The Queer Eternal September: LGBTQ Identity on the Early Internet and Web

by

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the expression of queer identity and community on the early internet and web, and suggests a methodology for working with archived internet and web sources when exploring the history of marginalized groups. I argue that the explosion of new users which accompanied the popularization of networking technologies between 1983 and 1999 changed and diversified the ways that individuals expressed their own identity, even as these users mediated a codified vocabulary for expressing what it means to be queer. By combining computational methods with traditional close reading, this dissertation suggests a methodology for working with large-scale archived web and internet sources, which can ethically maintain context and significance without losing individual voices.

I use a combination of text and network analysis in exploring user interaction and self-narrative within archived internet and web collections. Part one of this dissertation examines the distributed newsgroup service Usenet and the movement of users from one unified "gay and lesbian" newsgroup to hundreds of specialized groups for a multitude of identity categories, including specific sexual orientations and preferences, as well as gender identities. Using text analysis and topic modelling to delve into these large-scale sources, I argue that these archived Usenet materials reveal group tensions, as well as trends in labelling and social organization, during a period when the number of new users and new groups was growing at exponential rates. Part two of this dissertation follows these communities on to a new technology: the web. Faced with a seemingly unlimited platform to gather and communicate, we see user choices constrained by issues of discoverability and monetization, which helped to perpetuate existing queer hegemonies. Through a combination of text analysis and network analysis on large-scale sources like GeoCities.com's "WestHollywood" community, I examine the implications of the proliferation of an Anglo lexicon for describing queer identity on an increasingly-global stage. This dissertation contributes to the historiography on gay and lesbian history, and suggests methods for researchers engaging with queer and gender theory along with computational methods.

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Introduction

One of the largest lesbian communities on the early internet started with a joke about shoes.

On September 4, 1994, a discussion of computer operating systems on comp.misc, a

technology-focused Usenet newsgroup, turned into tongue-in-cheek chatter about "lesbian

shoes." This was much to the consternation of some users who preferred that the newsgroup

keep on topic. "You've done it now," wrote one user, who sent the message to both the original

discussion group, as well as a new newsgroup: alt.shoe.lesbians.[1] This simple act of sending the

message to this group, which had not existed until that moment, caused alt.shoe.lesbians to

spring into existence. The group languished in obscurity for several weeks, receiving only the

occasional joke or spam message, before suddenly taking off in November of 1994, when

several women began discussing lesbian relationships and monogamy. "Is this an appropriate

place to ask *really* personal questions, entirely unrelated to shoes (BTW, I'm partial to flats

and sneaks and L.L. Bean Bluechers)?" began the post written by Usenet user Elizabeth

Holman.[2] Implausibly, alt.shoe.lesbians would become the very first large-scale lesbian-focused

community on the internet, receiving approximately one-hundred messages per month in 1995

and 1996, and nearly 30,000 messages over the group's entire lifetime.

The newsgroup alt.shoe.lesbians illustrates the turbulent nature of Usenet, and the

internet as a whole, during the early 1990s period that came to be known as the "Eternal

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[1] Azmi Tenikalp, "Lesbian shoes," posted to comp.misc and alt.shoe.lesbians on September 4, 1994. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!topic/alt.shoe.lesbians/xEIPJatCyZg. (accessed October 22, 2019).
[2] Elizabeth Holman, "A Personal Question," posted to alt.shoe.lesbians on November 10, 1994. Archived by the *Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection.*

September." If Septembers of the 1980s had seen an influx of new internet users as they arrived on campuses, new users were now streaming in on a daily, or "eternal," basis. New communities like alt.shoe.lesbians appeared nearly instantaneously, populated by a flood of new users who, in many cases, were just trying to find their way around this new and emerging technology. This "Eternal September" had a significant effect on the LGBTQ community. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender users had been early adopters of networked technologies, creating vibrant, if not always harmonious, virtual spaces on the internet. This flood of new users, which continued and accelerated with the introduction of the web by the middle of the 1990s, revolutionized the LGBTQ community, both online and off.

This dissertation explores the dramatic transformation that online LGBTQ communities underwent between 1983 and 1999, arguing that networked communication platforms from Usenet to the web both enabled the creation of community, and shaped it in notable ways that continue to have an impact today. A diverse set of identity categories within the queer community were developed in part within the early internet forums and, as torrents of new users came online with the advent of the World Wide Web, these technologies inscribed stereotypes around queer identity and reinforced the centrality of an American anglophone rhetoric. Even as increasingly global users demanded new and diverse ways of expressing their identity, resulting in a codified vocabulary to describe queerness, this very process enabled a kind of transnational LGBTQ identity that permeated English and non-English-speaking users alike.

This process unfolded in two discrete processes. Accordingly, my dissertation reflects these processes through its two main parts. First, in 1983, when the first dedicated gay and

lesbian space on Usenet -- net.motss -- was created, a unified and homogenous gay and lesbian community was prioritized by its early creators. This community, and therefore net.motss as a whole, was more of an ideal than a reality. Tensions quickly grew between groups of users who found their worldviews shaken and altered by diversity within this supposedly "homogeneous" population of lesbian and gay users. I argue that the creation of a multitude of sexuality and gender categories was necessitated by the increased interaction amongst a diverse gay, lesbian, bisexual, and gender non-conforming population which occurred within these online communities. As the number of new users increased, so did the demands for an ever-increasing number of new communities – and correspondingly community rhetorics – which represented the new user base. These users constructed their own identity through the telling and retelling of self-narrative, which helped to solidify an agreed-upon lexicon of labelling in describing a multitude of queer identities.

The second part of this dissertation then traces the flood of new users associated with the introduction of the World Wide Web beginning in 1994. As LGBTQ users migrated towards this new platform, the communities that they formed and the choices that they made in expressing their own identity echoed earlier structures and hegemonies already established in existing internet communities. Furthermore, though the multimedia nature of the web – suddenly, instead of just text, users could communicate using fonts, images, and even video – opened up new opportunities for sharing ideas and cultures, it also served to reinforce stereotypes of what the queer community looked like and, therefore, what a queer website *should* look like.

This research examines deeply personal narratives which were published publicly, but in an era and on platforms where there were different assumptions of discoverability than we have about the internet today, and requires a nuanced approach to ethics. New scholarship is examining the ethical responsibility that historians and web archivists have when working with born digital materials that are freely and publicly available in web archives. In their 2020 paper on ethics and archived GeoCities personal webpages, Jimmy Lin et al. analyze the use of distant reading, as well as existing ethical frameworks and guidelines, and suggest that a systematic and reflective approach is needed in guiding the choices that historians make when using born digital sources.[3] Furthermore, it is important to consider, "historical representation, or the value of an inclusive and diverse historical record," in these decisions. They note:

> While the web, particularly the web of the late 1990s, is not a magical, all-encompassing place…it still does allow for the historical inclusion of some everyday people in dramatic fashion. We cannot simply abandon studies of social media platforms or websites like GeoCities due to privacy concerns, as that will have the effect of making the historical record skew towards the powerful: corporations, governments, elites, those who have established recordkeeping programs and digital preservation plans, or can actively shape their memory and legacy moving forward.[4]

In this perspective, the use of these born digital historical sources containing the voices of marginalized and underrepresented people is paramount to creating a diverse and inclusive historical record.

With these issues in mind, which are currently under wide debate in the field of web history and archiving, I have adopted an approach that aims to be sensitive to the

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[3] Jimmy Lin, Ian Milligan, Douglas Oard, Nick Ruest, and Katie Shilton, "We Could, but Should We? Ethical Considerations for Providing Access to GeoCities and Other Historical Digital Collections," In *2020 Conference on Human Information Interaction and Retrieval* (CHIIR '20), March 14–18, 2020, Vancouver, BC, Canada, 1.
[4] Ibid, 4.

consequences of dealing with personally identifiable individuals and their narratives. By using

distant reading, including text and network analysis, my research identifies trends in discourse

and language and labelling. However, these discussions often are narrowed down to the

individual level; given the personal and quite possibly harmful nature of some of this

information, I have made careful choices in omitting personally identifying information, and

certain individuals and content.[5] However, the very nature of my methodology isolates those

individuals and content which were considered by users at the time to be most "public" within

the community; these Usenet and web users often carefully cultivated an audience of like-

minded individuals.[6] In these cases, I feel that it would do a disservice to these users to remove

the authorship of their own messages and webpages. Through this careful and reflective

practice, this dissertation aims to create a diverse and inclusive historical record, which

provides new perspectives on queer identity on the internet and early web.

Geographic and Temporal Scope

My dissertation begins in 1983, with the founding of the first explicitly LGBTQ newsgroup on

Usenet, the aforementioned net.motss. Between 1979 and 1988, Usenet grew from a handful

of academic users, with an average of two messages sent per day in its first year, to

approximately 2000 posts a day by 1988, with users logging on from over 11 000 sites, mostly

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[5] Ian Milligan examines the tradeoffs involved in working with ethically-fraught websites in *History in the Age of Abundance?: How the Web is Transforming Historical Research* (Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2019).
[6] Stine Lomborg describes the increasingly fuzzy divide between the public and private when it comes to web material, arguing that some users have a notion of perceived privacy in social media that they don't have in other forms of web postings. Stine Lomborg, "Personal internet archives and ethics," *Research Ethics* 9:1 (2012).

from the United States and Canada.[7] Usenet had existed for several years before the founding

of net.motss, but it was throughout 1983 that users, both gay and straight, successfully

demanded of Usenet administrators the creation of a separate space for discussion of a gay and

lesbian nature. This one newsgroup would expand into hundreds of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and

transgender groups within a decade after its creation. Along with this expansion and

diversification came a flood of new discourse on what it meant to be gay – or queer, bisexual,

or transgender, as discussion on the very use of labels and identity categories made the issues

rather apparent – and how individuals would express their own self-identity on the new

medium. In 1993, the Eternal September arrived. With the introduction of thousands of new

users from internet service providers such as America Online and Prodigy, these groups

exploded in a number new users who were not affiliated with academic or research institutions.

In June of 1994, Usenet newsgroups averaged 67,344 messages a day; by October of 1997,

Usenet had grown to over 850 000 messages a day.[8] This time period shows a peak of rapid

growth, before sharply declining due to competition from other Internet technologies and

platforms for communication, notably the web.

The rapid expansion of Usenet would ultimately be eclipsed by the explosion of new

users on the web. While the Internet and the World Wide Web are often conflated in

contemporary rhetoric, they are distinct. The web, created in 1991 by European Organization

for Nuclear Research (CERN) researcher Tim Berners-Lee, is the application layer that Internet

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[7] Michael Hauben and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos: Wiley-IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997), 44.

[8] Larry R. Frey, *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Bonda Fide Groups* (London: Psychology Press, 2004), 339.

users interact with. The advent of the first public web browsers in 1992 brought an exponential increase in the number of new users. This new web made the earlier Internet far more accessible by allowing users to interact with an easy-to-use graphical interface, like many were familiar with through operating systems like Microsoft Windows, instead of through a command-line interface. By 1995, an estimated 16 million people were using the web worldwide and by 1999, this number had increased to over 195 million users.[9] To contextualize this rapid increase, in the United States, 4% of Americans had access to the Internet in 1995. The proportion of users increased to 23% of Americans in 1996, as the web gained in popularity, and 41% of Americans by 1998.[10] This rapid rate of increase was unprecedented, and represents the large-scale convergence of new users, at a time when uses of the technology and platform were still being mediated. Though the Internet had been steadily gaining in popularity in the years prior to the web, it was really the web that revolutionized Internet access and popularized the use of networked communications. This rapid migration of users on to the new medium had large-scale effects on both queer communities and the ways that individuals expressed their own identity.

My dissertation ends in 1999 with the first use of the term "Web 2.0" and the acknowledgement that the web was entering into a new era for users and developers. This transition from static web content, meant to be viewed, to interactive web content fundamentally changed our relationship with the web. The term "Web 2.0" was first coined by

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[9] "1994-2008 - 14 Years of Web Statistics at U.Va," University of Virginia, http://www.virginia.edu/virginia/archive/webstats.html.

[10] "The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary," Pew Research Center (January 14, 1999), https://www.people-press.org/1999/01/14/the-internet-news-audience-goes-ordinary/.

author and web developer Darcy DiNucci in a 1999 article in *Print Magazine*.[11] DiNucci

described 1999 as a critical period in web development, asserting that, "the Web, as we know it

now, is a fleeting thing. Web 1.0… The first glimmerings of Web 2.0 are beginning to appear."[12]

Web 2.0, as DiNucci described it, would be characterized by diverse user interfaces – phones

and tablets, TVs, and personal computers – that would render the inner workings of the

technology as invisible and integrate the technology into the lives of its users in an almost

seamless manner. The term Web 2.0 would be popularized by Tim O'Reilly and Dale

Dougherty's Web 2.0 Conference in 2004.[13] My periodization of 1983 to 1999 allows for the

charting of these new networked communities during their early years, when the technology

was novel, and the idea of rapid communication and interaction with friends and strangers in

other parts of the country and world was first being explored and mediated.

This time period also follows a period of global expansion of the use of networking

technologies. Particularly in the 1990s, we see an increase in discourse as new users particularly

from Western Europe, Japan, Brazil, and Australia logged on and began to engage. This

discourse has real implications for the study of how sexuality is expressed on the internet and

web. Recent scholarship has highlighted sexuality as something which is locally-mediated, but

also has been shaped and altered by "cultural encounter, imperialist expansion, transnational

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[11] Sam Hinton and Larissa Hjkorth, "What Is Web 2.0?," In *Understanding Social Media* (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 7-31.

[12] Darcy DiNucci, "Fragmented Future," *Print Magazine* (April 1999), 222.

[13] Tim O'Reilly and John Battelle, "Web Squared: Web 2.0 Five Years On Special Report," *Web 2.0 Summit,* https://assets.conferences.oreilly.com/1/event/28/web2009_websquared-whitepaper.pdf (accessed August 14, 2019).

migration, and international commerce."[14] The emergence of a global history of sexuality takes into account global differences in the mediation and expression of sexuality, but also the ways that transnational and global processes have changed this local nature. This perspective that sexuality is informed by both local and global influences is particularly prevalent in examining LGBTQ culture and politics in the 1980s and 1990s.

There is an increasingly global presence in the online sources that lie at the heart of this dissertation's research. During the early years of the internet, most users gained access through American institutions, both academic and otherwise. For this reason, much scholarship has focused on America as the geographical area of analysis. However, a growing body of scholarship in the digital humanities and new media studies has highlighted the importance of examining a global history of networked communication, and the importance of users worldwide in producing, mediating, and changing these technologies. Gerard Goggin and Mark McLelland, editors of the recent *Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories*, argue that the history of the Internet can only be understood as the mediation of global and local factors, which shape and continue to inform the internet today. Furthermore, there has been a tendency within the historiography to view the Internet as "deterritorialized." Instead, Goggin and McLelland posit that, "the Internet should, in fact, be understood in relation to different cultures of use, which are very much influenced by language, culture, and geographical

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[14] Robert M. Buffington, "Introduction," *A Global History of Sexuality: The Modern Era* ed. Robert M. Buffington, Eithne Luibhéid, Donna J. Guy (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 1. There are other notable works in this field. Ann Laura Stoler was the first to bring race and ethnicity in conversation with sexuality in *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (2002). This ideas have been picked up by other historians, such as in Saskia Wieringa and Horacio Sivori's (ed), *The Sexual History of the Global South: Sexual Politics in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (New York: Zed Books, 2013). Wieringa and Sivori argue for the need for new frameworks and methodologies for understanding sexuality on a global scale.

location."[15] My dissertation recognizes this global interaction and its effects not only on online

culture, but on LGBTQ identity and community as a whole.

Though recent scholarship has highlighted the importance of viewing the history of the

internet and the web as extending beyond its American origins, little attention has been paid to

the global aspects of Usenet in particular. However, we can see this awareness of the growing

global reach of the technology within the source base itself. In 1993, a Usenet FAQ was created

by the moderators of a 'newusers' group. This FAQ was periodically updated and re-sent out to

the group, as well as copied to other relevant locations, including local Internet Service Provider

(ISP) announcement channels, and admin communities. In this FAQ, moderator Mark Moraes

from the University of Toronto asserted that, though the origins of Usenet lie in the United

States, it is now a worldwide network — though, admittedly, mostly from Western countries

with large English-speaking populations -- with high concentrations of users in Canada, Europe,

Japan, and Australia. More significantly, Moraes requested that users "keep Usenet's

worldwide nature in mind when you post articles. Even those who can read your language may

have a culture wildly different from yours. When your words are read, they might not mean

what you think they mean."[16] Not only is there an acknowledgement of the growing number of

international users, but an entreaty to contribute positively and conscientiously to this online

cultural exchange. In emphasizing the global nature — and, significantly, *increasingly* global

nature — of these networked platforms during the 1980s and 1990s, we see the need for a

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[15] Gerard Goggin and Mark McLelland, eds. *The Routledge Companion to Global Internet Histories* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 8.

[16] Mark Moraes, "Subject: What is Usenet?" posted September 12, 1995. Archived by the University of Oklahoma, http://www.ou.edu/research/electron/internet/use-faq.htm.

nuanced approach to methods and theory, where sexuality is viewed in conversation with

ethnicity, nationality, language, and race, in order to understand the creation and expression of

identity online.

Identity and Self-Narrative

The digital humanities have had a fraught relationship with theory since the origins of the field

with literary studies in the 1980s, with the use of digital tools, methods, and resources within

the humanities in order to shed new light on diverse sources and topics. Furthermore, though

digital history is included under the umbrella of the digital humanities as a larger field, digital

history remains somewhat distinct from the digital humanities due to a general reluctance to

embrace digital analysis tools, despite a larger acceptance of digitized sources and

dissemination.[17]

Indeed, the field of digital history has been controversially characterized as being

divided between those who "hack" and those who "yack," delineating the acts of creating tools

and performing analysis as different from those in the field who engage with theory.[18]

However, these debates are largely counterproductive and demonstrate the need for scholars

to understand the tools and methods that they're using to perform complex analysis of large-

scale sources. My dissertation demonstrates how emerging computational methods can be

used to provide new perspectives on concepts like identity that have been largely grounded in

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[17] Stephen Robertson, "The Differences between Digital Humanities and Digital History," *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/ed4a1145-7044-42e9-a898-5ff8691b6628.

[18] Bethany Nowviskie, "On the Origin of 'Hack' and 'Yack,'" *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2016* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled/section/a5a2c3f4-65ca-4257-a8bb-6618d635c49f.

theory. In essence, it is crucial to both "hack" and "yack" to understand and interpret these large-scale born digital sources.

Understanding the theoretical origins of our construction of identity and sexuality is paramount to understanding the emerging division of online communities, and the ways that these communities changed and shifted during the 1980s and 1990s, according to identity categories. Similarly, the analysis of online narratives requires an understanding of autobiography and self-narrative, in order to make sense of the ways that individuals describe themselves to others on online platforms. These theoretical works in queer theory and English literature comprise the basis for my research on LGBTQ communities on Usenet and the early web. It is important to consider the foundation of our understanding of identity and identity politics within the LGBTQ population, which is largely built off the study of traditional forms of media, as well as queer theory. In understanding the construction of sexuality and gender on the internet and web, foundational works in queer theory have formed the basis for understanding the construction of these identity categories and communities within online media. Michael Foucault and Jeffrey Weeks' argued that society's division of sexual behaviour into normative and deviant categories has had the effect of prioritizing heterosexual monogamy and regulating homosexual behaviour.[19] We see this same identity regulation within the LGBTQ community, in controlling who is "in" and "out" of the community. This identity

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[19] Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (York: Vintage, 1976). Weeks, J, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality Since 1800* (New York: Trans-Atlantic Publications, 1989).

gatekeeping has been identified as an issue, particularly when it comes to the inclusion of

bisexual and transgender individuals.[20]

The 1980s and 1990s saw a surge of scholarship on identity and, in particular, identity

politics, with the goal of allowing marginalized groups to articulate their oppression in terms of

their own lived experience.[21] Scholarship on identity has been particularly prevalent in LGBTQ

and queer theory. Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler's works on queer and gender theory served

to define non-normative sexual and gender identities in relation to a culturally-defined

"normal."[22] This focus on the role of society in delineating the ways that individuals can express

their own sexual and gender identity has been influential, despite later criticism of Sedgwick

and Butler's failure to address the importance of these identity categories in giving individuals

the tools needed to describe who they are and where they fit in in the larger world. Later

scholarship has focused on the role of identity in community formation, and the use of labelling

in creating a sense of belonging and acceptance. The use of identity labels is particularly

powerful when used by an individual in order to describe their own journey to determine and

accept their own sexuality. Christopher Pullen argues that self-reflexive storytelling within

LGBTQ media, where gay and lesbian individuals articulate their own identity, has the ability to

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[20] Paula C. Rodriguez Rust, "Criticisms of the Scholarly Literature on Sexuality for Its Neglect of Bisexuality," and "Popular Images and the Growth of Bisexual Community and Visibility," in *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader* ed. Paula C. Rodriguez Rust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000). Rust groups bisexual and transgender identities into a category which, "finds themselves caught between the desire to deconstruct categories of sex and gender and the desire to develop positive identities in a discourse of identity politics that has thus far excluded them." (pg 544)

[21] Joan Wallach Scott, among others, articulates this in "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry* 17:4 (Summer 1991), 773-797.

[22] Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) describes the rise of homosexuality, which thus required the creation of heterosexual identities in its definition. Similarly, Judith Butler's 1990 work *Gender Trouble* examines the performativity of binary gender. Both of these works require the definition of culturally-constructed norms in order to explain society's fear and preoccupation with those who transgress.

foster community and social agency.[23] More recent scholarship has focused more on the role of

social media platforms, including MySpace, Facebook, Reddit, Instagram, and Tumblr, in

shaping LGBTQ community and discourse.[24] This dissertation engages with self-narrative and

identity on the internet and web, as a method and means of creating both virtual and real-life

community.

The self-narrative emerged as a unit of analysis for studying identity and the self in the

1980s and early 1990s, in such diverse fields as psychology, sociology, and literary theory. The

earliest of these works were in the field of psychological theory and concentrated on the use of

narrative to understand how individuals constructed their own self-identity. Psychologist

Donald Polkinghorne described the narrative representation of self as, "private and personal

stories linking diverse events of their lives into unified and understandable wholes. These are

stories about the self. They are the basis of personal identity and self-understanding and they

provide answers to the question 'Who am I?'"[25] While Polkinghorne viewed narrative as the

basis of self-identity, later works in psychology argued that self-narratives must be instead seen

as *remembered* self-narratives, and that care must be taken to distinguish between fiction and

reality when examining these writings. Psychologist Ulric Neisser introduces his edited volume

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[23] Christopher Pullen, *Gay Identity, New Storytelling and the Media* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 5.

[24] Recent scholarship on queer youth, identity, and the internet includes Alexander Cho, "Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine," *New Media and Society* 20:9 (2018). Samantha DeHaan, et al, "The Interplay between Online and Offline Explorations of Identity, Relationships, and Sex: A Mixed-Methods Study with LGBT Youth," *Journal of Sex Research* 50:5 (2013). Howard Earl Gardner and Katie Davis, *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy, and Imagination in a Digital World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013). Anthony Henry Triggs, Kristian Moller, Christina Neumayer, "Context collapse and anonymity among queer Reddit users," *New Media and Society* (November 2019). Avery Dame, "Making a name for yourself: tagging as transgender ontological practice on Tumblr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication 33:1 (2016).*

[25] Donald Polkinghorne, "Narrative and Self-Concept," *Journal of Narrative and Life History* 1(2&3), 1991, 136.

on construction and accuracy in self-narrative with the assertion that, "autobiographical memory is best taken with a grain of salt," and that self-narrative is subject to change on a near-daily basis, based on the changing perception of the individual relating these narratives.[26] Though these psychologists recognized the constructed nature of self-narrative, this was viewed as a problematic aspect which had to be overcome through specific methodologies.

By the early 2000s, the field of psychology had turned away from these issues of accuracy and imagery and towards the recognition of the subjective quality of personal memories. The process of remembering and recording events, the narrative form given to the events, and the self-protective skew often applied to these autobiographies were seen as much more important than the relationship between the narrative given and "reality."[27] Similarly, these ideas were picked up within the field of literary theory during the same time period. In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2001), Sidonie Smith and Julie Watson suggest a framework for examining and theorizing the self-narrative, particularly within a historical and cultural context. Significantly, Smith and Watson propose a movement from terms like *autobiography* and *memoir* and to less Western-centric terms like *life writing* and *life narrative*, in order to encompass a full range of global self-narratives. This is particularly important when using self-narrative in history, which Smith and Watson argue requires the recognition that, "when life writers write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time

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[26] Ulric Neisser, "Self-narratives: True and false," in *The Remembering Self: Construction and Accuracy in the Self-Narrative*, ed. Ulric Neisser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8. The earlier work Winograd and Neisser, *Affect and Accuracy in Recall,* 1992, also explores these issues of memory and accuracy when examining autobiography.

[27] Denise Beike, James Lampinen, and Douglas Behrend, "Evolving Conceptions of the Self and Memory," in *The Self and Memory*, ed. Denise Beike, James Lampinen, and Douglas Behrend (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 7.

period, or to enshrine a community, they are making 'history' in a sense. But they are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures, among others."[28] Thus, though life writing is a form of historical source, it is one that requires considerable unpacking by the historian. This is at the heart of a historian's work.

These ideas of subjective and constructed narrative also became indelibly tied to notions of identity. Brockmeier and Cabaugh (2001) explicitly link narrative, place, and identity in their edited volume *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*, asserting that the very idea of human identity is "tied to the very notion of narrative and narrativity." [29] Narratives are not only shaped by social conditions but are also social *actions* in their own right; in this perspective, place becomes particularly important to the creation and distribution of these narratives. This is significant when examining narratives posted on Usenet, as well as on the early web. The *place* is not a physical one (at least as it is experienced by its users) but shared virtual space where users interact and form their own community norms and rhetoric.[30] These spaces are particularly important for individuals and communities who lack offline outlets for expressing themselves, providing, "emotional release and the development

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[28] Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* 2nd Ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 13.

[29] Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, "Introduction," in *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture* ed. Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2001), 15.

[30] This idea of virtual community was first explored by Howard Rheingold in *Virtual Community* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993). These ideas have been further applied to web communities by Ian Milligan in "Welcome to the web: The online community of GeoCities during the early years of the World Wide Web," in *The Web as History* ed. Niels Brügger (London: UCL Press, 2017).

of a satisfying and coherent group identity in which to contextualize, and through which to adapt to, personal experience ."[31] Furthermore, through the sharing of these narratives on this platform, users solidify their own identity on a public stage which influences how other users describe and express their own identity.

It is the sharing of identity through public self-narrative which reveals the performative and instructive nature of these Usenet and discussion board posts, as well as later personal webpages. The discussions between users, introduction posts, autobiographies and journals, and writing of personal anecdotes and stories all express identity for the purpose of making these narratives of the self publicly-consumable. Carolyn Steedman's work on "enforced self-narratives" highlights the problematic assumption that the autobiography of marginalized groups represents authentic identity, or the construction of such, as opposed to, "expectations, orders, and instructions."[32] This dissertation engages with these self-narratives while acknowledging the expectations, instructions, and stereotypes that are contained within these writings, and which are often informed by more traditional mainstream media.

A number of studies on LGBTQ identity as portrayed by the traditional media informed, and continue to inform, the way that new media is treated within scholarship. The very first of these works, Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies,* laid the basis for the exploration of identity and stereotypes in films made by and for gay individuals.[33] Similarly, Richard Dyer's landmark works on identity and gay film, as well as Steven Capsuto's work on

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[31] Aimée Morrison, "'Suffused by Feeling and Affect': The Intimate Public of Personal Mommy Blogging," *Biography* vol. 34 no. 1 (Winter 2011), 41.

[32] Carolyn Steedman, "Enforced narratives: Stories of another self," in *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, theories, methods* ed. Tess Coslett, Celia Lury, Penny Summerfield (London: Routledge, 2000), 28.

[33] Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

gay images on TV and radio, have been influential in shaping how homosexuality and

transgender issues have been treated by scholars of more traditional media. This scholarship

from the 1980s and 1990s on film and television further influenced later studies of the ways

that traditional media on non-heterosexual topics is disseminated and discussed online.[34]

The context and influence of these traditional media theorists is seen in later studies of

queer identity in online new media. Nina Wakeford's oft-cited 2002 work "New Technologies

and 'Cyber-queer' Research" described the increasingly relevant relationship between online

community, identity, and research on LGBTQ topics. Perhaps more importantly, Wakeford

called for the prioritization of the study of the interplay of everyday life and online activities

over queer theory, as a way of understanding the importance of the internet to the queer

community.[35] Despite this early call for the backgrounding of queer theory and digital media,

the internet proved to be a rich source for studying the expression of identity for new media

scholars in the early 2000s. In the same year that Wakeford published her critique of the

binding together of cyber studies with queer theory, Jonathan Alexander edited a "Queer

Webs" special issue of *The International Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, asserting that,

"beyond connecting individuals and information to one another across geographic divides,

Internet technologies offer individuals—and groups—revolutionary ways to represent

themselves by combining texts and images, linking to other sites of interest or import, and

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[34] Queer online fandom communities have been studied by new media scholars like Rosalind Hanmer in "Internet Fandom, Queer Discourse, and Identities," and in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York: Routledge, 2010) and Judith Halberstam in "What's that smell?: Queer temporalities and subcultural lives," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6(3) 2003, 313-333, among others.

[35] Nina Wakeford, "New Technologies and 'Cyber-Queer' Research," in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 115-116.

experimenting with different modes of representation."[36] Indeed, to understand queer reality

in 2002, it was necessary to understand online culture. Responding directly to Wakeford in the

introduction to their 2007 edited book *Queer Online: Media, Technology and Sexuality*, Kate

O'Riordan and David Phillips argue that, "the use of theoretical frameworks to help understand

the formations and reformulations of cyber/queer is set up as a political imperative with

potentially rich outcomes," and that there is space for both theoretical textual readings, as well

as socio-economic contexts. In this vein, this dissertation considers both the theoretical

foundations of identity studies, as well as sees online LBGTQ culture as evidence of off-line

socio-economic and cultural conditions.

     In line with this earlier scholarship, I have chosen to use the word "queer" in this

dissertation. The word itself has a particularly fraught history of usage, both by academics and

LGBTQ individuals and activists, despite receiving wide acceptance within academia today.

Though the word *queer* has a history of being used with non-heterosexual connotations since at

least the late 1800s, queer began to be used as a gay-affirmative term in the 1980s.[37] However,

there has been pushback on the use of what many still consider to be a slur, primarily among

individuals who identify using LGBTQ or other non-heterosexual labels. While some see it as an

umbrella term, meant to be inclusive and to allow for privacy and ambiguity amongst those

describing their own identity, others have trouble seeing it as anything other than its negative

connotations, particularly as it was used in schools and educational settings. These objections

to the use of the word queer have often fallen along generational lines, with younger LGBTQ

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[36] Jonathan Alexander, "Introduction to the Special Issue: Queer Webs: Representations of LGBT People and Communities on the World Wide Web," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7, no. 2–3 (2002), 79.
[37] Patrick Dilley, "Queer theory: under construction," *Qualitative Studies in Education* Vol 12, No. 5 (1999), 457.

individuals tending to be more accepting of the term, although this has come under contention

in recent years.[38] Despite individual unease with the word, many LGBTQ scholars, writers, and

activists maintain that *queer*, "encompasses a diverse range of identities and experiences," and

"describes sexual orientations and gender identities that are not exclusively heterosexual or

cisgender."[39]

It was the coining of the phrase "queer theory" in 1990 by scholar Teresa de Lauretis in

a conference title that really brought the word to the academic forefront.[40] The use of the word

queer within the title was described as "scandalously offensive," but served to reinforce de

Lauretis' provocative stance: that gay and lesbian studies was dominated by white, male,

middle class perspectives, and scholars needed to disrupt this hegemony.[41] Accordingly, I

describe the online communities that emerged from 1983 to 1999 as *queer* within my

dissertation. Within these communities, we see the evolution and diversification from spaces

dominated by white, middle class, gay male perspectives, to spaces encompassing a diverse

collection of sexual orientation and gender identity labels – in essence, *queer* communities.

Community and the Virtual

Much scholarly attention was paid in the 1990s to determining whether it was possible to form

a true community of individuals who interacted online and yet would never meet offline. In

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[38] Juliette Rocheleau, "A Former Slur is Reclaimed and Listeners Have Mixed Feelings," *NPR* (August 21, 2019), https://www.npr.org/sections/publiceditor/2019/08/21/752330316/a-former-slur-is-reclaimed-and-listeners-have-mixed-feelings.
[39] Cory Collins, "Is Queer OK to Say? Here's Why We Use It," *Teaching Tolerance* (February 11, 2019), https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/is-queer-ok-to-say-heres-why-we-use-it.
[40] David M. Halperin, "The Normalization of Queer Theory," *Journal of Homosexuality* vol. 45, No. 2/3/4 (2003), 339.
[41] Ibid, 340.

1993, Howard Rheingold first coined the term "virtual community" to describe the existence of

significant and impactful online discourse:

> One minute I'm involved in the minutiae of local matters such as planning next
> week's bridge game, and the next minute I'm part of a debate raging in seven
> countries. Not only do I inhabit my virtual communities; to the degree that I carry
> around their conversations in my head and begin to mix it up with them in real life,
> my virtual communities also inhabit my life. I've been colonized; my sense of family
> at the most fundamental level has been virtualized.[42]

At the time that his book on virtual community was published, the web was just coming into

public usage, prompting the rapid and large-scale flood of new users on to the internet. Five

years later, Steven G. Jones referenced Rheingold's work as he wrote on the potential of

computer-mediated communication to connect individuals, describing networked

communications as, "not just a tool; it is at once technology, medium, and engine of social

relations."[43] The queer virtual communities examined in this dissertation corroborate

Rheingold's writings on the blur between the virtual and real. Users report finding an accepting

community, and what anthropologist Mary Gray refers to as "queer realness," within these

virtual communities.[44] For many users, this is the very first time that they had ever come out as

anything other than heterosexual, and their first contact with others like them.

However, the significance of these online communities goes beyond the virtual. In his

book *Digital Methods*, Richard Rogers states that the goal of Internet research is to move

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[42] Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier Revised Edition*, xxv.

[43] Steve Jones, *CyberSociety: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community* (London: SAGE Publications, 1994), 11.

[44] Mary L. Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America* (New York: NYU Press, 2009).

beyond the study of online culture and to use the Internet as a source for understanding real-

life socio-cultural conditions.

> I would like to help define a new era in Internet research, one that no longer
> concerns itself with the divide between the real and the virtual. It concerns a shift in
> the kinds of questions put to the study of the Internet. The Internet is employed as a
> site of research for far more than just online culture. The issue no longer is how much
> of society and culture is online, but rather how to diagnose cultural change and
> societal conditions by means of the Internet. The conceptual point of departure is the
> recognition that the Internet is not only an object of study but also a source.[45]

Keeping with this perspective, my research explores online LGBTQ communities as a source for

understanding trends in the larger queer demographic. These born digital historical sources

reflect more general trends in culture and opinion, much like how traditional media like

newspapers are used to understand the context within which they were written and

distributed. Though online culture was initially seen as separated from "real life," the

discussions going on within these virtual communities were informed by, and informed, off-line

realities. The trends in identity labelling, self-narrative, and issues of prejudice and

intersectionality within online groups are indicative of discourse occurring more generally

among LGTBQ individuals and communities, when faced with increasing visibility both in the

media and in larger society in North America and Western Europe. Furthermore, the

increasingly global nature of the internet and web throughout the 1990s had real-world

implications for the formation of a transnational queer identity.[46]

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[45] Richard Rogers, *Digital Methods* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 21.

[46] The research within *A Global History of Sexuality: The Modern Era,* ed. Robert Buffington, et al. presents
sexuality as intimate and local, but also informed by complex transnational processes that shape how sexuality is
perceived and performed.

The internet and the web stimulated a new venue for the expression and mediation of identity, both real and virtual. Lisa Nakamura's *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* controversially asserted that race and ethnicity are transferred on to the internet, even in text-based communities. [47] The use of online media for identity mediation and expression has real implications for queer individuals, who found themselves increasingly coming out online during the 1980s and 1990s. This concept of "cybertypes," used by Nakamura to describe race on the internet, has been applied to sexuality by scholars, including Jonathan Alexander and Christopher Pullen.[48] In 2010, Christopher Pullen wrote on the shift between the real and imagined which was occurring with the LGBT community: "we are living in a world where the discursive potential of an "imagined gay community" seems vividly real through online interactivity and identity affirmation."[49] Futhermore, Pullen argued, the sharing of personal expressions of self within online media leads to the construction of a public identity which is mediated first online, and then often translated to real life interactions and identity mediation.

In 2015, Roopika Risam called for an intersectional approach within the digital humanities in order to blend the margins between theory and practice. The ideas of intersectionality originated with legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw and her research on race, gender, and violence against women of colour. Crenshaw observed that the experiences of women of colour could not be explained through merely feminist or race-based theory, but required the acknowledgement that multiple frames of perspective combine to create unique

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[47] Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

[48] Jonathan Alexander, *Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web* (New York: Hampton Press, 2006), 248.

[49] Christopher Pullen, *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York: Routledge, 2010), 2.

experiences based on a multitude of factors.[50] In short, a given person's sexuality, class, ability, gender, and race intersect to produce a unique lived experience.[51] Risam calls for the use of an intersectional awareness to tie together method and theory, as a way of accessing marginalized user histories, and for, "those at the center of the digital humanities to understand the position of those whose work dwells in the peripheries, to understand the historical legacies that link knowledge production with the denigration – even the destruction – of that which is other."[52] With an intersectional approach, this dissertation acknowledges a diverse range of queer experiences, based on a multitude of factors; these experiences influence the ways that individuals express their identity online, the spaces within which they share their self-narratives, and the communities that they form.

Structure of this Dissertation

My dissertation explores queer identity and online self-narrative through four interrelated chapters. My first chapter, "Members of the Same Sex: LGBTQ Community on Usenet," examines the creation of the first large-scale explicitly queer community on the internet, the Usenet group net.motss. This group was created in 1983 after tensions over same-sex flirting erupted in the newsgroup net.singles. Through an examination of these tense early days, as well as the use of language and labelling in determining who was "in" or "out" of net.motss, the newsgroup emerges as a fascinating case study of the fracturing of queer identity and

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[50] Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.

[51] Roopika Risam, "Beyond the Margins: Intersectionality and the Digital Humanities," *Digital Humanities Quarterly* 9 (2015), 2.

