimensional when it comes to wx. I can't

help it ...just find winter wx much more compelling. My interest is about 2/3rd winter wx and 1/3rd the rest. I like tropical cyclones also....

Not only is American Weather sometimes considered a snow board, but the dominance of snow enthusiasts frequently leads to reflexive discussions amongst board users of the way that this focus shapes the social dynamic of the board itself. Posters such as the one below often express frustration at the way in which “acceptable” posts are filtered by group-think.

Poster D: This is comical, trolls calling for 3-6 inches on a regular basis, and then when it flurries they claim victory, its comical. Sometimes I wonder if this is just a purely snow board or truly a weather board LOL. If you want to be liked all you have to due is bullsh*t people and call for the greatest amount of snow for every event. 😂

Finally, underscoring just how deeply some people feel that the board is and should always be a “snow board” is the following quote. One of the most unabashed snow followers was even more blunt and to the point about what he saw as the purpose of the board when a debate erupted over what some posters perceived as a disappointingly limited in regional focus board-sponsored Internet radio show:

Poster E: make no mistake...this is an off spring of eastern US Wx. This is mainly an eastern US snow board.

Those who don't fall into the snow enthusiast category are at times considered to be in opposition to those who do root for snowstorms. A variety of labels have been affixed to this large group, but the most common is "Warminista", because of this groups' preference for warm season weather phenomena such as severe thunderstorms, tropical cyclones, and warm spells (known as "torches"). The term "Warminista" was first coined at the prior iteration of the community which was hosted at the now-dormant easternuswx.com and was used to describe a group of individuals who when forecasting displayed a bias towards warmer predictions. By now the term has lost its specific meaning and extends to all people with non-snow related weather interests. Although in most cases the term Warminista is used by snow enthusiasts in reference to their competition, some people proudly identify as Warministas. For instance, this individual claimed allegiance to the Warministas in a thread asking responders to rank the seasons in order from best to worst:

Poster F: My personal list, owing to the fact that I work outdoors and am a warminista at heart: 1. Summer, 2. Spring, 3. Winter, 4. Fall

Although sometimes grouped together into the Warminista group, there are two other distinct weather related groups that function as their own effective groups. Distinguished from the rest of the board by their particularized norms, these groups are smaller than the general warm and cold groups but tend to be very cohesive and singularly focused in their interests. The first of these are the board members who consider themselves to be specialists in tropical storms and hurricanes. The "tropical dudes" are perhaps the most insular and partisan of the groups on American Weather and largely stick to their own threads while following their own posting

customs. This is partially as a result of the size disparity between the tropical specialists and those who prefer winter weather, but is also related to differences in the way that the tropical enthusiasts organize their threads and discussions. Certain people are tasked with “hosting” tropical-related threads and are expected to regularly update the threads in a fashion that is uniform with threads on previous storms. For the most part the group polices its own threads and is not particularly forgiving of new posters who disrupt the established flow. Also influencing the insularity of the tropical crew is a group-wide superiority complex, especially when viewed in relation to the winter weather enthusiasts. A great example of this stated superiority complex in action is provided by this exchange between two well-respected board members which took place in a discussion during the winter “offseason” about the purpose of keeping a long-running thread tropics thread that was mostly filled with off topic banter. Poster H is a well-liked legal professional who typically stays out of the intergroup warfare and likes to provide level headed assessments whenever controversy erupts on the board. Poster I is another popular poster who is a hurricane chaser and a prominent member of the tropical specialists:

Poster G: The beauty of AmWx is that it caters to a variety of audiences. There are hardcore tropical nerds who would rather study a 70-year-old storm than enjoy a blizzard raging outside, but there are also posters who are interested in the tropics, but only as part of a balanced weather diet. Those two audiences have different needs, and it's not clear to me that there is a way of organizing the discussion that is compatible with those needs. As I noted in my post, I think the tropiclique has settled on a pretty reasonable solution (certainly better than the severe crowd), but it's not without its negatives. To mock someone for raising those concerns simply because their tropical bona fides are not

up to your standards does little more than to further the insular cliquish feel to the tropical community, which in turn stifles discussion. Perhaps that's a good thing, but I find the vibe from the tropical threads to be less than welcoming.

Poster H: Cliquish perhaps-- but that is what happens when you have a small group of people who discuss a shared passion all year, every year. Yes, bonding occurs.

We make a concerted effort to make the tropical scene welcoming-- in fact, I go out of my way to welcome new contributors. Granted, we have a low tolerance for hype posts and "OMG it's gonna be Isabel!!!!" and "OMG it's gonna be 1938!!!". But have you noticed that we don't have the problems that you icep*ssies do-- i.e., high-volume, super-low-quality posting that makes you regulars really pissy? You can say the tropical dudes aren't welcoming, but the bottom line is that the atmosphere we've created fosters a good balance of quality discussion and occasional horsing around.

But that's how it is now. There's a main discussion thread to catch all the general chitchat and junk, and then discrete threads for 1) individual cyclones, 2) important research findings, or 3) any other important news. I think people have this misconception that all tropical discussion must happen in that one thread, and that is just not the case. It's simply a place to chat and banter when there's nothing going on.

The Atlantic Tropical Action thread is simply the "neighborhood watering hole" for tropical dudes-- a place where occasionally deep conversations happen and yet aren't required-- and yet for some reason, church ladies from the outside are constantly insisting we make it into an institution of higher learning.

The response is simply: **no.** 😊

Similar to the tropical dudes is a cadre of posters who specialize in severe thunderstorms and tornadoes. Although they have no real nickname for their group, the severe weather enthusiasts are considered by most of the board regulars to be just as cohesive a unit as the other weather-related groups. The severe weather enthusiasts are often talked about whenever groups are compared to one another, since they are considered by many of the snow enthusiasts to be virtual squatters—people who joined the board after the initial group of snow enthusiasts and who threaten to unravel the purpose of the board, which is to discuss snow in the northeast. Like the tropical crowd, the severe weather group tends to stick to a particular spot on the board, which is the Central sub-forum where most of the United States' severe thunderstorms occur.

Also like the tropical crowd, the severe weather group has its own posting customs. The severe crowd is less hierarchical than the tropics group, which is evidenced by the diversity of people that are sanctioned by the group to start threads pertaining to severe weather. Relatively inexperienced posters who start threads for storm threats are routinely ignored by the tropics crowd but not by the severe weather group. Another difference between the posting customs of the severe weather group and others on the board is that the severe weather group has developed a strong norm about what is appropriate posting behavior during large outbreaks, which is constantly referred to as a way of slowing down runaway posting during big events. One prominent member of the severe weather group has even written this posting guide into his signature as a reminder for others in the group, despite not being a member of staff:

Poster I: In severe weather superthreads here is how we usually post the severe warning/statements.

1) post every warning in the initial stages

- 2) then as things get busy post only tornado warnings or other notable events
- 3) when things get nuts instead of posting many dozens of tornado warnings/statements(clogs up the thread) post only confirmed tornadoes or other notable events(ie doppler warned tornado for major metro area,strongly worded t-storm warning, confirmed extremely large hail reports etc)

The severe weather crowd not only has a set way of posting about their favorite kind of weather, they also tend to stick to one single sub-forum dedicated to the Central and Western United States, discussing outbreaks within the comforts of their group rather than risking going to another sub-forum and interacting with other regions' posters.

Not only are their situations where the structure of the board's allowance for the expression of multiple weather preferences encourage different groups to form and to come into competition with one another, but the system by which members are categorized on the board itself fosters the formation of groups and rivalries between them. The next section deals with the ways in which this process happens.