[52] Ibid, 5.

community along lines of gender and sexuality, despite attempts to present a unified and homogenous front for the purpose of visibility and political organizing. This chapter also highlights the changes in scale presented by archived digital collections during my time period of 1983 to 1999. In these early years, these messages posted to net.motss could be (and were) read in their entirety by the group's users. This trickle of messages, however, would quickly become a flood – beyond the ability of individuals to read. Just as users struggled at the time, researchers today need to adopt macroanalytical methodologies to study these archived communities.

In Chapter Two, "Usenet's Gay, Lesbian, and Trans Community During the Eternal September," the implications of this exponential growth in new Usenet users, groups, and postings are explored within the queer online community. Using methodologies which highlight "crossposting" behaviour, where discussions travel from one group to another when messages are posted to more than one group at a time, this chapter examines the rapid creation of thousands of new specialized queer-focused Usenet groups. This flood of new users, which came to be known as the Eternal September, had a substantial impact on Usenet's existing users. These newsgroups did not experience the same reluctance to engage with trolls that the earlier groups had, in addition to now being open to the discussion of topics that had been considered relatively taboo in net.motss, such as sex and gender dysmorphism. These groups would often come into conflict with existing communities, resulting in the disruption of established practices and discourse on identity and community groupings. I argue that the discourse occurring within both the new and established Usenet groups is reflected in a

proliferation of gradually accepted sexuality and gender identity categories, both online and off.

The next two chapters further follow this flood of new internet users as they migrated onto the soon-to-be dominant new technology, the World Wide Web. In chapter three, "Portals, Search Engines, and the LGBTQ Migration to the Web," I argue that, though the web offered the promise of increased access to information and community, in reality the choices narrowed only to those web pages and resources which were indexed and made discoverable through large-scale web directories and link lists. These portals, both general as well as more specialized LGBTQ affinity portals, packaged up queer identity into neatly commodified and monetized packages, ready to be sold to advertisers, especially in comparison to the Usenet wild west which had come before it. This model would ultimately be unsuccessful, and many of these early commercial websites failed within the first few years of their creation, amid the struggle to monetize these communities which were based on the myth of the affluent gay individual.

Finally, chapter four, "WestHollywood Goes Global: GeoCities and LGBTQ Personal Web Pages," presents a case study of a different type of queer web community – one where the content and structure was entirely decided and mediated by community members – GeoCities WestHollywood. GeoCities' model, which provided free web hosting accounts to anyone who wanted to start their own webpage, and organized around thematic "neighbourhoods," allowed for a kind of grassroots community creation, organized by members and volunteers. I argue that the sites found on WestHollywood reflect the creation of a transnational queer identity, using a common English language lexicon for describing queer identity, even in users'

native language. Furthermore, GeoCities represents the opposite end of the shift in scale from a

trickle of Usenet messages in 1983 to a flood of over 25 000 unique personal webpages within

the WestHollywood neighbourhood alone. This large-scale archived web collection, as well as

the structure of the web itself, which allows sites to be linked together through the practice of

hyperlinking, necessitates digital humanities methodologies such as network graphing in order

to make sense of the massive collection of self-narrative.

Of course, GeoCities was only the beginning of the flood that is the World Wide Web.

The shift from static web content to constantly changing user-interactive webpages that has

characterized Web 2.0 has led to a veritable crisis for both those of us who are concerned with

archiving and documenting online culture, as well as the general public as a whole. The

methodologies used in this dissertation suggest a way forward for understanding queer culture

and identity, as well as other identity categories and communities, as they are presented on the

web.

Chapter 1: Members of the Same Sex: LGBTQ Community on Usenet

When the Usenet newsgroup net.motss was created in 1983, it was heralded by users as the

first globally-accessible explicitly queer space on the internet. In her influential 2002 paper

"New Technologies and 'Cyber-queer' Research," sociologist Nina Wakeford briefly describes

the founding of the newsgroup as having "little documentation" other than a 1988 account of

the group's origins written by one of the users who spearheaded the creation of the group,

Stephen Dyer. In this account, which does not appear to be archived in any accessible location,

Dyer describes the "violent opposition" that the group faced in its creation, and the ways that

users came together in the first year to create a community whose quality was "self-evident." [1]

In this account, the opposition that the group faced was outweighed by the community effort in

order to create a publicly-visible queer space in the face of homophobia. This account, written

by Dyer and published (at least in part, as the original post now appears to be lost) by

Wakeford, has been the basis for later work on the origins of queer community on Usenet and

the internet.

Digital historians Kevin Driscoll and Camille Paloque-Berges have argued that this

relative absence of both contemporary and later scholarship on Usenet's queer community is

due to the difficulties in accessing Usenet materials because of the "impractical format" of

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[1] Nina Wakeford, "New Technologies and 'Cyber-queer' Research," in *The Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies* ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London: SAGE Publications, 2002), 118. Wakeford does not give a specific citation for Dyer's post and, unfortunately, the post does not seem to be archived through either Google Groups, the Internet Archive, or the UTZOO collection.

these archives.[2] As a result, these Usenet messages have remained relatively unused by researchers. However, using new methodologies for accessing these archived sources, it is now possible to explore these early days of net.motss' creation and history. Through an examination of these newsgroup posts which led to the creation of the community, it becomes evident that net.motss was not created only out of a desire for a queer space on the Internet, but because primarily gay and lesbian users felt unwelcome in existing spaces. Furthermore, the first years of the group were plagued by a distinct lack of consensus over who should be posting in the group and the topics that would be discussed. It is significant that Wakeford uses an account by Stephen Dyer to describe the origins of net.motss; Dyer emerged as a reluctant peacekeeper in the group during its tenuous first years. However, Dyer's later account of the group as being "well-engrained" and of considerable quality after one year of existence does not line up with the reality of the group's early days. Indeed, it was around the one-year birthday of net.motss that Dyer was unanimously nominated as the moderator of a new moderated MOTSS newsgroup, in order to insulate users from the large quantity of inflammatory postings and disagreements. However, it was through these debates and disagreements that queer identity was mediated, leading to that sense of community that Dyer would later describe as key to these early years of MOTSS' existence.

This chapter follows the first eight years, between 1983 and 1991, of the net.motss (and later soc.motss, after a system-wide renaming) newsgroup in order to examine who was posting on the group, the topics they were discussing, and the ways that users crafted their

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[2] Kevin Driscoll and Camille Paloque-Berges. "Searching for Missing 'Net Histories.'" *Internet Histories* 1, no. 1–2 (2017), 52. https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2017.1307541.

own self-narrative to justify inclusion within the queer community, and the existence of the

community as a whole. I argue that, instead of being brought together through a shared

community and common identity, the individuals posting in the MOTSS groups instead

described themselves according to who they were *not*. From the very founding of the group,

based on exclusion from a shared dating newsgroup, we see tensions between users — those

who identified as male and female; gay, straight and bisexual — over who the group was for,

what they were allowed to post, and how they were allowed to express their own identity.

These tensions reflect the larger anxieties of the queer community during this time period in

defining their own community identity and goals in the face of increasing public visibility and

acceptance.

The Origins of Usenet

Usenet began in 1979 as the project of Duke graduate students Tom Truscott and Jim Ellis. It

has been referred to as the "poor man's ARPANET," as it was set up as an alternative Unix-

based system to connect American universities to each other. ARPANET, the Advanced

Research Projects Agency Network, was first conceptualized in 1966 as a way for American

universities to share distributed computing resources around the country.[3] However, it was the

partnership with the US Department of Defense — who were concerned with building a

communication network which could survive a nuclear attack — which allowed the project to

come to fruition.[4] This uneasy merger of military and academic goals and concerns

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[3] Abbate, Janet, *Inventing the Internet* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 46.
[4] Ibid, 76.

characterized the growth and spread of ARPANET's network during the late 1960s and 1970s.

ARPANET began connecting research universities in 1969; by 1977, ARPANET had been

extended to over fifty sites. However, because the project was funded by the US Department of

Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), membership was limited to those

computer science departments with Department of Defense funding.[5] Usenet was born out of

the desire from other universities and other students to be part of a computer network, but

who did not have the money or connections to be connected to the ARPANET.

The first Usenet network included just three sites – Duke University and Duke Medical

School, as well as the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill – and allowed these three

groups to exchange files from one site to another. In January of 1980, James Ellis handed out

invitations to join Usenet at a Unix Conference, prompting extremely quick growth of the

network. In the first year of its existence, Usenet expanded from these three sites to fifteen

sites, and then to over 150 throughout the United States by 1981, including a connection to

ARPANET through the University of California Berkley.[6] Compared to ARPANET, Usenet had a

very low cost of access for academic and research users – just the computer equipment, the

Unix operating system, and the cost of the telephone calls to dial into the network.

Usenet's user experience has been described as similar to the Bulletin Board Systems

(BBS) that were pioneered in the 1970s and became popularized in 1978, right before Usenet

went public. In order to read and post to a BBS, users used a modem to dial into one of many

centralized BBS systems, where they could then upload and download data and exchange

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[5] Hauben, Michael, and Ronda Hauben, *Netizens: On the History and Impact of Usenet and the Internet* (Los Alamitos: Wiley-IEEE Computer Society Press, 1997), 41
[6] Ibid, 44.

messages with other users through public message boards. Interactions were limited to individuals dialing into that specific BBS, and there was no communication between BBS servers. Usenet functioned in much the same way as these BBSs – users used a modem to connect to a server and downloaded content from various newsgroups and could send their own messages which would then be distributed to the newsgroup. However, what made Usenet different from a BBS was the decentralized nature of the system. Instead of dialing into a centralized BBS server, Usenet could be accessed through commercial Usenet providers, news servers operated by local internet services providers (ISPs), or through academic and employer news servers. The distributed nature of Usenet made the system much cheaper to operate and avoided costly long-distance telephone bills for users dialing into distant BBS servers.[7]

Given these origins, it is unsurprising that many Usenet readers and posters in the 1980s and early 1990s were affiliated with academic and research institutions, who provided free access to Usenet servers for students and staff, along with access to computers and the Unix operating system. We see the effects of this primarily academic userbase in the discussions that occurred on the network. Many of the earliest Usenet groups were based on academic topics, primarily computer science and programming, however the discussion began to open up to more general campus chatter as the number of users increased. Discussions of campus life, sports, and even friendly (and sometimes not so friendly) rivalries between universities became frequent post topics on most newsgroups, in addition to the stated topic at hand. Usenet became an international academic network in 1981 when the University of Toronto joined, creating the first non-American site. Over time, other institutions from Western Europe

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[7] Ibid, 48.

gradually joined the network; the first trans-Atlantic connection was made in 1983, when

Philips Laboratories, an American research laboratory, connected to its Amsterdam location.[8]

This was quickly followed by Trinity College in Dublin, the University of Kent, England, and

Mathematisch Centrum in Amsterdam, as well as other institutions in Germany, Finland,

Sweden, Italy, and Australia by the end of 1984.

The very first Usenet newsgroups were divided into three worldwide categories: net.*

for unmoderated groups, mod.* for moderated groups, and fa.* (standing for "from ARPANET")

for those groups which were part of ARPANET, but had been forwarded over to Usenet to allow

participation from Usenet users. By 1986, this classification system was becoming unwieldly

and difficult to administer. Additionally, it was necessary for a news server to carry all

newsgroups within a category; given the size of the net.* category, many news servers were

choosing not to carry it at all, in order to control the costs of offering Usenet to subscribers. The

solution at this time was to reorganize the three large categories into eight thematic hierarchies

in what became known as "The Great Renaming."[9] Table 1.1 lists the eight thematic hierarchies

and the topics that they covered.

Group	Description
Comp.*	Discussion about computers
Humanities.*	Fine arts, literature, and philosophy
Misc.*	Miscellaneous topics

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Lee Bumgarner, "The Great Renaming FAQ," *Living Internet* (livinginternet.com), January 7, 2000, https://www.livinginternet.com/u/ui_modern_renamingfaq.htm (Retrieved October 16, 2018).

News.*	Discussion of Usenet news and developments
Rec.*	Entertainment and recreation
Sci.*	Discussion of science topics
Soc.*	Social and sociological discussions
Talk.*	Controversial topics and chatter

(Table 1.1: The eight thematic hierarchies creating during "The Great Renaming.")

This decision was met with concern and outright hostility from some users, who were worried that their favorite groups would be miscategorized or buried within sub-directories. In a post to the newsgroup net.news.group titled "Comments on Reorganization," Georgia Tech system administrator Gene Spafford explained the need for a system-wide renaming to a clearly reluctant user base:

> It is an attempt by a group of experienced, concerned individuals to help prune and shape the net into something that will continue to grow and exist. We're a big enough group with an incredible amount of collective experience with the net so that we believe (hope!) we're addressing everything that needs addressing… Please try to consider all this if you're still tempted to flame."[10]

Despite this entreaty for civility, many users were upset by the imposition of a thematic hierarchy on Usenet. There was a tendency for many groups which did not fit neatly into one of the more academic categories to be assigned to talk.*, a move which incensed posters to some of these groups, who saw their newsgroup as being relegated to less-serious and less-read sections of Usenet. Inevitably, mistakes were made and some groups were miscategorized based on their names. One user responded to this "Comments on Reorganization" post with his

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[10] Gene Spafford, "Comments on Reorganization," posted to net.news.group, September 17, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!msg/net.news.group/uWqKiWoiaSA/yJZ1uqmCGtIJ.

own accusations: "you also claimed to be making assignations of groups on the basis of a stated

set of criteria, yet in fact such assignments were made at the whim of the reorganizers… WHY

should we blithely accept your protestations of good will now?"[11] It was because of this conflict

over the reorganization of Usenet that the alt.* category was created in late 1987 by system

administrators, as an alternative for those groups or discussions which were outside of the

formal guidelines and control of the "Big Eight" categories. Anyone could decide to create an

alt.* group, subject to a few general rules about offensive or too long group names. The result

of the alt.* hierarchy was that similar content on similar topics tended to be spread across

multiple categories depending on the way that the group was created.

The "Great Renaming" is important to consider when doing historical research using

Usenet. The newsgroup soc.motss started its life as two groups -- net.motss and mod.motss --

before being moved to the "social and sociological" hierarchy. This location designated

soc.motss as inherently more "academic" and virtually guaranteed that Usenet servers would

carry it. In an August 1987 breakdown post of Usenet readership, it was reported that 96% of

Usenet servers carried the entire soc.* hierarchy, including soc.motss. Conversely, the talk.*,

misc.* and rec.* hierarchies were carried by 88% of Usenet servers, while the alt.* hierarchy

varied from 18% to 22%, depending on the topic (the lowest being alt.drugs).[12] This

prioritization of the more academic hierarchies, including comp.*, sci.*, and soc.*, meant that

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[11] Thomas J Keller, "Re: Comments on Reorganization," posted to net.news September 23, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/forum/#!original/net.news.group/uWqKiWoiaSA/IfS1A9NYwL8J. Succinctly, University of Toronto Usenet System Administrator Henry Spencer responded to this post with the message, "this whole discussion bores me stiff and I am only listening to about every tenth word. Life is too short." (September 26, 1986).

[12] Brian Reid, "USENET Readership report for Aug 87," posted to news.lists September 1, 1987. Internet Archive UTZOO Collection.

more users had access to these newsgroups than others, and perpetuated the perception of

Usenet as an academic network. If a Usenet server decided not to carry a particular newsgroup

or hierarchy, it would effectively be as if this newsgroup (or groups) did not exist for

subscribers. For example, in the case of the group alt.drugs, 82% of Usenet users would only

know of this group through mentions on other groups, but would have no way of accessing any

of the content posted to the actual alt.drugs group. In this way, systems administrators had a

large amount of control over the content that their users could see and access.

Public awareness and reaction to these new networking technologies remained rather

limited and skeptical through to the early 1990s. In June of 1985, the Canadian *Financial Post*

reported on a new worldwide computer network which linked, "more than 1000 subscribers,"

including 90 Canadians. This article focused on the role of Usenet in allowing users to

participate in political debate with other worldwide users; "people can… compose their

thoughts with care and quote one another properly. It's never really been done before." [13]

Despite this initial small, but growing, userbase, Usenet remains an important source for

examining the history of networked communications. It is not a coincidence that Tim Berners-

Lee's very first public announcement of his World Wide Web project was made on the Usenet

group alt.hypertext.[14] These Usenet newsgroups were incredibly important for *virtually* bringing

together individuals from some of the largest and most prominent research institutions in the

world for the very first time, and these interactions had widespread and sweeping reach for

altering discourse and culture.

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[13] Barbara Wade, "Defense plan being debated in electronic newspaper," *Financial Post* (June 29, 1985).
[14] Tim Berners-Lee, "Re: Qualifiers on Hypertext links…," posted to alt.hyptertext August 6, 1991. Archived by *The W3 Consortium,* https://www.w3.org/People/Berners-Lee/1991/08/art-6484.txt.

Working with Usenet

The fact that we have these early Usenet posts at all is the result of the extreme foresight shown by the University of Toronto's Usenet System Administrator, Henry Spencer. On February 6, 1981, the first non-American message was posted to Usenet from the University of Toronto's Zoology department by Henry Spencer, who was identified as utzoo!henry. Spencer went on to save this message, along with over 2 million other posts that came after it, on to a series of 141 magnetic tape drives. This collection of messages is the onlysignificant record of Usenet during its early days. Spencer notes that, "there were several other people archiving stuff, but... as far as I know none of their archiving survived."[15] This collection, which came to be known as the NetNews Archive during the early 1990s, was almost immediately recognized as a significant historical source in the history of the early internet.

It would take another decade for this Usenet archive to be made available in a publicly accessible form. The tapes were transferred to the Western University archives in London, Ontario and David Wiseman from Western and Lance Bailey with the Robarts Research Institute began the time-consuming task of pulling the data off of the magnetic tape drives. This process continued sporadically for several years until the collection came to the attention of Brewster Kahle, co-founder of the Internet Archive.[16] With added financial and technical support provided by Kahle, the collection was eventually made available online by the Internet Archive in a compressed raw text format on December 11, 2001.

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[15] Katherine Mieszkowski, "The Geeks Who Saved Usenet," *Salon.com* (January 8, 2002). https://www.salon.com/2002/01/08/saving_usenet/.

[16] David Wiseman, "Magi's NetNews Archive Involvement," *University of Western Ontario Computer Science Department News* (December 11, 2001), http://www.csd.uwo.ca/~magi/personal/usenet.html.

Unfortunately, here is where the difficulty of working with these files appears. The uncompressed file is 11.5 GB in size and structured in the same rough chronological order as the original magnetic tapes. Each text file comprises one individual Usenet post. Because Henry Spencer saved all messages that came through Usenet on to a tape until the tape was full, before moving on to the next, it means that all messages from all groups for a defined time period should appear together. In reality, this is not always the case. Messages from related newsgroups and time periods appear scattered throughout the UTZOO archive collection -- often with no clear explanation as to why the files are located where they are. Similarly, messages were sometimes saved to the end of earlier tapes in order to fill up small amounts of free space – these files were saved to a separate "scavenged" directory which completely removes them from the context of where they were found. "It is not in a very reasonable format, but it is all here," read David Wiseman's original announcement.[17] This collection spans ten years – from 1981 to 1991 – and represents the most complete collection of early Usenet posts.

This collection was also integrated into Google Groups on that same day in December 2001, allowing the messages to be navigated on a web-based platform, along with keyword searchability. Interestingly, Google invited users to find culturally significant Usenet messages and contribute them to a timeline, though they warned that, "Please note that while your own first post was undoubtedly of great personal historical value, we will only be able to include

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[17] "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *Internet Archive* (December 11, 2001). https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

submissions of interest to a wide range of users."[18] While Google Group's format provides the

most accessible means for browsing through Usenet posts, it is of limited use for performing

historical research at scale. Though Google's archive offers the benefit of browsing by date and

basic keyword searchability, this project is currently badly-supported within Google itself and

advanced keyword search has been offline since early 2015. Furthermore, Google's search tools

are of limited use for searching and analyzing large amounts of data, as each search result must

be individually clicked on and read, which can take extraordinary amounts of time when dealing

with a large number of results, and only one group can be searched at a time. Therefore,

Google's archive offers a valuable tool for searching out and viewing individual messages, once

areas of significance have been highlighted within the record.

Given the self-proclaimed "not very reasonable format" of the raw text UTZOO

collection made available by the Internet Archive, it would stand to reason that these files

would be more difficult to examine than the nicely-formatted Google Groups results. And on

the surface, this is true. However, the raw text format of the UTZOO collection lends itself well

to large-scale text analysis.

Because the soc.motss newgroup underwent several organizational name changes

between 1983 and 1991 and the group's messages were distributed throughout the UTZOO

archive, it was first necessary to pull out all messages that mentioned "motss." This is not a

perfect method, and resulted in the collection of a number of administrative and moderator

posts which mention the group, as well as the full library of monthly data and usage reports,

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[18] "20 Year Usenet Archive Now Available," *Google Groups* (December 12, 2001). *Internet Archive.*
https://web.archive.org/web/20011212191924/http://www.google.com/googlegroups/archive_announce_20.htm
l.

which also contained valuable context and statistics. Altogether, there are 6599 Usenet posts, or approximately 20 000 pages of raw text, in the UTZOO collection that contain the word "motss" – much more than could be opened individually and meaningfully read through conventional means. One of the advantages to using text analysis approaches such as topic modelling on a collection of mixed origin such as this is that the administrative posts and usage reports are collected into their own distinct set of topics – allowing them to be included in the overall analysis, without influencing other topics of interest.

Using topic modelling, it is possible to generate a list of the topics which come up most frequently within a large text source. Topic modelling employs latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) in order to derive word clusters from a text source. The LDA algorithm assigns a probability to words and sets of words that tend to occur within the text; this process is particularly useful for finding reasonably accurate sets of keywords which define the general topics found within a source.[19] In essence, topic modelling works on the assumption that the original author of a text chooses from a "basket" of possible words when writing about a topic. When using topic modelling, the algorithm looks at the choice of words used in the text and breaks the text down into the probable baskets from which the words originally came. These "baskets" become the topic output that is generated after analysis.[20] Like all macroanalytical tools, topic modelling must be used judiciously. The results that are generated by the algorithm depend on the data

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[19] Matthew Jockers, "The LDA Buffet: A Topic Modeling Fable," *matthewjockers.net, http://www.matthewjockers.net/macroanalysisbook/lda/* (accessed February 3, 2020).
[20] Shawn Graham, Scott Weingart, and Ian Milligan, "Getting Started with Topic Modeling and MALLET," *The Programming Historian* (September 2, 2012), https://programminghistorian.org/en/lessons/topic-modeling-and-mallet#what-is-topic-modeling-and-for-whom-is-this-useful.

that is fed into it, as well as the variables that are set by the researcher. All of these factors

greatly affect the output that topic modelling generates.

Topic modelling is useful for examining a large collection of hundreds or thousands of

text files in order to get a general idea of what is being discussed within the files, without

having to read them all individually. It makes an excellent starting point for examining a source

like Usenet, where each individual file is one (often short) message; opening and reading each

file individually to get a sense of what topics were being discussed and possible keywords for

further analysis would be incredibly time consuming. Furthermore, because many of the files

are threaded replies to earlier messages with new posts tacked on to the bottom, there is some

repetition within the collection. Because of this repetition, some topics do appear more

prominently, however this also helps to highlight places and topics of increased discourse; if

many individuals are responding to a particular post or on a particular subject, it often signals a

place that deserves further investigation within the collection. By using topic modelling, I was

able to target further analysis of common themes within the Usenet collection.

Using MALLET, an open-source tool for natural language processing, I generated a list of

the one hundred most frequently-discussed topics within the MOTSS newsgroups.[21] For each

topic, twenty keywords are given, in order to contextualize and define the topic.

1	file char article news readnews system newsrc line mail cat user list program set command directory header newsgroup read scan
2	aids virus disease blood risk cases test drug immune patients infected health people htlv-iii positive cells infection tested transmission medical
3	rights political jerry law laws violence court country power crime rape prison case civil government homosexual book read fact liberation
4	bbncca-arpa version site ron rizzo net.motss subject date date-received lines utzoo.uccp Cambridge message-id relay-version posting-version posted path gay bbncca newsgroups
5	turing lines jan gay date reply-to alan writes tim edt article sdcc depression thu theory article-i.d. newsgroup c.uccp aug unisoft.uccp

6	discussion discussions computers micros systems theory sun committee net.ham-radio.packet net.micro.amiga technical Atari readers packet spaf@gatetech.csnet univ setups est net.database net.games.chess
7	site version edt sdcc jan article-i.d. newsgroups date path message-id relay-version net date-received utzoo.uccp posted net.motss tonga xref wed lines
8	groups list addresses group internet mail usenet john mod.politics moderated address mark@cbosgd.uccp b.columbia.edu moderator mod.protocols.appletalk site article submissions ron mailing
9	homosexuality homosexual Greek boswell word male bible fact sexual acts meaning English boswell's book means words testament kiv arsenkoitai paul
10	command news people bug net foo articles lines scomp moddutc unix versions distribution newsgroup items labs questions usenet subject find
11	groups support jews members people group gays past won't explain blacks edt and/or correct comments interest attitudes solved days soviet
12	site version est lines net.motss date subject newsgroups relay-version path organization posted message-id utzoo.uccp date-received article-i.d. posting-version references feb fri
13	discussions computer related games products space hardware things computeres interest video research movies fixes users macintosh radio program net.singles political
14	men gay mit gerber Andrew feb act effeminate mit-ast.mit.edu women isl ri.cmu.edu student gerber@mit-amt.mit.edu young acting university straight costume it's
15	single kids apr men est site version osu-eddie.uccp mar posted child net.singles marriage posting-version subject net distribution date message-id path
16	char return hrs xdefine zone echo file number shar register test sed xchar xinclude path newsltr int day print month
17	nicaragua book sandinistas sophie Quigley Christian Canada mentor.uccp aug christian's people larry revolution sophie@netor.uccp read computer edt Sandinista family linus
18	list mailing rodeo jan post interested discussion item men group place members mail time net.misc items path net feel send
19	homosexuality edt church learned version inherited site Amdahl.uccp data catholic don't message-id organization newsgroups references mon subject moffett article-i.d. bbnccy.uppc
20	moderated edt news.announce.newusers comp.sources.mosc comp.sources.unix comp.sources.mac oct comp.sources.amiga comp.mail.maps comp.os.vbs comp.unix comp.sys.mac.digest comp.protocols.tcp-ip

Table 1.2: The first twenty topics for the *.motss collection, as generated by MALLET.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of topics relate to Usenet as a network, as well as computers more generally. This is both a result of the inadvertent collection of network traffic analysis posts, as well as the simple fact that many users were enthusiastically discussing the technology and platform, as well as the computers that they were using to access it. This distribution of discussion was typical of the time period. In a 1987 report on Usenet publishing, computer science scholar Brian K. Reid asserts that, "about 30% of the capacity of USENET is used to discuss the network itself, and another 30% is devoted to discussions of the computers out of

which USENET was built," with the remainder generally dedicated to the given topic at hand.[22]

However, we do also see a large number of topics which relate to subjects such as AIDS, gay

rights, queer culture, and current events.

NUMBER OF TOPICS BY THEME, 1983-1991

Legend: Usenet, Computers, Identity, AIDS, News/Current Events, Marriage/Family, Rights, Culture, Other, Academic Life, Religion
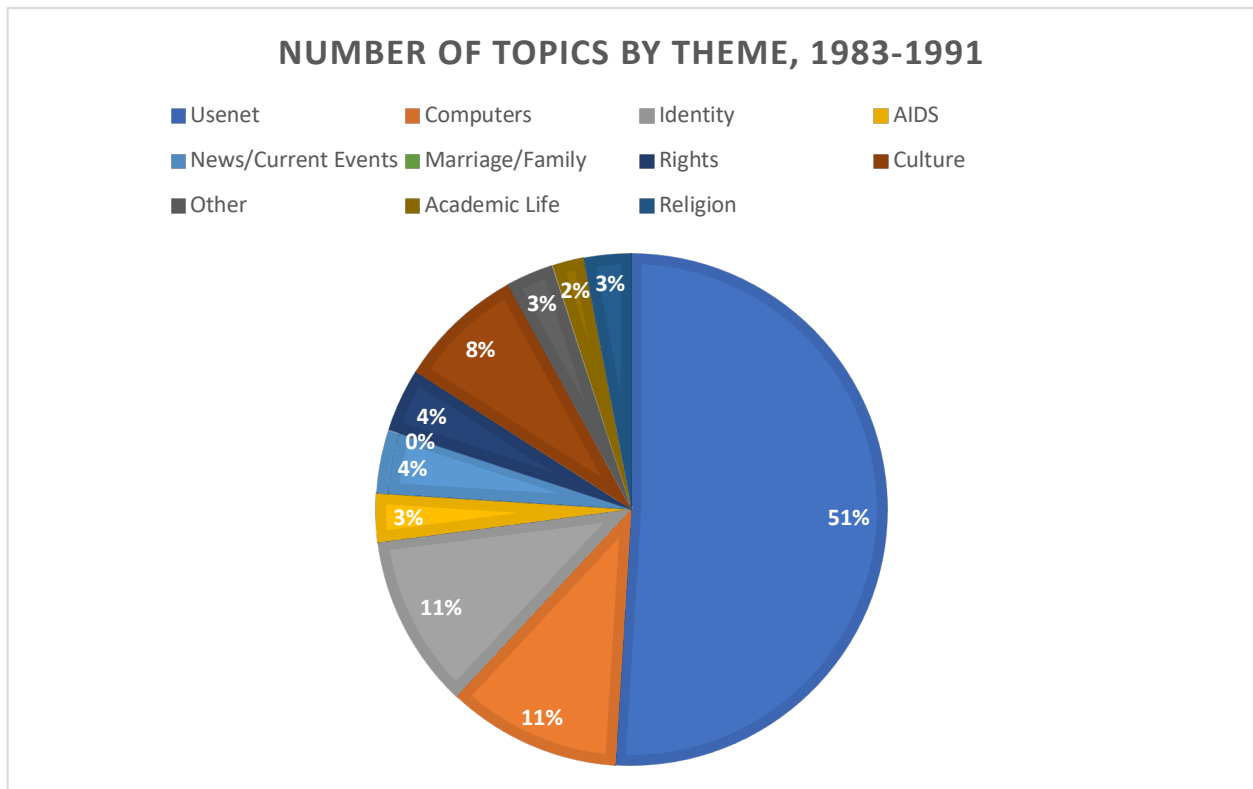
Figure 1.1: Pie chart of the number of topics generated by MALLET by theme from the soc.motss community.

From this list of topics, it is then possible to pull out distinct keywords which indicate

the type of discussion and self-narrative occurring within the *.motss newsgroups. These

keywords form the basis for further text analysis.

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[22] Brian K. Reid, "USENET Cookbook: An Experiment in Electronic Publication," *WRL Research Report* 87/7, Palo Alto: Western Research Laboratory, 1987, 1.

Figure 1.2: Word cloud of the most frequent terms in the MOTSS communities. A word cloud shows the most commonly used words within the source text, with more frequently-used words appearing larger.

Though this topic modeling output is interesting, it does not provide any sort of meaningful analysis or context in itself. However, it does serve as an indicator as to the types of discussion occurring on net.motss and soc.motss during the 1980s, and a starting point for further research.

The birth of soc.motss

In the summer of 1983, an explosion of discussion about homosexuality on the net erupted within the net.singles newsgroup. The debate largely stemmed from heterosexual male users

who found themselves occasionally propositioned by gay males in the newsgroup. A number of users argued for tolerance and good nature in dealing with these interactions, including pointing out the hypocrisy involved in feeling "disgusted or afraid" by these messages from other men. "How often in today's society do men driving by beep their horn or yell proposition [sic] to women walking by?... I haven't gotten over that basic mistrust entirely either, but I don't get disgusted or nauseous," wrote one user named Lisa, who self-identified as a straight female.[23] Another user named Pete responded to the thread with the observation that, "I would probably have about the same reaction to an overture regardless of whether it was from a man or woman (particularly since I'm married so wouldn't accept either). I think you're correct that it should be equally acceptable for overtures to be made from/to either sex in an appropriate situation."[24] "Why is everyone so paranoid?" bluntly queried one user identified only as Lady Arwen.[25] Despite these calls for civility and tolerance, the complaints gained in perceived legitimacy as more individuals posted about their own experiences of "violation." "After hearing about the supposed ratios of gay/straight for here (supposed about 1 in 10 are gay)... I have come to suspect everybody [of being homosexual]," asserted one MIT student.[26]

The proposal to create a new LBTQ-focused newsgroup came from both sides of the debate at once. Early on in the discussion, it had been suggested by both gay and straight users

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[23] Lisa B. Maiocco, "MOTSS response," posted August 25, 1983 in the net.singles newsgroup. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/WDs7R-X-LmI/0L8ntsvcaHcJ.

[24] Pete LeMaster, "Re: MOTSS response," posted August 26, 1983 in the net.singles newsgroup. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/WDs7R-X-LmI/_WWAjG9F-bYJ.

[25] Lady Arwen, "Re: gay response response," posted August 25, 1983 in the net.singles newsgroup. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/sLXBfBgQytc/fweubLf9-s8J.

[26] Mike Konopik, "Re: Meeting MOTSS," posted August 25, 1983 in the net.singles newsgroup. "Good Neanderthal instincts there, mit-eddie!zzz. About what we expect from the students at your school," replied a user posting from an ARPANET site. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/8N2zRNMjkDc/AIjpqDQ7vf4J.

that the creation of a separate newsgroup for gay users might eliminate some of the confusion

and "embarrassment" being experienced by some heterosexual users. However, there was

initially some resistance to the idea:

> I also received mail from other gays on the net, asking if maybe we should start a
> net.gays. There seem to be two problems with this: first, who would post to it?
> Most of us still worry about coming out of the closet (which posting to net.gays
> would be tantamount to doing). Secondly, creating a net.gays would be stating
> that we are different or special. We aren't. It is better to keep discussions on
> "gay" lifestyles in net.singles or net.social, where they belong. I must also admit
> that I feel the visibility is important. Nevertheless, if other gays feel the net might
> be useful to them in some way, I will be happy to act as a clearing-house.[27]

This concern was echoed in discussions several days later, when users began questioning why

there had been little input on the topic from LGBTQ individuals. The lack of visibility, along with

desired visibility, was highlighted as a foremost concern in both the creation of a new group,

along with the actual discussion about a need for it. Because Usenet access was often provided

by schools and employers, many queer users were hesitant to come out in any explicit way.

"I'm sure that there have been MANY responses by gays – but they haven't explicitly identified

themselves as such," wrote Stephen Dyer, who found himself mediating the discussion.[28] Dyer,

a Unix programmer living in Cambridge, MA, rarely discussed his own identity on the public

newsgroup, only ever mentioning a male partner (unnamed) and never going into detail.

Instead, he preferred to allow others to dominate the discussion, forwarding messages from

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[27] Robert Wahl, "Summary: Meeting MOTSS," posted September 7, 1983 in the net.singles newgroup. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/MMIHpONd7jQ/pTetR09JvA4J.
[28] Stephen Dyer, "MOTSS," posted in net.singles on September 16, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/GVN_A4R9vzA/km-TW_qdJxcJ.

anonymous posters and even, as reported by users after his 2010 death, providing Usenet

access accounts through the server that he operated.[29]

Despite these disagreements about the perceived need for an LGBTQ newsgroup, the

debate was pulled over to net.news.group, a newsgroup dedicated to debating the need for

new Usenet groups, on September 17. These discussions included the potential nature of the

newsgroup, with respect to sensitive topics like sex and pornography, the need for encryption

to protect users, possible methods for preventing children from viewing group content, ways of

anonymizing users, and whether there were actually enough queer people present on the

internet to justify the group itself. Unsurprisingly, these discussions became heated. Central to

the concerns of many users was the fact that there was very little anonymity on Usenet; users

posted from their (usually academic or research) institution's server, using their login name or

email address. These user accounts were almost always associated with their real name, and

often specific department or faculty at their institution. Consequently, many users were

reluctant to speak about their own identity, or even post to controversial groups at all, for fear

that their employer or fellow students would see the messages. At length, several queer-

identified individuals even posted their home addresses in an attempt to solicit opinions from

closeted gay members who were not willing to speak up on the public forum.[30] Secondary to

this concern over user privacy versus user visibility was the concern that internet and Usenet

service providers would drop access to Usenet because they did not wish to be associated with

homosexual content, which users feared would be viewed as morally corrupt and salacious.

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[29] "Stephen P Dyer – RIP," *Livejournal*.com, posted on June 13, 2010. https://jwg.livejournal.com/174815.html.
[30] Robert Wahl, "Net.gay (Important)," posted in net.news.group on September 19, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.news.group/FqswaHUAANg/5rh3_cOVz7gJ.

One user from the John Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory pointed out that their

funding came directly from the US Navy and that, "I can see Jack Anderson's column now –

'Taxpayers Paying for Gay Hackers.'"[31]

On September 19, the debate from net.news.group was pulled back over to net.singles

by Stephen Dyer, who wished to update the group where the discussion had originated. "If the

name (net.gays) is a problem, why not net.motss?" asked net.singles poster James Carbin, who

went on to suggest some tongue in cheek "disguise" versions of the acronym MOTSS.[32] This

suggestion was enthusiastically-embraced by many members on all sides of the debate – it was

vague enough to not attract the attention of system administrators and bosses (and children, as

some argued) and would allow closeted users to engage with other queer users, without fear of

being inadvertently outed. The decision was put to a vote by Stephen Dyer on September 21

with the assertion that, "those who would not carry the group because of management issues

should send a message to Mark Horton. Those who just want to rave about the coming

downfall of Western society should mail to /dev/null [the path to deletion]. This is a poll of

interested parties, NOT a discussion of the existence of the group."[33] In the end, all votes were

unanimously for the creation of an LGBTQ newsgroup which would be unmoderated and open

to everyone regardless of sexual orientation. Despite the fact that voting was "generally" in

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[31] Eric, "Re: newsgroup name game," posted to net.news.group on September 19, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups,* https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.news.group/fELiK5_cgPo/_wER1jR53vMJ.

[32] James Carbin, "Proposed net.gays newsgroup," posted to net.singles on September 19, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups,* https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.news.group/xqShlH7rlNY/wcbR_kVb5EwJ.

[33] Stephen Dyer, "'net.motss article posted to 'net.singles'," posted to net.news.group on September 21, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups,* https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.news.group/pV_VDYUxJRY/AK7AHq9ZfewJ.

favour of net.gay instead of net.motss, the decision was made to go with the MOTSS group

name, in keeping with the concerns of system administrators.[34]

On October 7, the very first messages were sent out to net.motss. "Thank goodness for

this turn of events. I was starting to think that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the

eye of a needle than for this news group to be created. (No flames from net.religion, please...),"

posted one user.[35] Despite this initial enthusiasm, the group was relatively slow to take off,

mostly owing to the fact that administrators refused to announce the creation of the new

group to prevent trolling and controversy and most Usenet users would not have known that it

even existed. For the first month, conversation was dominated by several individuals (including

Dyer, unsurprisingly), and sprinkled with numerous manifestos on why users would *not* be

reading the group, citing disagreements about morality, as well as more general concerns that

reading net.motss would reflect badly on them by anyone viewing their readership history. "I

want to get my 2 cents worth in on net.motss before I unsubscribe from the group," began one

user, to which Dyer responded, "progress will REALLY be made when we don't have people

trumpeting in public the fact that they don't intend to read this newsgroup."[36]

Complicating this issue of initial slow usership is the question of archival sources. The

first posts for the net.motss newsgroup in the UTZOO collection are from October 13th – nearly

a week after the initial creation of the group. It can be posited that, because these messages

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[34] Stephen Dyer, "net.gay/net.motss – summary of votes," posted to net.news.group on September 29, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.news.group/No50QhqOonI/QwYcLYC8jqoJ.
[35] Mike Simpson, "Net.motss is born!" posted to net.motss on October 7, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/mzNFic7MmYc/NuS7LIA49esJ.
[36] Keith Ericson, "Have a good newsgroup…" posted to net.motss on October 24, 1983, and Stephen Dyer, "Re: Have a good newsgroup…" posted to net.motss on October 25, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups,* https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/7cerfUpf9mk/stSO8EG8l2gJ and https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/7cerfUpf9mk/YPLwrH9VERcJ.

were collected and archived by Henry Spencer at the University of Toronto and, given the quiet

and unannounced birth of net.motss, that the group went unnoticed by him for several days.

However, despite this absence from the UTZOO files, the messages do appear in Google

Groups' archive, from an unknown source. It is clear from looking at the posts that the Google

Groups archive is not complete – often we see responses to a post, without actually seeing the

original post, itself – however this is the best and most complete archive of net.motss' origins

that currently exists. For these reasons, it is impossible to accurately calculate just how many

users were reading and posting to net.motss during the early years of its existence, or how

quickly the readership increased over time. For example, Google Groups has eighty net.motss

posts archived from October 7 to December 1, 1983, however it is clear from looking at the

threading on the messages that there were perhaps many more. Given the data that does exist

on these first few months, we see a sharp increase in the number of messages posted (or

perhaps simply the number of messages archived) in early 1984, compared with these last few

months of 1983.

Despite this slow start, postings did steadily increase over the group's first year of

existence. Discussions included current news events, identity and labelling, meeting other

LGBTQ people, coming out, and, inevitably, religion. The group became popular enough that in

October 1984 -- just over a year after net.motss's creation -- a second group, mod.motss, was

created in order to deal with the large volume of postings. Many users had begun to complain

about the huge number of messages sent through the net.motss group – both legitimate

discussion topics, as well as posts of a sexual nature and flame messages from "bible-baiters"

looking to start an argument. "I can go find a street-corner Christian and get the same 'friendly

persuasion.' Nor do I need to be told that discrimination is a pertinent issue -- I *know* that; I'd

like to be able to discuss it without having to fend off the twits at the same time," wrote one

anonymous reader, in a (published) email to Stephen Dyer.[37] For the mod.motss group, as with

all moderated Usenet groups, a moderator would have to approve messages that were posted

before they would be sent out publicly. Postings to the moderated group tended to be articles

of general interest which were cross-posted to both net.motss and mod.motss, as well as

forwarded messages from net.motss which were deemed suitable by moderators. Stephen

Dyer was made moderator of the new group, despite his own stated "ambivalence" about the

need for both groups: "my own personal view is that mod.motss should replace net.motss as

soon as it is off the ground and well-established," posted Dyer in the introduction message for

the new group.[38] Despite this intention, net.motss remained quite popular because of its

unmoderated nature, which allowed for more real-time freeform discussion. Both net.motss

and mod.motss remained active until they were combined into one group, soc.motss, during

the aforementioned 1986 Great Renaming.

Narrative and Identity on soc.motss

It is unsurprising that some of the earliest posts on net.motss were attempts to pin down

precisely who was using the group and for what reasons. Reflecting earlier anxieties over the

initial reluctance to designate a newsgroup for LGTBQ issues, for fear that no one would

virtually "show up," several early posters attempted to determine how many gay and lesbian

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[37] Stephen Dyer, "on the direction of net.motss," posted in net.motss on September 27, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/XWU1u-kxH4I/--O6BgLGc-gJ.
[38] Stephen Dyer, "Re: mod.motss," posted in net.moss on October 10, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/a3sQ7_ItTPE/GC2zAyVqJcAJ.

people could actually be found on the Internet. "I think a more appropriate question would be," answered one Yale student, "what proportion of people on the net are out enough to tell net.motss that they are gay?"[39]

Despite these initial concerns, what we find on net.motss (and later soc.motss) is a surge in self-narrative – essentially, individuals telling net.motss (and later soc.motss) that they are gay. Because of Usenet's "conversational" format, where users mostly post with the expectation and hope that others will respond, this self-narrative almost always takes on the form of a discussion or question and answer. Quite often, this self-narrative is coincidental to the written message; not the expressed purpose of the post, but explanation or personal anecdotal evidence to back up a discussed point. Furthermore, Usenet's threaded responses — users quoted the part of the message that they were replying to, adding their own commentary *within* the quoted message — lead to individual's self-narrative becoming woven around each other, as individuals provided counterpoints with their own life narratives. This format and platform greatly influenced the way that people wrote about their own experiences and identity; far from traditional memoirs or autobiographies, or even later online journals and blog posts, these narratives are intended as part of a conversation -- simultaneously one-to-many and one-on-one. However, unlike a chat room or later social media, there was also an expectation that any conversation would be asynchronous, with replies coming in days or even weeks later, removed both temporally and spatially from the original post. When examining these self-narratives, attention to form, audience, place, and performance are central to

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[39] Robert DeBenedictis, "Coming Out, Homoeroticism, and stats," posted in net.motss on October 14, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/5xb1BbkFQig/FFNQ5xHjr7wJ.

understanding and interpreting the stories that Usenet users tell in answering the question, "who am I?"

It is perhaps unsurprising that the largest number of *posters* (to say nothing of readers as a whole, as this number cannot be accurately determined) to net.motss were men who identified as gay. This gender imbalance persisted through the 1980s and early 1990s. During the month of February of 1986, approximately two and a half years after net.motss was created, a total of 65 posts from posters with traditionally-male names were archived, in contrast to just 10 posts from writers with traditionally-feminine names, and 8 posters with gender-indeterminate names, or using anonymous accounts. By 1994, soc.motss was seeing over 4000 posts a month, however, the proportion of posters with masculine names remained high in comparison to those with feminine names. There was a greater tendency for posters in the early 1990s to use anonymous pseudonyms or initials than in the earlier years of the group; this is likely owing to many more users having access through personal accounts instead of institutional or academic access. In August of 1994, 73% of users posting to soc.motss had a traditionally-masculine name, while 5% used a traditionally-feminine name, and 21% used a pseudonym or gender-indeterminate name. Of course, this method of looking at merely names does not concretely ascertain the gender of the individual user but does highlight how the group would look to an outsider looking at message topics and poster names. At first glance, net.motss and soc.motss appear to be male-dominated communities, filled with discussions of topics which primarily interest gay male posters.

The selection bias in the MOTSS groups encompasses several factors. At least in the time period prior to the Eternal September of 1993, the vast majority of individuals with Usenet

access were affiliated with computer science university departments or research institutions; in

the mid-1980s, the proportion of computer science majors who were women was

approximately one third -- this number peaked in 1984 and fell steadily over the next two

decades.[40] The result of this male domination of the fields of computer science and computer

engineering during the 1980s and early 1990s was that there were simply more men than

women on Usenet. This very factor was pointed out on net.motss in one of the very first posts

in October of 1983, along with further discussion as to the male-dominated nature of computer

programming with cautious hope that the balance was slowly changing.[41] Furthermore, given

the origins of the MOTSS groups with the net.singles newsgroup, we see a further bias towards

male users, who were much more likely to post in this particular group, respond to posts, and

email other posters.[42]

That is not to say that women did not post in the MOTSS newsgroups. Text analysis of

the MOTSS newsgroups shows 1217 instances of the term lesbian (including any variation, like

lesbians or lesbianism) within the 6600 messages posted to, or referencing, the MOTSS groups

from 1983 to 1991. Figure 1.3 illustrates the relative frequency of the term *lesbian* within the

MOTSS groups.

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[40] Jane Margolis and Allan Fisher, *Unlocking the Clubhouse: Women in Computing* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 12.

[41] Will Doherty, "how many out there?" posted in net.motss on January 9, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/jPwo56O_WUc/1C8-H4dfF1oJ.

[42] John M Sellens, "mail.personals: October stats," posted in net.singles and net.motss on November 18, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.singles/ry7_m5Hq7Tg/1eOPIHyvkJcJ.
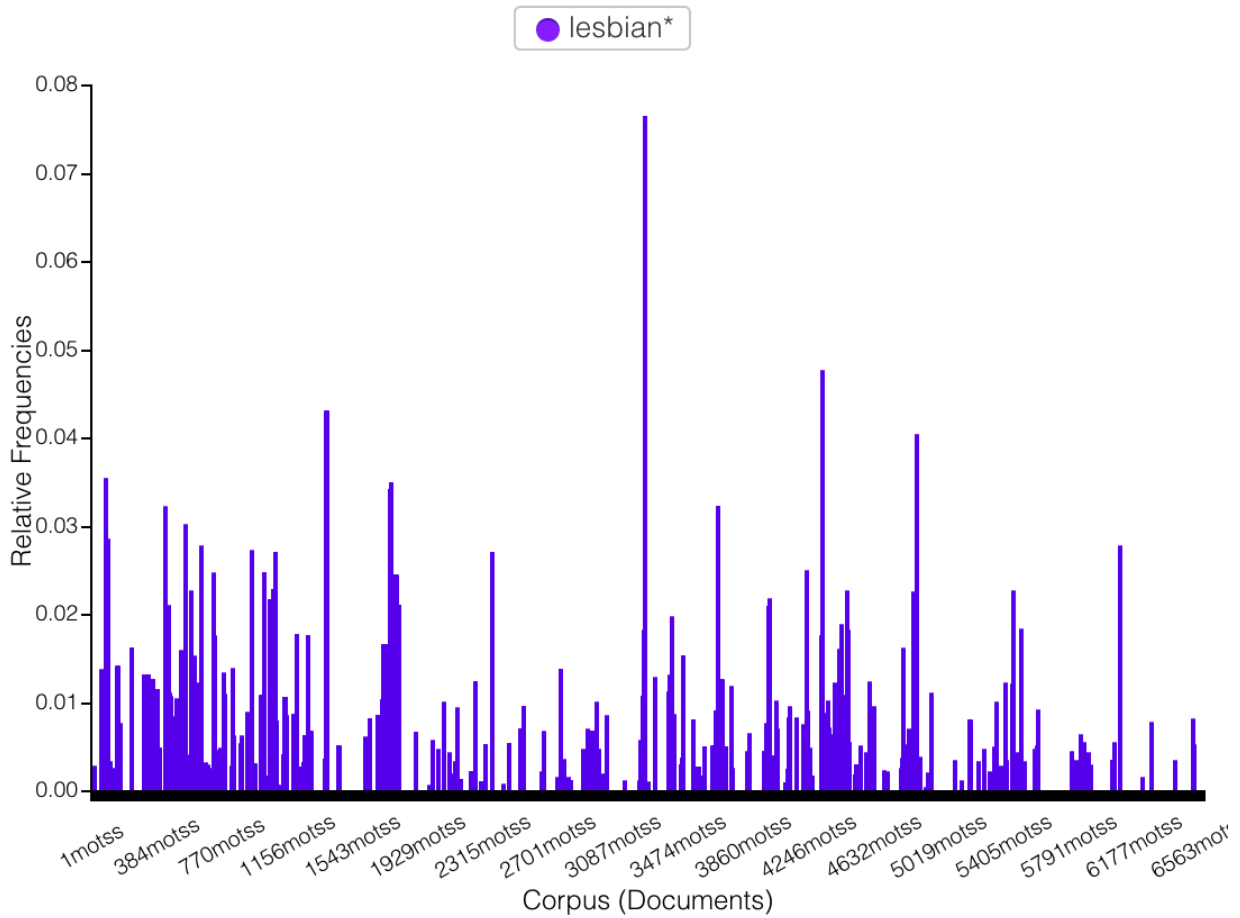
Figure 1.3: Bar graph of the relative frequency of the term lesbian in the MOTSS newsgroups over the time period from 1983 to 1991. The x axis shows all posts organized by date and numbered from 1 to 6563. Source: Voyant Tools.

Early on, many of these posts were tentative and guarded in their writing -- in short, quite

aware of the outsider status in being a woman in a group of primarily gay men. One female user

ended her post on coming out to family with a disclaimer that, "I hope I am not offending

anybody with these questions. I realise that I am somewhat of an outsider to this group, as I

have never had sexual relationships with MOTSS, and because I am a woman in a group which

seems completely made up of men, but I do not feel different, even though I might be

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perceived as different by some of you."[43] Furthermore, there seemed to be a concerted effort by many posters to make the group welcoming to lesbians and other female posters. One male user followed up a post soliciting for feedback with the message, "A note to women: Please, please don't feel that your input is not wanted! This newsgroup is as much for lesbian issues as for gay male ones."[44]

Despite these attempts at inclusion, the idea of a separate lesbian newsgroup was discussed several months later. The majority of male respondents were openly opposed to the idea, preferring to maintain a unified "gay and lesbian" presence on Usenet, though generally understanding of why some female posters felt the need for it. "Oppressed groups should have the right to gather by themselves, even if they gather in what is technically a public place... I want the world to be a place where lesbians won't want to segregate from gay men or from men in general. But this is not the world that we live in" commented one male user.[45] This discussion, as well as several others that came up over the next few years, eventually ended with the decision that there were not enough lesbian users on Usenet to justify a separate group (a perception that continued to be influenced by the hesitation many women felt to post in the MOTSS groups) and that maintaining one group was preferable to fracturing into multiple smaller groups. Despite this decision, 1184 messages posted to the MOTSS groups out of the 6600 from 1983 to 1991 were cross-posted to the net.women and soc.women newsgroups. This cross-posting indicates that a number of users were following and posting to both communities,

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[43] Sophie Quigley, "coming out," posted in net.motss on February 5, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/D8niqtwgv2M/vDqSHs9S93wJ.
[44] Robert Wahl, "Coming out," posted in net.motss on February 7, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/Fw8WSR2dI1g/XFQ0uwGOSzwJ.
[45] Will Doherty, "Re: SEPARATE SPACE," posted in net.motss on January 14, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/1-C_kOQu5mI/lLaBHqSJPZUJ.

and that messages of possible interest were distributed to both in order to reach the widest possible audience of queer women. It wasn't until January 1996, around the time period that Usenet was decreasing in popularity among competition from the web, that soc.women.lesbian-and-bi was created, when there were enough users to finally justify the existence of a separate group.

It is also significant that the majority of posters identified as "gay," as opposed to other sexual orientations and labels. The topic of bisexuality came around in waves, with a generally-negative viewpoint on bisexuals being expressed by many of MOTSS' more vocal posters. "I don't know what to make of bisexuality, myself… I have often heard bisexuality used as a justification for a series of inconclusive relationships (yes, I know that's a cliche, but...). It must, however, be fairly difficult for someone to make a serious commitment to another person if s/he assumes that his/her sexual makeup requires continuing experiences with other people," read one reply to a post asking if there were any married bisexuals in the group.[46] One anonymous poster had a different set of concerns, noting that, "I have known a few people who claimed to be bisexual and I felt after talking to most of them that they were really gay but couldn't admit it to themselves."[47] This discussion seemed to come up regularly in both the net.motss and soc.motss groups and echoed contemporary attitudes towards bisexuality. Figure 1.4 illustrates the relative frequency of the term *bisexual* within the MOTSS newsgroups.

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[46] Vince Manis, "Re: Bisexuality, anyone?" posted in net.motss on August 16, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/tZdoDNSkP0U/ESVyCif7eB8J.

[47] Anonymous, "Re: Bisexuality, anyone?" posted in net.motss on August 21, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/tZdoDNSkP0U/q27M7bdJan4J.
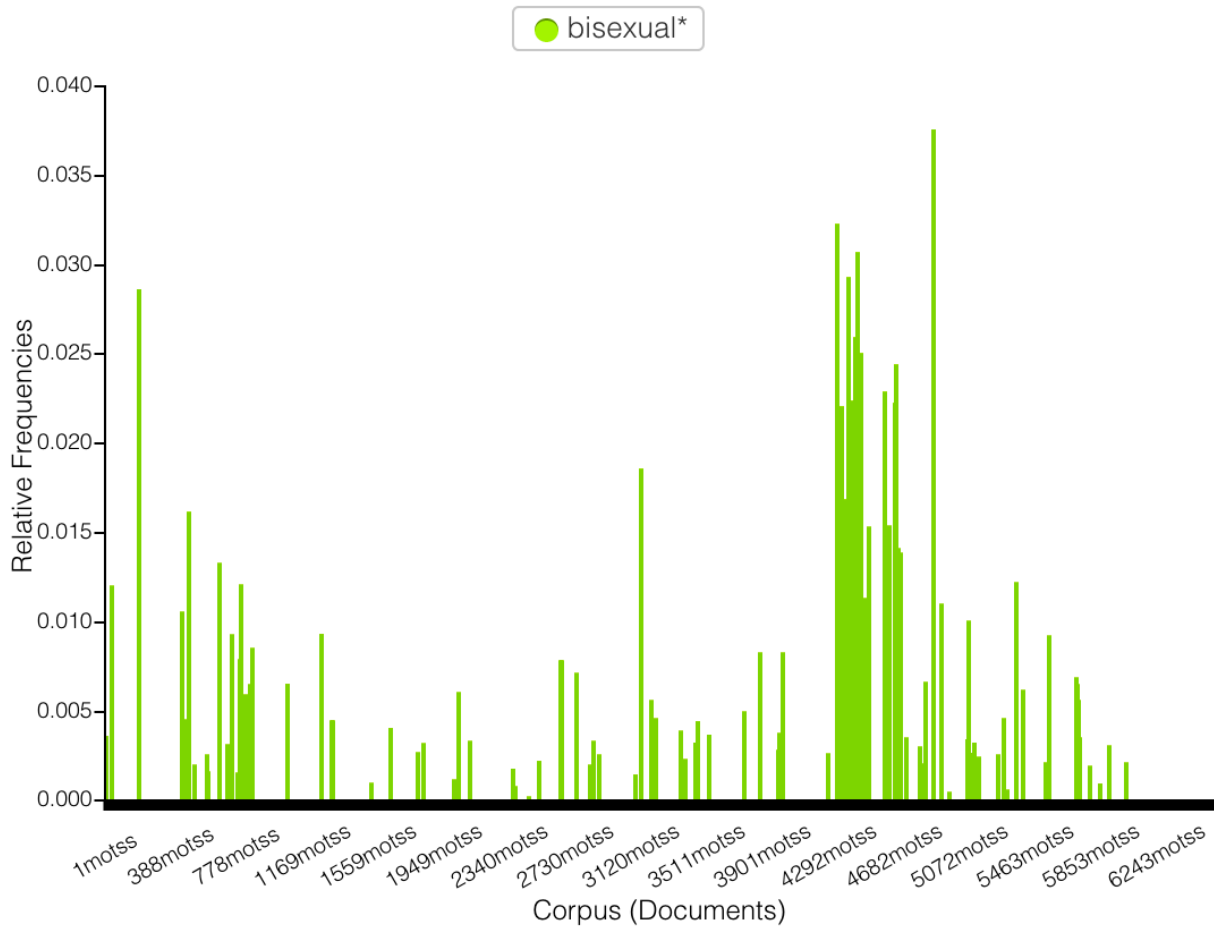
Figure 1.4: Bar graph showing the frequency of the use of the word "bisexual" in the net.motss and soc.motss newgroups. The x axis shows posts ordered chronologically and ordered from numbers 1 to 6243.

In his 1985 article, "Bisexuality: Reassessing Our Paradigms of Sexuality," written contemporary to the period that this discussion was occurring on the MOTSS newsgroups, Jay P. Paul examines the role of gay politics and organizing in essentializing the category of homosexual and argues that this simplistic model has had detrimental effects on scientific and sociological research on sexuality. Through the tying of homosexual behaviour to gay identity, and the emergence of a "gay community," bisexuals became associated with deviant or "immature" behaviour, viewed as counterproductive to the goals of the community. Paul

asserts that the bisexual has "neither a clear social identity nor a strong political voice" and

necessarily must act and organize in a separate sphere outside of mainstream gay and lesbian

associations.[48] This bi-phobic discussion on soc.motss, which echoed led to the creation of the

group soc.bi in October of 1991, as a place for bisexual users to post and chat with other

bisexual users, without facing the types of negativity that were found in the MOTSS groups.

"Yipppppeeeeeeeeeee!" posted group creator Ciaran in the group's test message.[49]

Much of the discussion in the early days of the soc.bi group revolved around labelling

and inclusion; "I like the word Queer as an inclusive term. I don't like the word Gay so much,

because it's always meant more 'gay men, and maybe lesbians, but barely a hint of bisexuals to

me than Queer does. I think part of it is that Queer is so shocking, that you think a little more

about what it means," suggested one female user from Penn State.[50] Another user responded

to the discussion with his thoughts on inclusion within the gay and lesbian community, stating

that, "gay men didn't include lesbians in Gay Rights until *lesbians* insisted on it. Likewise,

lesbians and gay men won't include bisexuals until *bis* insist on it, loudly and vociferously."[51]

In another post, a user asked if other bisexual group members also preferred to have

relationships with other bisexuals, over gay and straight individuals, and was met with general

agreement from those who responded.[52] Users in this new group were also more likely than

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[48] Jay P. Paul, "Bisexuality: Reassessing Our Paradigms of Sexuality," *Journal of Homosexuality* 11 no. 1-2 (1985).
[49] Ciaran McHale, "Testing 1 2 3," posted in soc.bi on October 24, 1991. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.bi/IyLcAPTV7R4/v9aqvvJOScEJ.
[50] Sonja Kueppers, "Re: Get the FAQ out of here," posted in soc.bi on November 5, 1991. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.bi/WuTb59GzNXY/1cu1riIdo2gJ.
[51] Rod Williams, "Re: Get the FAQ out of here," posted in soc.bi on November 5, 1991. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.bi/WuTb59GzNXY/YogQg6sIXKcJ.
[52] Chris, "Sexual 'affinity' vs. 'orientation,'" posted in soc.bi on October 25, 1991. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.bi/zHQQt4Z4kYQ/beeJRlxMawMJ.

those in soc.motss to use their signature line on their posts to express their identity. "See sig,"

posted one user in response to a question about how he identified; his signature included,

along with the standard lines with his name, email address, and academic institution, the text,

"Part straight. Part Gay. All Queer."[53] This focus on terminology and defining exactly where the

group fit into the gay and lesbian community highlights the soc.bi group as distinct from the

queer-centered groups that were created before it.

In 1984, at the time that the moderated mod.motss group was founded, net.motss was

overrun with complaints that the overwhelming majority of users posting to the group were

not, in fact, gay. These users came from two sides -- both posters intent on explaining why, for

various reasons, homosexuality was "wrong" and misguided, and heterosexual allies defending

the group. For the most part, participation by heterosexual users who were merely curious was

tolerated and even encouraged, in the spirit of "normalizing" the gay community through

friendly interaction. Input from non-gay users on discussions of sexual orientation was often

solicited in these early years, in order to gain further insights on the homosexual/heterosexual

dichotomy. However, these discussions were not always civil and productive, and many users

began to withdraw from the community during the first year, in order to avoid what often

turned into all-out flame wars. Stephen Dyer answered one user's concerns about the direction

that many of these debates took with the positive implications of this large number of

heterosexual users on net.motss. In Dyer's perspective, the general reaction from most

heterosexual users could be seen as a positive development, as, "the general consensus of the

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[53] Paul Crowley, "Re: Get the FAQ out of here," posted in soc.bi on November 4, 1991. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.bi/WuTb59GzNXY/qKOp-4jfCdoJ.

contributors, most of whom are not gay, is that [prolific troll] Brunson, etc. are fools. This alone

can be important to realize for the many people who read net.motss but who do not feel

comfortable coming out in public. That is, the sentiments of such people are distasteful, but

their presentation in this forum tends to vitiate them, and render them ludicrous."[54] Though

users such as Dyer called for non-engagement with trolls, it was difficult for LGBTQ users to

avoid the large number of posts on religious, philosophical, and even scientific topics. These

discussions touched on issues of morality, ethics, evolution, and choice. Figure 1.5 shows the

relation of frequently used terms to each other, illustrating how frequently terms like

"morality," "religion," and "sex" appeared in connection to identity labels like "gay."

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[54] Stephen Dyer, "on the direction of net.motss," posted to net.motss on September 27, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/XWU1u-kxH4I/--O6BgLGc-gJ.
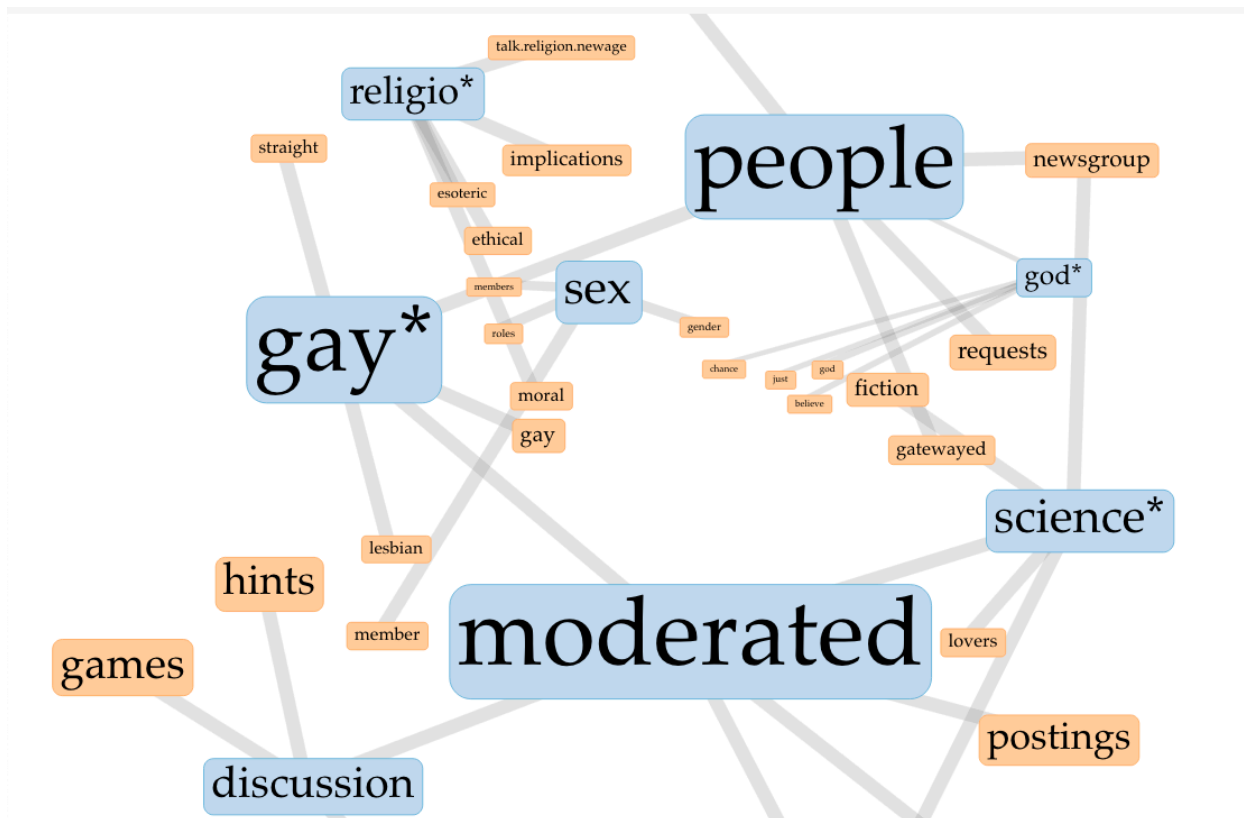
Figure 1.5: Map of discussion terms on MOTSS. This map shows the most-discussed terms larger (in blue) and maps out the relationship between often-discussed terms. For example, "religion" is used frequently in association with other terms like "ethical", and "moral," which also highly links to "sex" and "gay". Source: Voyant Tools.

This online discourse was underscored by the legal, social, and cultural reality for queer people and queer rights in the 1980s. Though the 1970s had seen the proliferation of political and social organizing in the United States in the wake of the 1969 Stonewall Riots, leading to repeals of sodomy laws in half of the American states and the beginnings of protections against discrimination on the basis of sexuality, the early 1980s marked a return to a more conservative climate. In the United States, this echoed political changes, including the election of Republican Ronald Reagan and a Republican majority senate, as well as the rise of conservative Christian

organizations aimed at repealing pro-gay legislation.[55] On a worldwide level, the rise of the

HIV/AIDS crisis beginning in 1981 also served to foster homophobia and anti-gay sentiment.

This further strengthened the assertions of conservative organizations and media, such as

popular American Republican politician and political commentator Patrick Buchanan, who

described HIV infection as the result, "immoral, unnatural, unsanitary, unhealthy, and suicidal"

sexual behaviours practiced by gay men.[56] With this harmful rhetoric so ubiquitous within

society – and particularly American society – it is unsurprising that many Usenet groups echoed

these perspectives heard within the mainstream media.

Many of these discussions began on other Usenet groups, such as net.religion, christian.

talk.religion, or soc.philosophy, however the nature of posting and cross-posting to Usenet

made it easy for users to pull the debates over to the MOTSS groups. This was oftentimes

phrased as a genuine (if misguided) attempt to bring in opinions from outside the originating

group but, predictably, almost always led to arguments and marginalization. Additionally,

because it was done rather often, outsiders tended to not recognize just how frequently these

discussions were raised within the MOTSS groups. "This article has been posted to

net.religion.christian as well, but I wanted to see what people here had to say," posted one

user, along with an article titled "Homosexuality and the Bible." The reaction should have (and

perhaps was) unsurprising: "Just don't expect a warm welcome on my front porch when you

come to tell me I'm doomed to hell… if I was to come to your door bearing such glad tidings, I

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[55] John D'Emilio, *The World Turned: Essays on gay history, politics, and culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 84-85.
[56] Patrick Buchanan, "AIDS and moral bankruptcy," *New York Post* (December 2, 1987), 23.

bet that you'd pretend that you weren't home, too," read one response.[57] These types of

discussions almost always generated responses from queer individuals posting in the MOTSS

groups who could not turn down the opportunity to engage on these issues.

In addition to this inadvertent debate, there were also frequent posts made by trolls,

posters looking to deliberately start trouble.[58] In the case of these posters, most users advised

that they simply be ignored, however this advice seemed to simply drive many to respond

through private email, instead of publicly on the group. Other users asserted the need to

engage with negative posters, pointing out that these views were quite prevalent during this

time period, or risk being forced to "crawl back into the shadows, maybe forever this time."[59]

Equally adamant were the trolls themselves about their right to post on the public forum. "I

really object to people posting emotionally inflammatory remarks just for the sake of being

antagonistic and to see who they can invoke an equally antagonistic reaction out of," began

one post on the net.motss newsgroup, before going on to assert that:

> The gay lifestyle is wrong for most people because it interferes with one's
> relationship with God. The interference may be a result of guilt feelings, tension
> over the inability to establish loving relationships with people of other lifestyles,
> or of a generally non-conformist, rebellious type attitude… I would also like to
> suggest that regardless of one's upbringing, chromosomes, and inborn instincts,
> any behavior can be learned. I feel that those who continue to insist that they

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[57] Larry, "Homosexuality and the bible," posted to net.motss on February 1, 1985, and anonymous response posted to net.motss on February 1, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/MfWZuLLNtX4/7lmLOBtmh9kJ.

[58] Whitney Phillips describes the relationship between online trolling, culture, and the mainstream media in *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015). Phillips describes these online postings, in search of a negative reaction, as not purely a deviant act, but as a reflection of the mainstream media made absurd. In the case of these homophobic messages, these trolls were parroting dominant perspectives on the LGBTQ community, in search of a negative reaction. By rendering these dominant opinions absurd, as pointed out by Steve Dyer, these trolls actually helped to sway public opinion towards tolerance of the gay community.

[59] Owen Rowley, "Ken Arndt et al [long but hopefully worth it]," posted to net.motss on November 18, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/GcTm6fVOzi8/jfhl57VgAykJ.

cannot change their nature either don't want to, are too lazy, or have been brainwashed by others into believing they can't.[60]

Essentially, it was seen as their right to free speech to virtually enter these specialized communities, in order to say what they felt that they needed to say. It was up to the MOTSS to decide how, or even whether, to respond.

The result of this discourse between these groups – gay men and women, bisexuals, and heterosexual posters -- appearing on the MOTSS communities was the proliferation of self-narrative expressing identity, but according to (or in opposition to) a specific set of expectations and stereotypes which were dictated by the very debate occurring on an almost daily basis.

Queer identity on soc.motss

Individuals in the MOTSS groups tended to identify themselves in relation to the discourse they were hearing within the group. Discussions on the use of labelling in describing identity, and as a form of exclusion, came up frequently in the MOTSS groups. To take one 1985 example:

> Anyhoo, the whole message is let's stop this differentiation on meaningless attributes ... sexual orientation, skin color, drug usage...Gee, if you want to treat everyone the same, why shouldn't we stop the differentiation between gay "posers" and "masculine" gay men, between "butch" lesbians and "feminine" lesbians. Why can't we celebrate these differences, or will celebrating these differences in gays and lesbians cause straight people to question their own male/female role models?[61]

The themes surrounding the differentiation of identity categories on soc.motss can be broadly sorted into three categories: the self in relation to stereotypes; identity and labelling; and

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[60] Craig V. Johnson, "Serious people, only," posted on net.motss on November 4, 1983. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/HWFO0ffhVyM/ZXBMoZKoHxEJ.
[61] Chris, "Celebrating Differences," posted to net.motss on November 11, 1985. Archived at *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/LOhNP8NKgwI/OFusz0-KP_UJ.

homosexuality and morality and religion. By examining the topic modelling output from

MALLET, it is possible to construct the ways that individuals described their identity in relation

to these outside ideas and, in particular, in relation to who they were *not.*

The topic of gay and lesbian stereotypes came up frequently on net.motss and

soc.motss. These discussions tended to revolve around two types of stereotypes: stereotypes of

gay men and lesbians in the media, and stereotypes *within* the gay community. One of the most

hotly-debated issues within net.motss was 'displays' of 'effeminate' behaviour. These aspects,

which include styles of dress, ways of speaking, posture, and hand-gestures, were described by

some within the online gay community as stereotypical signifiers of sexual orientation and

polarized many individuals on the topic. Scholarly work on the topic of effeminacy in the gay

male community has highlighted this issue as particularly prominent. In the article

"Marginalization Among the Marginalized: Gay Men's Anti-Effeminacy Attitudes," Kittiwut Jod

Taywaditep describes the issue as a reaction against non-conformity, which many individuals in

the community associate with bullying and violence. While other forms of effeminacy, such as

drag and camp, are considered to be socially acceptable forms of gender non-conformation and

power subversion, everyday effeminate behaviour has become stigmatized within the

community.[62] This topic exploded on net.motss in February and March of 1986, with 109 posts

and replies on the subject.