Member Tags

The next significant way that the structure of American Weather contributes to the formation of and communication between different groups is via the member tag system. Both American Weather and its predecessor board Easternuswx, have had a long established system of differently colored member tags that sort people into groups according to their role on the board. The administrators of the board are known as "black taggers", moderators are known as "green taggers", professional meteorologists are "red taggers", forecasters without a formal degree are known as "orange taggers", and regular hobbyists are "blue taggers". Some of these tagged

groups are more cohesive than others. Because regular hobbyists are the vast majority of the board's population, the blue taggers are the largest group—a group so large that it serves little purpose for unification or group identity. The other tags however carry a significant amount of meaning across the board and help to bond together the individuals assigned them.

The board staff, which is comprised of both green and black taggers, is oftentimes referred to as a unit by non-staff members despite being made up of a set of members with a wide variety of participation and enforcement of board rules. The unity of the staff lies in the power it has over the rest of the board population. The staff makes decisions about board policies, enforces suspensions and bans members, deletes posts that are inconsistent with the rules of the board, and in general manages the board itself. There are currently 16 members on the staff, so it is a rather small group with a disproportionate amount of power and influence in the community.

A red tag is seen as a sign of expertise by many because it is only conferred on those with degrees in meteorology or atmospheric science. There are currently 227 red-tagged meteorologists present on the board, some of which work in the field and others who have a degree in meteorology but work in an unrelated field. Conversations about the direction of the board often include a discussion of how to attract and retain red taggers, since the expertise they bring is seen by many members as being critical to the vitality of the board. Many red taggers participate on the off topic side of the board while others prefer to stick solely to the weather side to avoid entangling themselves in many of the conflicts that occur on

The red taggers perceived importance to the board is magnified when contrasted to the way that orange taggers are perceived. Because the guidelines for orange tags don't include having to have an actual degree, the orange taggers are treated differently by many, despite the

fact that the actual quality of a orange tagger's meteorological analysis could be stronger than a red tagger (especially the red taggers whose only qualification is a degree).

Research Question 2 will further discuss the intergroup communication dynamic between groups of different tags, but first another set of groups that are highlighted by the structure of boards must be described. The sub-forum system which the board adopted over the past few years has altered the group dynamic by strengthening the regional ties by funneling posters into various sub-forums based on their region, a structural aspect of the board that is distinct from the visible tagging system described in this section.

Regional Groups

In 2009, as a result of the growth of the forum the staff decided to reorganize the board, creating several regional sub-forums out of what once was a unified, single weather forum. People are now often organized by what region they post in, creating fault lines and groups where previous ones had never before existed. This move has been both incredibly successful in growing the board and managing traffic, but also controversial because of the way that it has balkanized the board. Keeping with the spirit of talking openly about the faults of the board, the subject of ending the sub-forum system is brought up regularly in the off topic forums, producing endless debate over the pros and cons of the system. The staff has spoken, and it is unlikely that the system will ever be rolled back, meaning the consequences of this change are likely to be continuing as the board continues to develop. The biggest consequence that is relevant for the discussion of how groups are formed and the type of intergroup communication that they engage in is the formation of rivalries between regions. There is already tension between people in different regions because weather systems tend to affect some people at the expense of others, but the formation of sub-forums amplifies that tension and formalizes it as people get to root for

their region like it is a sports team or political party. In a thread called “Sub-forums are killing this bb” a frequent contributor wrote:

Poster J: I'm kind of split on the subforums. I do like being able to go to a place where the information I mainly care about is discussed, and it helps everything to be better organized. On the other hand, though, I do miss the sense of unity this board used to have, and I miss the insight from a lot of the really good meteorologists/forecasters, most of whom don't post in my regional forum.

I will say that I don't think the NYC and Philly areas should've been split up; that was taking it too far IMO, especially for someone like me who's kind of on the border between the two.

There are seven different regional sub-forums on American Weather: New England, Upstate New York/Pennsylvania, New York City Metro, Philadelphia Region, Mid Atlantic, Southeast, and Central/Western. The regions were not designed to be equal in geographical size or population, and were made largely as a reflection of the demographics of the board in 2009, which skewed heavily towards areas of the United States east of the Appalachian Mountains. Each region has its own set of posting norms, personalities, and weather conditions, all of which can work to create group conflict throughout the year.

Taken altogether, the lack of focus on particular weather, the member tag system, and the splitting of the board into regional sub-forums are all structural factors, which create and maintain groups and facilitate intergroup behavior. These factors create a atmosphere on American Weather where group competition is cultivated and a variety of communication

strategies are employed. Social Identity Theory describes individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition as three of the primary ways in which individuals and the groups with which they identify interact with members of other groups. The findings in the next section pertain to this directly.

RQ2: What roles do individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition play in the communication patterns of members of the American Weather forum?

On American Weather, intergroup conflict is a daily reality. The forum is gaining users at a rapid rate and there are too many people for the average user to identify with interpersonally, and even when interpersonal relationships exist, it is easier to identify others by their social identity in a broader forum discussion. As a result, group ties become a quick way for referencing the other and protecting the self. As the data collected in the section discussing Research Question 1 explained, there are a diversity of overlapping groups present on the board whose agendas frequently come into conflict. Strategies for negotiating intergroup conflict are important to the posters who most frequently interact on American Weather. Individual mobility, Social Creativity, and Social Competition are three important concepts that help to explain these interactions.

Individual Mobility

Individual mobility is the first strategy used by individuals to manage and make sense of the group dynamic. It involves the idea that social identity is portable—if an individual no longer identifies with a group they can take themselves (and their social identity) elsewhere. On message boards individual mobility takes two primary forms: At the top level individuals can choose to join or leave the board itself, and at a smaller level they can choose to identify with a

different subgroup present on the board. Both of these strategies accomplish the primary task of individual mobility because they allow a person to calibrate their social identity to create the best set of group associations for themselves.

On American Weather, individual mobility manifests itself in members' decisions to join the board and in decisions about whether to leave the board. When it comes to choices about whether to join the board in the first place, group identity can sometimes play a significant role. Although gaining information about the weather plays a large role in choices about where to get that information, there are many places on the Internet where a person can get accurate and useful weather information. As far as weather boards and other virtual communities go, there are numerous competing forums such as Accuweather.com and Fortysouthwx.com, which provide access to weather discussion. In addition to this, many meteorologists have a social media presence (especially on the social networking site Facebook) where people engage in persistent discussion with one another about the weather in a way that duplicates many of the functions of traditional bulletin boards. Because of this, one's preference for one website over another sometimes comes down to factors unrelated to the weather itself, including the group dynamics present. Camaraderie between in-group members creates powerful social bonds and has been cited as one of the reasons many choose to come to (and stay on) American Weather. For evidence of this, one must look no further than a discussion in the New England sub-forum about how people "found" the board, in which social groups were an important theme present in many of the posts:

Poster K: I discovered Eastern by way of a key word that I am remiss that I cannot recall. I lurked for a month, joined on September 30, 2006 and the rest is history.....all

joking aside, my life was altered for the better forever, as not only was my meteorological knowledge base expanded upon exponentially, but I was introduced to what I have grown to view as exceptional social network.....replete with a great bunch of folks harboring the same bizarre fetish that I do.

In conclusion, perhaps it was divine intervention, but at the very least it was certainly highly appropriate that it was weather that helped to force that fateful series into existence, and it was weather that consoled me by means of leading me to this site....formerly Easternuswx and now American Weather.

Poster L: Like you though this place has definitely improved me for the better, I gained an absolute incredible amount of meteorological knowledge and continue to do so. I've also met some great people, developed some great friendships and have had some of the best times of my life at g2g and conferences.

Poster M: My co-worker (*****) asked if I knew about the various weather boards out there. Believe it or not, I didn't even know wx forums existed until 2005. I figured I'd give them a try since they sounded like a good place to weenie out and talk wx. He told me Eastern was a snowboard so I lurked there for a while. I joined back in Nov of '08 and not only did my meteorological knowledge expand, I got to know some good people as well.