> It's amazing when new people show up at a gay student group – many of them
> ALREADY act effeminate before they 'come out'. Many others never act effeminate.
> A few… grow more effeminate as time goes on… When I first came out, I was

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[62] Kittiwut Jod Taywaditep, "Marginalization Among the Marginalized: Gay Men's Anti-Effeminacy Attitudes,"
Journal of Homosexuality Vol. 42: 1 (2001).

amazed by the number of guys who I met who were effeminate. My gut reaction
was "I'm gay because I like men – not men who act like women!"[63]

Another user discusses a former partner who was he describes as "one of the limpest wristed

"Mary's" [a slang term for an effeminate gay male] I've ever met," with a body builder's

physique. He goes on to explain that he felt embarrassed when out with this partner and that

he "knew it was an act on his part because he still believed we were supposed to act

effeminate."[64] We can see keywords from this debate, and particularly from February of 1986,

show up as a distinctive topic from the MALLET output, highlighting several identity concepts

associated with gay male stereotyping.

```
men gay feb gerber andrew act effeminate mit-amt.mit.edu women
isl ri.cmu.edu student young-acting university straight costume
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Some of the keywords refer to a prolific poster on the topic, but we see the identification of

several identity terms, including "effeminate," "young-acting," "act," and "costume." These

keywords show the words most frequently used in discussing this topic and provide a unique

perspective on these anxieties surrounding male sexual identity and performance.

Though some posters saw these stereotypical effeminate behaviours as a negative form

of camp -- female impersonation by homosexual men -- there were just as many who defended

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[63] Andrew S Gerber, "Gays and stereotypes (A relatively young perspective)," posted to net.motss on February 13, 1986. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

[64] Ray, "Effeminacy/Stereotypes…Yamaha, Sansui, Pioneer, Akai…and us!" posted in net.motss on February 24, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/VjZacFoYFvs/0wTHZYpdEq8J. Ray went on to remark on the heterosexual male stereotype with the tongue-in-cheek, "Hey Jack! Wanna go an suck down a coupla frosty ones, den let's see if dere are any hot lookin chicks at da club," to which a poster named Wendy responded, "Sounds more like Lesbians talking, to me. : -)"

them for exactly the same reasons.[65] Many of these debates between users highlighted the

paradoxical nature of these expressions of sexuality, which relied on traditional notions of

gender. One poster on net.motss pointed out that, far from defying gender stereotypes and

societal expectations, effeminate behaviour was simply, "cast[ing] off one restricting stereotype

to adopt another."[66] These ideas of performance were strongly rooted in speech and

mannerisms, but the subject of *costume* also came up frequently in the online community, with

posters identifying several styles of both "costume" and "non-costume" clothing that could be

worn to signal a queer identity. "After all, the person who works in the financial district puts on

a costume of a suit/tie to *show* others how he fits in and is successful -- isn't that drag?"

asked a poster named Richard, while defending his choice to wear what had been described as

"stereotypical" gay clothing – faded Levi 501s and flannel shirts – during all his non-working

hours.[67]

On one level, this was merely a discussion of personal preference, which many users

defended as their right to choose how to express themselves and their preference for potential

partners. However, it also reveals anxieties over the presentation of queer identity to the larger

world, in relation to the dominant stereotypes about gay males. One user shared an anecdote

about his experience playing for a gay men's basketball team in Boston, where the individual

described feeling like he "belonged" among the company of the team more than any other gay

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[65] For a discussion of camp as an art form in the late 20th century see Esther Newton's *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[66] Andrew S Gerber, "Re: Gays and stereotypes (A relatively young perspective)," posted to net.motss on February 16, 1983. Gerber followed up this comment with, "(I know, it's none of my business how people act, they should be the way want to be.)" Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

[67] Richard Johnson, "Drag……. TV Stereotypes," posted in net.motss on March 6, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/WuPoU43_XNI/0yv5Hl7eM0wJ.

association he had experienced. However, he was troubled by the team's lack of desire to associate themselves with anything relating to a gay male stereotype. "I sensed that although these guys were easy going about traditionally masculine behaviour, they were *very* uptight about anything that could be linked to being "gay"… Under close inspection, generalizations never describe real people. We are too complex to fit into rigid stereotypes."[68] Nevertheless, many of these individuals described their struggle to express their queer identity within a prescribed set of expected stereotypes which they felt pressure to conform to.

Users in the MOTSS groups also discussed the evolution of stereotypes within media and popular culture. These discussions were considered particularly important in the early days of the group, with the assertion that, "Motss has a very large readership, and for the most part I am sure it is made up of curious straights (Hi There!). Most of these people know very little about the gay community except for the more outrageous (and outdated) stereotypes."[69] It became commonplace for users to post topics on new movies with gay and lesbian characters, for the purpose of discussing the ways that the character was presented. In particular, posters to the MOTSS groups were divided on the "new stereotype" of gay men as "well-paid stylish professionals." Though some posters stressed that this was a positive evolution from earlier portrayals as the "unrespectable dregs of humanity," other users felt that their identity was being diluted down to "as average as the next guy except that they love other men."[70] This led

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[68] Gerry Fisher, "Generalizations about Gay Men," posted to net.motss on February 6, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/MGdP0Y9zODI/vyvxur4cirQJ.

[69] Lance, "forwarded message," posted to net.motss on January 11, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/Di-eD0HX9t4/wu0zo5TdFEUJ.

[70] P.Hanson, "The new stereotype," posted in net.motss on February 25, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/jW6OhQkyFoQ/vq3H9sUg7ZMJ.

to discussion as to the goals of the gay rights movement, and the need (or lack thereof) for

identity visibility.

These issues of visibility and identity in relation to other identity categories became

increasingly-discussed as the number of users, along with the diversity of users, on the MOTSS

groups increased throughout the late 1980s. This included debates on labelling, slurs, and even

sexuality as an identity category in comparison to other categories like race and religion. It is

unsurprising that users described preferences for various identity labels based on their own

experiences and prejudices. These issues were frequently tied to other labelling questions for

other marginalized groups. An example of this can be seen in this 1985 post:

> My impression was that "Negro" (& similarly "homo-sexual") were objectionable
> because 1) they were the labels used during the bad old days of near-universal
> discrimination & thus are inextricably bound up with the benighted attitudes of
> that period; 2) they were names given by the "oppressor", & since naming affects
> perception which affects people's sense of what is real, minorities ought to regain
> control over their identities by renaming themselves; 3) they're misleading or
> poorly chosen names: "homosexual" was coined in late Victorian times, using a
> Greek prefix & Latin suffix (the ancient world had no terms for either homo- or
> heterosexual).[71]

These debates often turned into discussions of the history and etymology of various labels; this

process was important to the mediation of these labels in relation to the historically negative

origins of the words.

> >Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think the term, "Negro", is considered to be
> >insulting because its actual meaning is "slave".
>
> You're wrong. Its actual meaning is "black" (the colour). "Negro" is insulting
> because of its historical usage, that's all. Though to me "homosexual" never

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[71] Ron Rizzo, "Re: Nomenclature – Gay/Homosexual/Lesbia," posted in net.motss on August 15, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/0msSHXzLHFs/miIKkw3CvTkJ.

seemed insulting... this idea is new to me upon just recently joining net.motss. I never liked it though, because it seemed very clinical sorta. But I think that if a significant number of people object to it, it shouldn't be used... there are plenty of words in the English language! I always liked Gay, it sounds really nice.[72]

Another user defended his preference for the use of the word "gay" a few days later, asserting that, "I use the term gay to group together for political and social purposes. I go to a gay boating club, I belong to a gay computer club, I go to gay bars, I vote according to a "gay" agenda, and I think of myself as a gay person. .. It is interesting how we choose our labels."[73]

Furthermore, there was also a number of discussions about whether the term "gay" could be used for women as well as men. "I would like to know why straight people always think of men when they think of homosexuals? Lesbians are homosexuals too you know!" posted one anonymous user in a discussion about terminology and associations.[74] This discussion really highlighted the division between the group's male and female users about whether women really belonged in net.motss, and in gay associations as a whole. Fascinatingly, and very telling about the group's readership and posters as a whole, women tended not to weigh in on these discussions and so the debates about the place of women in the group and, in fact, the language used to describe their own identity, tended to fall on to male posters. In general, most of the posters in the MOTSS groups seemed to favour the use of the gay as a generic term that described both men and women. One male poster asserted that, "I strongly dislike using "Gay" to refer only to men because it seems to me that the history of this is the

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[72] Alan J Rosenthal, "Re: Nomenclature - Gay/Homosexual/Lesbia," posted in net.motss on September 2, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/0msSHXzLHFs/o8O2oVQhynEJ.
[73] Anonymous, "Re: Nomenclature – Gay/Homosexual/Lesbia," posted in net.motss on August 19, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/0msSHXzLHFs/gwvI5V4T6YgJ.
[74] Anonymous, "Re: homosexual associations," posted in net.motss on August 28, 1984. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

belief that only male homosexuals exist. You know, like how men always ask gay women "Uhh...

how do you do it??"[75] Another poster posted a chart to describe the relation between the term

homosexual and gay men and women, reproduced in Figure 1.6.[76]

```
>         I would like to know why straight people always think of males when
>         they speak of homosexuals?  Lesbians are homosexuals too you know!

Why do some people think "homosexual" implies "male"?  I can think of
two reasons.

I suspect that the word may have become specialized in the same way as
"man", which originally referred to any human being -- and for the same
reasons.

        +------------------------------------------+
        |           HOMOSEXUAL (= gay person)      |
        |  +-----------+        +-------------+     |
        |  | HOMOSEXUAL|        |   LESBIAN   |  |  |
        |  |  (= gay   |        |   (= gay    |  |  |
        |  |    man)   |        |    woman)   |  |  |
        |  +-----------+        +-------------+     |
        +------------------------------------------+


        +------------------------------------------+
        |           MAN (= person)                 |
        |  +-----------+        +-------------+     |
        |  |    MAN    |        |    WOMAN    |  |  |
        |  |  (= male  |        |  (= female  |  |  |
        |  |   person) |        |    person)  |  |  |
        |  +-----------+        +-------------+     |
        +------------------------------------------+
```
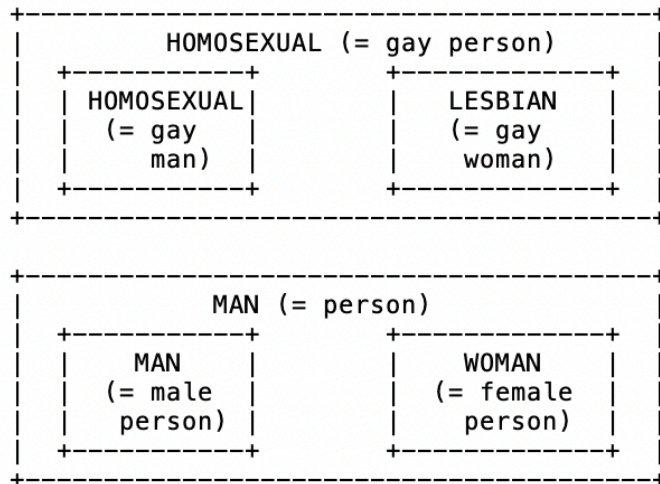
Figure 1.6: Andy Behrens, "Re: homosexual associations."

This uncertainty over terminology and gay male and female users became further

complicated by derogatory terms for heterosexuals which gained increasing prominence in the

group in 1985 and 1986. During a slump in posting that lasted for several weeks after the

renaming of net.motss to soc.motss, one user asked for feedback for a label for heterosexual

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[75] Alan J Rosenthal, "Re: Nomenclature – Gay/Homosexual/Lesbia," posted in net.motss on September 2, 1985. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/0msSHXzLHFs/o8O2oVQhynEJ.
[76] Andy Behrens, "Re: homosexual associations," posted to net.motss on August 28, 1984. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

posters, with the statement that, "those-who-sleep-with-and-are-attracted-to-only-those-of-the-opposite-sex have been giving us names since the dawn of time, and we have nothing to offer in return… Seeing as the net.motss crowd has recently acquired a new name itself, soc.motss, does anybody have any good suggestions for what we can call the motos lovers?"[77] Responses tongue-in-cheek rejected the term "straight" as it implied that gay users were, in relation, bent or broken. Conversely, many users posted in support of the term "breeders" to refer to heterosexual posters, despite protests that name-calling hadn't gotten either group particularly far in the past. [78] The slur was also problematically linked to lesbians when one user pointed out that though birth control was not something that gay men had to worry about, "but that doesn't mean we don't cause or carry babies. This newsgroup is gay male dominated so perhaps we tend to forget our sisters. I know of at least one of my lesbian friends who is pregnant by choice. There are other friends who are active parents through current or previous marriages."[79] These issues of terminology which did not apply to gay men specifically highlighted the divide between the usership of the MOTSS groups and the range of queer identities.

Particularly in the early days of MOTSS, users found themselves frequently discussing their own identity in relation to flames, attacks, and claims of moral degradation. These negative posts from Usenet users came frequently, right into most users' email inboxes, and were not something that could be ignored by many, despite calls to "not feed the trolls.'

[77] Brian R. Holt, "Re: test," posted to soc.motss on October 10, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.motss/ZFiJuYJOQrc/BmnoJwL5TdAJ.

[78] Chris, "Celebrating Differences," posted to net.motss on November 11, 1985. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

[79] Bob, "Re: Children," mosted to net.motss on February 17, 1986. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

Perhaps even more damaging were the seemingly innocent posts from 'helpful' users providing context and justification for these claims of sin and damnation. "Here are some biblical references to the homosexuality issue," posted one user to both net.religion and net.motss, with no clues to the ultimate 'goal' of the post.[80] Figure 1.7, a screenshot of the net.motss from May 1984, reproduced in Google Groups, illustrates how the frequency of troll and flame posts would have appeared to users.

net.motss Shared publicly
900 of 1074 topics (99+ unread) ☆   **Join group**   G+

Ignoring & Homophobia (3)
By Ron Rizzo - 3 posts - 2 views

Boswell's talk. (1)
By Tony Della Fera - 1 post - 1 view

Three cheers for the queers, they're ok now. (1)
By ar...@smurf.dec - 1 post - 3 views

John Boswell talks about Gay Christian History: Part 1 (1)
By Ron Rizzo - 1 post - 2 views

John Boswell"s "Christianity, Homosexuality & Social Tolerance" (1)
By ___ - 1 post - 2 views

Greetings from Olympus! (2)
By Tony Della Fera - 2 posts - 1 view

John Boswell's "Christianity, Homosexuality & Social Tolerance" (2)
By Ron Rizzo - 2 posts - 4 views

Good News (1)
By dy...@vaxuum.dec - 1 post - 3 views

I would like to be add to your mailing list (1)
By David J. Cimalore - 1 post - 2 views

Addition to the mailing list (1)
By David J. Cimalore - 1 post - 3 views

CwS 4.1 article: Gay and Lesbian Naturists (1)
By Steve Nahm - 1 post - 1 view

Is there something I don't know? (1)
By Robert DeBenedictis - 1 post - 4 views

DISCRIMINATION AT MIT (1)
By Will Doherty - 1 post - 4 views

Figure 1.7: Screen shot of messages posted to net.motss in May 1984. Discrimination was a frequent subject, along with inflammatory postings and discussions of articles and other messages.

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[80] Don Caprio, "Homosexuals as ministers??" posted to net.religion and net.motss on September 13, 1984. Archived in the "Usenet Archive of UTZOO Tapes," *The Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/utzoo-wiseman-usenet-archive.

During the first year of MOTSS's life, users frequently complained that troll and flame

postings along with discussion of discrimination, both on and offline, dominated the group and

gave a rather depressing and one-sided view of life as a queer individual. The MALLET topic

modelling output reveals the frequency with which these topics came up in the groups. In the

first twenty-five most frequently-discussed topics on MOTSS, religion and morality come up

three times.

1	brunson rights homosexuals people usfbobo.uucp david site version oct discrimination edt homosexuality gay wrong religious message-id person hire don't subject
5	god church christian bible christians jesus gay religious sin homosexuality evil love people religion christianity give man good catholic christ
21	god history christian press sex richard egypt sin homosexuality jesus love university fortune.uucp law teklds.uucp century sexuality nude karen historical

Table 1.3: MALLET output of topics relating to religion and morality.

In Table 1.3, we see a number of keywords relating to both religion and morality, including

references to both Egypt and Judaism, which refer to the Old Testament teachings on

homosexuality. Interestingly, the names and servers used by several noted trolls who posted

frequently to the groups over multiple years also show up as keywords in these topics,

highlighting the role that named individuals played in directing these types of discussions.

At times, these types of inflammatory messages made up the majority of posts being

made to MOTSS; it is unsurprising to see many MOTSS members internalizing these messages

and describing their own identity in relation to these messages, particularly in opposition to these ideas of sin and moral depravation. Often, this took on the form of users explaining their own understanding of religious texts and beliefs or relating their own journey to accepting themselves in relation to their own religious beliefs. "There is absolutely nothing that precludes a Christian from being a homosexual, or vice versa. A Christian is a believer in the risen Christ: nothing more, nothing less. Some churches like to impose their own qualifications on what constitutes a "real" Christian; but these are latter-day additions to or corruptions of Christianity," writes one poster who identifies both as gay and Christian.[81] These types of posts were often made in response to heterosexual posters describing their own understanding of their religion and homosexuality – often quoting religious texts back to the original poster, but with a completely different interpretation of the same words. However, we also see a significant number of posters discussing these issues more generally. In a goodbye post (the result of graduating from university and losing his Usenet access) that begins "To all my friends (and enemies) in net.motss," one user in 1988 describes his own journey to accept his own sexuality in light of his religious beliefs:

> I used to be a very religious conservative Bible reader, but I NEVER EVER beat anybody over the head with it because they didn't believe as I did. I just kept an open mind and tried to love all people regardless of where they were coming from. Then one day I grew up, quit pretending to be somebody I wasn't and discovered that I was "one of those people my parents warned me about." I can honestly that that I have never been happier. I am more outgoing, have a lot more friends, can help people more, and feel just as close to God as I ever did.[82]

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[81] "Lonestar," "Re: New question for biblical scholars," posted to soc.motss on September 26, 1986. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.motss/1dEsW8BD43Y/Fc5SGGTk5sUJ.

[82] John Crane, "Goodbye (for now at least)," posted to net.motss on July 27, 1984. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/net.motss/oG3Y_D5gTMI/M_dAJQevYNgJ.

These types of posts provide context for the reconciliation of religious beliefs and sexuality within the community, particularly in the face of numerous and frequent negative perspectives.

Significantly, though the frequency with which discussions on religion and morality occurred did not change over the lifespan of MOTSS, the number of attacks on group members decreased over time. As an example, using Voyant Tools to chart the frequency of the terms "god," "church," and "sin," Figure 1.8 shows how the use of the more benign terms god and church stayed relatively stable within the MOTSS groups from 1983 to 1991, while the use of the word "sin" dropped dramatically in frequency, likely due to the increasing usage of speciality Usenet groups for discussing these types of issues, as will be discussed in the next chapter.
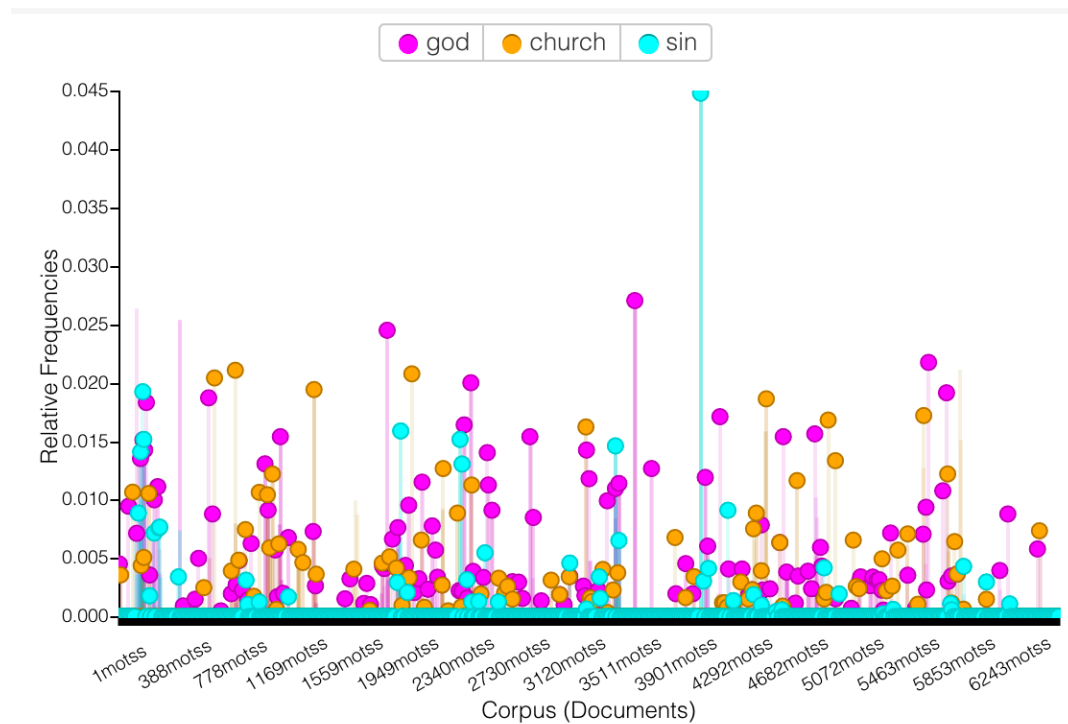

Figure 1.8: Graph of the relative frequency of the words "god," "church," and "sin." The x axis represents messages posted in chronological order from 1983 to 1991. Source: Voyant Tools.

As a whole, we also see significantly lower percentages of inflammatory postings in soc.motss in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in comparison to the earlier years of the group. In part, this was simply due to the larger volume of posts -- the off-topic posts decreased proportionally with a larger number of queer individuals posting on topics of interest to the community. However, we also see a concerted refusal to engage with trolls within the soc.motss community, though many members had no such qualms about replying on *other* newsgroups. One MOTSS member describes his own method, stating that, "I try not to get soc.motss dirty by fighting with him here. When I do want to answer [the troll], I delete soc.motss from the newsgroup list. He didn't crosspost? I answer in talk.politics.misc anyway - he always sees it there."[83] Through efforts such as this, we see a decrease in the decline in the discussion of religious and morality issues within the MOTSS community.

Conclusion

Through this examination of the first years of the MOTSS communities, and the beginning of the online queer community in general, several themes emerge. Throughout the net.motss and soc.motss newsgroups during the 1980s and early 1990s we see the question asked again and again: who is gay, and who belongs? The MOTSS newsgroups were dominated by gay men and, though there were sometimes attempts to include women in the discussions taking place, very few women contributed to the conversations. On the occasions when women did offer up their own thoughts and feelings, it was often with disclaimers that they knew that they didn't really

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[83] Paul Ryan, "Not Responding to the Monster Here," posted in soc.motss on June 23, 1992. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.motss/UqXMRh0b7iI/_QHut0aFafAJ.

belong in the group. Similarly, we see attempts by individuals identifying as bisexual to join in on the discussion, but they were often clearly made to feel as outsiders when they expressed their bisexual identity, leading to the creation of a separate soc.bi community for discussion between individuals identifying as bisexual or, sometimes, simply "queer." Significantly, transgender individuals and issues rarely surfaced and were considered to be beyond the scope and desired userbase of the MOTSS newsgroups during the 1980s and early 1990s. Though net.motss has been highlighted in scholarship as the first "queer" or LGBT online community, the group had very little cohesion on engagement from anyone other than individuals who identified as "gay." Similar to these questions of *who* would be involved in the newsgroup is the question of how identity would be expressed, both individually and as a community. Frequent debates took place about the use of specific identity labels, with very little consensus on even basic labels such as gay, homosexual, and queer.

Finally, we see the increasing visibility of the LGBTQ community, both online and off, as a central concern in both net.motss and soc. In the face of expanding acceptance and a growing presence in the media and pop culture, gay individuals were divided over how visible they wanted to be in society, both as a group and also as individuals with specific dress styles and behaviors. These discussions were often framed as debates over feminine versus masculine behavior and "passing privilege." When bombarded by a constant stream of negative moral and religious postings on the Usenet newsgroups, it raised the question for many of the users about the perceived value to being more out and visible within society as a whole.

However, even this delicate facade of homogeneity would quickly be challenged and broken by the flood of new users who accompanied the Eternal September of 1993. These

users were not content to follow the agreed-upon rules and norms of soc.motss, but challenged

that community in new ways. Moreover, the Eternal September led to the creation of

thousands of new Usenet newsgroups for a growing diversity of queer identity categories, who

all demanded their own space on the rapidly-expanding internet. This relatively small

community of "insiders" would never again be the same.

Chapter 2: Usenet's Gay, Lesbian, and Trans Community During the Eternal September

Though soc.motss was the first explicitly gay and lesbian newsgroup on Usenet, it did not remain the only one for long. The tensions between groups of users and the use of certain identity labels, as discussed in the previous chapter, resulted in a fracturing of the community into more specialized groups by the early 1990s, despite entreaties for a unified gay and lesbian presence on the Internet. All of this took place in a context of discrimination and homophobia that sometimes flooded the gay and lesbian Usenet groups, drowning out other conversation between users. In August of 1993, soc.motss had 4,367 individual messages posted to the group and archived through Google Groups during the month. This number of messages grew as large as almost 8,500 posted during March of 1994, before dropping to only 464 archived messages in September of 1994. This dramatic drop in usership leads to the question of where did all of those users go?

The early 1990s saw the fracturing of large centralized Usenet communities such as soc.mottss into a nearly-infinite number of smaller specialized groups. The pace with which new groups were created was staggering – many would never see any real use or readership, fading into obscurity almost from the instant that they came into being. However, others would stagnate for months or even years, before suddenly exploding into popularity with no readily apparent explanation. For users, the experience was one of chaos and confusion. As users joined Usenet every day at an exponential rate, these new (and even experienced) Usenet posters had little idea of the purpose of many of the groups that they were interacting with, or

which groups they should even read. This confusion would only be heightened in September of

1993, when large-scale internet service providers CompuServe and America Online (AOL) began

offering Usenet access as part of their service package. All at once, thousands of new users

flooded Usenet in what would become known among users as "Eternal September." These new

users, part of the popularization of the internet which would eventually culminate with the

introduction of the World Wide Web, dramatically altered existing communities, discourse, and

ways of interacting using networked communications.

     This chapter examines this flood of new Usenet users in the early 1990s and the ways

that they navigated Usenet's existing queer community, forging new pathways in the process. I

argue that the Eternal September in Usenet's gay and lesbian community occurred not only as

an influx of users to the small number of existing groups – as has been described in the existing

historical narrative – but as the sudden and turbulent creation of new groups to accommodate

these individuals. This disruptive change had a substantial impact on Usenet's existing users.

These new users were not content with soc.motss, or even the small selection of more

specialized groups found on the more academic hierarchies. From 1991 to 1996, we see the

rapid and chaotic proliferation of groups in the alt.* hierarchy, creating a new landscape of user

engagement. Yet this would not come as one centralized gay and lesbian community, but in

specialized newsgroups for every identity imaginable. These newsgroups did not experience the

same reluctance to engage with trolls that the earlier groups had, in addition to now being

open to the discussion of topics that had been considered relatively taboo in soc.motss, such as

sex and gender dysmorphism. These groups would often come into conflict with existing

communities, such as soc.motss, resulting in the disruption of established practices and discourse on identity and community groupings.

As with the last chapter, the exhaustive volume of text required me to adopt computational approaches. Using a combination of crossposting analysis, which examines users posting a single message to multiple groups in order to generate attention, discussion, or support, along with topic modelling using MALLET, this chapter follows the shifts in community and discourse that occurred as individuals joined in with the discussion. Through this analysis of interaction patterns and language, I argue that we see a shift from a central gay and homosexual community to a multitude of specialized groups. However, these groups experienced discord even within their narrow focus, demonstrating high levels of disagreement and anxiety over who would be included in each community, the allowable topics of discussion, and the permitted identity labels that could be used by individuals in mediating their own self-narrative. This uneasiness was particularly prevalent in Usenet's fledgling transgender community, who found themselves arbitrating what it meant to be transgender in a very public forum.

For queer users, the alt.* hierarchy represented a space where groups that administrators were reluctant to create in the big seven hierarchies were made. Increasingly, users turned to the alt.* hierarchy to house the content and communities that were considered too controversial for the academic hierarchies. The result of this relative freedom found in the alt.* hierarchy, along with the accompanying trolls, flames, spam, and disorder, was that those at the margins of the community in the 1980s, including transgender individuals, were able to carve out their own space on Usenet. This chapter uses three of these groups, alt.sex.motss,

alt.homosexual, and alt.transgendered, as case studies of how users interacted with these new

groups in mediating new and more inclusive identity categories and communities.

Usenet's Eternal September

In October of 1992, one user who identified himself as Oliver posted to the alt.homosexual

newsgroup to ask if anyone in Iowa would be willing to participate in his first homosexual

experience, and included an email address to reply to as he was using a friend's account to post

his message. He received this cheerful reply: "These postings are always such a joy! A

celebration of the rebirth of the academic year! Welcome back Students! We love you each and

every one! Oh, and don't forget to log out when you're done!"[1] Clearly, users had become

accustomed to the flood of new Usenet posters that arrived with the beginning of each

academic year. As students gained access to the internet and email for the first time as they

entered universities and colleges, they inevitably made a number of rookie mistakes. This

included posting to the wrong groups, omitting information such as subject headings, using all

capital letters and, most crucially, as in Oliver's case, not understanding the established culture

in the groups upon which they were gaining access. For the most part, these missteps were

seen as part of the learning process, and an expected yearly ritual. In her 1998 book *net.wars*,

journalist Wendy Grossman describes each September in the 1980s and early 1990s as, "a time

when large numbers of newcomers had to be assimilated into the existing Net culture, much

like a small college town each year has to put up with a huge influx of rowdy kids who keep

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[1] Jon Gefaell, "Re: <None>," posted to alt.homosexual on October 4, 1992. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.homosexual/u8JKa9lMS0g/MSlLhonSNtsJ.

stopping you on the street to ask where everything is and clogging all the bookstores."[2] This

yearly influx of new users on to Usenet was simply seen as part of life on the largely-academic

and institutional network. And, anyways, within a month or so it would all settle down and get

back to normal.

September of 1993 was much different than the previous Septembers that Usenet had

seen before. This year, a group of new users began what was later coined as the "September

that never ended."[3] In other words, things would not "settle down" this time. It was that month

that AOL added the "Usenet feature" to their service. Up until this point, AOL had operated as

essentially a walled garden for subscribers – for a monthly fee, users were given access to

email, chat rooms, and a kind of digital newspaper. By adding Usenet to their set of features,

AOL subscribers found themselves unleashed into the wilds of the internet for the very first

time. Furthermore, as historian Finn Brunton describes, AOL gave no indication to their users

that Usenet was not just a new part of AOL.

> These new users weren't in any way bound by the old dispensation of sysadmins
> and the common ground of university affiliation and computer savvy… it was the
> beginning of a steady invasion from the vast galaxy of newbies to what was then
> still a relatively stable little planet on which even the constant conflicts were part of
> a shared lexicon of debate and a longstanding set of social tensions."[4]

These AOL users, who were familiar only with AOL's relatively narrow set of services and

culture, interacted with the Usenet network in ways that were ignorant of the culture which

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[2] Wendy Grossman, *net.wars* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 5. *net.wars* is also available online as the first fully web-published book. https://nyupress.org/netwars/.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Finn Brunton, *Spam: A Shadow History of the Internet* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 52.

had already been constructed for over a decade, and of the community norms and expectations.

Though the introduction of the relatively isolated AOL members heralded the beginning of the Eternal September, they were only the beginning of the flood. In June 1994, just a few months after the beginning of the Eternal September, Usenet newsgroups averaged 67,344 messages a day; by October of 1997, Usenet had grown to over 850,000 messages a day.[5] These users would transform the platform, which had been little-changed since the Great Renaming in 1986, when the network was still home to a very small number of users. And unlike the seasonal influx of students, which were mostly tolerated with good nature and the knowledge that normality would soon reign, long-time Usenet users reacted to the Eternal September with resignation. The network that they knew would never be the same. In a Usenet history FAQ post written in 1995 and posted to the alt.culture.usenet ("we know it's an oxymoron" reads the FAQ description) newsgroup, administrator Tom Seidenberg described September as "the time when college students return to school and start to post stupid questions, repost MAKE MONEY FAST, break rules of netiquette, and just generally make life on Usenet more difficult than at other times of the year. Unfortunately, it has been September since 1993. With the growing sensationalism surrounding the "Information-Superhighway" in the United States, the current September is likely to last into the next century."[6]

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[5] Larry R. Frey, *Group Communication in Context: Studies of Bonda Fide Groups* (Hove: Psychology Press, 2004), 339.

[6] Thomas Seidenberg, "alt.culture.usenet FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions,)" posted to alt.culture.usenet on March 16, 1995. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

What did the Eternal September mean for Usenet's gay and lesbian community? One would expect to see the number of users posting to soc.motss to increase exponentially during September of 1993 and in the months and years afterwards. And in the first few months of 1994 there is a dramatic increase in the number of postings to the group. However, we also see a significant drop in the number of messages soon after, particularly in proportion to the increase of postings to other LGBTQ newsgroups.

An examination of traffic and crossposting between soc.motss and other newsgroups between 1992 and 1994 reveals an enormous degree of specialization and diversification between gay and lesbian-focused Usenet groups. Several of these popular new groups, notably soc.bi and soc.support.youth.gay-lesbian-bi, were located within the soc.* hierarchy. The process of creating a group in the soc.* hierarchy was rather complex. It required the creation of the group to first be proposed within a Usenet administration group. Following this, the proposal then went through several rounds of extensive polling of users and Usenet administrators, where opinions on the group were solicited. In the end, even if users desired the group, the final decision fell to administrators who often rejected group creation requests that had high levels of user support. After going through this process, these new queer groups created within the soc.* hierarchy were considered to be natural extensions of the soc.motss community, and places where separate newsgroups were necessary because of the unique segment of the community that they represented.

However, despite the creation of new newsgroups within the "Big Eight" official hierarchies, the vast majority of new groups were created in what was considered something of a "wild west" within Usenet: the "alt" hierarchy. From the initial creation of the alt.* Usenet

hierarchy in 1987, the very existence of the hierarchy was fraught with controversy. The alt.*

hierarchy arose out of a desire for a kind of free speech on Usenet, outside of the Big Eight

major hierarchies created by the Great Renaming in 1986. When requests for new groups –

most notably, rec.drugs and talk.flame -- within the Big Eight were immediately rejected by

system administrators in charge of these more "academic" categories, Usenet system

administrator Brian Reid proposed the idea of an alt.* hierarchy, within which anyone could

create their own newsgroup, but individual system administrators could decide whether or not

to carry it on their servers. Usenet users and administrators Brian Reid, Gordon Moffet, and

John Gilmore are credited with the ultimate creation of the alt.* hierarchy in 1987.[7]

Immediately, the hierarchy became the home of popular groups such as alt.flame (where users

could post messages designed to incite anger and controversy among other segments of users),

alt.drugs, and alt.binary, which was intended for the sharing of media files and would come to

be dominated by illegal bootleg movies and pornography.

For much of its existence, the alt.* hierarchy strived to live up to its tongue-in-cheek

unofficial acronym – anarchists, lunatics, and terrorists.[8] New groups arose quickly and

randomly but lived and died by their own readership. Because Usenet administrators were able

to choose which individual alt.* groups to carry to its subscribers, it allowed for a sort of natural

selection amongst the multitude of rapidly-created newsgroups. No new groups would ever be

deleted but if no one was reading them, they would not be carried by Usenet servers and would

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[7] "1987: The alt.* Hierarchy," *Giganews Usenet History* (accessed January 31, 2019),
https://www.giganews.com/usenet-history/alt.html.

[8] David Barr, "So you want to create an alt newsgroup," posted to alt.config on August 11, 1995. Archived in the
"Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

effectively die a natural death. However, this also meant that groups were created rather haphazardly, often based on inside jokes or pop culture references. In a post titled, "So You Want to Create an Alt Newsgroup," that was created in 1995 and sent out every 14 days, writer David Barr used the example of one of the early alt.* newsgroups, alt.swedish.chef.bork.bork.bork, which had frequent "copycat" groups created by adding additional "borks" to the end, in order to illustrate the creation of groups that served no purpose and would largely go unnoticed within Usenet.[9] Despite these guidelines, we do see the proliferation, and even popularization, of many groups which were initially created as an inside joke or to incite controversy. As long as a group found users willing to read and post, any alt.* had the potential to flourish, no matter if other users found it vulgar or controversial.

From 1990 on, many new LGBTQ newsgroups were created on the alt.* hierarchy. Table 2.1 highlights the creation dates of some of the most popular queer newsgroups created during the early 1990s; these newsgroups also showed high levels of crossposting to the soc.motss newsgroup. It should be noted that these were some of the most popular groups, but thousands of others were also created during this time period.

Newsgroup	Date Created
Alt.politics.homosexuality	4/28/90
Alt.sex.motss	4/11/91
Alt.homosexual	3/27/92
Alt.transgendered	10/30/92

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[9] Ibid.

Alt.shoe.lesbian	9/5/94
Alt.personals.motss	12/22/94
Alt.sex.stories.gay	5/24/95
Alt.lesbian	1/8/96
Alt.sex.gay	2/9/96
Alt.homosexual.lesbian	4/10/96
Alt.teens.gay	10/27/96
Alt.religion.gay-les-bi-trans	11/27/96

Table 2.1: These LGBTQ groups in the alt.* hierarchy, created in the early to mid 90s, received high levels of engagement, as well as considerable crossposting to soc.motss.

It was the same Usenet community that prompted the creation of the net.motss newsgroup in 1983 that became involved in another controversial matter in April of 1988. Frustrated by the ban on discussion of a sexual nature within soc.singles, the group began calling for the creation of a new group: soc.sex. However, the inherently academic nature of the soc.* hierarchy provided a barrier to the suggestion. The creation of a soc.sex newsgroup was put to a vote and, though it was unanimously agreed upon by users, another vote among system administrators (still largely associated with academic and research institutions) indicated that administrators did not wish to have discussion of a sexual nature on their servers. Accordingly, as Usenet administrator Gene Spafford explained in a post, the soc.sex newsgroup would not be created.[10] For the most part, this decision was made to appease

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[10] Gene Spafford, "Final action on soc.sex," posted to soc.singles on April 3, 1988. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.singles/l_Ma42j7AJY/qd2cEyzp2O4J.

system administrators associated with academic, research, and military institutions, who feared

reprisal from higher up within their chain of command if Usenet was seen as a service for

spreading pornography and illegal materials. This was not to be the end of the matter,

however. In a move of defiance against the backbone cabal of the Big Eight hierarchies, alt.*

hierarchy creator Brian Reid responded to Spafford within a matter of hours, stating that, "I

have created the newsgroup alt.sex. That caused us to have both alt.sex and alt.drugs. It was

then clearly necessary to have alt.rock-n-roll, so I created that too. Cut loose."[11]

The alt.* hierarchy continued to have a particularly complicated relationship with

Usenet users, news server administrators, and the public as a whole. Many academic and

institutional news servers were reluctant to carry the alt.* hierarchy groups because of this

"sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" reputation that preceded it. Because of this reluctance to allow

possibly offensive or questionable material on their servers, not all Usenet users had access to

these alt.* groups, compared to the Big Eight hierarchies which were almost universally carried

by servers. This selective readership has implications for any study of the alt.* hierarchy, and

requires a degree of awareness of the fact that these newsgroups were not available to all

possible users. The users themselves were well-aware of this reality. Throughout the early

1990s, many alt.* groups discussed the potential benefits to moving to one of the Big Eight

hierarchies, in order to attract the widest-possible readership. This coverage of the alt.*

hierarchy did gradually increase over time, culminating with large-scale private internet service

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[11] Brian Reid, "Re: Final action on soc.sex," posted to soc.singles on April 4, 1988. User Brandon Allbery responded to this post with the message, "Spaf must have one heck of a headache by now…" Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/soc.singles/l_Ma42j7AJY/PF8yrHvSKtUJ.

providers, such as AOL and CompuServe, offering their users access to the full range of available newsgroups in 1993.

Furthermore, the inability to control which new groups were being created within the alt.* hierarchy, as well as the pace with which new groups began, concerned system administrators as well as users. The creation of new groups in the alt.* hierarchy which overlapped with the charter of established groups in other hierarchies frustrated moderators and long-time posters. Even more concerning were instances where groups were created with very little regard for established norms and terminology – sometimes created even as a joke, which nevertheless gained a foothold with users – and required redefinition of these very concepts which were being mediated. These instances were particularly influential within the LGBTQ community, where instances of new groups often led to discussion of identity, labelling, and the very nature of inclusion within the queer community. In the sections that follow, I examine three groups in the alt.* hierarchy which had controversial origins, but rose to considerable Usenet popularity in the early 90s, amid the flood of new users which defined the Eternal September: alt.sex.motss, alt.homosexual, and alt.transgendered. By examining the creation of these groups, the new users who found themselves posting in them, and the patterns of interaction with other groups (some new, and some more established) through crossposting, we see an acceleration of discourse about sexuality, as well as the definition of who was queer, and who would be included in the larger community.

Methodology and Challenges

There are a number of issues and challenges to working with Usenet sources from the early

1990s as opposed to the 1980s. Most significant is the issue of the availability of archival

sources. By 1991, Usenet's growth had outpaced the University of Toronto Zoology

Department's budget for $15 magnetic tapes, and Henry Spencer ceased collecting Usenet

messages.[12] With the end of the UTZOO collection in June of 1991 came the end of the single

largest cohesive collection of early Usenet archival material, and a significant gap in Usenet's

historical record. Four years later, in 1995, DejaNews would emerge as a web-based

newsreader and take up the role of archiving Usenet as it was created. However, this leaves a

four-year gap where there was no one single organization or individual collecting and archiving

Usenet. It is unknown just how much of Usenet's postings were lost during this time period.

Fortunately, Henry Spencer was not the only individual collecting Usenet messages by

the early 90s. These other collections, though not nearly as comprehensive and ambitious as

UTZOO's 1981-1991 archive, help to fill in the gaps between 1991 and 1995. For example, the

Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection contains data from all Usenet hierarchies over a

30-year period.[13] It is a massive collection of data – just the *alt.** hierarchy alone contains

219GB of compressed text – however many groups and hierarchies are missing significant

portions of their messages. Many groups were not collected until 1996 and others contain large

gaps, some encompassing multiple years. These files have been saved and made available in an

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[12] Katherine Mieszkowski, "The geeks who saved Usenet," *Salon.com* (January 7, 2002). *Internet Archive,*
September 2, 2003.
https://web.archive.org/web/20030902002600/http://archive.salon.com:80/tech/feature/2002/01/07/saving_use
net/index.html.
[13] "Internet Archive Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive,* https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

.mbox mailbox file format and must be opened using compatible mail software such as Mozilla

Thunderbird. Once imported, these messages can be browsed and read just like one would read

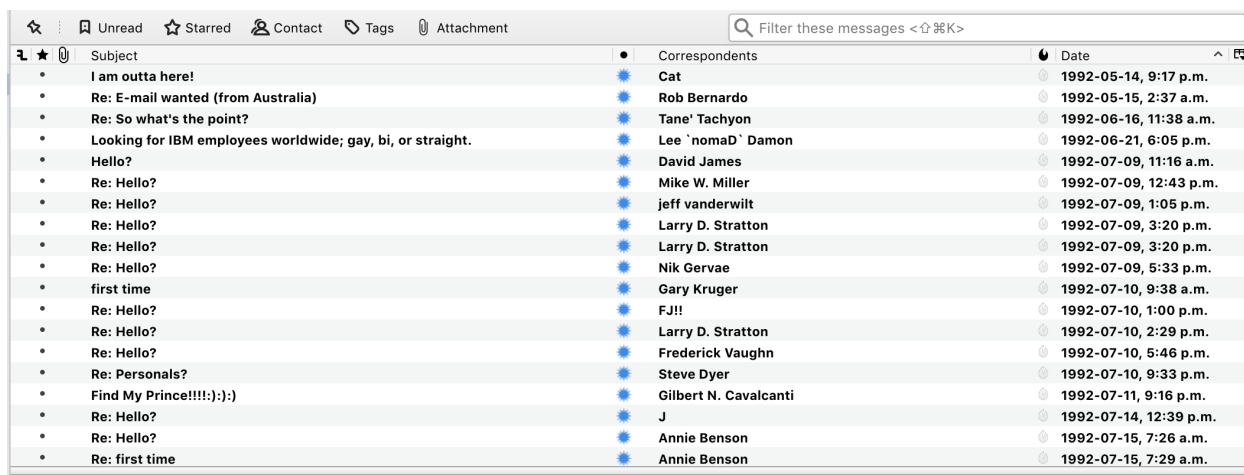their own email, as illustrated in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of a .mbox file from the Usenet Historical Collection loaded into Mozilla Thunderbird. These messages may be browsed much like one would browse their own email.

This method feels almost a bit like having access to a time machine, however it is not the most

efficient way to read through tens of thousands of Usenet messages. Fortunately, Thunderbird

offers an Import/Export tool that allows the messages to be exported in a plain text format,

which makes the files accessible to further text analysis.

The Internet Archive lists their Usenet Historical Collection as being donated by a

"generous donor" and there is no description of who was collecting it, for what purpose, or any

estimation for how complete the archive is for the dates and groups that do appear. In this way,

the collection is much like any traditional physical archival collection – we have no idea what

we are missing, and no way of finding out. However, for several groups – alt.homosexual,

alt.transgendered, and alt.sex.motss – we see what appears to be a relatively cohesive record

with no large gaps, from the first messages of the group through to the early 2000s. Though the

collection of messages for these groups appears to be relatively comprehensive, we do see

several inconsistencies in the data. For example, there are several months, notably October of

1993 and August of 1994, where the number of archived posts sharply declines in comparison

to the months before and after. It is unclear whether this represents a decline in posting or a

gap in collecting and archiving. A search on Google Groups for the same time periods shows a

similar lack of archived messages – in August of 1994, the Usenet Historical Collection has

fifteen messages archived for alt.homosexual, and Google Groups shows only four – indicating

that this is not a gap in only this one collection, but a lapse in message collection or posting

reflected in all archived collections. These inferences in the interpretation of the number of

archived postings for this time period are based on a large-scale examination of archived

groups from multiple sources during the time period from 1991 to 1995. Unfortunately, it is not

possible to determine whether the declines in archived messages reflect a lapse in posting,

perhaps due to large-scale system outages, or that the unnamed individual collecting the

postings simply ceased in his collecting for several weeks, for whatever reason.
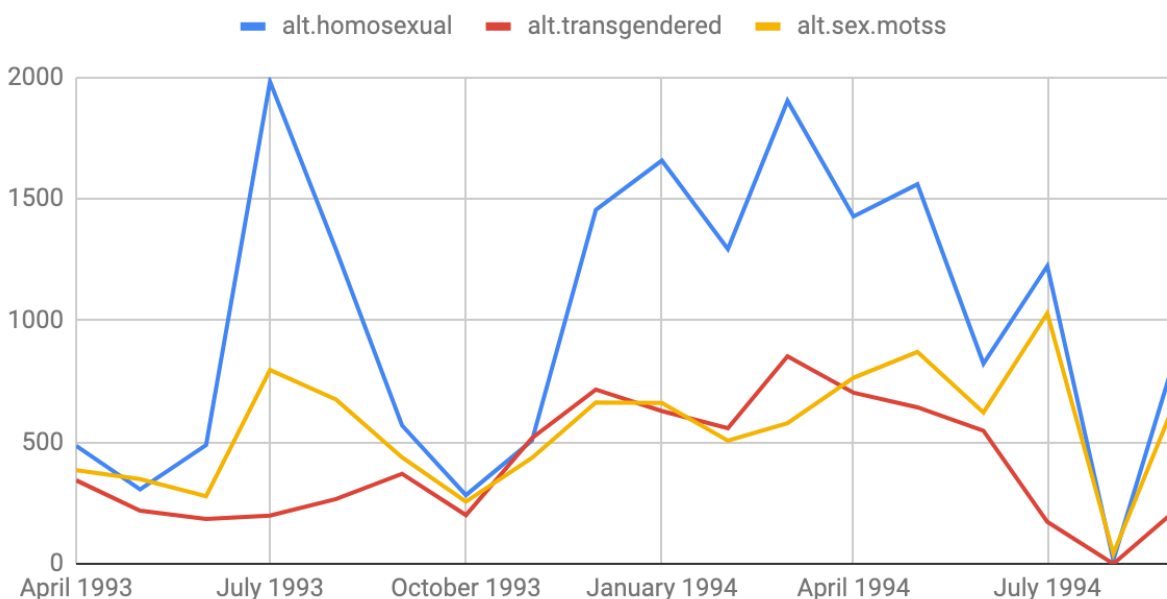
Figure 2.2: Chart showing messages posted to and archived for alt.homosexual, alt.transgendered, and alt.sex.motss, as archived by the Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection. The large declines seen for all three groups in October of 1993 and August of 1994 perhaps reflect a lapse in message collection and archiving.

Because of the inconsistencies in the number of messages collected each month, as shown in Figure 2.2, it is quite difficult to accurately determine posting rates for any particular month. The newsgroup soc.motss shows similar trends in collection and archiving over the same period and so it is not possible to determine the absolute decline in the number of postings. However, we can examine the number of archived messages in relation to other similarly-themed groups. As a whole, soc.motss shows a much greater decline in the number of messages in relation to what one would expect to see based on archiving inconsistencies alone. While alt.homosexual, alt.transgendered, and alt.sex.motss recover from the decline in archived messages seen in the summer of 1994, soc.motss posting rates do not return to their previous levels and continue to decline over time. For example, in March of 1994, soc.motss

had 8,471 individual messages – more than four times the 1,903 messages posted to alt.homosexual in the same month. In September of 1994, both groups show considerably fewer messages, which is likely the result of a collection and archiving inconsistency. However, soc.motss, at 464 messages, has approximately half the number of archived messages as alt.homosexual, which had 906 individual posts. This indicates that, despite the gaps in the archival record, soc.motss was likely declining in readers and posters during the same period that alt.homosexual was increasing its number of users.

Messages posted after 1995 have been collected within Deja's Usenet archive. The Deja News Research Service was created by entrepreneur Steve Madere in March of 1995. This web-based service was originally intended as a publicly-accessible archive of all Usenet messages – the first open archive of Usenet material – along with keyword searchability and other filtering tools. Deja News eventually expanded their services to allow users to post, read, and subscribe to Usenet newsgroups without having to install a newsreader and download Usenet content directly to their computer. However, by 1999, Deja News, which now went by simply Deja.com, had shifted its focus from Usenet, which was declining in popularity, and to private forums for paid business users.[14] Also during that year, Deja's Usenet archive was taken offline during a server relocation and never restored. Google acquired Deja.com in 2001, along with the archive of Usenet messages going back to 1995. Usenet and Deja's Usenet archive was described by

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[14] Lisa Napoli, "Compressed Data; Turning 'Sticky Traffic' Into Advertising Dollars," *The New York Times* (May 10, 1999), C4.

Google CEO Larry Page as, "one of the most active and valuable information sources on the internet."[15]

Google Groups started by offering the most recent six months of Usenet postings, but quickly transitioned the entire Deja News archive on to their platform. By the end of 2001, they had also added Henry Spencer's UTZOO tapes, expanding the coverage back to 1981. These major collections have been supplemented with additional holdings from other "anonymous donors," although Google gives no information as to who these donors might be, how widely and extensively the organization or individual was collecting Usenet, how many donors in total submitted data, or what years these data donations cover. Despite this ambiguity, it is clear that Google Groups currently holds the most complete collection of archived Usenet messages, particularly for the years of 1991 to 1995. For many newsgroups which began during these years, when Usenet was at the peak of its popularity, the only evidence of their early beginnings is found within Google Groups.

On one hand, it is extraordinary that these newsgroups have been preserved at all and that they are publicly accessible on a free web-based platform. However, this same free web-based platform makes performing research on Usenet during the early-1990s challenging at best for scholars. For example, the LGBTQ Usenet group soc.motss had 4367 posts in August of 1993. Using Google Groups' filtering tool, I am able to filter the archive down to just that group and that month. However, the search results tell me that Google is displaying search results 1-30 of "many." In order to find out just how many, it is necessary to navigate Google's "infinite

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[15] "Google Acquires Usenet Discussion Service and Significant Assets from Deja.com," *News from Google* (Blogspot.com), February 12, 2001. http://googlepress.blogspot.com/2001/02/google-acquires-usenet-discussion.html.

scroll," which loads more results once one scrolls to the end of the page. It is only once the user

reaches "the bottom" that the search results actually report the number of messages found.

Furthermore, because Google Groups collapses threaded replies into one topic – an excellent

feature for actually *reading* these discussions – if a researcher wants to find out the total

number of posts, it is necessary to manually scroll through and add up the number of replies for

each topic, in order to get a true sense of just how many search results have been produced.

Furthermore, Google Groups' advanced search tools have been offline since 2015, resulting in

making it very difficult to search within groups. It is possible to filter all messages down to

messages posted within a certain time period, but it is not possible to use keyword searching

alongside these filters. For example, it is possible to isolate all the messages posted to

soc.motss in the year 1993, but if I wanted to search for all messages that mention

"Pennsylvania," I then get all results for the entire span of the archive, and not just my selected

time period. It is also possible to search across the entire Google Groups archive, however this

often generates millions of search results, given the size and span of the archive; it is not

possible to search within a small subsection of named groups.

Given the limited functionality of Google Groups' interface, there have been attempts

by researchers to scrape Google Groups – essentially, using a web scraper script to download

desired Google Groups content to a local computer. However, because many private and

corporate groups are also hosted on Google Groups, Google has been quick to close any

vulnerability which allows access to non-public messages. As a result of these security

measures, is has become impossible for researchers to access Google's Usenet messages for

computer-mediated text analysis. Furthermore, Google's previously-mentioned infinite scroll

also complicates any attempt to analyze the data. As not all of the search results appear on the

same page until a user has scrolled to the bottom, it is not possible to collect the results

through an RSS reader or other scraping tool.

As a result of these logistical challenges to collecting and analyzing the data from Google

Groups, there remains limited access to postings made between 1991 and 1995, despite the

messages being freely available to the public. In other words, the data is there but access is

sorely lacking. The volume of messages made to many groups – often thousands of messages

per month – makes reading all of these messages quite daunting. With these methodological

considerations in mind, this chapter focuses on three groups which are largely represented

within the Internet Archive's Usenet Historical Collection, as well as Google Groups, during the

years of 1992 to 1995. These three groups, alt.homosexual, alt.transgendered, and

alt.sex.motss, were all created in 1991 and 1992, just prior to the Eternal September, and

experienced increased usership during the time period that soc.motss was greatly declining in

use. Through the use of large-scale text analysis possible with the Usenet Historical Collection,

as well as using Google Groups once threads and discussions have been pinpointed, it is

possible to perform both wide and targeted readings on these three large-volume Usenet

communities.

alt.sex.motss

In April of 1991, soc.motss began tabling the possibility of the creation of a group for discussion

of a sexual nature, such as graphic talk on practical matters related to same-sex sexual activity,

and the sharing of explicit stories and pornography. This type of content and discussion had

been explicitly prohibited from soc.motss since the group's inception, particularly due to the soc.* hierarchy's ban on such postings. However, the alt.* hierarchy, already home to alt.sex and dozens of related groups by this time period, appeared to be a natural home for the proposed new group. On April 11, 1991, a user who identified himself as "Richard" posted a welcome message, asserting that, "alt.sex.motss was in no way created to be in competition with soc.motss," and that, "there should be a heavy emphasis on sex in all postings…. I also feel crosspostings between soc.motss and alt.sex should be kept to a minimum."[16] However, Richard also provided a list of suggested topics, which included answering questions about gay sex, discussing vacationing, dating, and movies and actors. Readers were quick to point out the overlap between soc.motss and the proposed topics for the new alt.sex.motss group; "perhaps alt.motss.sex should stick to the erotica/porn stuff," suggested one response.[17] However, even this welcome post immediately evolved into a lengthy discussion of identity, labelling, and terminology, as users began arguing for use of the terms "lesbigay" versus "bilesgay" (short for bi-les-gay, and inclusive of bisexuals) in the group's official description. These first posts would set the precedent for alt.sex.motss's initial few years – though the group was intended for only the discussion of sexual matters, the group would continue to be used for debates of identity, the queer community, and other more general issues.