More evidence of the group dynamic being important in one's choice to be individually mobile is the way in which many people have chosen to follow groups of posters as they shifted from one board to the next. These individuals have now exhibited this behavior for over a decade,

indicating the high levels of attachment that are present amongst group members, where one poster notes:

Poster N: I've bounced around with the community back to the TWC days in the 90s. TWC to WWBB to EUSWX to here. I even posted on those AOL boards back in the mid 90s.

Present in this same thread was a different type of direct evidence concerning individual mobility—posters who had started out elsewhere and decided to move to American Weather:

Poster O: Found WeatherMatrix in 2004 (omg there are people like me)
Through that found Storm2K in 2005 (omg people post more than once a day here)
And through S2K I found Eastern in 2006 (joined in February 06) (omg there are smart people here)

Poster P: I started lurking on Accuwx a few years ago in 08. Then mid way through winter 08-09 someone mentioned eastern and I searched the forum, lurked for 4 months and joined May 15, 2009. I didn't go back to accuwx 😁

Poster Q: Stumbled across accuwx first, then thank god stumbled across here shortly thereafter.

Just as being a member of a group and reaping the social benefits of the membership can cause people to join a board, being part of a vilified outgroup can have just as powerful an effect in causing people to leave the board as a strategy of individual mobility. An exemplar of this behavior can be found in this discussion, in which a poster felt wronged as a result of favoritism and cliquish behavior. On their way out the door, the poster wrote:

Poster R: As a matter of a fact, **ATTN: ADMIN** I respectfully request for my account here to be closed. I know of at least two forums that are more imformative, and helpful, and are not full of smartass know it alls, and clique's who get away with things that more normal, and intelligent posters couldn't. They also dont support, or allow chronic trolls such as ***** I mean *****. This place is steadily going to hell and its sad that the stupid ***** that is causing this is allowed by mods and admins.

Another poster who didn't leave the board made a similar observation about the way that cliques on the board function to drive people away:

Poster S: OK, A thread that has devolved into what appears to be a criticism of me from the clique, Trixie, who alternates offensive memes about me, who sees her mission as making this board so unpleasant for me I'll leave, makes some kind of comment about people being driven from weatherside by sexist posters, and she has a history of lying like a rug, so I just assumed, in this instance, it was all about me.

Although not everyone who joins or leaves the board does so because of group dynamics, it clearly is something that many consider when weighing the pros and cons of board participation. But the question of board participation is not the only way in which individual mobility manifests itself. Individual mobility also plays a role in determining which subgroups individuals choose to identify with. Just like in offline communities where individuals find a new set of friends or choose to associate with a different group of people for a change of pace, the same thing occurs on online message boards. On Americanwx.com, posters have even gone so far as to decide that the group they were a part of was not fulfilling their needs so they decided to start a spinoff board as a way of avoiding the annoyances of their own group. The owner of the spinoff board and longtime poster in the community explained the rationale for the creation of the spinoff board, fortysouthwx.com in this post:

Poster T: We are a different kind of board. For those who prefer a smaller, higher quality, regional feel, this is the place to be. I realize this is not either/or for most people. Nor should it be. But for the time being I will be spending my time exclusively here. In fact I am read only at American (at my request) so I cannot even post there if I wanted. This isn't a competition, but I know there are folks at American who wish this board would go away. That isn't happening. If anything I feel emboldened. I know I may be in the minority, but there are others like me who prefer a smaller, higher quality experience. If you are one of those people, welcome, and I look forward to sharing the winter with you here.

Fortysouthwx ended up being an unsuccessful venture and the posters who left to populate that board eventually ended up coming back to American Weather full-time. Regardless of the success of the board, the episodes with Fortysouthwx and previous board spinoffs prove that individual mobility plays a key role in the way that people manage their group affiliations within the broader weather community.

Individual mobility is only the first part of the intergroup communication dynamic. The next important concept is social creativity, a crucial piece to explaining the ways in which groups compare themselves to one another when they come into conflict in discussions occurring on the board.

Social Creativity

Social creativity is when groups selectively alter the criteria by which they compare themselves to other groups in order to produce a positive value. There are a variety of ways that social creativity is deployed on American Weather, and each of the groupings created by the structural factors outlined in research question one has its own methods of social creativity. All of the groups displayed the basic elements of social creativity, which involve establishing a positive identity vis a vis outgroups by choosing to highlight what is best about them and worst about others.

Before discussing the various ways in which groups differ in the approach to social creativity, I first will discuss the nearly universalized outgroup around American Weather, known as the “Weenies”. The weenies are deserving of their own section because they occupy the lowest rung of American Weather society, serving as a whipping post for the other groups to establish their dominance. Considered a dubious distinction, the term “weenie” is used to describe posters who display a lack of knowledge about the weather, a certain excitability which

causes them to root for extreme scenarios, and a general lack of quality posting. On previous boards there was even a special pink weenie tag, which was used as the community's Scarlett letter. The tag no longer exists because of complaints about the way that it was deployed, but the term weenie persists to this day and is used mostly as a way of distinguishing one group from another. Groups in competition with one another frequently accuse the other groups as being filled with weenies, and in general they are viewed by many being an annoying byproduct of the American Weather community's growth over the last several years.

Returning to the groups outlined in the section discussing research question one, the first set of groups in competition with one another are the snow enthusiasts and the Warministas. These two groups justify their own supposed superiority to the other group by using radically different value schemes when it comes to the weather. One of the classic intergroup arguments that repeats itself during big weather events involves the morality of tracking and even rooting for strong storms. Some snow enthusiasts use these moments as opportunities for social creativity and argue that their weather obsession is healthier and more moral because warm season events such as tornadoes and hurricanes are violent in comparison to the benign nature of winter storms. One such example of this discussion occurred after an EF5 tornado devastated Joplin, MO in May 2011. The first poster is Poster T is a long time board member and avid snow enthusiast. At the beginning of this discussion Poster T had been accused of attempting to troll, or disrupt the thread discussing the disaster. Poster H from the tropical weather crowd returns as the same person who is considered a leader of the tropical weather crowd and is also a hurricane chaser. The third poster in this exchange is a meteorologist who frequently posts in threads concerning severe thunderstorms. The final poster (V) who uses foul language to express his disgust at the rehashing of this old argument, is a member of the severe weather

crew. All posters involved have thousands of posts and years of board experience with one another:

Poster T: I made a valid point...people were foaming at the mouth for long track EF-4's/5's to hit highly populated areas....How is that trolling?

Poster H: That seems like an OT sort of topic-- not for the actual discussion in a wx thread. You icep*ssies always need to moralize Re: others' wx interests. Y'all see snow as so benign. 🤔

Poster T (In Response to Poster H): snow kills, but in the means, it is benign by comparison.....I am not moralizing....I know you give a lot in terms of time, money, and volunteer work back to the poor rural Mexican communities you chase in....I'm not calling you out

Poster H (In Response to Poster T): What's the matter, honey? Angry it ain't winter?

Poster U: True true - snow and ice kill more people each year than tornadoes! And the \$\$\$ add up with winter storms, as well
Long threads on that before - here and on other forums.

Poster V: not this fuucking stupid argument again.

Poster T: There was palpable disappointment that the cells were merging.....you dont see that in snow threads....for better or worse, we are unapologetic...we openly want the worst possible conditions to materialize at all times...If all weather is so sad and destructive, why the ambivalence among rainers?

Poster T (In response to Poster U): yet we openly root for the "worst" without guilt and you guys don't.... why is that?

Besides the obvious debate over the morality involved in rooting for destructive weather to track, there are a couple other things to note about this exchange. First, is that it gets heated pretty quickly. The people involved know each other as individuals but still prefer to talk in intergroup terms, preferring to sling arrows back and forth while using derogatory terms like “icep*ssies” for snow enthusiasts and “rainers” for people who prefer warmer weather. In addition, Posters G, Y, and Z acknowledge that these discussions occur frequently, which attests to the durability of this line of argumentation as a snow enthusiast tool of social creativity.