By performing topic modelling using MALLET, as discussed in the previous chapter, on six month segments of archived messages posted to alt.sex.motss, we see the evolution of

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[16] Richard, "Welcome to Alt.sex.motss," posted to alt.sex.motss on April 11, 1991. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[17] Rob Boldbear, "Re: Welcome to Alt.sex.motss," posted to alt.sex.motss on April 13, 1991. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

alt.sex.motss between 1992 and 1994 from one more preoccupied with labelling, organizing, and community-building, to one that more-closely resembled its original charter and stated purpose. By charting the relative frequency of generated keywords associated with topics derived using MALLET, it is possible to get a sense of what was being discussed in alt.sex.motss during the first three years of the group's lifespan, as shown in Figure 2.3. High frequency keywords such as "homosexual," "bisexual," "lesbian," "academic," and "college" drop off quickly after the first two years following the group's creation. These keywords are replaced with body parts, terms like "adult" and "naked," and references to other adult-content newsgroups. Other high-profile discussions such as those of current issues facing the gay and lesbian communities, such as HIV/AIDS, discrimination, religion, and politics came up frequently during the first year of alt.sex.motss' life, but quickly dropped off over time. Users seemed to be rather divided on whether these topics belonged in alt.sex.motss or were of general interest and should have been posted to soc.motss. In a rather polite entreaty, one user requested that other users remained to the topic at hand, writing that "while the recent philosophical discussions and political debates have been fascinating and informative, I thought this group was originally created for other purposes. Maybe I was mistaken. If I can be forgiven for this affront, I would like to know if there are any archives of a sort for stories of a, um, shall we say 'prurient' nature?... I have always read with the hope that more might appear."[18] Notably, this request for erotic material received no archived responses, while the religious and political discussions carried on around it.

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[18] Harry Sharp, "Story Archives," posted to alt.sex.motss on June 30, 1993. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.sex.motss/_H1nFR4c5K0/fkUjVeE69fIJ.
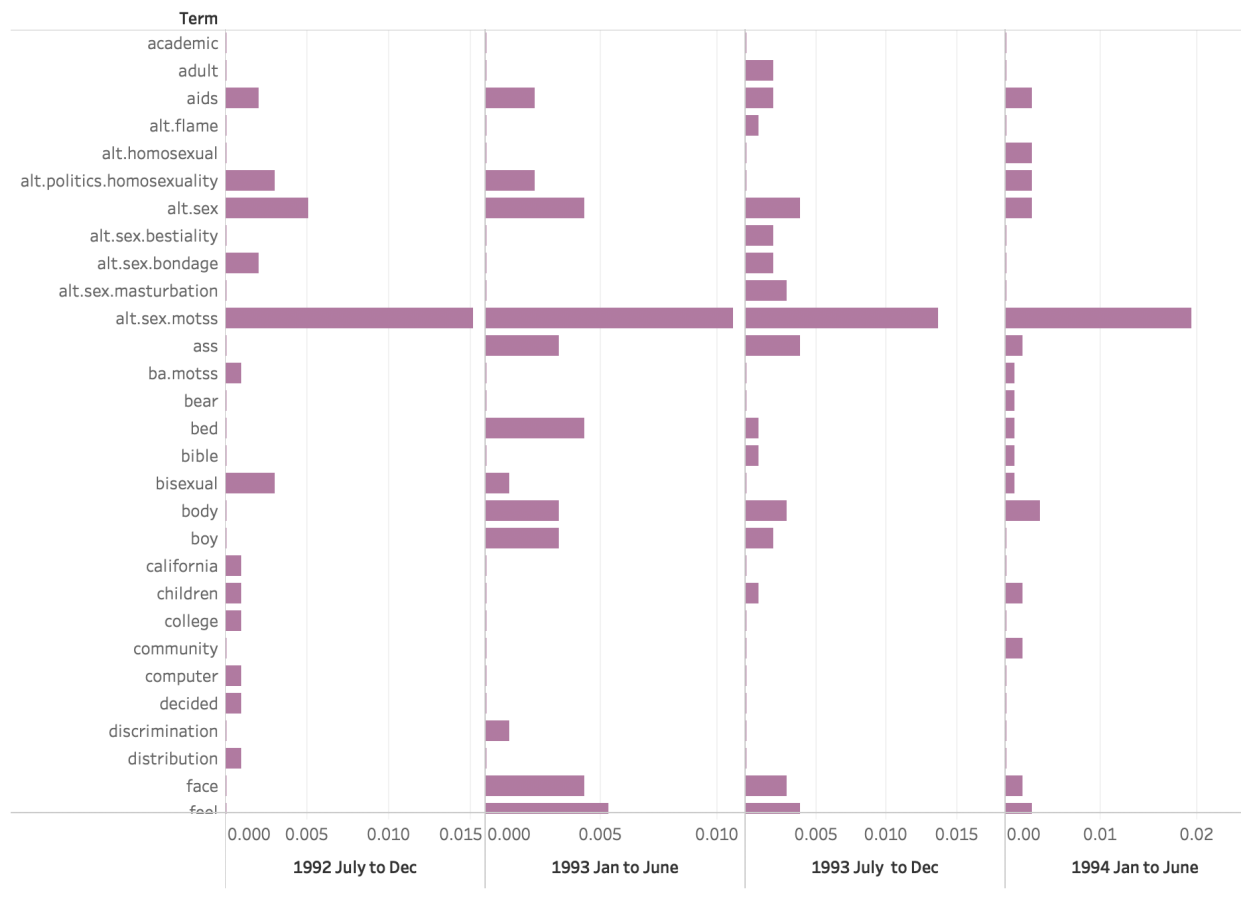
Figure 2.3: Bar graph of the relative frequency of keywords associated with most frequently-discussed topics on alt.sex.motss, as generated by MALLET. The full graph can be found at: https://public.tableau.com/profile/sarah.mctavish6316#!/.

HIV/AIDS was a common topic on alt.sex.motss in 1992 and early 1993. Discussions primarily surrounded practical matters such as HIV transmission. These discussions often detailed safe sex practices and minimizing exposure, and were generally seen as fitting into alt.sex.motss' official charter. The question of safe forms of sex came up frequently, with users asking questions about different types of transmission. One user who was posting anonymously through a Usenet relayer asked the question, "how unsafe is oral sex?... What do y'all do in

practice? Does anyone always use/not use condoms or dams for oral sex?"[19] This question

received many different answers, with users citing such sources as their personal dentist,

published academic literature on the topic, and the CDC National AIDS Hotline. "There ought to

be a FAQ, indeed!" remarked one user who detailed just how frequently this type of question

was asked on the newsgroup.[20] Despite these good-natured complaints about how often

HIV/AIDS was being brought up alt.sex.motss, the focus on sexual activity between gay men, in

particular, along with suggestions for particular condoms and other safe sex products, led most

to agree that the discussions were relevant to the newsgroup. The drop in the relative

frequency of discussion on AIDS/HIV seems to relate directly to the frequency with which the

same questions were asked; after a couple years of writing the same answers to the same

questions, the questions generated much less debate and discussion and often warranted only

a single response, referring the user to an established discussion.

Despite this open-ended charter on allowable subjects, alt.sex.motss did eventually turn

towards the sharing of sexual stories (both fictional and otherwise), messages, and other

content which was not allowed in any other gay and lesbian group at the time. Fascinatingly,

even the more provocative sexual discussions often turned to more serious matters seemingly

at random. On a thread on San Francisco's kink scene, which turned into a solicitation for

reviews on a gay-friendly bed and breakfast, one user with a Russian telecom email address

wrote, "life's hard on gays everywhere… The worst place for a gay to live is in Russia. They can

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[19] Anonymous, "Latest on oral HIV transmission?" posted to alt.sex.motss on August 21, 1993. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.sex.motss/3M3R3yeCvkc/O-GtFJqfp8sJ.

[20] Sean J. Crist, "Re: Latest on oral HIV transmission?" posted to alt.sex.motss on August 21, 1993. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.sex.motss/3M3R3yeCvkc/XToFmMkiw1UJ.

be fired, be picked on at the university."[21] Embedded within the sexual stories and how-to

posts were moments of frank self-narrative which give clear indicators of the preoccupations of

the user base posting to the newsgroup. The alt.sex.motss group would maintain this

combination of political debate, current events, and (sometimes raunchy) discussion of sexual

matters until midway through 1996, when Usenet began to rapidly decline in usership amid

competition from the World Wide Web. Like much of the alt.sex hierarchy, the group quickly

became consumed with spam messages, both explicit and not.

In the first year of alt.sex.motss' existence, there were frequent references to both

soc.motss and soc.bi, emphasizing the connection to the older groups, as well as the origins of

alt.sex.motss as an affiliated community. "Cross-posted to soc.motss, because this is really

more than alt.sex.motss," began one message on engaging in sexual activity while under the

influence of alcohol or drugs.[22] This inability to decipher whether messages belonged in

soc.motss or alt.sex.motss plagued both groups during 1991 and 1992. For the most part, this

seemed to be genuine confusion over the charter of each group and the topics that it covered,

as well as the stated goal of alt.sex.motss in fostering general discussion on gay and lesbian

issues. "I wanted to say that I was informed that soc.motss is not appropriate for the discussion

of this topic. I apologize… I guess we should just try to keep it in alt.sex," posted one user,

highlighting the confusion experienced by users over the stated charter of each group.[23]

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[21] Vladimir Shahidjanjan, "Re: Help! Info on "The Black Stallion" B&B in San Francisco," posted to alt.sex.motss on December 30, 1995. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[22] Nelson Minar, "Re: Seducing a Straight Guy," posted to alt.sex.motss and soc.motss on January 4, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[23] Aaron Weiss, "About my 'A Better Question Thread,'" posted to alt.sex.motss on May 9, 1993. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.sex.motss/h_HtGhjyxRk/1NK-i46uZB0J.

This high rate of crossposting with the soc.* newsgroups dropped off drastically after 1993, indicating an increasing degree of division between soc.motss and alt.sex.motss, despite the similar names and charters. However, this did not mean that alt.sex.motss was becoming more isolated within the relatively small sphere of queer Usenet, but only that users were beginning to direct their attention towards a new group which was rapidly gaining in popularity: alt.homosexual.

alt.homosexual

Aside from its status as the very first gay and lesbian Usenet community to be created since net.motss' origins in 1983, alt.sex.motss is notable because it maintained the "motss" (members of the same sex) nomenclature choice. By using this acronym, the group maintained its ties to soc.motss; not an alternative, but a closely-affiliated group created with an explicit purpose. This can be contrasted with the creation of the new group, alt.homosexual, in March of 1992. As far as could be determined by users at the time, alt.homosexual was created as a "joke," according to soc.motss administrator Stephen Dyer, and was never formally announced as a new Usenet group with a purpose and desired readership.[24] The alt.homosexual newsgroup was largely seen as superfluous to established users; as far as these users could tell, "members of the same sex" and "homosexual" were directed at the same groups of individuals and there was no need for a second group within the alt.* hierarchy. However, this difference in nomenclature was significant within the context of the Eternal September. The name

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[24] Steve Dyer, "Re: Personals?" posted to alt.homosexual on July 11, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

"motss" likely flew under the radar of most new users who were not initiated into the origins and culture of the group, as was the original intent of the name choice. However, if "soc.motss" was considered ambiguous, "alt.homosexual" was like a neon arrow pointed at the newsgroup, both for queer individuals as well as trolls.

Because it was possible for users to create new groups in the alt.* hierarchy on a whim, alt.homosexual was likely created by one individual who had no real plan or purpose for creating the newsgroup. The group was created quietly and with no fanfare and went largely unnoticed by Usenet readers for many months, although was occasionally included in crossposts to several LGBTQ newsgroups. "This group suddenly flashed up on my screen. What is it for? Does it have a charter?" asked one Usenet reader in July 1992, several months after the group's creation.[25] This first message invited a flurry of interest from both heterosexual and gay users, mostly posting in order to introduce themselves and describe why they were (or were not) reading the newsgroup. Despite these origins, alt.homosexual began to really take off in popularity in late-October 1992, and by the end of September 1993 the group had over 6000 archived messages.

The alt.homosexual group, as a group with no stated charter, invited all types of conversation, both on-topic and off. This included discussions of a sexual nature, political and religious debates, discussion of current events, soliciting for friends or romantic partners in one's own area, and sharing of other resources. Unprotected by an obscure group name, the newsgroup also attracted much more attention than soc.motss, both positive and negative. The

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[25] FJ, "Re: Hello?" posted to alt.homosexual on July 10, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

result was a chaotic high-volume Usenet community, peppered with frequent postings from trolls, as well as users who felt no social pressure to *not* engage with these threads. At times, these postings were so frequent that they drowned out any attempts at actual discussion on the group. "fags must die, that's all just thought i'd let you know [sic]," wrote one user in late September of 1993, sparking a torrent of angry responses which flooded out the day's earlier discussions on the sexuality of cartoon characters Ren and Stimpy, a custody dispute concerning a lesbian parent, and a French-language conversation between users in Paris and Montreal.[26] The chaotic and fast-moving nature of alt.homosexual meant that very few users stayed very long before moving on.

This sense of pandemonium in alt.homosexual was also exacerbated by the rate that discussions moved from one newsgroup to another, with replies becoming scattered across groups and hierarchies, through the use of excessive crossposting. Crossposting was the practice where users posted one message to several (or sometimes many) groups at one time, in order to generate more interest and discussion. However, it also led to irritation when discussion became off-topic for one of the crossposted groups. What had once been a tool to bring in related readers became a much-maligned practice, particularly in the period immediately following the Eternal September. As one alt.homosexual user remarked in October of 1993, "can we all just put down our differences now and band together, conservative and liberal, gay and straight, religious and atheist, against the _true_ scourge of the '90s –

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[26] Glen D. Gorman, "fags must die," posted to alt.homosexual on September 30, 1993. Archived by *Google Groups*, https://groups.google.com/d/msg/alt.homosexual/qkL2OdleMrM/znRBlUiwPIQJ.

crossposting!"[27] By examining the incidence of crossposting, using a script which isolates the

groups which each message was posted to from the metadata of the message, and collecting

this information into groupings in order to show the likelihood that each newsgroup would be

included in a single message alongside others, we can see the patterns of interaction and

discussion amongst this community. Figure 2.4 shows the most common crossposting patterns

within alt.homosexual from the beginning of the group in 1992 until the end of 1994. The larger

circles indicate more messages crossposted to this newsgroup; the closer the circles appear to

each other, the more likely it is that a user would post to both of these groups, as well as

alt.homosexual.[28] For example, if a message posted to alt.homosexual was also posted to

alt.politics.homosexuality, there was a great likelihood that the message would also be posted

to the other political newsgroups alt.fan.rush.limbaugh and talk.politics.misc, as well as the

inflammatory group alt.flame. However, alt.politics.homosexuality and soc.motss appear on

opposite sides of the map, indicating that messages were infrequently posted to both groups.

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[27] Bill Lindemann, "Re: Crossposting (Was: Re: "Yo, man. You kissed a dude")," posted to alt.politics.homosexuality, alt.rush-limbaugh, alt.homosexual on October 12, 1993. Bill, knowing his audience, went on to clarify, "Also, please note for those into wearing drag, I said "crossposting", not "cross-DRESSING"." Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[28] This analysis is based off of Avery Dame's work on transgender Usenet communities, "Transgender Usenet Archive Visualizations," http://averydame.net/?page_id=495. Avery Dame has made these Usenet analysis tools available on GitHub at https://github.com/apdame/usenet-tools.
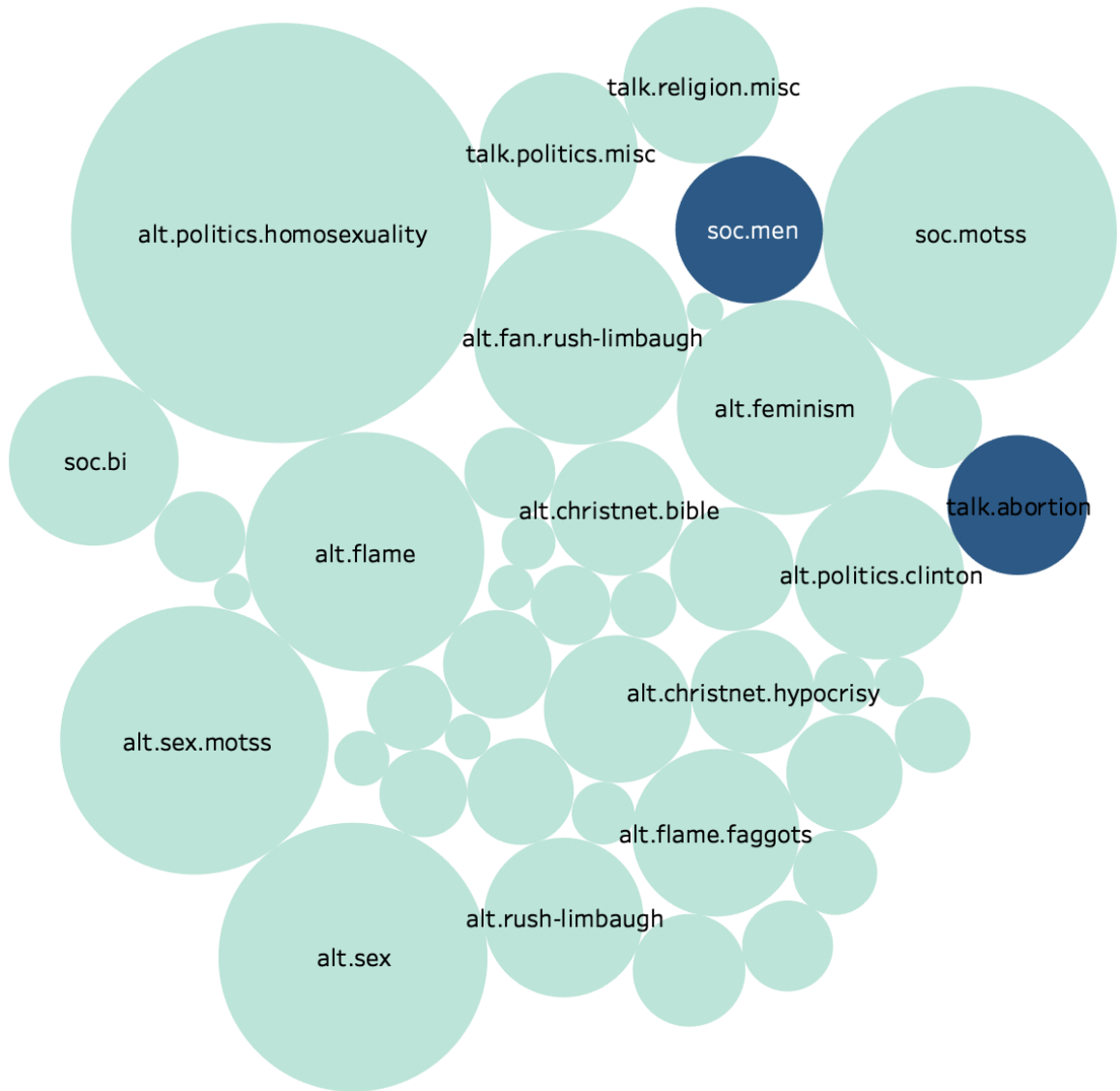
Figure 2.4: Visualization of common crossposting patterns amongst the alt.homosexual community from 1992 to the end of 1994.

The newsgroup most commonly crossposted to from alt.homosexual during this time period

was alt.politics.homosexuality, with 5169 cross-posted messages out of a total of 22 201 total

messages, or 23.3%. Alt.politics.homosexuality was created in April of 1990 and, like

alt.homosexuality, had no introduction or charter and received very little attention until the fall

of 1992. The first archived message for alt.politics.homosexuality is from April 28, 1990 and is

an in-progress argument about the hygiene and morality of gay men. During this discussion,

posters refer to others by nicknames instead of the full name on their email account, suggesting

that the group existed for some amount of time before any archiving body took notice of it.[29]

The purpose of the group, as it was understood by 1992, was to allow for discussion of politics

and religion, as they pertained to homosexuality, homophobia, and current events, in an effort

to keep the discussions out of other gay and lesbian Usenet groups. Additionally, and likely

contributing to the high level of crossposting to the alt.politics.homosexuality group, messages

on this topic that were posted to other LGBTQ groups were often responded to in

alt.politics.homosexuality, as a method of keeping these discussions out of the major

communities. "Soc.motss is not a place where endless speculations of this sort are welcome,

especially from straight people," wrote one user, in a message which was clearly a response to

a soc.motss thread, but which was posted only to alt.politics.homosexuality.[30] "Soc.motss is

not the place to argue with bonehead homophobes. Alt.politics.homosexuality was created

for just that purpose," posted another user, who also cross-posted the message to

alt.homosexual.[31] Messages which were cross-posted to alt.politics.homosexuality group also

had a greater likelihood of also being cross-posted to other political newsgroups like

talk.politics.misc and alt.fan.rush-limbaugh, as well as alt.flame, which was intended for

inflammatory and provocative messages.

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[29] Louis K Lyda, "Re: ISIS Position Paper on Homosexuality," posted to alt.politics.homosexuality on April 28, 1990. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[30] Jess Anderson,"Crosspostings (was Re: Human sexuality)," posted to alt.politics.homosexuality on March 20, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[31] Aldolphson, "Re: Implications of 1% Suicide Rate," posted to alt.homosexual and alt.politics.homosexuality on April 30, 1993. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

Of the 22,201 messages posted to alt.homosexual from May of 1992 to the end of

December 1994, 2,531 (or 11.4%) were cross-posted to soc.motss, indicating a certain degree

of overlap between conversations on the two groups. For the most part, these cross-posted

messages were postings that were considered general interest to the gay and lesbian

community, such as book, movie, and other media recommendations, gay rights marches,

travel information, and news and academic literature. However, given the nature of these

discussions, as well as the overall level of engagement with controversial topics, even the most

general interest posting often turned into a debate, leading to users changing the subject name

(often many times) as the topic of discussion swung wildly. We also see instances where new

users on the alt.homosexual newsgroup disagreed with long-established articles written by

users on soc.motss. In October of 1993, both soc.motss and alt.homosexual engaged in

discussion and argument over a series of articles titled "QUEER MANIFESTO" that had been

posted to soc.motss in 1990 and were being reposted to both newsgroups as a matter of

general interest for new users. This series of essays was written by various anonymous users in

soc.motss and called on queer individuals to stand up against injustice, both against gay and

lesbian people as well as other marginalized groups, as earlier generations had in the 1960s.

The users on alt.homosexual responded to the articles with a high level of skepticism and

frustration, emphasizing that earlier gay rights movement had largely not been successful and

that the movement required the participation of heterosexual allies, as well as a large-scale

change in public perception. "If rage doesn't empower you, try fear. If that doesn't work, try

panic," wrote one anonymous writer in part three of the manifesto, to which an alt.homosexual

reader cheekily responded, "this one will be easy for me. This is how I approach my laundry."[32]

This irreverence for established discourse frustrated soc.motss users, who frequently

complained about the rate of crossposting between the two groups.

While alt.homosexual's users engaged in a high level of discussion on gay and lesbian

issues, politics, and religion, we see a noted lack of engagement with the transgender

newsgroups which were created during this time period. This implied — and sometimes implicit

— division between gay and lesbian individuals on Usenet echoed offline reality within queer

communities. In 1990, gender theorist Judith Butler published her influential book *Gender*

Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, where she argued that gender as a category

was merely the assumption of an expected performance.[33] These ideas were widely influential

within the queer community. In her 1995 book *Gender Outlaw*, Kate Bornstein tied gender non-

conformation to queer identity, and further asserted that violence against gay and lesbian

individuals was actually violence against visible gender non-conformation.[34] By seeking sex

reassignment, it was argued, through surgical or other means, individuals were reasserting

binary gender. This work by theorists and sociologists in the 1990s served to further the

practical divide between gay and lesbian and transgender individuals, who were seen as having

very different personal and community goals, despite having been subsumed under the

umbrella of "queer" and "LGBT" since the late 1980s. This practical and organizational divide is

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[32] Jim Halat, "Re: QUEER MANIFESTO -- #3," posted to alt.homosexual on November 9, 1993. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[33] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). Butler would go on to further explore the use of sex reassignment surgery to attain a binary gender "ideal" in her 2004 book *Undoing Gender*.

[34] Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

seen on Usenet during the early 1990s as a lack of interaction between the two spheres, though

rarely outright hostility. However, though the large-scale gay lesbian Usenet communities

infrequently participated in discussion with the new transgender communities, the transgender

presence was asserted during the Eternal September period.

alt.transgendered

The early 1990s saw the beginning of a large-scale shift in the ways that gender non-

conformation, transgender, and sex-reassignment was viewed and categorized. It was during

this time period that the very word "transgender" came into popular usage, and that the

acronym LGBT was first used instead of earlier terms such as LGB or "lesbigay." Though the first

uses of *transgender* as a label can be dated back to psychiatrist John F. Oliven in 1965, who

argued that a more inclusive term was needed in order to encompass those who transitioned

their gender but did not seek surgical sex reassignment, it was not until the 1990s that the term

became widely used within the trans community.[35] It was argued by those who identified as

transgender that the label encompassed a wide range of gender non-conformation and served

as a more accurate community identifier.

Despite the widespread push for the use of *transgender,* a number of individuals also

elected to use simply *trans* as their label of choice, in order to circumvent the distinguishing

between sex and gender. This sense of change and divisiveness over language and labelling is

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[35] Joanne J. Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 36.

reflected in the transgender Usenet groups that arose during this time period, as well as the discussions that occurred within the groups.

In October of 1992, the first dedicated transgender newsgroup was created on Usenet, alt.transgendered. In the very first archived post to the newsgroup, with the subject "Re: alt.sex.trans," user 'PakRat' announced "I have sent in a newsgroup for alt.transgendered and it has started to propogate [sic]. The group alt.transgendered is for the discussion of transgenderism (Gender Dysphoria) and the issues associated with it."[36] Notably, the group referred to in the subject line, alt.sex.trans, does not appear in any archived form, although several references to it can be found in other groups until 1995. The distinction between alt.sex.trans and alt.transgendered was described in a post to alt.transgendered on November 10, 1992: "Newsadmins, take note: the two groups should not be connected in any way. The whole point of alt.transgendered was to have a group out of the alt.sex.* hierarchy."[37] PakRat replied to this message with the assertion that, "alt.transgendered should be described as 'issues concerning gender and gender dysphoria,' alt.sex.trans should be described as 'idiot NCSU student learns about news protocol please remove me.'"[38] This incidence highlights the rapidly-changing and chaotic nature of group creation in the alt.* hierarchy, where new groups were created by individuals, regardless of whether they were desired by the community or had an audience, as well as the difficult process of doing research on these groups. It is not

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[36] PakRat, "Re: alt.sex.trans," posted to alt.transgendered on October 30, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[37] M. Otto, "Another listing of newsgroups in the "alt" Usenet hierarchy," posted to alt.transgendered on November 10, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[38] PakRat, "Re: Another listing of newsgroups in the "alt" Usenet hierarchy," posted to alt.transgendered on November 10, 1992. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

immediately apparent whether this group actually ever existed, was ever archived, or existed but was never actually posted to. Further complicating the matter, the alt.transgendered group was sometimes referred to as alt.sex.trans even by its own posters, posting to alt.transgendered, suggesting that the two groups existed concurrently, tied together in some way, for at least some amount of time.

By examining these posts to alt.transgendered, we also see evidence of disagreement amongst users about where individual groups should be located, which groups would be "connected" (either officially or unofficially) with others, and whether subdivision was a worthwhile goal for the group. In a post with the subject, "Alt.Sex.Trans.Flame.War," user Jackie suggested that those posters primarily performing gender non-conformation for sexual gratification should confine their posts to alt.sex.trans, while alt.transgendered could stand to be subdivided into groups defined by identity category. "The group is growing, but people… seem dumbfounded at the suggestion that we all can't live happily together… the facts are, that Drag Queens and Transsexuals do NOT make easy friends," asserted Jackie, while suggesting that alt.transgendered should be divided into subgroups such as alt.transgendered.transsexual and alt.transgendered.drag.queen.[39] Despite these suggestions, alt.transgendered remained a single group through the early 1990s.

Throughout these discussions a perspective permeated that transgender individuals should have their own community on the soc.* hierarchy, as women, men, and gay and lesbians did. In February of 1994, these discussions dominated alt.transgendered when one user

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[39] Jackie, "Alt.Sex.Trans.Flame.War," posted to alt.transgendered on March 11, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

suggested that it was time for alt.transgendered to "come of age" and "move into the

mainstream," and put the motion to a vote among users.[40] For many, this move was seen as

necessary for gaining legitimacy and social acceptance. "I think its way past time for this group

to go "main stream [sic]." It seems almost unfair that our [gay and lesbian] counterparts are in

the almost acceptable group, but we as transgenderists are still looked on with a negative

connotation," remarked one user in response to this call for a vote.[41] At the forefront of the

argument was the idea that alt.transgendered was only reaching a fraction of their intended

audience, as long as they were located within the alt.* hierarchy. "I like the concept of alt.* and

would like us to stay here. The one point you make that gives me consideration is accessability

[sic] to more people," posted one user, expressing a sentiment that was echoed by many

others.[42] Because many news servers chose not to carry the alt.* groups, there was a fear that

alt.transgendered was missing out on a large number of potential users who could not read or

post to the group. While some users posited that moving to the soc.* hierarchy would bring

new users, as the soc.* hierarchy was more highly propagated by news servers, others worried

about the censorship and regulation that would come along with a movement to the society

hierarchy. One user who identified himself only as "Gee" and posted from the Oklahoma State

Regents for Higher Education news server argued that administrators who viewed the alt.*

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[40] Amy Lewis, "Not-an-RFD: Moving to soc.*," posted to alt.transgendered on February 26, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[41] Stephanie2, "Re: Straw poll, before proceeding further," posted to alt.transgendered on March 5, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[42] Denise Hudson, "Re: Not-an-RDF: Moving to soc.*," posted to alt.transgendered on February 28, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

newsgroups "with grave suspicion do so, I think, because of their inability to effectively control them. On the other hand, it is just this feature of the alt hierarchy that I find appealing."[43]

In part due to these concerns expressed by users, the alt.transgendered newsgroup would eventually be joined by soc.support.transgendered in July 1994. However, this group was created as a brand-new newsgroup, not a replacement, and alt.transgendered remained active. In particular, the placement of the new group within soc.support.*, "along with all the other disability-related support groups for cancer victims, nicotine addicts, alcoholics, and other unfortunate persons," proved to be a divisive issue that prevented some users from migrating to the new group.[44] An examination of crossposting in the alt.transgendered community, as illustrated in Figure 2.5, shows a high level of crossposting between alt.transgendered and soc.support.transgendered in the last half of 1994, after the group was created.

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[43] Gee, "Re: Not-an-RFD: Moving to soc.*," posted to alt.transgendered on Febraury 25, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[44] Mark Hood, "SOC.SUPPORT.TRANSGENDERED CONSIDERED HARMFUL," posted to alt.transgendered on June 16, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.
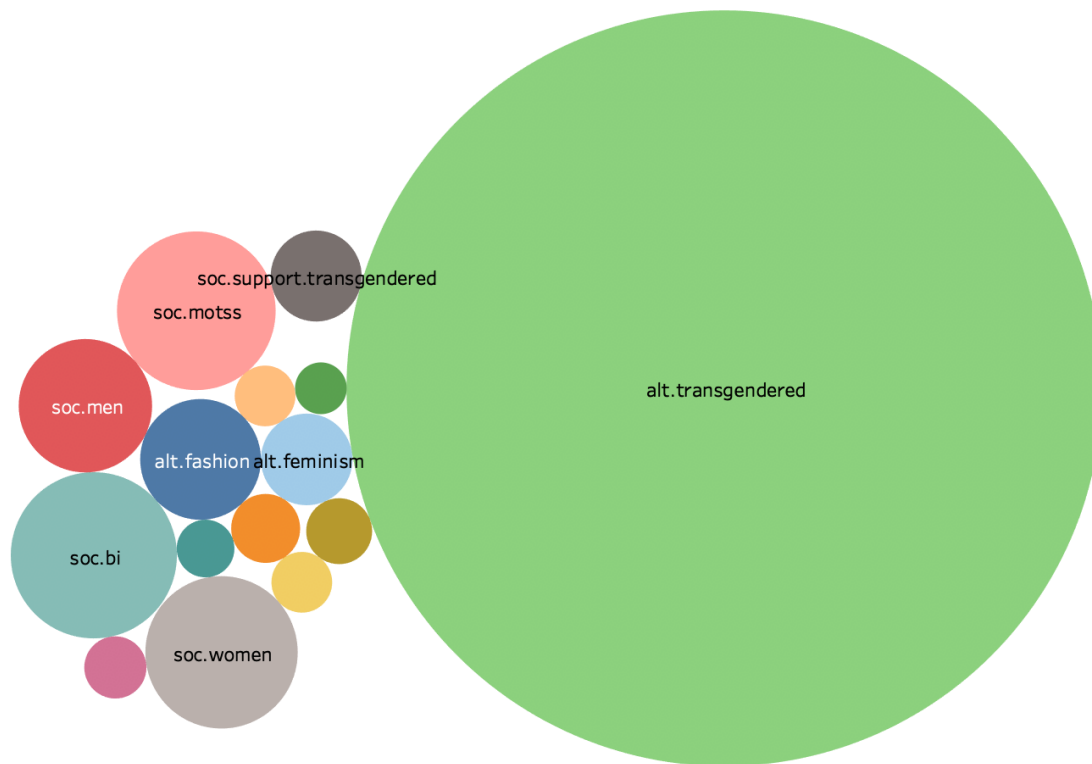
Figure 2.5: Visualization of crossposting patterns in the alt.transgendered newsgroup from the creation of the group in October 1992 to the end of 1994. Larger circles indicate more cross-posts to that particular group, while those circles that that are closer together indicate likelihood that groups would be cross-posted to at the same time. For example, we see high levels of crossposting to the soc.bi, soc.women, and soc.motss Usenet groups from the alt.transgendered community.

Despite the fact that soc.support.transgendered was only created in July of 1994, the group still appears prominently in Figure 2.5 showing crossposting trends from the creation of alt.transgendered in October of 1992 to the end of 1994. Between the announcement of the new group on July 20, 1994, and the end of 1994, there were 1209 messages posted to alt.transgendered – 139 of these (or 11.5%) of these messages were cross-posted to both groups. We also see some crossposting between alt.transgendered and other soc.*

newsgroups, including soc.motss (423 out of a total 9599 posts, or 4.4%), soc.men (3.1%), soc.women (4%), and soc.bi (4.8%). However, these numbers are relatively small, indicating that posters to alt.transgendered were most likely to keep discussions within their own group and community. The only religious or political group that we see crosspostings to is alt.pagan, with 80 total cross-posts out of 9599 messages.

The highest incidence of crossposting is in alt.transgendered is to the soc.bi newsgroup. Interestingly, we see a number of individuals who posted to alt.trandgender specifically pinpoint soc.bi as another group that they read; we do not see any similar statement of readership for other queer-focused communities like soc.motss or alt.homosexuality. Individuals posting to both newsgroups also seemed much more likely to engage in cross-posted debates, especially those concerning gender. In one such discussion on cross-dressing and drag, which became cross-posted to both soc.motss and soc.bi, the question under a post titled "What is this crap doing on soc.motss?" it was noted that "this thread has nothing to do with that group, and has little relevance to soc.bi other than the individuals taking part."[45] This explicit division between gender non-conforming behaviours and soc.motss is particularly prevalent during the early 90s. It is unclear from these discussions whether it is primarily individuals who post on both groups who engage in these discussions, or whether users from soc.bi welcomed the opportunity to discuss these matters with other users from a group which was largely marginalized from the online gay and lesbian community.

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[45] Mike Lloyd, "What is this crap doing on soc.motss (Was Re: What is "Cross-dressing"?)," posted to alt.fashion, soc.men, soc.women, alt.transgendered, soc.bi on January 7, 1994. Soc.motss had been removed from the crossposting groups list. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

These issues of identity, inclusion within the queer community, and crossposting as a measure of inclusivity were a major source of conflict between these frequently-associated groups. Individuals who cross-posted articles about transgender issues to soc.motss were often called out for spamming the group with off-topic conversation; this discourse echoed off-line conversations about the place of transgender individuals in the gay and lesbian community, as well as society as a whole. In March of 1994, discussion on alt.transgendered focused on women "rejecting" male-to-female transgender individuals, following the widely-publicized banning of trans-women from the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. This ban would later lead to protests and the establishment of "Camp Trans" just outside the festival grounds during the August 1994 musical festival, which included performances, workshops, and readings from transgender activists.[46] These discussions on alt.transgendered were quite often cross-posted to other groups, such as soc.motss, soc.bi, and soc.women, in order to solicit opinions from gay and lesbian posters about their feelings on trans inclusion within the queer community. "If I hadn't [cross-posted] it to other news groups, you would not have responded. I felt that the topics would best be discussed by input from people in the news groups I posted to. I mean, I can talk about feminist or women's issues in a vacuum, or I can post the topic to groups where I might actually *get* their opinion," posted user who included alt.feminism, soc.motss, soc.bi, soc.women, and ba.motss in their posting, as well as alt.transgendered.[47] In a response to

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[46] Emi Koyama, "A Handbook on Discussing the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival for Trans Activists and Allies," *Confluere.com* (October 2, 2008). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20081002092021/http://www.confluere.com/store/pdf-zn/mich-handbook.pdf. This controversy would continue to plague the music festival, eventually leading to widespread boycotts by many gay and lesbian associations, including GLAAD, and would ultimately be attributed to the decline and ending of the festival in 2015.

[47] William, "Re: Nature of Female TS rejection," posted to alt.transgendered on March 18, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

alt.transgendered several days later, another user pointed out one poster even, "went as far as asking 'what's motss?'" and that that should indicate to alt.transgendered that, "soc.motss shouldn't get crosspostings of this string!"[48] The irony that the very discussion of rejection of trans-women within lesbian and women-only spaces was requested to stay within alt.transgendered seemed to have been somewhat lost among the posters.

These issues of inclusivity and labelling would continue to be a source of tension between alt.transgendered and gay and lesbian Usenet groups, as well as the larger community, throughout the early 1990s. In 1992 in San Francisco, protest group Transgender Nation was spawned from the Queer Nation chapter, in order to bring attention to transgender issues. Transgender Nation was the first explicitly-transgender organization in the United States. This division from the larger queer community was significant and represented a movement towards greater attention and acceptance for transgender rights. Transgender Nation was only active from 1992 to 1994 but spawned many other similar organizations across the United States in the early 1990s.[49] This increasing visibility and activism would continue throughout the decade, drawing on new technologies and platforms for organizing and community building, such as the World Wide Web.

[48] Jeff Bowles, "Re: Nature of Female TS rejection," posted to alt.transgendered on March 23, 1994. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.
[49] Susan Stryker, "Transgender Activism," glbtq.com, 2015. http://www.glbtqarchive.com/ssh/transgender_activism_S.pdf.

Conclusion

From 1992 to 1994, Usenet rapidly proliferated as a discussion platform. This exponential increase in users, set off in 1993 by the Eternal September, would continue until 1996 when Usenet began to see real competition from another platform: the World Wide Web. Throughout this time period, existing communities, discourse, and practices were disrupted by this flood of new users, who were unaccustomed to the ways that things had been done since the beginnings of Usenet in 1980. The Eternal September would have real implications for Usenet's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender communities who, until this time period, had largely operated under a single umbrella within the soc.motss newsgroup. However, with the influx of new individuals, we see the rapid creation of popular separate groups for each identity, as well as an indeterminable number of other groups created within the alt.* hierarchy.

Usenet is notable during the Eternal September period for its lack of monetization. Though there were costs to access the servers, these fees were normally rolled into internet service providers' operating costs and passed on to users in the form of internet access fees. And, despite the proliferation of spam advertising messages posted to newsgroups, there was no "official" way to advertise on the service and very little sense that Usenet users made up a consumer base, ripe for the selling of goods and services. This lack of monetization, along with the way that users dictated the flow of information and discussion – really, the structure, organization, and norms of the network, itself – has served to characterize Usenet as the last "wild west" of the growing internet.

In the next two chapters, I follow the growth and spread of a new technology: the World Wide Web. The web went public in 1991 and really began to pick up steam in 1993. By 1996, Usenet would be offered as a web-based service through online newsreader Deja News. However, at this point, Usenet was already beginning to sharply decline in usership. Amidst competition from webpages, web-based forums, chat rooms, and instant messaging, Usenet just couldn't compete. Usenet never died – it was never shut down. In fact, Usenet has seen a steady increase in traffic and content sent and downloaded every year.[50] However, usage statistics represent increases not in discrete users or discussion, but in the proliferation of spam messages, pornography, and pirated videos and software. Usenet is primarily used today as a data transmission network, where users can send and download large files, often illegal in nature. Usenet's fate seems to be the result of its free and unmoderated nature – it had always hosted this seedier content, but what used to be a secondary purpose has become a primary destination.

However, the decline of Usenet was clearly not the end of LGBTQ community on the internet. With the web, we see the proliferation of an even greater diversity of choices for queer users, along with new venues, new technologies, and a steadily-growing population of new global users. Usenet's alt.* hierarchy was described as chaos, but the World Wide Web would prove to be immeasurably more disruptive to the "order" that had been established on net.motss a decade earlier.

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[50] John Biggs, "Reports of Usenet's Death Are Greatly Exaggerated," *Tech Crunch* (August 1, 2008), https://techcrunch.com/2008/08/01/the-reports-of-usenets-death-are-greatly-exaggerated/.

Chapter 3: Portals, Search Engines, and the LGBTQ Migration to the Web

By late 1994 and early 1995, a revolution began to sweep through Usenet. "I just received [web] access and was wondering where the Web pages related to gay lifestyle can be found," posted one user to soc.motss in February of 1995.[1] In another post just a couple weeks later to the same group, Sean Burke from the Lesbian, Gay & Bisexual Communities' Resource Center at California State University posted an administrative message, notifying users that the online Queer Resources Directory had been moved from their previous online location, an FTP server which required users to log into the system to download files to their own computer, to a brand new site on the new medium that was the World Wide Web. "The WWW interface to the QRD will be a lot more coherent," promised Sean in the Usenet post.[2] These types of messages heralded the migration of existing users to a brand-new platform: the World Wide Web.

This excitement was not limited to these new users, but also reflected in scholarship which was written in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which often also used the new technology as a medium for sharing and disseminating their work. In 1997, queer theorist and new media scholar Jonathan Alexander wrote enthusiastically on the intersections of queer theory and hypertext, in a paper which was presented at a conference on College Composition and Communication, and also self-published on his website dedicated to new media scholarship and theory, technorhetoric.net. Alexander proclaimed that the web had the potential to

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[1] Fl triguy, "Gay WWW sites?" posted to soc.motss on February 2, 1995. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

[2] Sean M. Burke, "The Queer Resources Directory by WWW," posted to soc.motss on February 25, 1995. Archived in the "Usenet Historical Collection," *Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/usenethistorical.

deconstruct the "simple, often binary, hierarchical, and linear forms of thought and, instead, [engage] more sophisticated, polyvocal ways of understanding, or at least representing, human experience, sexual and otherwise."[3]

With this new technological revolution came the ability to connect information, as well as people, in novel ways. While Usenet in the early 1990s had been dominated by cross-posting as a method for moving messages and information throughout the network, this approach came with a number of issues, such as the spamming of newsgroups with both unrelated and perhaps undesirable postings. However, the web introduced hypertext to the internet, allowing users to link to other websites in what promised to be an intuitive and unobtrusive way. The very nature of hyperlinking encouraged users to "surf the web," browsing for further websites. A published 1997 internet guidebook for gay and lesbian users written by Richard Laermer and primarily filled with descriptions and even photos of web sites, much like a travel guide book would describe the highlights of a city, described the experience for new users:

> Every person you meet online and every link you make by clicking on a brightly lit word (a hot link or hypertext) will take you to the next level. Each layer you unveil as you head up the learning curve of the internet makes it more fascinating and, sometimes, a little frustrating. But stick with it. Don't let it overwhelm you. Imagine that it's just another step in the evolution of the phone: from tin cans to huge servers. People often ask how to start, or where to go after they've plateaued. Learn as much as you can from the thousands of offerings on the net, bookmark those sites that turn you on, make sure your software is strong enough to handle your desires – and suddenly you're surfin' safari, baby.[4]

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[3] Jonathan Alexander, "Hypertext and Queer Theory," *technorhetoric.net* (1997), http://kairos.technorhetoric.net/2.2/features/reflections/jon.htm.

[4] Richard Laermer, *Get On With It: The Gay and Lesbian Guide to Getting Online* (New York: Broadway Books, 1997), 4-5. Richard Laermer also wrote several travel books on New York City, including *The Gay and Lesbian Handbook to New York City* and *Bargain Hunting in Greater New York.*

This transition to hypertext and the introduction of images in line with text was both revolutionary and also disruptive to the communities which had existed in their largely text-based mediums for over a decade. With the web came images, "under construction" banners, colored text, font choices, and, crucially, interactivity, though not yet at levels like that which would be later-realized by the introduction of Web 2.0. The Internet, and the LGBTQ communities which gathered on it, would never be the same.

In this chapter, I examine the user experience for queer individuals on the brand-new World Wide Web, and the ways that these users found community, resources, and, inevitably, marketing. Who was creating content during this time period and who was consuming it? And, more importantly, how did these new web users find their bearings? The web's growth and organization has been greatly influenced by search engine technologies, from the idea that the web could be indexed like a traditional library catalogue, leading to the development of search engines and, eventually, the prioritization of search engine optimization among web developers.[5] This issue of discoverability greatly influenced the popularity of some sites over others, as well as impacted how individuals found their own identity reflected in the new medium. By tracing the early days of the web – in terms of the actual webpages, the individuals using them, and the scholarship that arose out of the medium – I argue that while users were confronted by a multitude of content choices, in reality they were rather limited to those websites which were made discoverable through large-scale web directories and affinity

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[5] See Alexander Halavais's "How Search Shaped and Was Shaped by the Web," in *The SAGE Handbook of Web History* ed. Niels Brügger and Ian Milligan (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), 242-243. Halavais argues that online socialization and search engines have evolved alongside each other, influencing each other's biases and structures; this has been further complicated by the monetization of these search results, leading to search engines taking on a kind of "gatekeeping" role on the Web.

portals. Furthermore, these websites, with the primary goal of profitability, perpetuated

pervasive mythologies about the gender, sexuality, and affluence of the queer users who were

frequenting their sites. By 1999, the idea of targeted web advertising among marginalized

groups was making headway in the United States. In particular, gay and lesbian individuals were

highlighted as a desirable but hard to reach target audience, who also happened to have

extremely high internet usage rates.

Building on a diverse body of scholarship on the web from the late 1990s and early-

2000s, this chapter examines how queer and new media theorists understood the early

development of the web, alongside the surviving archival record of the web's first few years,

providing new perspectives on queer realness, marketing and commercial viability, and active

community-creation. Through an examination of the LGBTQ portals offered by some of the

most powerful players on the early web, directories and search engines such as Yahoo! and

Excite, as well as successful specialized portals such as PlanetOut and Gay.com, this chapter

examines the ways that queer individuals found their way around the World Wide Web. From

the earliest days of the web, it was used as a source for scholarly works in sociology,

anthropology, and psychology, among others. In particular, the online LGBTQ community fueled

many academic works; the queer community had traditionally been rather private and difficult

to pin down. Studies that focused on gay bar culture or drag culture, for example, were often

criticized for only showcasing a very small corner of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender

community. However, the web provided a novel and promising platform for performing

research on these queer communities and cultures. By examining this scholarship alongside the

archived web, a fascinating perspective on these early web communities emerges.

The Web's First Years