The Warministas use different aspects of comparison to make the case for why they are a superior group. Instead of evaluating themselves and their competition by how benign or destructive their weather of choice is, the Warministas use their comparatively smaller group size as an advantage by shifting the terms of the comparison towards which group has more “weenies” in it. Because the snow enthusiasts outnumber the warm weather enthusiasts there are more snow weenies—posters with little experience or expertise who root for unlikely outcomes and generally degrade the level of discussion. In many instances, the arrival of a flood of “snow weenies” is used by warm weather enthusiasts as an excuse to prop their own group up at the

expense of snow enthusiasts. For instance, in a thread discussing which group has the biggest “hypesters”, a long time member and board administrator outlines the case against snow enthusiasts and bases it upon a numbers issue:

Poster W: I consider full fledged snow weenies (regardless of location) the worst of the bunch on the board as a whole. Primarily because so many of them don't actually understand the weather at all.. they just like snow. The svr group is extremely knowledgeable on the whole... perhaps the most so on the board. But there are many a drama queen, if not hypesters, in the group.

Also worthy of note from the preceding post is the notion that severe posters (who are a warm-season group) are the most knowledgeable group on the board. Both the severe crowd and the tropical enthusiasts use this line of reasoning to support their superiority over the winter weather group. This is yet another variation of the above “quality over quantity” argument which forms the basis for Warminista social comparison.

Moving to the next set of groups, social creativity manifests itself in a fairly straightforward way between the groups created by the member tag system. Staff members’ basis of comparison to others is rooted in the power that they have to moderate others’ posts and make decisions on behalf of the board. Because the staff operates a sub-forum that is only visible to them, they also have the advantage of having intimate knowledge of and the ability to shape board policies outside of the purview of other members.

Although they are influential around the board, meteorologists generate a positive image for their group based not upon the power that they wield across the board but instead upon the

knowledge and expertise that they have by virtue of having formalized training in interpreting weather data and making forecasts. Professional forecasters with orange tags share an elevated position as well, but because of their lack of degree they are generally held with a lower regard than meteorologists. Nevertheless, both groups generate their positive self image out of the weather-related expertise they possess. They are generally seen by outsiders as being a group worthy of respect and special privileges. One regular member even went as far as to propose that the board should establish a sub-forum solely for these two groups:

Poster S: This would be a separate forum from the taggers only forum, not for discussing job openings or complaining about someone at the office. Read only to most. Red/orange taggers, and some no taggers who consistently post good stuff. From our regional forum, Jorge seems like a good example of a non-tagger who might get posting privileges in that scenario.

Finally, regular members have a variety of social creativity mechanisms that enable them to have a positive concept of their group. Because they are by far the largest group on the board and the blue tag serves no special social purpose the blue tagged users fragment into a variety of subgroups. Because membership numbers in the thousands, Americanwx.com has a variety of “crews”, many of whom sometimes engage in competition with one another for prestige around the forum. Different crews of people strive to become popular or just to get attention from others. Nearly every sub-forum has a dominant ingroup and outgroup. In the regional sub-forums the dynamic revolves around two factors: knowledgeable posters organizing against the clueless weenies and the seniority of posters involved.

The off-topic sub-forums are the place where many subgroups comprised mainly of regular members frequent. There are four sub-forums within the off topic side of the board: The Political Roundtable, The Sports Zone, A-L-E-X's Playhouse (devoted to science and technology topics), and General Off Topic. As can be expected, the politics and sports areas are places where group competition is extensive and particularly intense. The rivalries between political parties and sports fans tend to stay contained within their respective sub-forums and are not a thing that I extensively studied. I felt this was justified by the special character of political and sports fanaticism, which is qualitatively different from group rivalries that arise organically within the Americanwx.com community itself rather than being imported in from outside the community. The third off topic forum is another sub-forum which I spent very little time observing, but for a different reason than politics and sports. A-L-E-X's playhouse is named after the one individual who consistently posts articles there. The sub-forum itself is devoid of many real exchanges and most threads tend to go un-responded to after their initial post.

Unlike the other 3 off topic forums, the general off topic forum is a place where intergroup competition is regularly played out, especially among blue-tagged members who have few outlets for social creativity other than to accentuate the social remarkability of their own group. Because the general off topic forum is not weather related, the dominant in-groups need out groups other than the weather weenies that exist on the weather side sub-forums. One example of a way in which off topic communication is filtered through an intergroup lens is the conflict between the "DC Clique", a group of prolific off topic posters from the Mid-Atlantic region, and a group of posters who frequent the off topic sections who are deemed to be socially awkward. The following discussion is emblematic of the way in which these discussions

normally occur, where one side denies that a clique even exists but criticizes the out-group for being awkward, creepy, or “weird”:

Poster T: I'm not part of any clique....but when you look at the recipients of some of these beatdowns, you have to wonder what purpose it serves allowing them to post here....perhaps it doesn't matter cause it is OT, but do you really want people like **, *****, *****, etc amassing massive post counts?

Poster W (In response to Poster T): i dunno.. it's a constant feedback loop. to me the people who are constantly attacking are as problematic, though perhaps banning would suffice. i don't get that worked up over someone being "weird" online at this pt i guess.

Poster T (In response to Poster W): I think there is a difference between weird and creepy/pathological.....I have never ever seen the directive "just ignore them" actually work.....It isn't just that **'s presence is a net negative...it is...It is that he makes any thread off topic and about him and his posts aren't just weird...they are often really creepy and focused on the same subject matter over and over....It is just OT and I guess weather is what matters but if you look at **'s body of work just today, I think it makes the idea that the attackers are as much of the problem to lack merit

Poster W (In Response to Poster T): It's just tough because some of it gets compounded by the constant attacks against these people. I won't argue that ***** does not suck a big one. However, I have not found ** to be this insane creep that the 10-20 who

constantly go after him have. Many of those folks are people who I generally trust but I'm not about to just take their word on a matter like that simply because they are so heavily involved.

A big board is going to have lots of ****ty posters. I wish banning them all was the answer... maybe it is and I don't get it.

Poster X (In Response to T and W): lol

Anyone thinking they are superior to another member/poster in OT/PR is seriously laughable. This is a message board. Get over it. Weather side, that's totally a different topic all together.

The poster being discussed throughout the previous exchange never directly responded in that thread to the discussion that was being had about him. Later that month, however, he responded back to another post made by a member of the DC Clique, highlighting perfectly that there is a strong intergroup element to the habitual attacking of certain unpopular posters (labeled the “misfit toys” after the classic Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer TV special) in the off topic sections:

Poster S: She might be right for a change. She is the leader of attacking the perceived unpopular posters club, and ****, except for the Rand Paul stuff, and everyone is entitled to an opinion, seems ok enough. I shouldn't be attacking another one of Miss Sunshine's 'misfit toys', since I'm the head of the group, apparently.

The conflict between the DC Clique and socially awkward posters is but one example of the ways in which social creativity demands that groups in OT maintain favorable social comparisons with other groups by way of verbal combat and attempting to portray the other group as awkward or weird. As we will see in the concluding section of this chapter about Social Competition, the blue-tag led groups in General Off Topic harness the positive associations generated via social creativity into a competition for board resources, creating a perpetual state of conflict in that area of the forum. Before that can occur an account must be given of the way that the regional subforum scheme also creates avenues for social creativity.

Although both factors have a role, social creativity in the seven regional subforums is less about weather preference or maligning awkward posters but instead is about extolling the virtues of their region in relation to others. As mentioned above in the section about weather preferences and weenies, one of the most common tactics available for intergroup comparison and social creativity is to describe other regions/out-groups as being full of weenies while describing the ingroup region as being a zone populated by informed and intelligent posters. One prominent example of this occurred during the winter of 2010-11 when posters in the Philadelphia area began to more aggressively assert that their region was different enough from the New York City region to justify splitting the group into two regions. Despite there being only about 100 miles of geographic distance between the two cities and many similarities in climate, the Philadelphia posters successfully used social creativity to articulate that the New York weenies were dragging down the level of conversation, warranting a subforum split. A poster (who many would label a weenie himself) from the suburbs of Philadelphia wrote:

Poster Y: With all the NYC weenies and wishcasters and such its become so unreadable and the philly region people are being pushed out and such we cant make heads or tails in there anymore because of it becoming so majorly focused on NYC and leaving Philly out in the dark and left behind, its becoming really bad.

I think and i have others who agree that this is the time to split the NYC and Philly subforum from being one into 2, One for NYC folks and 1 for the Philadelphia based regions. If you agree or disagree post your thoughts here.

Others in the Philadelphia area chimed in using similar group terminology:

Poster Z: I agree with (Poster Y). This +1.000.000. I used to be against splitting PHL and NYC up, but these past couple of days have taken the cake. We need to be split. PHL people can't get a work in edgewise, with all the NYC area weenies wishcasting and fighting among themselves, like frigging 12 year olds.

There are examples of this occurring in other regions as well. One of the classic rivalries on the website is the one between the Mid-Atlantic and New England. The ever opinionated Poster T provides the best example of this rivalry by taking a potshot at the New England group in a thread full of Mid-Atlantic posters labeled “SNE weenies are gross and disgusting”, labeling the group as being populated by “massholes and meatheads” as a way of denigrating the intelligence and class of the New England group:

Poster T: I have never seen a more bitter bunch coming off a climo winter.....You'd think they had 50% of climo last winter....I guess it is too much to expect massholes and meatheads to understand simple concepts like climatology and averages....

One final example comes from the Southeast region, which bolsters its own group-image by championing its group as being the most well behaved. In a tongue and cheek thread about which groups have the “worst posters”, one of the staff members tasked with moderating the Southeast region made an incredibly serious post demonstrating the Southeast region’s version of social creativity and how it differs from the rivalry that persists between the sub-forums to the north:

Poster AA: Not to sound like I'm bragging or anything....well actually I am lol, but I'm glad the southeast forum does not have the same problems as some of the others because you won't find a more respectful group anywhere on the weather side of this board. If there is something major going on in NC, you won't see NC members bitching about members being upset over a bust in Ga. In fact, it's just the opposite..there are "condolences" from the NC crew and at the same time Ga posters will congratulate the nc posters. Same holds true if the nc crew is screwed and ga gets hit. It's also noteworthy that if one area gets screwed, the complaining is always tolerable. With the exception of a very few instances, it's always within reason. And you would never see NC posters rushing in to a thread and trashing it with complaints if Ga was getting hammered..nor the other way around. By doing what Kush is describing, you are only making people dislike you and even disliking your entire area.

In less active times or with a system that clearly will hit one area more than the other, there are also no fights if the discussion focuses on north carolina instead of georgia or

vice versa. The only issue that we have had, and it's just been 2 or 3 times, is a few, very few, tennessee posters feel left out sometimes and frankly they have a point...but it's only because there aren't many posters there but as I told them as more and more posters join, more attention will be given to them. However, most TN posters understand this and it's no problem. Same thing for all posters. We only have a couple of al posters and honestly they too get ignored a lot due to so few from there but they never complain.

Now that it has been established that there are a variety of Social Creativity techniques on American Weather and that those techniques vary based upon which group is deploying them, the next step is to demonstrate some of the ways that groups not only inflate their own importance and positive attributes, but how they come into direct competition and conflict with one another. This process is called social competition in the terminology of SIT.

Social Competition

One of the basic premises of social identity theory is that in every community there are forms of social competition. When conceived of in the broadest sense, the distribution of finite resources demands that various groups compete for a share of those resources, provoking intergroup conflict. American Weather is no exception to this rule. As the section above on social creativity demonstrates, there is a large degree of rivalry between different factions on American Weather. Some of that competition may be considered petty and unnecessary to outsiders, but in reality there are board resources at stake, which provide prizes to be captured by the dominant groups on the board. This section will first describe the way in which social competition starts at a very high level between American Weather and other weather boards,

then step down to a smaller level and provide some examples of the ways in which subgroups on American Weather battle for forum resources.

At the highest level, American Weather can be conceived of as a group unto itself, which engages in social competition with other boards. As shown in the section on individual mobility, the board competes with other weather-related forums for traffic. Although some people find time to post at multiple boards, many people tend to spend almost all of their weather-forum related time at one place. The staff of American Weather knows this and has invested both time and money in attracting and retaining members. Members themselves are the resources that are at stake. Without a healthy membership base many boards (such as fortysouthwx.com) simply fail.

At the subgroup level the competition intensifies and what is considered a resource worth fighting over shifts from the people themselves to the benefits of the board itself. Several of the examples of social creativity given above also tie into the question of competition for resources. The creation of a new region entails the assignment of new staff members and board space. The development of social hierarchies in the off topic sections translates into the development of influence, which can be used to shape board policies. The staff at American Weather generally is malleable to the suggestions of influential groups of posters, providing the incentive to seek power while minimizing the power of others. The end of the weenie tag system, the splitting of the board into sub-regions, policies related to avatars and signatures, and the banning and suspension of “trouble” posters have all been precipitated by groups who achieved influence and then pushed their own agendas upon the rest of the membership base.

The following is a summary of a few other aspects of social competition that are relevant to the intergroup dynamic on the board. My structure of the discussion follows the order set out

in the beginning of Research Question 1, starting with the cold/warm rivalry, followed by the tag system, and finishing with examples drawn from the regional subforum scheme.

Competition between the Warministas and the snow enthusiasts is particularly intense during the transitional seasons of Spring and Fall, when the weather is highly volatile and both warm and cold options are available as possible outcomes. In this example, a snow enthusiast from New England sees the weather itself as being something worth entering into social competition over and engages directly in calling out the Warministas, accusing them of being disruptive by labeling them as trolls (presumably to encourage the staff to do something about people rooting for warm weather:

Poster BB: I just want it to snow like a mofo through April just to p*ss off the Warminista trolls.

Ten days later the same poster continues the attacks on Warministas, using the same basic talking points about the group once again:

Poster BB: Well, for a month that so many declared Winter over it looks like nearly all of SNE carded over 20+", just shy of 36" here. We're ending the month under a WWA with more cold air poised to rush in. I'm sure the warminista antagonists will be blowing their horns again prematurely as they are so prone to do. In the meantime March will, in the end, provide more snowy times for SNE. Get out and enjoy more Winter people. (Just wait until the heavy icing subsides. lol)

About a half hour later the anti Warminista polemic continues after another poster responds with a wisecrack about heavy icing:

Poster BB: That must be why I have almost 4' more snow than you this season. You'll get the mud and bare ground you want so badly while winter continues here. You really have morphed into a obnoxious troll.

Although the intergroup competition is sometimes bordering on nasty as demonstrated above, oftentimes it is manifested in more playful ways, as exemplified by this post by a popular regional meteorologist which received numerous favorable responses in the New England sub-forum:

Poster M: The path of the righteous weenie is beset on all snow events and by the inequities of the selfish and warminista thoughts of evil energy mets. Blessed is he, who in the name of snow and good will, sheperds the weenies through the dark times of torches. For he is truly his weenie's keeper and the finder of lost weenies. And I will strike down upon thee with great vengeance and furious snow storms, those who attempt to poison and destroy my snowpack. And you will know I am rev kev, when I lay my weenie upon you.

In addition to the competitive environment that exists between groups with different weather preferences, social competition also emerges within the regional groups that exist on American Weather. The example of the Philadelphia-New York City sub-forum split given in the section about social creativity was about more than just an attempt by Philadelphia region posters

to label their rivals as weenies, but also a grab for resources. Philadelphia would now have its own space on the board free from the “clutter” of other groups’ posts. Moderators were reassigned to cover the new sub-forum and the meteorologists who were from Philadelphia would no longer have to split the finite time they had to post responses to amateur questions between the Philadelphia region and the New York City region. This is but one example of regionalism fostering a competition over resources, because the same struggle plays out in other regions as well.