While the World Wide Web revolutionized and popularized the Internet, the idea behind the technology, hypertext, has much older roots. Hypertext was conceptualized as the ability to link information in an organic way that allowed a user to move from one topic to the next, browsing according to theme and interest, instead of having to "flip" through all the pages in between to find the information that we're looking for. In 1945, Vannevar Bush, head of the American Office of Scientific Research and Development during the Second World War, wrote an essay titled "As We May Think" for *Atlantic Monthly,* where he described his idea for an invention called a Memex – a device that would allow users to jump from one microfilm slide to another thematically, making links between documents. The Memex would never exist, but it would inspire a number of similar inventions, both real and conceptual, based on the idea of hypertext and hyperlinks.[6] The web is the application of this concept of hypertext on to Internet, as a way of organizing the information stored there, and making links between documents.

The web itself began as English physicist Tim Berners-Lee's idea to organize the digital information and documentation at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) in Switzerland, using hypertext to make linkages between individual projects and documents.[7] In his 1989 document "Information Management: A Proposal," Berners-Lee outlined his ideas for how a hypertext information management system would work: "This is why a "web" of notes with links (like references) between them is far more useful than a fixed hierarchical system.

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[6] Belinda Barnet writes about this evolution from Bush's idea to the reality of the World Wide Web in *Memory Machines: The Evolution of Hypertext* (London: Anthem Press, 2013).

[7] Tim Berners-Lee. *Weaving the Web: The Original Design and Ultimate Destiny of the World Wide Web* (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 15-16.

When describing a complex system, many people resort to diagrams with circles and arrows…

The system we need is like a diagram of circles and arrows, where circles and arrows can stand

for anything." [8] Through the creation of an information system where documents could be

linked together like the web that Berners-Lee described, CERN could solve its issues of disparate

documents and project data existing in isolation from each other, and undiscoverable by other

employees. What started as an ambitious proposal for managing internal projects within CERN

in 1989 became a server running on one computer by the end of 1990. However, Berners-Lee's

vision for the web went much bigger than one computer. In August of 1991, Berners-Lee posted

a message to the alt.hypertext Usenet newsgroup, describing his project at CERN: "The

WorldWideWeb (WWW) project aims to allow links to be made to any information anywhere…

If you're interested in using the code, mail me. It's very prototype but available… from

info.cern.ch."[9] The response to this public post was enthusiastic. A few months later, in

December 1991, Berners-Lee published a document that described HTML as a markup language

that could determine how text looked, and how hyperlinks could be made between

documents.[10] The speed with which this idea spread is nothing short of phenomenal. What had

started as Tim Berners-Lee's pet project at CERN led to an information revolution.

  From Tim Berners-Lee's one webpage in 1991, the web grew to 2,738 webpages and

over 25 000 global users in 1994, and 23 500 webpages and 45 000 users in 1995.[11] These users

were primarily located in the English-speaking world -- the United States of America and United

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[8] Tim Berners-Lee, "Information Management: A Proposal," CERN March 1989,
https://www.w3.org/History/1989/Proposal.html.
[9] Tim Berners-Lee, "Re: Qualifiers on Hypertext links," posted to alt.hypertext on August 6, 1991.
[10] Berners-Lee, *Weaving the Web*.
[11] "Total Number of Websites," *Internet Live Stats* (accessed July 11, 2019),
https://www.internetlivestats.com/total-number-of-websites/.

Kingdom, in particular – as well as Japan and France.[12] American internet usage data from the

Pew Research Center helps contextualize this increase among the highest reported country, the

United States: 4% of Americans had access to the Internet in 1995, which increased to 23% in

1996, as the web gained in popularity, and 41% by 1998.[13] The speed that the general

population jumped on to the internet following the introduction of the web was

unprecedented. While internet usage had steadily been increasing in the years preceding, the

web was the "killer app" that popularized the technology and other competing platforms –

Gopher, WAIS, even Usenet – would quickly lose ground the web.[14]

  The development of the web browser was so fundamental to the popularization of the

World Wide Web, that it's difficult to separate the history of the web from the user interface.

The web browser, which is the part of the web that users actually interact with –- the part of

the web that users see and touch – reads and interprets the HTML code and displays the web

on a computer monitor. The very first browsers were text-only and ran on proprietary systems.

Berners-Lee's browser, WorldWideWeb, which also included in-browser editing, could only be

run on the NeXT computer, a powerful but extraordinarily-expensive computer built by Steve

Jobs' NeXT Inc.[15] In 1993, the first graphical web browser was introduced, not by CERN, but

from the United States, and the web rapidly increased in popularity. This first graphical

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[12] "ICT Access and Usage By Households and Individuals," Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, https://stats.oecd.org.
[13] "The Internet News Audience Goes Ordinary," Pew Research Center (January 14, 1999), https://www.people-press.org/1999/01/14/the-internet-news-audience-goes-ordinary/.
[14] Jean Marie Deken makes this point in "The web's first 'Killer App': SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory's World Wide Web site 1991-1993" in *Web 25: Histories from the First 25 Years of the World Wide Web* ed. Niels Brugger (New York: Peter Lang, 2017).
[15] John Gilles and Robert Cailliau, *How the Web Was Born: The Story of the World Wide Web* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

browser, Mosaic, was created by the National Center for Supercomputing Applications (NCSA), and headed by Marc Andreessen, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Notably, Mosaic, seen in Figure 3.1, was released as a free download to Internet users. In terms of internet accessibility, NCSA Mosaic was a major revolution. For the very first time, users could access the internet, through the framework of the web, in much the same way that we access it now – by clicking on links and viewing in-line text and images – instead of through a command line interface, and all available from the average personal computer. Mosaic was also the first browser that removed the ability to edit webpages within the browser, which had been at the forefront of Berners-Lee's vision for the World Wide Web.[16]
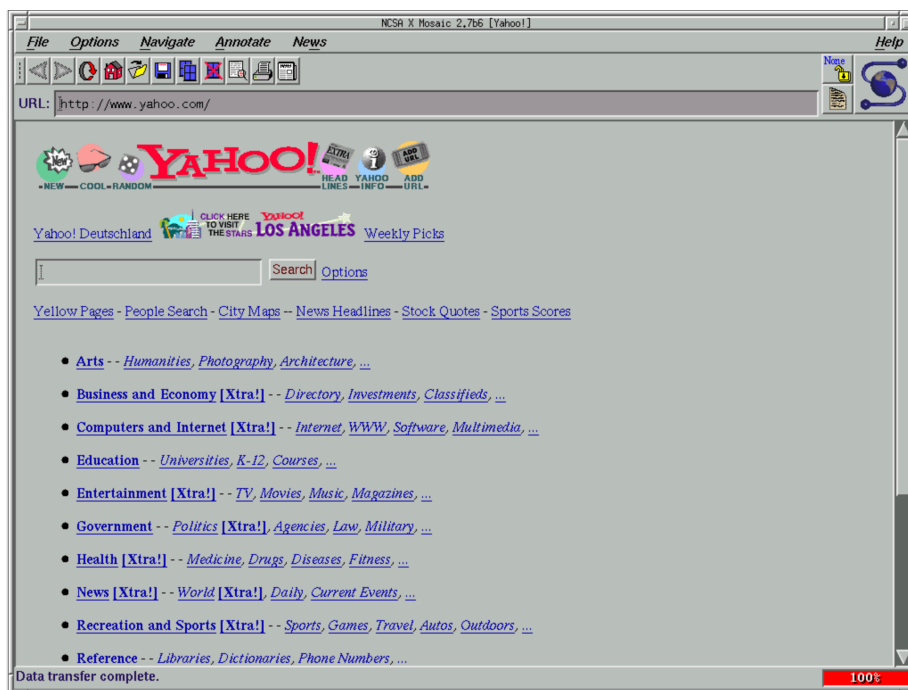

Figure 3.1: Yahoo's homepage, as it would have appeared in 1996, using the NCSA Mosaic browser. Source: OldWeb.Today.

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[16] Marc Weber, "Browsers and Browser Wars," in *The SAGE Handbook to Web History* (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), 276.

The impact of Mosaic on internet usage and the popularization of the World Wide Web

cannot be over-stated, and, indeed, "Mosaic" seemed for a time to be synonymous with the

web itself. In an October 1994 article titled, "The (Second Phase of the) Revolution Has Begun,"

Wired Magazine asserted that, "Prodigy, AOL, and CompuServe are all suddenly obsolete – and

Mosaic is well on its way to becoming the world's standard interface… Mosaic is not the most

direct way to find information online. Nor is it the most powerful. It is merely the most

pleasurable way, and in the 18 months since it was released, Mosaic has incited a rush of

excitement and commercial energy unprecedented in the history of the Net."[17] For the first

time, using a personal computer, the average user could navigate through multifaceted

webpages which married text with multimedia and images, and connected to each other

through a network of hyperlinks which required only one click to move on to the next. More

than this, Mosaic was offered was offered as a free cross-platform download to users, further

increasing the accessibility of the web. Unlike WorldWideWeb, which required a rare and

expensive computer system, Mosaic was the first browser that was easy for the general public

to obtain and install. This revolution made the Internet accessible to users in ways that it had

never been before. More than that, the web was free once you were connected to the internet,

unlike other services like Gopher, as well as internet access services like America Online and

CompuServe. Marc Weber emphasizes the speed that the web became the dominant means of

accessing the internet, crushing alternative technologies within a matter of months: "Gopher

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[17] Gary Wolfe, "The (Second Phase of the) Revolution Has Begun," *Wired Magazine* (October 1, 1994). https://www.wired.com/1994/10/mosaic/.

servers withered like snowmen in the spring rain… It was the launching pad for several services still familiar today."[18]

Mosaic laid the groundwork for the ways that users interact with the World Wide Web, but ultimately would be eclipsed by the development of new browsers. The head of the team at the NCSA that developed Mosaic, Marc Andreessen, went on to create a new software company amid tensions between CERN and NCSA Mosaic over ownership and creative rights. This company, codenamed Mozilla, would go on to develop the Netscape Navigator browser and capture the majority of Mosaic's usership with their fast, stable, and well-supported browser.[19] In 1995, Microsoft licensed Mosaic in order to create their own web browser, Internet Explorer.[20] The rivalry between Netscape and Internet Explorer escalated throughout the 1990s, fueled by Microsoft bundling Internet Explorer with nearly all new computer purchases during the time period, and leading to anti-trust lawsuits in the United States and Europe. Ultimately, Netscape's decline would lead to the founding of the open-source Mozilla foundation by the same individuals who created Netscape; Mozilla released their flagship product, the Firefox browser, in 2002. This web browser evolution is significant and has major implications for web development and uptake. Through the early 2000s, all web browsers were based off of one common ancestor – Mosaic. Furthermore, as argued by Weber, the development of the web browser evolved alongside the development of the Web, shaping both the technology itself, as well as models for monetization, organization, and discoverability. [21]

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[18] Marc Weber, "Browsers and Browser Wars," 280.
[19] Weber, "Browsers and Browser Wars," 283-285.
[20] Gilles and Cailliau, *How the Web Was Born*.
[21] Marc Weber, "Browsers and Browser Wars," 270.

The challenges associated with conducting historical research using the early web as a historical source tend to mirror the challenges experienced by the web's early users. Keyword searching on archived webpages is rather limited, making discoverability a major issue for finding relevant old webpages. Similarly, many sites have been deleted or contain broken links to sites which were never crawled and archived. However, these users did not see the structure and organization of the web as challenging, but as a site of opportunity and ease of access. By using the same methodologies that early web users followed to find their bearings on the web -- primarily through web directories and large-scale portals -- along with following the user experience as a method of conducting historical research, it is possible to examine some of these early websites and communities that arose in the mid to late-1990s.

One of the primary issues with examining the web as an avenue to enhance our understanding of culture and community in the 1990s is a frustration which users both then and now were and are familiar with: the "404 – File not found" error. This error page appeared when users clicked on a hyperlink which led to a webpage which had been moved or deleted, and was particularly common in the early days of the web when users were learning about the process of creating a website, establishing hyperlinking patterns, and navigating free and paid website hosting options. The 404 page has changed significantly in the recent Web 2.0 era – broken links now often send web users back to the central homepage or forward them on to other content. When we do come across a "not found" page, it's often customized by the website being visited, and links on to other possible locations for what the user is looking for.[22]

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[22] Research and news coverage on personalized 404 pages has turned up some interesting examples of these pages being used, primarily on American elections websites.

Using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine to investigate the 1990s web feels a bit like

going back to the 1990s ourselves – though many pages have been archived, hyperlinks

frequently lead to "not found" errors for content which has not been archived and is now lost

to historians.

To explore why, it is worth discussing the Internet Archive briefly. In 1996, computer

engineers Brewster Kahle and Bruce Gilliat founded Alexa Internet, in order to crawl the web to

help users find relevant content via web traffic analysis. Using web crawler software, Alexa's

crawlers followed hyperlinks with the goal of mapping the web. The Internet Archive was

founded in 1996 by Kahle, using donated archived crawl records from Alexa. The Internet

Archive saved crawled content on to digital tape with the goal of eventually making the content

publicly accessible. This data was made accessible to researchers who wished to work with

these archived webpages. In 2001, the archived data was made publicly accessible through the

Wayback Machine. By this point, the Internet Archive already contained over ten billion

archived pages.[23] The Wayback Machine has continued to grow since 2001 and, at the time of

writing, currently contains over 750 billion archived web pages containing text, images, and

media such as music and video. This figure continues to grow at a rapid pace, rendering

"current estimates" almost immediately out of date as soon as they are reported.

However, there are limits to what the Wayback Machine can collect; notably, Flash and

JavaScript content, which were widely used for navigation and web applications in the 1990s

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https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/politics/onpolitics/2016/08/23/candidate-website-error-pages/89208222/.

[23] Sanjay Arora, et al. "Using the Wayback Machine to mine websites in the social sciences: A methodological resource," *Journal of the Association for Information Science and Technology* 67:8 (May 2015), 1904–1915.

and early 2000s, are not included within the Wayback Machine. As Megan Sapnar Ankerson

explains, it is much easier to find a film from 1924 than to find a video clip from a website from

1994.[24] The web crawlers simply could not crawl and archive many of these interactive and

multimedia web elements. For the same reasons, any websites which used a Flash or JavaScript

navigation page were also not crawlable, and therefore any hyperlinks included within that

navigation application also could not be crawled and archived. As Niels Brügger has argued, the

archived web page is not merely a copy of the original, but a new type of primary source

altogether, created by bringing together elements of each page which were collected and

archived at different times, and reconstructing the webpage to look much as it would have

when it was live on the web.[25] While it is important to take this "reconstructed" nature of the

archived web into consideration, it is also necessary to view each individual website not as a

singular entity, but in conversation with the websites which it links to, and which link to it. Ian

Milligan stresses the interconnected nature of the web in asking the question, "If you have

archived a page, but not the pages that lie behind the links on that page, what are you

missing?"[26] Given that this technology was conceived of as a web of documents linked together

in dynamic and intuitive ways, is it still the same medium, when removed of its connections?

Working with archived web material requires awareness of the constraints of web crawling and

archiving, particularly in the early days of the web, when storage and budget constraints

dictated how much of the web could be saved.

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[24] Megan Sapnar Ankerson, "Writing web histories with an eye on the analog past," *new media and society* 14(3), 384.

[25] Niels Brügger, "The Archived Website and Website Philology: A New Type of Historical Document?," *Nordicom Review* 29:2 (2008), 156.

[26] Ian Milligan, *History in the Age of Abundance: How the web is transforming historical research* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 45.

Though Alexa Internet collected billions of websites between 1996 and 2001, many websites created and updated before 1999 are poorly represented within the collection. The first few years of archived crawls saved only the textual information from webpages, and not any images or other media. Within these sites, often the main webpage would be crawled, but none of the linked-to content pages within the site were crawled or archived. Clicking on the link leads to a not-found error page within the Wayback Machine, as seen in Figure 3.2.
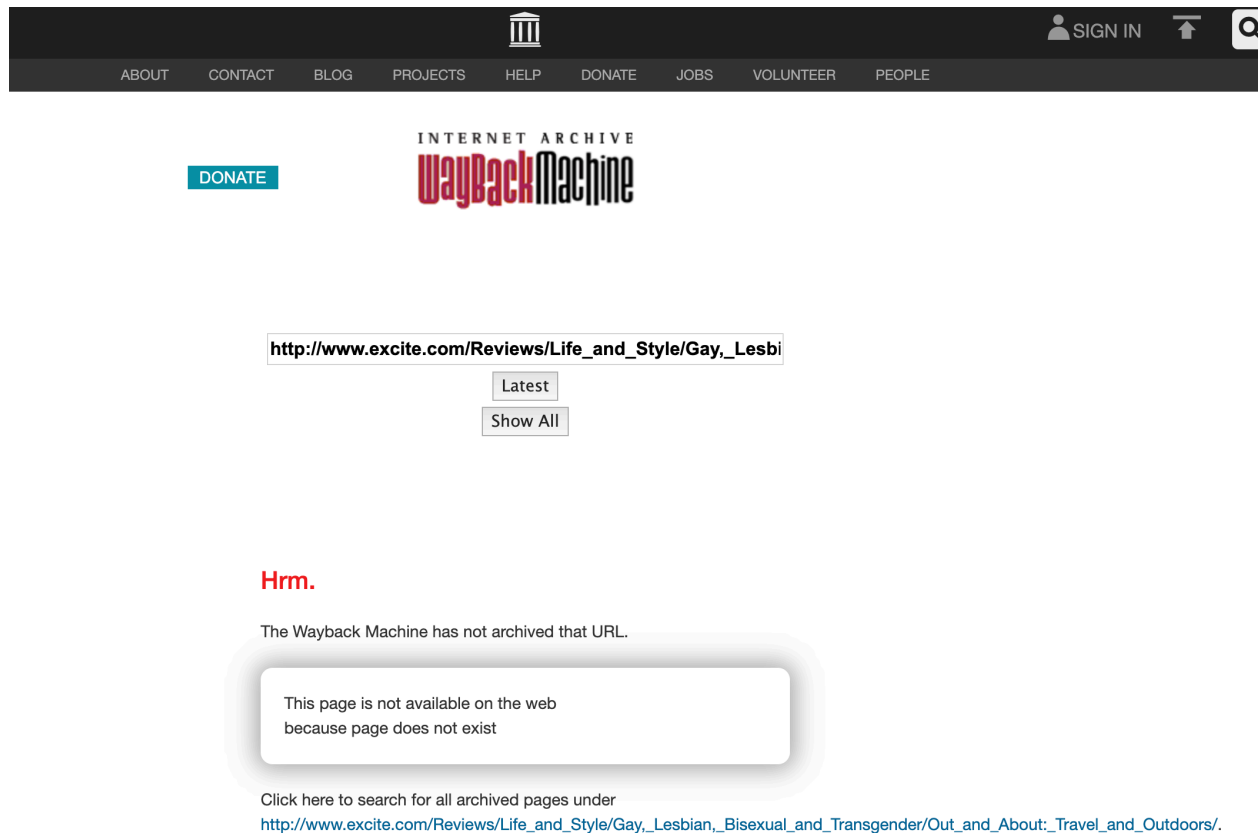
Figure 3.2: The Wayback Machine's "page not found" error page for webpages which were not crawled or archived by the Internet Archive.

The Wayback Machine attempts to compensate for these missing pages by providing a copy of the page which was archived at a later time, whenever possible. For example, Yahoo!'s directory of transgender personal webpages was first archived on June 18, 1997. However,

clicking on the linked pages often leads to websites which were crawled and archived several years later. Additionally, many of these webpages are missing elements such as images and navigation.

When using the Wayback Machine for research of this type, it's important to be aware of dating inconsistencies within the archive. Moreover, each web crawl does not capture all elements on a single page at the same time, due to storage and bandwidth considerations. It is therefore probable that webpages within the Wayback Machine look cohesive but are the result of multiple web captures, sometimes crawled months or even years apart, which have then been stitched together. The very nature of these pieced together pages within the Wayback Machine has led to "temporal violations," where the Wayback Machine creates a webpage that never actually existed.[27] In an article titled "Only One Out of Five Archived Web Pages Existed as Presented," researchers Scott Ainsworth, Michael Nelson, and Herbert Van de Sompel use the example of an archived Weather Underground forecast page which shows the weather for Varina, Iowa on December 9, 2004 as "rainy" despite a perfectly clear radar image. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the radar image was actually captured nine months after the initial weather page was archived, creating a temporal violation, and a weather forecast page which never actually existed.[28] Web historian Ian Milligan argues that these temporal and technological inconsistencies within archived web materials require a degree of care, however, "it does not mean that they should all be abandoned as fictional

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[27] Ibid, 110-111.
[28] Scott G. Ainsworth, Michael L. Nelson, Herbert Van de Sompel, "Only One Out of Five Archived Web Pages Existed as Presented," *HT '15* Proceedings of the 26th ACM Conference on Hypertext & Social Media, Guzelyurt, Northern Cyprus, September 1-4, 2015. Fulltext available at https://www.cs.odu.edu/~mln/pubs/ht-2015/hypertext-2015-temporal-violations.pdf.

creations of web crawlers, but it does mean that researchers need to be aware of the way the archive is assembled."[29]

The age and format of this archived material does not lend itself well to any sort of large-scale methodology, such as text analysis or network graphing. The format and intent of the Wayback Machine invites users to browse the material as one would have at the time that it was "live" on the web but is of limited use to researchers who want to examine the websites at scale. One really must click on each link individually and read the webpages as they were meant to be read. Attempts to collect just the text layer of these webpages from the archived material reveals myriad errors, missing pages, and temporally-inconsistent site elements. These sites, particularly in the early years of the web when web crawlers were new and the idea of archiving the web – let alone making it publicly available! -- was still merely an experimental concept, were simply not crawled with the goal of large-scale analysis. Complicating the issue is the question of whether these webpages should be viewed as they were meant to be seen – complete with their backgrounds, images, blinking text and, most crucially, in context and conversation with the sites which each page linked to, as a functional whole.

Even this goal of viewing the web as it was becomes further complicated by browser and technological considerations. During the 1990s, many webpages were created to be viewed on a specific browser and pages simply looked different when viewed with NCSA Mosaic, Netscape Navigator, or Internet Explorer.[30] Webmasters often included text or banners proclaiming which browser the site had been built for.

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[29] Milligan, *History in the Age of Abundance?*, 111.
[30] Ian Milligan's exploration of the browser wars and their effect on HTML standards in *History in the Age of Abundance?* further illustrates the issues and possibilities of archived webpages and browser emulation.

Given these browser considerations, and the fact that a website could look vastly

different when viewed from different browsers and computers during the 1990s, it can only be

expected that today's browsers greatly affect how an archived website is viewed. Use of sites

like OldWeb.Today, as in Figure 3.3, which offers the ability to view a site as it would have

appeared on any browser of the user's choice, help researchers to understand how browsers
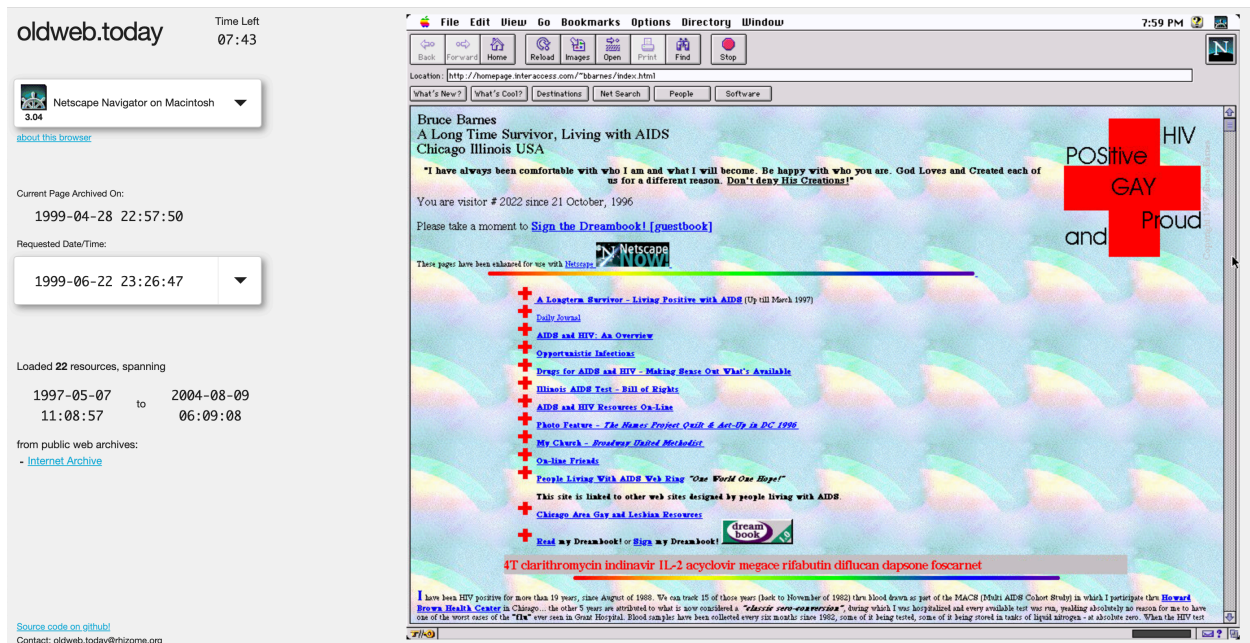
during the 1990s would have interpreted the HTML code.

Figure 3.3: Using OldWeb.Today, it's possible to view Bruce Barnes' personal website as it would have looked on its optimized browser, Netscape Navigator, in 1999, complete with scrolling marquee text, midi file music, and java applets.

For many of these sites, just having any archived web materials at all is considered

particularly fortunate. For these reasons, I focus primarily on some of the most popular sites

during the 1990s — large web portals, such Yahoo! and Excite, as well as popular queer affinity

portals, like Gay.com and PlanetOut. Where we have an absence of records within the archived

web, we do have a wealth of more traditional sources, such as newspapers and academic

studies, describing the use and popularity of these web portals. These sites were not only

frequented by users, but a source for sociological, psychological, and ethnographic scholarship

in the 1990s. By examining news media and academic literature written during the 1990s, this

chapter fills in the gaps in the online archived record, particularly in looking at how users

described their experiences on the sites, the information that they found most useful and

relevant, and the ways that the web integrated itself into queer identity and community during

this time period.

Search Engines and Web Directories

In 1996, a syndicated advice column-style feature on how to use personal computers and get

on to the World Wide Web ran in Canadian newspapers. "I've noticed that during the past few

months the Internet search engines I use have been getting worse and worse trying to find

what I'm looking for. Is there anything new to do this that may be better? I use Yahoo and

Excite," wrote in one reader identified as L. Charles. Columnist John Dvorak's response echoed

user frustration over the speed with which the web was changing: "There are about 70 million

Web pages out there and more than one million new pages are going online each month. The

search engines can't keep up. Right now there is no alternative and my approach is to use

multiple search engines and multiple searches."[31] How were users to keep up with the rapid

growth of the new medium?

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[31] John Dvorak, "Outsiders can't get on to intranets," *Vancouver Sun* (October 9, 1996), Business, D10.

Nearly from the very moment that the web became popularized, there were attempts to organize it to make webpages discoverable. There was simply so much content on the web, even within a few years of its development, that the major challenge was to find relevant content. Some of these first attempts were based on web directories, similar to hierarchy-based systems like Usenet. The very first of these directories, W3Catalog, was developed by developer Oscar Nierstrasz at the University of Geneva, and was based not off of web crawling, but through the collection of manually-created topic-based resource lists that already existed on the web.[32] W3Catalog was retired in December of 1996 and was never crawled and captured by the Internet Archive, leaving this first directory and search engine lost as a primary source. However, W3Catalog was quickly joined by other similar services based on automated web crawlers, including Infoseek, JumpStation, and WebCrawler. Notably, WebCrawler, created at the University of Washington, was the first web search engine to provide full-text searchability; the search engine was the second most-visited site on the web in 1996, before losing popularity to other rival web portals and search engines.[33] Some of these search engines, like Lycos, AltaVista, Ask Jeeves, and Excite, would achieve massive popularity for a short amount of time in the late 1990s, before each being replaced by a new successor which offered new promises of discoverability on the web.

Two such websites, Yahoo! and Excite, were founded in 1994 and were each ranked in the top five most visited sites on the web in the late 1990s. Yahoo! was notable as a return to

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[32] Oscar Nierstrasz, "Searchable Catalog of WWW Resources (experimental)," posted to comp.infosystems.www on September 2, 1993.

[33] Philip Bump, "From Lycos to AskJeeves to Facebook: Tracking the 20 most popular web sites every year since 1996," *Washington Post* (December 15, 2014), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2014/12/15/from-lycos-to-ask-jeeves-to-facebook-tracking-the-20-most-popular-web-sites-every-year-since-1996/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.d7664b8f0084.

the web directory format. The platform was originally founded by Stanford graduate students

Jerry Yang and David Filo in January 1994 as "Jerry and David's Guide to the World Wide Web,"

before being renamed as the Yahoo! Directory (which Yang and Filo later stated stands for "Yet

Another Hierarchically-Organized Oracle") several months later.[34] The Yahoo! Directory began

as a human-created directory of websites; Yahoo! would not develop its own search engine

until 2002, instead relying on competitor AltaVista to provide its search engine infrastructure

until 1999, and software provider Inktomi until 2002.[35]

It is significant that the Yahoo! Directory, as seen in Figure 3.4, originally organized

many of its categories in a method which directly referenced the Usenet newgroup system.

These topics, such as science, computers, news, recreation, regional groups, and arts, greatly

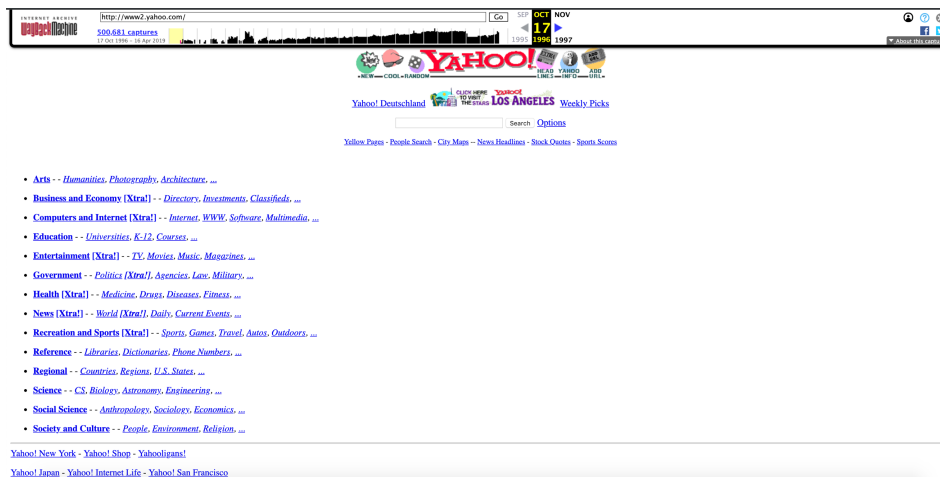resembled Usenet's Big Eight hierarchies which were created in 1987.

Figure 3.4: Screenshot of Yahoo!'s main page in October of 1996. Though the page does include a search bar, the directory is most prominent. The major categories in the Yahoo! directory include topics like arts, science, social science, recreation, and news, which follows Usenet's hierarchy system.

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[34] Yahoo Media Relations, "The History of Yahoo! – How it All Started," *yahoo.com* (April 2, 2013). *The Internet Archive.* https://web.archive.org/web/20130402073246/http://docs.yahoo.com/info/misc/history.html.

[35] "Yahoo!" still first portal call," *BBC News* (June 5, 1998), news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/107667.stm.

For example, in 1996 the gay and lesbian sub-category was located within the Society and

Culture category, which mirrored the topics found within Usenet's soc.* hierarchy, such as age,

gender, museums, holidays, and religion. However, unlike Usenet, the gay and lesbian category

further separated out into many sub-categories, which included everything from Politics and

Civil Rights, to Relationships, to Anti-Violence and Health, and further identity categories such

as Bisexual and Lesbian. Significantly, the "Transgendered" category was located not within the

Gay and Lesbian category, but within the "Gender" section of the directory, though it was

periodically linked-to from the Gay and Lesbian category.

Yahoo!'s persistent use of the label "transgendered" is particularly revealing, given the

lack of consensus on how the term should be used, even within the Usenet groups

alt.transgendered and soc.support.transgendered themselves, as discussed in the previous

chapter. Though the label was somewhat contested within these groups, we see the echoing of

Usenet's groups and structures on the web, particularly in the early days when these directories

were being created. The label transgendered was seen by some trans individuals as implying

that transgender identity was something that was actively *done to* someone, as opposed to

existing as an identity category such as gay or lesbian. Comparisons were made between the

offensive label *coloured* for black individuals.[36] Despite this disagreement in terminology, the

use of *transgendered* as the "official" term in Usenet group names seems to influence Yahoo!'s

choice of labels in their own directory. An analysis of the use of the term in literature, using

Google's N-Gram Viewer, as illustrated in Figure 3.5, shows the terms transgender and

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[36] "GLAAD Glossary of Terms – Transgender," *GLAAD* (accessed May 8, 2019),
https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender.

transgendered being used at a relatively equal frequency until 1998. After that time, the word

transgender is used at a much greater frequency, as the term transgendered declines in usage.
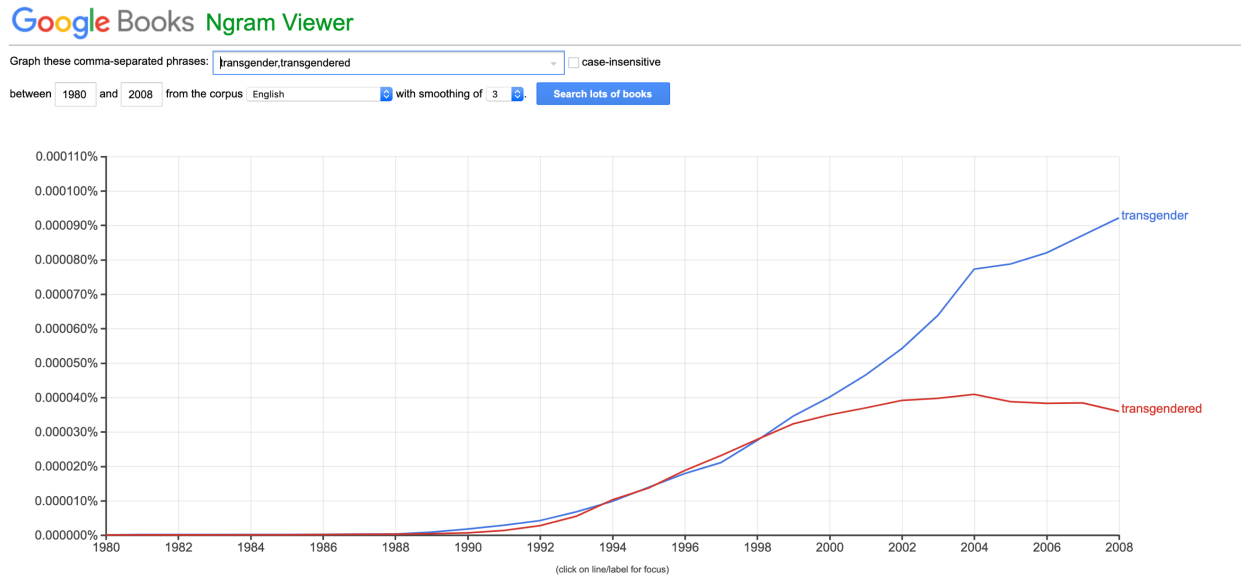

Figure 3.5: Graph of the relative frequency of the terms transgender and transgendered in books from 1980 to 2008. Source: Google Ngram.

The category *Transgendered* continued to be used on Yahoo! until 2015, when the directory

was replaced by a more standard news and media portal.

One of Yahoo!'s most significant rivals in the mid to late-1990s was the web portal

Excite, founded in 1994 by a group of Stanford University students. The original goal of Excite

was to create a search engine which would "manage the vast information on the World Wide

Web."[37] However, what initially differentiated Excite from similar search engines like AltaVista

and Lycos was the site's goal of making high-quality web content accessible to users by

providing "Excite Reviews" of as many web pages as possible, written by "the Web's best

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[37] "Finding Web Info is Now a Lot Easier, *Courier Mail* (Queensland, Australia), May 4, 1996.

editorial team."[38] Sites were given a rating of 1-4 Excite logos, which were defined as varying

from "must see" to "if you're desperate." These reviews are archived from October 1996, at the

beginning of the Internet Archive's collection, to June 1, 1997 when, given the exponential

increase in the number of websites and web users, Excite abandoned the idea of reviewing

every site on the web. However, for the short time that we have these archived reviews, they

provide a fascinating insight into the sites that Excite felt were exceptional enough to review

and make discoverable to web users. Excite's "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender" section

was located within their "Life and Style" category and contained a number of subtopics like "Bi-

Friendly," "Groups & Resources," and "Same Sex Marriages."[39]

Excite's reviews contain a diverse selection of webpages and internet resources. For

example, the Groups & Resources subtopic contains "Gay Personal Pages," PlanetOut, links to

mailing lists, and even Usenet newsgroups such as alt.homosexual and alt.sex.motss (these

groups were each given two Excite logos, rating them slightly above "if you're desperate"). The

very fact that a directory of webpages linked to non-web entities like Usenet reflects, and

served to further perpetuate, confusion among users about what exactly the web really was.

Excite also included a section on queer publications, where they rated both webpages and

actual content of local, national, and international queer newspapers, magazines, and zines. In

this way, Excite's reviews transcended the born-digital, and encompassed print resources as

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[38] "Excite.com Homepage," *Excite.com,* October 22, 1996. *The Internet Archive,*
http://web.archive.org/web/19961022175004/http://www07.excite.com/.
[39] "Life & Style > Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender > Groups and Resources," *Excite.com* (March 3, 1997).
Internet Archive,
http://web.archive.org/web/19970303140240/http://www05.excite.com/Reviews/Life_and_Style/Gay,_Lesbian,_
Bisexual_and_Transgender/Groups_and_Resources/index.html?CCt.

well as web content. This rating and categorizing of web content was self-selecting – given the

lack of reliable search during this time period, only those sites which were already reasonably

popular and discoverable were selected to be reviewed – and also influenced the amount of

attention a site would be given through the attribution of a relatively arbitrary rating given by

Excite's team of "esteemed reviewers." For example, The Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review was

given two logos, while The Rainbow Icon Archive, a site which provided rainbow graphics for

use when creating a website, was given four logos, with no explanation as to why each site

warranted each rating. Though the Excite Reviews sections creased to be updated and offered

as a distinct section of the site by June of 1997, the reviews continued to be offered through

Excite's Channels, which were arranged around a similar organizational system as the reviews

and included news and events, until 1999.

Significantly, though these directories served to make sites discoverable to users, only

the sites which were already popular and highly-visited appeared within the listings.

Furthermore, the most-popular sites appear highest in the listings, in order to ensure quick and

easy access to the sites that users most-wanted to find. For example, the popular gay and

lesbian affinity portal PlanetOut appears at the top of Yahoo!'s Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual

category, alongside Yahoo! resources. Users could be forgiven for assuming that PlanetOut,

appearing in Figure 3.6, was part of the Yahoo! website – however, it was actually a popular gay

and lesbian portal, PlanetOut.com, and entirely separate from Yahoo!'s holdings, though

affiliated with other net services such as America Online, and MSN.

Figure 3.6: Yahoo's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual category included PlanetOut at the very top of the directory, separate from other categories. PlanetOut was an incredibly popular web portal during the late 1990s, and offered services such as message boards, resources, news, and feature articles.

Though search engines would purport to make it easier to discover websites, in reality the search algorithms used by these engines would continue to emphasize the most-popular and most-linked-to search results. However, these web directories and web site reviews, which began as human-created and organized lists of hyperlinks, necessarily only included the most discoverable links, perpetuating issues of information access for only the most visited sites.

LGBTQ Affinity Portals

The mid-1990s also saw the rise of large portals catering to specific groups of users – these websites were referred to in the 1990s as affinity portals. Driven by the "gold rush" atmosphere of the early web, these affinity portals -- like the larger more general web portals that came just slightly before them -- were seeking to monetize on the new large user bases of the World Wide Web. Indeed, there were several gay and lesbian-focused endeavors which saw the web as an opportunity to capture a segment of the market on a brand-new platform with potential for monetization. These commercial sites, including the two largest, PlanetOut and Gay.com, have been criticized by new media scholars like Jonathan Alexander, Ben Aslinger, and Nina Wakeford for their focus on monetization and "marketing 'stereotypes' or 'cybertypes'… in the process of attracting buyers or visitors," even as they promoted queer visibility within the larger population.[40] In short, though these large websites were rather successful during the 1990s and served to normalize queer community on the World Wide Web, they were also criticized by both users, as well as scholars, for reinforcing existing stereotypes about the queer community, and in particular gay males, while largely ignoring other segments of the LGBTQ population.

As early as 2004, when these queer commercial portals were still popular among users (they began declining around 2007, amid competition from social media and other web platforms), scholars began shedding light on the linkages between marginalized community, surveillance, and corporate sponsorship. Attracting a community which traditionally considered

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[40] Jonathan Alexander, *Digital Youth: Emerging Literacies on the World Wide Web* (Hampton Press, 2006), 248. Also see Ben Aslinger's "PlanetOut and Queer Media Conglomeration," and Nina Wakeford's "New Technologies and Cyber-Queer Research." The term "cybertypes" was first used by Lisa Nakamura in her book *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicty and Identity on the Internet*, but has been further applied to gender and sexuality by Aslinger and Alexander.

privacy to be paramount to their existence, these websites' continued success required that

they "convince marketers that they are capable of delivering advertisements to economically

desirable audiences," and led to sites like PlanetOut and Gay.com using "techniques of panoptic

surveillance, combining automated modes of data-gathering with the enticement of patrons to

participate in their own surveillance."[41] In short, through the participation in memberships (to

gain access to message boards and chat rooms, as well as other site features) users surrendered

their own privacy to these large web corporations. These websites were seen as fundamentally

different than other businesses which targeted gay individuals, such as bars and bookshops,

which were primarily operated by gay business owners. Thus, there was a dual purpose to

these portals, which could both be seen as important community resources, but also large

commercial enterprises which operated outside of – and in potentially exploitive ways -- the

community sphere. These surveillance and privacy concerns surrounding the web have been

well-documented in recent years, but users and scholars struggled with these new issues in the

early days of the World Wide Web. For groups like the LGBTQ community, which valued and

relied on privacy, the issues of becoming personally identifiable became particularly poignant as

the web grew in popularity.

    In August of 1995, PlanetOut was launched on the Microsoft Network (MSN) by a team

of developers and media directors, including Tom Rielly, Darren Nye, Christian Williams, Jenni

Olson, and Greg Gordon. For PlanetOut, the web presented a much more lucrative space than

traditional print media – with no printing costs or traditional print deadlines, the barrier to

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[41] John Edward Campbell, "Outing PlanetOut: surveillance, gay marketing and internet affinity portals," *New Media & Society* Vol 7(5), 2005, 666.

entry was much lower than print competitors such as magazines and newsletters. Founder Tom

Rielly was a programmer for Macintosh in the late-1980s and created the non-profit

organization Digital Queers to promote digital skills for LGBT individuals.[42] Rielly cited the lack

of major gay and lesbian publications within traditional media as a primary motivation for

starting PlanetOut, stating that, "the Internet is the first medium where we can have equal

footing with the big players."[43] The original plan for PlanetOut included a dedicated space on

the Microsoft Network, Microsoft's membership-based internet service which provided a

curated selection of features such as email, news, and chat rooms, and came bundled with each

new Windows computer purchase, as well as a website on the World Wide Web. This service

was also a direct competitor to America Online's (AOL) own wildly-popular Gay and Lesbian

Community Forum.

PlanetOut's website seems to have gotten off to a slow start in creating content and

driving traffic to their chat rooms and message boards. Richard Laermer describes PlanetOut in

his 1997 book *Get On With It: The Gay and Lesbian Guide to Getting Online* as being a bit

"barren" of content in the web-based version of the online venture, despite having a "vibrant"

community on the Microsoft Network. "Where are the boys and girls?" Laermer laments. "By

the time you get to the shop at PlanetOut, you feel as if you have just tracked fifteen miles at

Gay Pride and are rummaging through all the crap forced on you by some overly zealous,

broken-out-of-the-closed , button-clad dyke with her gay bro."[44] This unfavorable summary of

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[42] "TED Biographies – Tom Reilly," (accessed July 19, 2019), https://www.ted.com/speakers/tom_reilly. Reilly is best known for his role as the TED Director of Paternships and as TED's "resident satirist."
[43] Peter H. Lewis, "'Gay Global Village' of Cyberspace," *The New York Times* (August 21, 1995), D3.
[44] Richard Laermer, *Get On With it*, 116-117.

the commercial aspects of the site, in relation to the actual content being provided, would

become a common criticism of the site's focus on monetization and profitability.

Despite Laermer's unfavorable first impressions of the site, queer users would flock to

the portal, making PlanetOut the largest gay and lesbian presence on the web. In large part,

PlanetOut's early success and initial growth was due to the relative lack of gay images found in

the mainstream media, and the ability of the web to unite LGBTQ men and women, "without

the fear of public reprisal, humiliation, or forced outing."[45] The PlanetOut website, first

archived by the Internet Archive on February 22, 1997, initially featured news, chat rooms,

message boards, movie reviews, and link lists for personal webpages and community groups.

For users, the real value of PlanetOut was in the ready-made community that the site provided.

"I learned how to be gay online. I came out there first," asserted user Barbara Dozetos, who

met her girlfriend on PlanetOut in 1997 and went on to become the editor of a gay and lesbian

newspaper in Vermont, demonstrating the fluidity between online and offline spaces.[46] By

providing chat rooms and message boards tailored to certain topics, identity categories, and

locations, these sites demonstrated the real power of hypertext to direct individuals to others

like them. In these early days, PlanetOut was careful to keep material, including discussion in

the chat rooms and personal ads, strictly PG-rated, citing concerns with the US Congress'

attempts to restrict websites with sexual content.[47] This stands as an interesting comparison to

the Usenet platform, where explicit content was expected and welcomed in some LGBTQ

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[45] Ben Aslinger, "PlanetOut and Queer Media Conglomeration," in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York: Routledge, 2010), 119.
[46] Elinor Abreu, "Gay portals come out; Their users log on more often and spend more money than average users. Investors and Advertisors are taking notice," *Network World* (February 14, 2000).
[47] Ibid.

communities, in some situations, but strictly prohibited in others. In particular, the linking of

queer individuals with adult content on the internet was considered by PlanetOut's creators to

be problematic, as the community faced increasing visibility and public acceptance. In

particular, PlanetOut worried that advertisers would be reluctant to advertise on a platform

with a reputation of being overtly sexual.[48]

In an evolution that echoed many other early web sites, PlanetOut focused on building

community through chat rooms and message boards but had very little monetization through

advertising and paid subscriptions. This model would be seen in many other websites during

the same time period, including large web hosting services such as GeoCities and Tripod.com,

which amassed millions of users during the 1990s, but struggled to monetize this success in any

real way. Beginning in 1998, PlanetOut began experimenting with banner advertising at the top

of the page, as well as paid links to books and videos for sale at businesses such as Barnes &

Noble and Amazon.

In a 1999 study, the internet sampling and research group Greenfield Online reported

that 28% of gays polled reported that they had no access to gay magazines or newspapers for

reasons such as that they were difficult to find locally, or individuals did not feel comfortable

buying them in person.[49] However, the Internet opened up new avenues for LGBTQ community,

as the web opened up new methods of advertising. In a 1999 *USA Today* article, analyst David

Alschuler clearly-stated the link between LBGTQ individuals, online community, and internet

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[48] John Edward Campbell, "Gay and Lesbian/Queer Markets/Marketing," *The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Consumption and Consumer Studies,* First Edition, ed. Daniel Thomas Cook and J. Michael Ryan (John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2015), 3.
[49] Greg Farrell, "Web opens hard-to-reach markets to advertisers. From college kids to gays, Net delivers," *USA Today* (August 6, 1999).

marketing, stating that, "the fact that the group faces some not-so-subtle forms of discrimination makes them more cohesive and more likely to interact in an on-line community. You've got a clearly demarcated and defined demographic group that is engaged by the sites, and it's a group that has high economic buying power. It's not very wide, but it's very deep."[50] This explicit economic link between the LGBTQ community and affluence emphasizes pervasive stereotypes about the LGBTQ community – one that has been proven to be largely untrue, particularly among segments of the population like transgender individuals.[51] Ben Aslinger has emphasized the importance of PlanetOut as the first gay and lesbian company to attract the attention of international investors and to receive venture capital funding. Building on work on queer visibility and buying power, Aslinger argues that PlanetOut worked to "bolster and reinforce mythic constructions of the LGBT audience and worked to deliver LBGT users to national/mainstream advertisers," in order to attempt to render PlanetOut profitable in the pre-dot.com bubble period. [52] In this way, PlanetOut reinforced stereotypes of the gay and lesbian population as white, affluent technophiles, with considerable buying power.

In September of 1999, PlanetOut took out a full two-page advertisement in the very first pages of the September 14 issue of *The Advocate*, the American national gay and lesbian newsmagazine. "If you've never visited PlanetOut, fasten your seat belt, you're in for quite a ride," reads the advertisement, which highlights faster performance, improved chat rooms, and new features, as well as including screenshots of each major section of the webpage.[53]

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[50] Ibid.
[51] M.V.L. Badgett, *Money, Myths, and Change: The Economic Lives of Lesbians and Gay Men* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).
[52] Ben Aslinger, "PlanetOut and Queer Media Conglomeration," 118.
[53] "PlanetOut – Land on it Today!" in *The Advocate* (September 14, 1999), 2.

"PlanetOut provides a safe, protected space for people of all kinds to take their first coming-out steps," the advertisement claims, highlighting a section of the site dedicated just to coming out narratives. This advertisement provides a fascinating perspective on the ways that PlanetOut marketed themselves within traditional print media; the advertisement emphasizes that the content is "absolutely free and different every day," differentiating PlanetOut from the very magazine that they're advertising within. The size and placement of the advertisement also reveals just how committed PlanetOut was to capture this segment of the queer population who were still buying or subscribing to traditional print media for queer individuals.

Sadly, the ephemeral nature of web-based chat rooms means that these discussions have not been archived in any way (and would be ethically fraught to work with, in any case). Similarly, PlanetOut's message boards also were never crawled or archived. However, we do have an archived listing of PlanetOut's available message boards, which provide some clues as to the types of conversation that were occurring. Major categories included message boards for discussions on politics and voting, anti-violence, health, religion, HIV/AIDS, news, drug abuse, and coming out. PlanetOut also included sections for single gay and lesbian users, like personals advertisements, with the message board names "Man2Man" and "Grrrrl Flirt." The message board sections also encompassed multiple identity categories, with sections such as "Sports Dykes," "Transitions," and "Seniors." Perhaps most telling was the fact that PlanetOut had three bisexual-specific message boards; these boards included a community board, a singles forum, and a "BeyondBi" area where users could "vent those frustrations" to "good listeners."[54]