Perhaps the best example of this trend of competition between regions that has not already been introduced earlier is the way in which members of the Central and Western sub-forum argue that their group has been marginalized by the board staff and the other groups to the east. Because the community was previously situated at the website “easternuswx.com” and the fact that the vast majority of the board’s membership hails from the east coast of the United States the Central and Western members feel that their interests are often marginalized. Part of the argument stems from size differences between the regions. Whereas some cities such as Philadelphia have their own region, the Central and Western forum covers almost two thirds of the continental United States. People in from the Central and Western sub-forum often complain about having to post and interact with members who are thousands of miles away and several climate zones away. A meteorologist from Oregon made this point in a thread where chopping up the sub-forum was being discussed, in response to a post downplaying the differences between posters in the Central and Western sub-forum:

Poster CC: Comparatively speaking, yes it does. Specifically as compared with the "western/central" subforum. Obviously there are pretty substantial differences in the

extreme areas of the region, but the differences are paltry in comparison to the differences across the western/central states... mostly because of the sheer size of that region, though the topography also has a large impact out west.

The point is more that people from the "southeast" identify much easier with others from the "southeast" than people from Michigan do with people from Kansas. I don't think that's a very controversial point, right?

Furthermore, members from west of the Appalachians have also complained not enough board resources have been put into sub-forum, especially when it comes to the selection of a yearly weather conference venue and the distribution of administrator positions. The complaints about unequal treatment have happened many times throughout the years, to the point where members of the staff have publicly commented that members in the region sees things through a conspiratorial lens:

Poster CC: Not only that, but we've bent over backwards for the Central/Midwest folks and got burned at the conference. We've made sure to make that group feel included.

The persecution complex is real and intense. I remember Marcus took down the server for an hour for some clean up maintenance and a poster from the midwest swore it was a conspiracy against them because it was during a pop up line of thunderstorms.

As the experience of the Central and Western Group illustrates, sometimes it is not even necessary for there to be tangible resources at stake. Most of the board lives near the east coast and therefore it is structured to meet the needs of its members. Despite the unlikelihood that this

will ever change, members of the Central and Western forum continue to press the rest of the board for resources that they will likely never be given. None of this stops the group from continuing to see themselves in competition with others, even if the competition has already been decided.

There are many other places where regionalism breeds competition, most of which are rooted in the same issues that drove the Philadelphia-New York City split and persist in calls by the Central and Western group to more evenly divide up the regions. One thing that must be noted is that the social competition experienced at the level of weather type and region overlaps to a degree, complicating any straight forward explanation for how intergroup competition and communication functions on American Weather. Immediately after the exchange about the tropical crowd detailed in the Research Question 1 section of this chapter came another post from Poster H, the widely acknowledged “leader” of the tropics group, showing just how complicated the intergroup communication dynamic gets once weather preference is stacked on top of regional concerns:

Poster G: One last thing: I think the regional subforums were an enormously fortunate invention for the tropical community-- because before then, there was tension between 1) hardcore tropical dudes who are interested in tropical cyclones and 2) the seasonal/IMBY crowd that wants to examine every single cyclone through the prism of their own region-- i.e., they live in VA and want to discuss the chances of every single African system hitting VA.

The regional sub-forums solved this. When we have a cyclone, the tropical dudes discuss it from a more technical perspective in the main thread, and the seasonal/IMBY folks can

go totally nutty and talk about Isabel/1938 again and again in their respective regional threads-- and we're all happy. A perfect solution.

As this quote illustrates, competition for uncluttered board space is always at stake because American Weather is a large message board with thousands of members. The cleavages that result from one aspect of the design of the site (in this case weather preference) can be either smoothed over or further complicated by the way the region system shapes discussion. In this case, the tropical enthusiasts enjoy the regional set up because it reduces the pressure of part-time enthusiasts from the Northeastern United States who mostly follow snow flooding threads about tropical systems that could only pose a potential threat to their backyard.

Chapter 5 - Discussion

American Weather is a website where thousands of individuals congregate to discuss the weather. Most members of the board do not know each other outside of the interactions that take place on the board itself, leaving an environment full of uncertainty about the identities and motives of those who are involved. What little cues the members do receive are quickly filtered through pre-existing ideas about what it means to be a poster from New England or a member of the severe weather crowd. Given the permissive environment cultivated by the staff, and the structural aspects of the board, which contribute to formation of groups and competition between them, American Weather is a highly suitable forum for testing and refining the assumptions of Social Identity Theory in a world that is increasingly digital and mediated. Although the project I have conducted does not answer every question about the way people communicate on American Weather or the applicability of Social Identity Theory to Internet forums writ large, there are multiple reasons why it is important to consider the data collected and discussed in the previous chapter.

First, the findings inform the broader discussion of how communication occurs in online communities. It is clear now that the dangers that Utz (2003) and Postmes and Baym (2010) described of overly focusing on interpersonal communication to the detriment of intergroup modes of discussion is real and palpable, at least in the case of the American Weather forum. As Postmes and Baym explain, there are certain instances where action is “informed by social behaviors that are not reducible to individual or interpersonal influences, but are best understood as characteristics of the group as an entity, i.e. social norms or identity” (2010, p. 220). On American Weather, users routinely forgo the option of communicating as individuals qua

individuals, instead preferring to discuss matters in terms of group identity, group behavior and group resources. This pattern is played out on both the weather side of the board and in the off topic forums. It happens with individuals interested in both snow and rain. The staff, the meteorologists, and the amateur hobbyists all engage in intergroup communication to various degrees. Although not every discussion between members takes this path, enough do to create lasting rivalries and the persistence of threads devoted to discussing group behavior. When this study's results are combined with other studies such as those conducted by Utz on Multi-User Dungeons (2000), Ellis and Maoz on online arguments between Jews and Palestinians (2003), Hughey on Black identity online (2008), and others, the salience of intergroup communication and the importance of theories of social identity become obvious. One cannot help agreeing with Postmes and Baym's conclusion that "the neglect of the intergroup dimension of the Internet...has rendered analysis of its social effects on interpersonal relations and within groups powerless." (2010, p. 230).

Another reason why the results gathered and interpreted here are of significance is because of the critical lack of attention that has been given to intergroup phenomena by researchers studying computer-mediated communication (Postmes and Baym, 2010). Although one study can only do so much to make up for over a decade of neglect, this study not only helps to close the gap, but also provides novel insight that other studies of online intergroup phenomena may have missed. As detailed in the research question one findings, the structure of the American Weather board creates an environment that fosters intergroup communication and competition. Other published research has described the processes by which intergroup communication occurs, but has often not sought to explain the origins of groups in the first place. In the original studies conducted by SIT pioneers Tajfel and Turner, the researchers started with

a simple experiment that arbitrarily placed people into groups and then asked them to dole out a finite amount of money as they saw fit. The major finding of this study was that the mere creation of sets of people ensures group competition and conflict. Decades have passed since the initial studies and the lessons learned are still as relevant today. When one looks at American Weather it is easy to see the ways that the structure of a virtual community has a partially determinant role in shaping the way people assemble into groups and behave when interacting with one another. While some groups are chosen—a poster opts to identify with being from New York as opposed to Philadelphia, others are assigned to them upon signing up for the board (e.g. member tags). For individuals who see Internet discussion boards as a potential catalyst for democratic deliberation and liberal tolerance via encountering other points of view, the question of structure is one that must be attended to with the lessons of American Weather in mind. For if forums for discussion are created in a way that exacerbates group cleavages, the likelihood of successful conflict resolution and true understanding of other points of view wanes.

The material related to the second research question lines up well with the existing body of literature on the way in which social identity is managed and deployed. Assumptions inherent to Social Identity Theory about individual mobility, social creativity, and social competition were all confirmed when looking at the intergroup behavior of at least 30 prominent members of American Weather as they interacted with others. Countless other members whose writings did not receive quotation in the previous chapter worked to bolster the conclusions made.

Member choices to both join the board and leave the board are consistent with Social Identity Theory's claim that individuals rely upon the portability of identity to create individual mobility. Many members of the board traveled to American Weather from some other online weather forum. These members decided that the groups present on American Weather fit their

needs better than those present on other boards. This was true of people seeking both information about the weather and a stimulating social experience. Posters who used individual mobility as a way of choosing American Weather over other boards frequently remarked that they were happy to have moved past whatever group dynamic was present at their previous boards, that they had found a social home, and that the quality of weather information they received was superior. On the other hand, members who chose to leave the board were also engaging in individual mobility. Many of the people who left voluntarily or were banned by the staff had a moment where they blamed their departure on cliquish behavior, favoritism towards certain groups, or the machinations of some plot designed to make them and others like them unwelcome.

Likewise, Social Identity Theory's explanation of the importance of social creativity in shaping the intergroup dynamic lines up well with what was experienced at American Weather. Groups had a variety of self-serving formulas for determining which group was the "best". Some of these criteria were related to knowledge, others to social awkwardness, and some were related to physical factors such as the size of the group and the climatology of the area it is associated with. Groups used social creativity both as a means of bolstering their own image to group members and outsiders, but also as a way of denigrating out-groups. These attempts at social creativity created both hostile and playful exchanges, some of which were ignored but others of which spiraled into open and lingering conflict.

The final assumption of Social Identity Theory found to be present all over American Weather was social competition. American Weather itself engages in social competition with other boards for resources, namely meteorologists and posters who contribute positively to the board itself. At a more local level, however, the subgroups on the board compete for resources

in a manner that is consistent with what SIT would predict. Because there is a scarcity of moderators, meteorologists willing to answer questions, and uncluttered board space, the regional groups have an incentive to organize and demand their own sub-forums, where all three of those resources can be hoarded. Likewise, because members of the staff are subject to pressure from outside groups, all groups on the board compete for the ability to influence staff policies on a range of issues from appropriate posting guidelines to the decision to suspend or ban individual members.

Finally, the question of whether Social Identity Theory needs to be modified to fit into the digital environment is one that is heavily discussed in the recent literature on the topic (Giles 2010). As the discursive environment of American Weather demonstrates, SIT is not in need of a major overhaul to its core assumptions in order to accommodate Internet communities. In fact, because of the amplified role of uncertainty on Internet forums, the utility of the theoretical framework provided by SIT is enhanced. Posters on American Weather display all of the classic intergroup behaviors that have been a hallmark of SIT since its inception. Members use individual mobility to seek the best fitting group for themselves. Groups create and maintain positive images of themselves by means of social creativity and the marginalization of out groups. Competition at the group level creates communicative combat between the groups as they jockey for resources.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Despite living as members of a society where many outlets for group rivalry are promoted, from politics to sports to within the business world, we expect certain topics of conversation to remain relatively uncontroversial, and the weather is one of those “safe” topics. After all, the weather is supposed to be a quintessential topic of “small talk”—something that we can talk to strangers about without offending them or provoking conflict. However, as the experience of many on American Weather indicates, the banality of weather is not something that guarantees that conversations about it will remain civil. As I have shown, sometimes group conflict is a more attractive option than simply having a civil discussion. This is both a function of the structure of the forum where conversations are happening, and the way in which groups operate in competition with one another. But beyond American Weather, there are implications for this project that speak to broader issues both within the discipline of Communication Studies and the offline world itself.

As scholarly activity related to the Internet has proliferated, researchers have been faced with uncertainty over the social and cultural meaningfulness of Internet activity itself; the question of whether online environments have more similarities or differences with offline environments, and even the basic unit, whether that be the group or the individual, with which to start analysis. Our discipline has chosen a variety of routes to understanding online communication; and while there are multiple instances of researchers studying how the individual communicates on dating sites, social networks, and forums, the study of intergroup communication in online environments has been minimal. While its important to understand the individual’s interpersonal communication choices online, research has shown that in situations

where we aren't as familiar with those around us (e.g. an online environment where every person you interact with could potentially be a stranger) we tend to understand our self and those we are communicating with in terms of group distinctions (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Postmes and Baym, 2005). It would stand to reason then that instead of spending our time researching strictly interpersonal communication in online environments that its important that we begin to understand the intergroup implications of communicating online as well.

This study of the Internet bulletin board American Weather has sought to fill that gap that exists in the literature on intergroup communication, concluding that for many people online bulletin boards are a rich source of information and camaraderie. Within the milieu of online forums the structure of message boards themselves and the anonymity of other posters forms a breeding ground for group formation and intergroup behavior, all of which can only be understood properly via a lens that begins with the group itself instead of the individual as the unit of analysis. Social Identity Theory provides such a lens, allowing for a rich and textured understanding of issues surrounding digital-age forums such as American Weather. If more is understood about the way in which groups interact with one another via mechanisms of individual mobility, social creativity, and social comparison, then measures can be crafted to adjust online social environments to maximize the benefits of group affiliations while minimizing the disruptions that they may cause.

As an added benefit, learning more about group behavior has benefits for non-digital settings as well, by understanding how we engage in intergroup conflict with individuals who we generally have few interpersonal ties with, we can better evaluate how to deal with conflict in the workplace, communities, and even between groups of different socio-economic status. The more we understand about group conflict, the better the possibility of resolving it in offline settings,

allowing for society to combat the ills of ethnocentrism, xenophobia, and other forms of cultural stereotyping. After all, the first step to ending any conflict is to come to terms with the factors that precipitate it. Instead of seeking out proximate causes that are specific to a given conflict, starting with the dynamics of the group provides another way of thinking about problems, enhancing the chances that the world's offline intergroup conflicts can be mitigated.

Limitations

As with any form of ethnographic approach, careful consideration has to be given to what conclusions can be considered analysis and what can be considered mere opinion. The onus is upon the researcher to keep an open mind and let the explanation come to them naturally instead of coaxing it out of the group being studied or cherry-picking data and examples. I have tried my best to maintain this approach throughout the months I have been studying American Weather. That being said, I am a regular member of the forum and have been part of the community for years, long before I ever considered studying the board as an academic project. The sources of tension that I felt were never related to my ethics as a researcher. It was easy to find intergroup conflict since it was everywhere on American Weather, and I never had the need to provoke it solely for the purposes of study. Where I did feel a sense of tension was in my own actions. I often wondered whether I would have participated in some of the discussions in a different way had I not been researching the board. "Am I being myself?" is a question I pondered numerous times during the period where I was simultaneously researching and posting. Ultimately this process led me to the conclusion that all I could do was to be transparent and give an honest account of what I saw and how I interpreted it. Ultimately, whatever concerns arise from me being too close to the action as a researcher are overwhelmed by the depth of analysis that only an insider can provide.

An additional limitation to the research resides in the method; the very nature of participant observation sans interview can have its limitations in that I can only infer what I believe to be true from observing the profiles of participants, but without additional interviews to triangulate, this remains a one-sided view of the findings. In many instances I chose quotes where the member themselves draws the inference. Luckily American Weather is a forum where reflexivity over the nature of intergroup conflict itself is a frequent topic of conversation, enabling me to tell the story using as many of the original words and interpretations of the participants themselves. Throughout the project I have maintained constant contact with numerous members of the board, using them as a sounding board for ideas and asking them for advice and their own interpretations of conversations, creating the best possible interpretation possible short of actual formalized interviews.

Beyond questions of ethnographic approach, there were other constraints, which prevented me from fully reaching theoretical saturation and the ability to definitely say that I had mapped out the intricacies of intergroup behavior on American Weather. The board is simply too big and too fast to keep up with every discussion that may have been of relevance to the conclusions I have made. This was apparent almost immediately when I sat down to begin thinking about how to answer a now-discarded research question pertaining to the frequency of intergroup discussion. American Weather had over 830,000 posts over the span of eight months, with more and more coming every day. To catalogue all of the posts, filter them for intergroup talk and avoid the pitfalls of detached content analysis would have been a task that would be beyond my means.

Likewise, American Weather is just one website and has a fair degree of eccentricities. Demographically it skews towards well-educated males. The board has a staff that is permissive

of group conflict. The forum software differs from that which is used by many other boards. All of the reasons why American Weather is not representative of other boards are acknowledged. Nevertheless, since every forum (and every community) has its own peculiarities, the same could be said of any study, which engages with a particular forum. Regardless, my findings are consistent with the literature base on social identity and what little has been written regarding the way it manifests itself in online environments, which means it should not be fully discounted for failure to be representative.

Future Research

As Postmes and Baym (2010) argue, there is a significant and ongoing need for new research into the way group affiliation functions to shape online reality. My own future research into American Weather needs to include a better system for triangulating conclusions, including involving more members of the board in actively interpreting the meaning of the data, which I have gathered. This will better enable me to justify the conclusions, which I have drawn about intergroup conflict on the board itself. Further areas of exploration involve the role of the staff and board policies in shaping the intergroup environment and the factors that cause some people to relish in intergroup conflict while others avoid it altogether. Another possible direction for study is to address the question of how a community like American Weather evolves over time. In several years will the same group rivalries exist or will they fail to stand the test of time. There will never be an end to the questions that can be asked about what makes American Weather the unique environment that it is.

Taking a broader view that encompasses forums other than American Weather and research other than my own, one of the most important things researchers can do is test theory in a large variety of settings. In order to build a robust account of how intergroup communication

functions in online settings it will be necessary to conduct more research into other venues, from small to large and from mainstream to niche. The Internet is filled with thousands of special interest forums and it is unlikely that all or even most of those websites will ever be visited by researchers interested in the communication habits of their posters, but that does not make the study of more of them a futile task. This preliminary account of how groups communicate on one particular message board opens up additional questions that may be useful for future researchers. Of particular interest would be testing the conclusions that I have drawn regarding the role that board structure plays in facilitating or restricting intergroup communication and conflict; does the very nature of how the website was constructed cause conflict to occur?

In the end we return to that first image of American Weather: a drab blue web site; a series of forums structurally set up to talk about different weather in different areas by different people. Yet this study has shown just how flawed that image is—with over 100,000 posts a month and members who view their interactions on the site as an important component of their lives, we must continue to understand the connections being formed online and the implications they have for the study of both intergroup and computer-mediated communication.

Ashforth and Mael (1989) suggested that individuals tend to identify with groups as a means of defining their self within a given social environment. While that social environment they spoke of was not the online forums and boards we know today, we can see from this project that this is exactly what individuals are doing. Whether this be a result of the structure of the site (e.g. specific forums for different regions) or a result of discussion (e.g. threads that pit warm weather versus cold weather), this study has shown us that even a topic and website as seemingly anonymous as the weather can lead to intergroup conflict. It is when we begin to dig deeper into

these relationships that form and the threads of discussion that unfold that we can move forward in preventing conflict that damages those relationships.

In a world where so many of our social interactions are becoming increasingly mediated by computers and taking place in virtual spaces, these issues with intergroup conflict will continue to arise. If the weather can provoke discussions such as those that I have documented via this project, then it stands to reason that any topic can be a flashpoint for group conflict if it inserted into a framework that promotes divisive group identities. This conclusion serves as a sobering reminder for those who see the Internet as a place where social interaction between strangers produce enhanced understanding and tolerance. Are we hard wired to otherize and place individuals we first meet into groups that inevitably lead to conflict—or is the Internet really a place where we look to form interpersonal, rather than intergroup connections? Without attending to the elements that produce group conflict and without future research into why we choose to attend to intergroup rather than interpersonal ties in online environments, it is unlikely that progress will be made, and unlikely that we'll ever know the answer to these questions we often ask regarding group conflict.

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Appendix A - Informed Consent

<http://www.americanwx.com/bb/index.php/topic/2883-wut/#entry91843>

Hello everybody. As many of you may have already heard, I am studying communication on the board as part of the requirements for finishing my master's degree. Over the coming months, I will be reading many posts and analyzing them for their content. At no point will I ever disclose (by screen name or real name) any personal details about any of you, meaning that you should not feel like your privacy is at stake. If you have any questions or concerns about my studies and how they pertain to you, feel free to send me a private message or email me at jkoehle AT ksu.edu.

Appendix B - Codes of Groups on Americanwx

Code	Definition/Description
1. Green Tag	Moderators on the Board
2. Black Tag	Administrators on the Board
3. Red Tag	Meteorologists on the Board
4. Orange Tag	Professional Forecasters on the Board
5. Blue Tag	Hobbyists on the Board
6. New England Region	Posters who identify as being a part of the NE Region Sub-Forum
7. Upstate New York/PA	Posters who identify as being a part of the Upstate NY/PA Region Sub-Forum
8. NYC Metro	Posters who identify as being a part of the NYC Metro Region Sub-Forum
9. Philly Metro	Posters who identify as being a part of the Philly Metro Region Sub-Forum
10. Mid-Atlantic	Posters who identify as being a part of the Mid-Atlantic Region Sub-Forum
11. Southeast	Posters who identify as being a part of the SE Region Sub-Forum
12. Central/Western	Posters who identify as being a part of the Central/Western Region Sub-Forum
13. Snow Enthusiasts	Posters who identify themselves as primarily interested in snow/cold weather phenomenon

14. Warministas	Posters who identify themselves as primarily interested in warm weather phenomenon
15. Tropical Crowd	Posters who identify themselves as primarily interested in tropical weather phenomenon
16. Severe Weather Crowd	Posters who identify themselves as primarily interested in severe weather phenomenon of the warm weather variety
17. Weenies	Posters identified by others by the term 'weenies' who are considered the lowest out-group on the board
18. D.C. Clique	Posters from the D.C. area who frequent the off-topic forums, focuses heavily on intelligence and social grace

Appendix C – The Member Tag System



Mark my words!!! Third party sources have told me...

ADMINISTRATOR



Posts: 5,759

Joined: November 9, 2010

Location [Washington, DC](#)



unique

METEOROLOGIST



Posts: 1,438

Joined: November 20, 2010

Location [Asheville, NC \(UNCA\)](#)



PRO FORECASTER



Posts: 614

Joined: November 15, 2010

Location [Lancaster, Pennsylvania](#)



MODERATOR



Posts: 5,208

Joined: November 9, 2010

Location [Lafayette, IN](#)



MEMBER










Posts: 2,556

Joined: November 16, 2010

Location [Rutherford NJ](#)

Appendix D – The Regional Forums

Regional Weather Discussion Subforums	
Forum	Last Post Info
 New England	In: Dog days continue, summer d... By: CapeCodWeather.net » 2 minutes ago
 Upstate New York/Pennsylvania	In: Central PA Summer Thread By: canderson » 39 minutes ago
 New York City Metro Covering NYC Metro, Northern and Central NJ, SW CT	In: August NYC Metro WX Disco By: winterwarlock » 9 minutes ago
 Philadelphia Region Covering PHL metro, South and Central NJ, Northern DE and South Central PA	In: E PA/NJ/DE/NE MD/Elko, NV :... By: winterwarlock » 8 minutes ago
 Mid Atlantic	In: HEAT WAVE 6 now underway..... By: Ian » 4 minutes ago
 Southeastern States	In: Winter 2011-2012 By: VirginiaHippie » 8 minutes ago
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