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[54] "PNO Message Boards," *PlanetOut.com* (December 1, 1998). *Internet Archive*, http://web.archive.org/web/19981201041337/http://www.planetout.com/people/msgbrds/msgbrds.html.

The fact that these message boards were divided into so many categories reveals just how far

the online queer community had come from the days of net.motss in the early 1980s; on

PlanetOut, one finds a diverse collection of message boards for multiple identity categories and

interests. Furthermore, the division of these categories reveals the embracing of diverse queer

experiences even within a single identity. In his internet guide book, Richard Laermer described

separate spaces for diverse identities as crucial to building community on the internet. For

example, Laermer characterizes lesbian online spaces as different than gay male spaces.

> Women who meet and greet on the world of the internet are more often than not
> conciliatory and placating and tend to try to soothe the ones they meet, especially
> in the newsgroup scene… unlike guys who said that they were on even when they
> weren't supposed to be cruising, women specifically sought the internet for news,
> community, bonding, and friendship.[55]

Though this viewpoint draws on gender stereotypes, as well as stereotypes about lesbians, it

does demonstrate the desired separate communities for different identity categories under the

umbrella of LGBTQ. This is similar to those diverse newsgroups that were desired and formed

on Usenet, as discussed in the previous two chapters. While Laermer's perspective on online

lesbian community typecasts women and the communities that they form and inhabit as

"placating" and passive, we do see the deliberate separation of communities for gay men and

women, particularly on sites like PlanetOut.

Despite this attempt at diversity, PlanetOut was criticized both by contemporary users

as well as later scholars for their failure to embrace diverse segments of the queer population

— such as people of colour, individuals over the age of 40, and lesbians — particularly within

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[55] Richard Laermer, *Get On With it*, 206.

their own visual culture, such as site images and advertising.[56] However, we do see deliberate

thought put into creating a varied community of members within PlanetOut's message boards.

Unfortunately, as the actual message board postings have not been archived, we have few

clues as to how successful at building community these attempts were. Indeed, to learn more,

we need to turn to contemporary academic accounts of how users engaged with these sites.

Though we do not have the actual archival record of messages and chat logs from

PlanetOut during the 1990s, the site was a common source for sociological and ethnographic

research on queer youth and their experiences online. This contemporary research used

accounts and quotations from users interacting on these online platforms, during the time that

the sites were popular. By examining this scholarship as a primary historical source, it is

possible to piece together some of the discourse which was occurring on sites like PlanetOut

during the 1990s. In her work on queer youth in rural America, drawing on research conducted

during the 1990s and early 2000s, American anthropologist Mary Gray described PlanetOut as a

place of "queer realness" which expanded "young people's sense of place, home, and belonging

within queer social worlds."[57] In Gray's work, youth describe the sense of anonymity that they

experienced on these large commercial platforms, and the ways that this anonymity helped

them to mediate their own queer identity. Other individuals also describe essentially learning

through *lurking* – reading discussions that are occurring but without joining in, themselves.

Grey quotes one teenager that she identifies only as "Sarah" (no relation to author) as stating

that she likes to "read others' stories and experiences… I like personal stories, people's personal

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[56] Aslinger, "PlanetOut and Queer Media Conglomeration," 120.
[57] Mary Gray, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America (*New York: New York University Press, 2009), 127.

coming out, if you will, stories. How their family reacted… Just basically stuff like that. Trying to

be as much of a sponge as I can when it comes to other people and their situations and how

they handled themselves in those situations… using their experiences as possibilities for mine

own."[58] Through PlanetOut's combination of community interaction, through message boards

and the chat rooms, as well as articles and columns from notable individuals such as Ellen

DeGeneres' mother, Betty DeGeneres, the site provided a multi-faceted experience that

appealed to queer users.

Jonathan Alexander addresses this divide between web-based reality and "real-life"

experience in his 2002 article, "Homo-Pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and

Representation of Queer Identity on the World Wide Web." In particular, Alexander surveyed

the ways that queer identity was signified on the web, in comparison to earlier forms of

networked communication – often not with words, but by taking advantage of the new

graphical platform of the web. By frequent use of rainbow flags, pink triangles, and other

symbols, site creators marked their own territory as *gay*. This creation of a visually-queer space

on the web, connected by hyperlinks to other queer spaces, designates these websites as a

virtual homeland for LGBTQ users.[59] However, Alexander also tackles the weighty question,

"what does it mean to be closet[ed] in real life and 'out' on the net?"[60] Are there implications

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[58] Ibid, 128.

[59] Madhavi Mallapragada uses the term "virtual homelands" to describe online portals for Indians living in the United States in her 2013 book *Virtual Homelands: Indian Immigrants and Online Cultures in the United States.* Through her exploration of websites intended for Indian immigrants, and also web forums for such niche groups as the wives of Indian tech workers, Mallapragada argues that these online spaces provide a kind of home for those individuals who lack access to their real-life homelands and communities. This argument can be extended to LGBTQ users who are out online and closeted offline, and therefore are denied access to offline community.

[60] Jonathan Alexander, "Homo-Pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and Representation of Queer Identity on the World Wide Web," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* Vol. 7(2/3), July 2002, 102.

for a technology that allows queer users to be visually-queer, through the use of a graphical

interface, but which also allows those same users to remain fully-closeted and invisible in their

offline lives? And, perhaps more crucially, does this online open-ness represent a new kind of

middle step in the journey towards being fully-out in users' real-life relationships? Indeed,

PlanetOut was well-aware of what they referred to as the "Closet Paradox," the importance of

reaching a userbase – and advertising dollars – provided by a largely-closeted population of

queer users. In a 1999 *Washington Post* article, a representative for PlanetOut stated that

"reaching gays who might still be in the closet and might never go to a bar or rally - or even

subscribe to a gay publication – but who might look for information or conversation from the

privacy that a modem affords," was a major goal for the affinity portal.[61] "Online, you can be

openly closeted," said PlanetOut CEO Megan Smith in 2000.[62]

New media scholars like Alexander and Nina Wakeford also tackled issues of community

and representation.[63] Despite the often-stated goal of finding others like them on the web, can

these groupings of queer individuals online truly be called a community? Does online discourse

make up for a lack of real-life community and real-life "out" identity? Alexander acknowledges

that even many of these early web and internet users are hesitant to call their online

associations a "community" and further asserts that "the tension between 'virtuality' and the

'real'... points to the double bind that many queers may find themselves in – in which the only

sense of community or affirmation of identity that they can find may be virtual, despite the

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[61] John Schwartz, "Online Gays Become a Market for Advertisers," *Washington Post* (May 22, 1999), Financial Section, E01.

[62] Elizabeth Weise, "Gays join the march online, Community forms freely," *USA Today* (May 2, 2000), Life Section, 3D.

[63] Nina Wakeford, "New Technologies and 'Cyber-Queer' Research," in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies* ed. Diane Richardson and Steven Seidman (London: SAGE Publications, 2002).

'reality' of their feelings in the real world. It is hard to see such community as anything but 'absence,' as underscoring the lack of vital (if not virtual) community."[64]

Alexander's contemporary critique of queer websites is particularly poignant when examining the rise of large and increasingly corporate gay and lesbian web portals during the mid to late-1990s. Through a focus on "membership" and community-building features, such as chat rooms and message boards, these portals encouraged the development of virtual community among users. However, beholden to advertisers and subject to multiple large-scale mergers and buy-outs during the 1990s, these sites could be rather fickle with the features offered and the structure of the "community" which they purported to support.

In March of 1997, PlanetOut posted a message for subscribers of *Out Magazine* and their affiliated website Out.com, stating that *Out Magazine* had decided to close their website, in a move that would seem unfathomable just a short few years later, in order to focus on the magazine. Through an agreement with PlanetOut, *Out Magazine* would direct their subscribers to PlanetOut.com, while PlanetOut would provide advertising and subscription information for *Out Magazine*.[65] The last-archived version of the Out.com webpage from February of 1997, illustrated in Figure 3.7, strongly-illustrates this lack of commitment to maintaining a web portal, offering very little content, branding, or imagery.

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[64] Jonathan Alexander, "Homo-Pages and Queer Sites: Studying the Construction and Representation of Queer Identity on the World Wide Web," *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 7 (2002), 102.

[65] "A Letter to Out.com's and PNO's Members," PlanetOut.com (March 10, 1997). Internet Archive (archived May 26, 1997), http://web.archive.org/web/19970526035110/http://www.planetout.com/whats-hot/out/.

Figure 3.7: Screenshot of the Out.com homepage from February of 1997. The website has a distinct lack of branding, organization, or content.

From March of 1997 to May of 2000, the Out.com website would redirect to PlanetOut.com. However, in spring of 2000, Out.com restored their own web presence; this presence remained focused on *Out Magazine* and provided past issues of the magazine, as well as allowed readers to submit letters to the editor.[66] Out Magazine would be acquired by PlanetOut in 2006, before ultimately being bought by LGBTQ cable TV and media corporation Here Networks in 2008, who continue to operate the magazine and webpage today. These frequent mergers and acquisitions were typical of the web during the 1990s and early 2000s as these commercial platforms sought to define and redefine their business model, desired user base, and advertising. This fluidity had real implications for affinity portals like PlanetOut and Out.com, based on ideas of membership and community. As sites merged and split, users quickly found their community suddenly ceasing to exist, as users were shuffled from one website to another.

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[66] "Out Magazine Contents," *Out.com* (March 2001). *Internet Archived* (archived March 31, 2001), http://web.archive.org/web/20010331173201/http://www.out.com/html/main88.html.

PlanetOut's largest competitor, Gay.com, had a similar series of branding and focus changes during the 1990s and early 2000s. A news article written in 2000 characterized the differences between PlanetOut and Gay.com -- if PlanetOut was the "champagne" of the LGBTQ online sphere, "Gay.com is the Budweiser."[67] Gay.com primarily operated as an online extension of what was considered to be a ubiquitous gay and lesbian bar culture, largely centred around casual sexual relationships. Gay.com launched in 1994 and began as a bi-monthly newsletter for paid subscribers; by 1996, the site had expanded into a portal for LGBTQ message boards and JavaScript-based chat rooms.[68] At the peak of its popularity in 2000, Gay.com had 2.6 million visitors each month.[69] The amount of time spent by Gay.com's users browsing the message boards and using the chat rooms was not insignificant, either; in 2000, the average Gay.com user spent 80 minutes a month browsing the website. In comparison, PlanetOut users averaged 27 minutes, and online retailer Amazon.com shoppers averaged 13 minutes.[70] Gay.com's success in generating user traffic could largely be attributed to the site's goal of fostering relationships between gay users – particularly those that lived close to each other.

Unfortunately, JavaScript chat rooms cannot be archived by the Internet Archive, and the actual Gay.com forums were also not crawled. However, like PlanetOut, we are left with the listing of available message board topics. We can thus get a sense of the organizing principles at work.
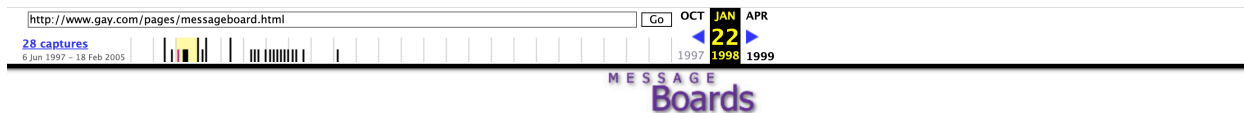
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[67] Elinor Abreu, "Gay portals come out."
[68] John Edward Campbell, "Outing PlanetOut: surveillance, gay marketing and internet affinity portals," 664.
[69] Jessica Toonkel, "In Brief: Gay.com Buys into Gay Financial Network," *The American Banker* (August 10, 2000), 12.
[70] Elizabeth Weise, "Gays join the march online, Community forms freely."

Figure 3.8: The Gay.com message board entry page in 1998.

Gay.com's message boards, seen in Figure 3.8, were primarily based around geographical

location -- for the boards intended for gay men, this was narrowed as far as major American

cities, giving the perception that these boards' primary purpose was facilitating meetups among

members. "Have fun and get lucky," read the description for the gay men's section on

Gay.com.[71] This characterization fits the way that Gay.com was described and marked in

relation to PlanetOut, by both the website itself, as well as the mainstream media. While

PlanetOut strived to attract a more "professional" audience, Gay.com self-identified as having

its biggest strength in its ability to encourage users to spend more time in the site's chat rooms,

often looking for "companionship."[72] Notably, bisexual and transgender individuals were

grouped together for the purpose of Gay.com's organization. This choice again reflects the

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[71] "Message Boards," *Gay.com* (January 22, 1998). *Internet Archive,*
http://web.archive.org/web/19980122111437/http://www.gay.com/pages/messageboard.html.
[72] Elinor Abreu, "Gay portals come out."

dominant perception of the queer community as being primarily made up of gay men and lesbians, with a somewhat uncertain idea of where others who identified as somehow queer fit into the community. While these identity-based message boards dominated Gay.com's message board selection, the site did offer several choices for general interest boards. These boards included announcements, HIV/AIDS, youth, health, and sports. Because none of the actual board content has been archived, it is uncertain just how many users were using each of these boards, and the types of discussion that went on in.

In December of 1999, Gay.com had 413,000 unique visitors and PlanetOut had 226,000 visitors.[73] However, these sites occupied distinctly-different spaces in the LGBTQ online community, with PlanetOut serving as an advertising revenue-generating portal, and Gay.com primarily emphasizing "community over commerce."[74] It was during 2000 that PlanetOut merged with Gay.com, capturing a total audience of 3.5 million gay and lesbian users. Despite the merge, it was decided that the two sites would maintain separate but affiliated websites, in order to continue to capture the very different segments of the LGBTQ sphere. However, as the dot.com crash indicated, it was not the number of unique visitors or the amount of time that users spent online on a given site that indicated profitability, but the amount of money that a user spent on goods and services. Though both PlanetOut and Gay.com were exceedingly successful in attracting LGBTQ users to the websites, neither site cracked the code in monetizing their services, despite attempts to introduce pay for subscription models. This cycle would be repeated countless times in the late 1990s, including by web hosting service

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[73] Ibid.
[74] Ben Aslinger, 115.

GeoCities.com, as discussed in the following chapter. However, PlanetOut's monetization

model, which was built on a flawed perception of its own audience as being affluent and

untapped – what Aslinger refers to as "mythologies of the queer web user" -- led to even

further issues with making the website profitable, particularly as the site absorbed other LGBTQ

platforms in the 2000s.[75]

PlanetOut went public in 2004, becoming the very first LGBTQ-centric business to trade

its stock on a major US stock exchange.[76] Over the next two years, PlanetOut would continue to

acquire further holdings, including *The Advocate, Out Magazine*, and RSVP Vacations, a gay and

lesbian travel company, eventually becoming the largest LGBTQ corporation in the world at the

time. However, PlanetOut began reporting financial losses in 2007, and for two years relied on

venture capital to stay afloat, before eventually closing a number of their sites and services.

PlanetOut was ultimately sold to Here Media in June of 2009.[77] The site continued to be

operational until summer of 2010, when it began redirecting to Gay.com, and then to Here

Media's main page in February 2011. As of writing, PlanetOut's page is still registered to Here

Media, but contains only a "coming soon" splash message. As for Gay.com, the site rebranded

itself as "The Original Gay Social Network" in 2013, and continued to operate through to the

end of 2017 as a dating site for primarily gay male singles.[78] Gay.com is no longer in operation,

and the URL redirects to lgbtnewsnow.org, the website of the Los Angeles LGBT Center.

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[75] Ibid, 120.
[76] David Shabelman, "PlanetOut debut off to fast start," *Daily Deal* (October 15, 2004).
[77] Paul Bond, "PlanetOut Merges with Here Networks," *AdWeek* (June 18, 2009),
https://www.adweek.com/digital/planetout-merges-here-networks-112650/.
[78] "Gay.com Homepage," *Gay.com* (June 7, 2013),
http://web.archive.org/web/20130607230221/http://www.gay.com/.

PlanetOut's sharp decline in usership and eventual closure reflects tends seen all over

the World Wide Web in the late 2000s. Even large affinity websites lost users to even larger

platforms, not organized around specific groups of people, but providing a targeted service,

such as social media and blogging platforms, video hosting sites, and mobile platforms. Web 2.0

truly heralded the end of many of these early web successes. However, for ten years -- from

1996 to 2006 – these affinity platforms like PlanetOut and Gay.com provided a place where

LGBTQ individuals could find "queer realness." For many of these users, whose very first

exposure to the internet was via the World Wide Web, these large-scale websites, which

offered chat rooms and message boards, among other services, were the first place that they

got to meet others like them. By leveraging discoverability through early search engines and

web directories, which often included only the most-visited sites in the 1990s, these sites

marketed themselves as destinations for queer users, and especially those who were not yet

"out" in their offline lives. The effect of these sites on the LGTBQ community was profound.

Users reported being out and feeling safe to talk about who they really were, often for the first

time in their lives. Though these chat rooms and message boards have not been archived and

these discussions are lost, scholarship and the news media from the 1990s and early-2000s

emphasizes the importance of PlanetOut and Gay.com to mediating identity and community for

individuals. Furthermore, the focus on marketing and profitability, which became a primary

consideration for most online media during the 1990s, reflects the communities found on these

queer affinity portals as homogenous, cohesive, and ripe for monetization. This evolution was

seen by users, as well as contemporary scholarship writing about them, as both a troubling

development, but also a promising step on the road to acceptance and normalization.

Conclusion

From 1994 to 1999, the online LGBTQ community, like much of the internet, embarked on a rapid and large-scale migration to the web, a technological revolution which allowed for novel ways of linking together information and people. The somewhat grassroots community of the internet, which until this time had retained a kind of "insider" mentality, would never again be the same.

Echoing the rapid proliferation of groups and communities on Usenet in the early-1990s – but at an unprecedented scale – the number of LGBTQ websites grew rapidly and chaotically, necessitating new developments in organizing the web and making websites discoverable. However, these very developments prioritized those sites which were already most popular and highly linked-to – primarily large corporate portals. Building off of earlier communities, often retaining the very structures and identity categories which had been mediated in the decade before on pre-web platforms, these portals attempted to bring queer community to the web. Through the very nature of these enterprises, a monetization-mentality complicated the development of community and enforced stereotypes – or cybertypes – of the queer community as affluent and homogeneous. Portals which were built on these very stereotypes, like PlanetOut and Gay.com, eventually collapsed when it became clear during the dot.com bubble that total number of unique users did not always translate into profitability.

However, these large commercial enterprises were only one side of the web during the late 1990s. The next chapter explores another large commercial web entity built around the idea of creating community on the World Wide Web — GeoCities. However, where GeoCities differed from Yahoo!, Excite, or even PlanetOut, was that the site put the responsibility of

content creation in the hands of its own users. While the ways that queer GeoCities users

described their own identity and found others like them followed earlier models like Usenet

and other large commercial websites, GeoCities' users also forged out their own rules for how

community on the web would be mediated and how users would discover other sites and

individuals like themselves. GeoCities' ultimate success and eventual failure echoed some of

these other large 90s web presences; however, the user narratives found on the site provide a

fascinatingly personal perspective into how LGBTQ people found their way on the web in the

90s, and predicted the direction that the technology would move into the Web 2.0 era.

Chapter 4: West Hollywood Goes Global: GeoCities and LGBTQ Personal Web Pages

In 1993, the first graphical browser was introduced and the web rapidly increased in popularity. Within two years, it would be possible for anyone with an Internet connection and a web browser to create their own content — hosted for free — on the web. One of the strengths of the web has always been in the ability for anyone with basic knowledge of HTML mark-up to create and publish their own web content. The web hosting service GeoCities allowed its users to do just that – and in the process, created a network of large-scale communities full of individuals looking to share their interests in any number of topics or, in the case of the WestHollywood neighbourhood, their sexual identities.

In this chapter, I examine the web hosting service GeoCities, and the role of GeoCities in creating the first large-scale LGBTQ community on the World Wide Web. I argue that these personal webpages published by users all over the world, in many languages and formats, demonstrate clear evidence of the growth and development of a transnational queer identity. By using network graphing methodologies to examine how users connected to other users, and in order to highlight places of significance or interest within the community, we can see the interconnection of these global users on this new platform. By combining this network analysis with more traditional close reading using the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine and large-scale text analysis, we can examine LGBTQ identity within GeoCities' WestHollywood neighbourhood, as expressed through coming out narratives. Through this analysis, I argue that GeoCities WestHollywood, as the first large-scale LGBTQ community on the web, helped

shaped the identity of its users, and instructed these users in where and how they fit in in the

larger world.

What differentiated GeoCities from other early web-based services and communities

like those discussed in the previous chapter, such as web pioneers Excite and Yahoo!, as well as

PlanetOut and Gay.com, was the creation of content — and really, the entire framework within

which the content was presented — by the community's users. How did these early web users

interact with this new technology, and how did community structures and norms become

perpetuated on this new medium? Furthermore, what role did hyperlinking, so fundamental to

the web as new media, play in the creation of the community as a place that helped define who

people were, and how they related to other queer individuals?

The Rise and Fall of GeoCities

GeoCities was at the forefront of the web revolution. In June 1995, fledgling web hosting

provider Beverly Hills Internet began offering free web hosting accounts to anyone who wanted

to start their own web page. This business model – free web-based services – was in its infancy,

as a crop of new web start-ups, such as Hotmail, Tripod, and Angelfire, experimented with new

services, like free email and free news, in an attempt to gain a foothold on the new platform.

Beverly Hills Internet users, referred to as "homesteaders," could choose from one of six

thematic "neighbourhoods" within which to build their new webpage. Users simply had to sign

up for a free account, and then GeoCities would guide new users into choosing the appropriate

neighbourhood for their content.[1] These neighbourhoods were largely based around American, and largely Southern Californian geography – Hollywood for television and movies, WallStreet for finances and economics, Coliseum for sports, RodeoDrive for fashion, SunsetStrip for music, and WestHollywood for LGBTQ community and news.

By December of 1995, Beverly Hills Internet had already undergone significant changes. Those first six neighbourhoods had been expanded to fourteen, which included such global locations as Vienna for sites relating to arts and culture, Athens for writing and philosophy, Paris for food and wine, and Tokyo for east-Asian culture. It was also in December of 1995 that Beverly Hills Internet changed their name to GeoCities. Creator David Bohnett stated that this renaming "reflects our vision to build online communities with themes based on real-world landmark locations."[2] At this time, GeoCities already had 20 000 users, and over 6 million monthly page views. This initial explosion of new Homesteaders would be eclipsed by the site's growth over the next three years. By June of 1998, GeoCities had expanded to 40 neighbourhoods, encompassing 1.9 million users, and over 15 million pages on any conceivable topic.[3]

GeoCities' free hosting model made web publishing accessible to users as never before. Before the growth of these free hosting services, starting your own webpage required

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[1] Ben Sawyer and Dave Greely, *The Guide to Creating Great Websites: Creating GeoCities Websites* (Cincinnati: Muska & Lipman, 1999), 23.

[2] "Beverly Hills Internet, Builder of Web Communities, Changes Name to GeoCities," *Business Wire* (December 14, 1995). The Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/20081211170054/http://www.allbusiness.com/marketing-advertising/marketing-advertising/7191644-1.html.

[3] Saul Hansell, "The Neighborhood Business; Geocities' Cyberworld is Vibrant, but Can It Make Money?," *New York Times* (July 13, 1998), https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/13/business/the-neighborhood-business-geocities-cyberworld-is-vibrant-but-can-it-make-money.html.

registering a domain, paying for web hosting, and using an FTP server to upload materials onto your site. Many internet service providers allotted web hosting space to their customers, but using this space still required specialized knowledge — in addition to the costs of paying for the internet service. GeoCities allowed users to sign up for their accounts with no extra fees — users could even build their own website using the free internet service provided through schools and libraries. In addition, GeoCities' web-based page editor and file uploader allowed pages to be edited right in the browser, without the need to use an ungainly FTP server, requiring even more specialized knowledge, to upload the files and content. After choosing a thematic neighbourhood, Homesteaders would then navigate GeoCities' graphical interface in order to choose an available "street address" within the neighbourhood. Building a personal website took little more than some basic HTML coding knowledge, which was provided by many online tutorials and references, and the use of graphic design software such as Microsoft Paint, which came preloaded on every Windows PC. GeoCities even offered a homepage "wizard", which allowed users to essentially fill in the blanks with text, and then choose how they wanted the text to look from a drop-down menu, in order to create a basic personal web page without having to know any HTML at all.[4]

GeoCities was not the only web-based service offering free hosting during the mid-1990s, though they were the largest and most successful. The two largest competitors were Tripod.com and Angelfire.com, which began in 1995 and 1996, respectively. Tripod.com offered free hosting, including a home page builder similar to GeoCities', however that was not the sole

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[4] "GeoCities Basic Home Page Editor and Advanced HTML Editor," *GeoCities.com* (December 20, 1996). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19961220170742/http://www.geocities.com:80/homestead/homechg.html.

focus of Tripod.com's services. Instead, the site offered members a suite of finance and career

tools, including online banking, resume builders, budget calculators, and market reports; these

services were sponsored by banking institutions and were the primary money-making aspect of

Tripod.com's business model, despite the overwhelming popularity of their free hosting.[5]

Conversely, Angelfire.com offered a type of bare-bones free hosting service for users who were

already familiar with HTML and who were simply looking for free hosting space, without the

support of a community. In contrast to GeoCities, who offered 1 megabyte of free space when

they started in 1995, and which gradually expanded to 15 megabytes over the next several

years, Angelfire.com only offered users 35 kilobytes — enough space for a few pages of plain

text and possibly a *very* small image file like an icon — with no option to pay for additional

space. Instead, Angelfire.com's FAQ stated that, "we may provide you more space if you have a

page that is of general interest. We are not going to provide space for alot [sic] of junk.... Space

allocation is going to be on the basis of the activity your page gets."[6] Angelfire.com processed

requests for hosting increases on a case-by-case basis, and with a prioritization towards those

sites most likely to generate the most advertising revenue. Both Tripod.com and Angelfire.com

were acquired by the search engine Lycos in 1998. Tripod.com was closed in 2009, while

Angelfire.com remains active for paid member accounts.

What set GeoCities apart from other similar free webpage hosting services was the

focus on community and neighbourhood-building. The entire user experience was built around

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[5] "Why Become a Tripod Member?," *Tripod.com* (December 21, 1996). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19961221113057/http://www.tripod.com:80/tripod/membership/services.html.
[6] "Angelfire FAQ – Frequently Asked Questions," Angelfire.com (April 12, 1997). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19970412092120/http://www.angelfire.com:80/doc/faq.html.

what was referred to at the time as, "a Little House on the Prairie sense of community," evoking the idea of community on a brave new frontier.[7] Both Tripod.com and Angelfire.com allocated website URLs by username (like 'www.tripod.com/~miatafans' or 'www.angelfire.com/digitaldave') in direct contrast to GeoCities' neighbourhood-based addresses. Figure 4.1 highlights how a GeoCities URL was constructed, by neighbourhood, sub-neighbourhood, and street address. By choosing a neighbourhood, GeoCities Homesteaders situated themselves into similarly-minded communities, alongside other websites on similar topics. Though there were some outliers within neighbourhoods, the vast majority of websites in each neighbourhood related to the thematic topic, which provided a sense of sense of cohesion within GeoCities' directories.[8] This neighbourhood system would be replaced by a username-based system of URL allocation after GeoCities was acquired by Yahoo! in 1999.
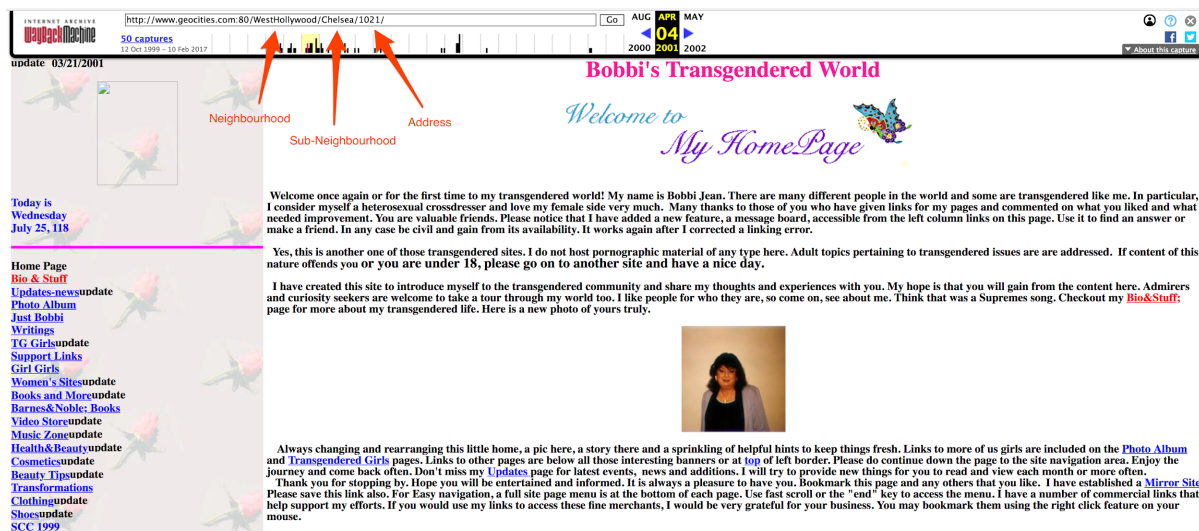
Figure 4.1. "Bobbi's Transgendered World," GeoCities.com (April 4, 2001). Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/20010404033905/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/ Chelsea/1021/.

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[7] "Home, home on the web: Libby Young on the best place to hang your homepage." *The Irish Times*, (March 1, 1999).

[8] Ian Milligan, "Welcome to the web: The online community of GeoCities during the early years of the World Wide Web," *The Web as History* ed. Niels Brügger and Ralph Schroeder (London: UCL Press), 2017.

This sense of community within neighbourhoods was also fostered through webrings, user directories, peer-given site awards, and community leaders, as seen in Figure 4.2. Each GeoCities' neighbourhood had a network of Homesteaders who acted as volunteer community leaders who were responsible for answering questions, liaising between Homesteaders and GeoCities employees, and reviewing sites for "Featured Sites" listings. These community leaders provided a valuable service, particularly among a usership which was often learning HTML and web authorship as they went, and during a time when other resources could be difficult to locate. The perks for performing the duties of a Community Leader were described as, "long hours, very little thanks, the occasional hate mail, and 25 GeoPoints a month (hey, you might as well get the truth up front!)... What we do get out of it all, though, is the satisfaction of helping our neighbors in a place we all truly love (WestHollywood), and the chance to make some wonderful friends in the process."[9] As WestHollywood grew, so did the number of Community Leaders; from 1996 to 1999, the number of leaders increased from 16 to 42.

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[9] "So you think you want to be a Community Leader?" *GeoCities.com* (August 9, 1997). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19970809054949/http://www15.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/4395/ldrapp.html. These "GeoPoints" noted here were a kind of currency that could be traded in for GeoCities-branded merchandise in the GeoCities Marketplace.

Figure 4.2. "WestHollywood Community Center," GeoCities.com (February 25, 1998). Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/19970809054949/http://www15.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/4395/.

On January 28, 1999, it was announced that Yahoo! had purchased GeoCities for $3.56 billion. At the time, GeoCities was the third most visited website on the web and reached an estimated 34% of the audience accessing the Internet in 1999. Yahoo's CEO, Tim Koogle, stated that that this merger would give Yahoo a combined reach of approximately 60% of the web's audience.[10] Despite this enormous reach, and 3.5 million members at the time of the merger, Yahoo and GeoCities struggled to monetize the free web hosting service. As early as 1998, as GeoCities prepared for public trading, the difficulties in making GeoCities financially viable were being highlighted. Homesteaders complained about increasingly invasive advertising, including top and bottom banner ads, and a watermark placed on the bottom corner of each page; these ads weren't merely "unsightly" but also made each page load slowly, during a time when user connection speeds and bandwidth were major considerations. Advertisers were also wary of

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[10] "Yahoo snaps up GeoCities in $3.56B deal," *National Post* (January 29, 1999).

placing banner ads on sites which could contain adult content, lest they be associated with this type of web content.[11] In March 1999, GeoCities announced an affiliate program, which would provide a commission to users linking to products from fifteen different affiliated websites, including Barnes and Noble and Expedia.[12] Over the next several years, GeoCities also experimented with pop-up and click-through advertising, further alienating their user base, and causing many to go elsewhere for free web hosting.

There were valuable lessons to be learned from GeoCities' attempts to make their highly-popular service profitable. On this new frontier, audience and market share did not always correlate with financial viability. Additionally, tried and true advertising strategies, such as watermarks, small graphics that appeared at the bottom corner of each page like the ones used for years by television networks, often did not sit as well with internet users, who were working with different technological constraints, compared to other media users. Perhaps most significantly, GeoCities was learning that the formation of a ready-made community of users did not guarantee that they wouldn't go elsewhere with that community, if frustrated by even a free provider.

After Yahoo and GeoCities' merger in 1999, GeoCities transitioned from their neighbourhood- based organizational system to username-based URLs like those used by Tripod and Angelfire; established websites would be allowed to keep their old web addresses, but no new sites were added to the neighbourhoods. GeoCities' defining feature — their neighbourhoods — was eliminated. This would be the beginning of the end for GeoCities' free

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[11] Hansell, 1998.

[12] "Geocities Encourages Members to Make Their Web Pages Pay," *The New York Times*, (March 18, 1999).

web community. In early 2002, Yahoo! GeoCities began offering new tiers of paid service, while

stripping back their free options and increasing the advertising on these free pages. In 2003,

they ceased to advertise the free web hosting plan, instead highly promoting their $8.95

GeoCities Pro plan (Figure 4.3).[13] By 2004, amid dropping usership, GeoCities once again

brought their free hosting back into the forefront of their business model. However, the

damage had been done, and many Homesteaders had moved to other free services such as

Blogger.com during those years.

Figure 4.3. "The Way to Build a Better Web Site," GeoCities.com (September 15, 2004). Internet Archive.

With dropping usership, amid competition from other web publishing services, including

blogging tools and social media, Yahoo! announced on April 23, 2009 that they would be closing

GeoCities. A message on the homepage stated that, "Sorry, new GeoCities accounts are not

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[13] "Yahoo! Geocities - The Way to Build a Better Website," *Yahoo! GeoCities* (March 30, 2002). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20020330011514/http://geocities.yahoo.com:80/.

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available. After careful consideration, we have decided to close GeoCities later this year. We'll share more details this summer."[14] Although it was originally announced that existing sites would still be available, in June of that year Yahoo declared that all sites would be deleted on October 26, 2009. This decision was met with shock and dismay from users (both current and former) as well as the web archiving community. Writing about the closure, *The Guardian* remarked that, "closing GeoCities feels a bit like your Mum making you throw out a manky old toy you never play with anymore. As soon as there's the threat of it going, it's suddenly your favourite thing."[15]

From June to October 26, 2009, the Internet Archive, as well as other organizations such as the web archiving group Archive Team, embarked on an intensive project to archive as much of GeoCities as possible before it disappeared off of the web forever. GeoCities encouraged its users to submit any unarchived websites, in order to ensure that as much of GeoCities as possible was archived during this time period.[16] The idea that one of the largest collections of social memory of the 1990s could possibly be deleted en mass was an enormous shock to a population of users who, by 2009, were becoming accustomed to documenting their lives online through services such as Facebook, Twitter, Picasa, and Photobucket. If GeoCities could be simply deleted, then what else was at risk?

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[14] "Yahoo! GeoCities Homepage," *Yahoo! GeoCities* (May 31, 2009). *Internet Archive*. https://web.archive.org/web/20090531094621/http://geocities.yahoo.com/.

[15] "RIP Geocities - Yahoo kills off 'your home on the web,'" *The Guardian* (April 24, 2009).

[16] "Yahoo! GeoCities Help - Will my site be archived?" *Yahoo! GeoCities* (July 10, 2009). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20090710202613/http://help.yahoo.com:80/l/us/yahoo/geocities/close/close-17.html.

Though GeoCities disappeared on October 26, 2009, its sites live on through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. One year later, on October 29, 2010, Archive Team also released the GeoCities collection as a 900GB torrent file. Writing about the importance of this data, Archive Team stated that they were quite sure that they didn't have all of GeoCities, but "a significant percentage," and that, "while it's quite clear this sort of cavalier attitude to digital history will continue, the hope is that this torrent will bring some attention to both the worth of these archives and the ease at which it can be lost – and found again. Clear your disk space – this one's going to be a doozy."[17]

Mapping Community on GeoCities WestHollywood

It is significant that WestHollywood, named after the prominent gay village in Los Angeles, was one of the first six GeoCities neighbourhoods. While staffing a gay crisis line as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, GeoCities' creator David Bohnett recognized that, "admitting to be gay often brought on feelings of unbearable isolation and even thoughts of suicide."[18] It was only through connection, and the realization that there were others going through the same thing, that young gay people could find a sense of belonging and self-confidence. Over the following two decades, Bohnett became an activist and a leader within the LGBTQ community, as well as developing a keen interest in the emerging internet. However, it was the death of Bohnett's partner in 1993 from AIDS that prompted him to once again revisit this idea of the importance of interconnection and community. Bohnett saw the web as a fundamental technology which could bring people together as never before. Using his

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[17] Jason Scott, "Archiveteam! The GeoCities Torrent," *ASCII By Jason Scott* (October 26, 2010), http://ascii.textfiles.com/archives/2720.

[18] Michael Kearns, "Out on the Web," *LA Weekly* (November 24, 1999), http://www.laweekly.com/arts/out-on-the-web-2131370.

own savings, as well as the balance of his partner's life insurance policy, Bohnett founded

Beverly Hills Internet in 1994 with the goal of creating community on the World Wide Web.

Bohnett stated in a 2015 interview that, "it wasn't just about giving away free web pages, it was

about organizing community ventures."[19]

Given Bohnett's motivations for creating GeoCities, the WestHollywood neighbourhood

can be viewed as significantly different from other early GeoCities neighbourhoods. While the

other neighbourhoods had the goal of bringing together individuals with shared interests, such

as sports, television, and fashion, WestHollywood was the first neighbourhood to attempt to

form a web-based community on the basis of shared *identity*. It was through this network that

individuals could find others that were like them, not because of shared love for a particular

movie or sports team, but because of who they were, how they identified, and a sense of

otherness that excluded them from other communities or associations.

By combining methodologies for both close and distant reading, we can examine how

queer identity was expressed on WestHollywood. Because of the size of the WestHollywood

collection, it is necessary to use macroanalytical methodologies which allow large-scale analysis

of big data, in order to pinpoint places of significance in the network, and to examine the use of

language and labelling.[20] However, it is also important to maintain the context that is provided

by these individual narratives; without close reading, we lose the intricacies of these stories,

the interplay of local languages with English, and the use of specific labels used in unique ways.

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[19] "GeoCities Founder Paves Path for LTBT," *Millennial Magazine* (February 2, 2015),
https://millennialmagazine.com/2015/02/02/geocities-founder-david-bohnett-paves-path-for-lgbt/.
[20] In *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History*, Matthew Jockers describes how digital methods can be
used in order to perform large scale analysis on a large corpus of text. These computer-mediated research
methods allow scholars to digitally "read" massive quantities of text, in order to discern theme, word-choice, and
interconnection between texts, among other things.

Through this reading at multiple scales of analysis, we can find and examine these significant

places in the collection, with a perspective as to how these individual narratives influence the

network as a functional whole.

Though the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine is invaluable for browsing individual

websites, the Internet Archive's text-only file allows for large-scale analysis of WestHollywood

as a whole. The WestHollywood neighbourhood comprises 1.7 GB of raw text, approximately

850 million words; it is possible to extract all of the hyperlinks from the raw WARC file using the

Archives Unleashed Toolkit.[21] This data can be written to a file format which can be opened

using network graphing software. In order to highlight site interconnection, I used open-source

visualization and network analysis software Gephi to graph the link structure of GeoCities

WestHollywood.[22] By creating network graphs, which show the connection between sites, it is

possible to see which sites were linking to who, and which sites were linked to most frequently.

In these communities, reciprocal linking practices can be seen as "voting" for particular sites,

whether because they are seen as more relevant, trustworthy, or indicating a high level of

community engagement from that user. Hyperlinking can be seen as a deliberate act, showing

thought and care, and done with the intent of forming relationships between sites and users.

Gephi's PageRank algorithm measures the importance of each site within the network,

by ranking the pages according to the probability that a user would land on a given site, given a

certain number of clicks on links. In short, if a person was randomly clicking on links on

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[21] Install instructions and documentation for the Archived Unleashed Toolkit is found at
https://archivesunleashed.org/aut/. In particular, the tools for extracting named entities and analyzing site
structure and linkages are useful for this type of analysis.
[22] *Gephi*, https://gephi.org/.

webpages, the likelihood of them ending up on a given website is determined by the number of

other pages which link to that webpage. Pages which are linked to more frequently have a

higher PageRank, as there is a greater probability of a user landing on that page. The PageRank

algorithm helps to find and visualize those sites which were visited and linked to more

frequently, and therefore are most likely to have the largest influence within the

neighbourhood.[23] Those sites which are most highly linked-to appear with the largest nodes

and labels on the network graph, which allows these sites to be easily identified, as well as their

relative number of connections and their level of interconnection within the neighbourhood as

a whole.

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[23] Lawrence Page, et al., "The PageRank Citation Ranking: Bringing Order to the Web," (1999), http://ilpubs.stanford.edu:8090/422/1/1999-66.pdf.

http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/6200
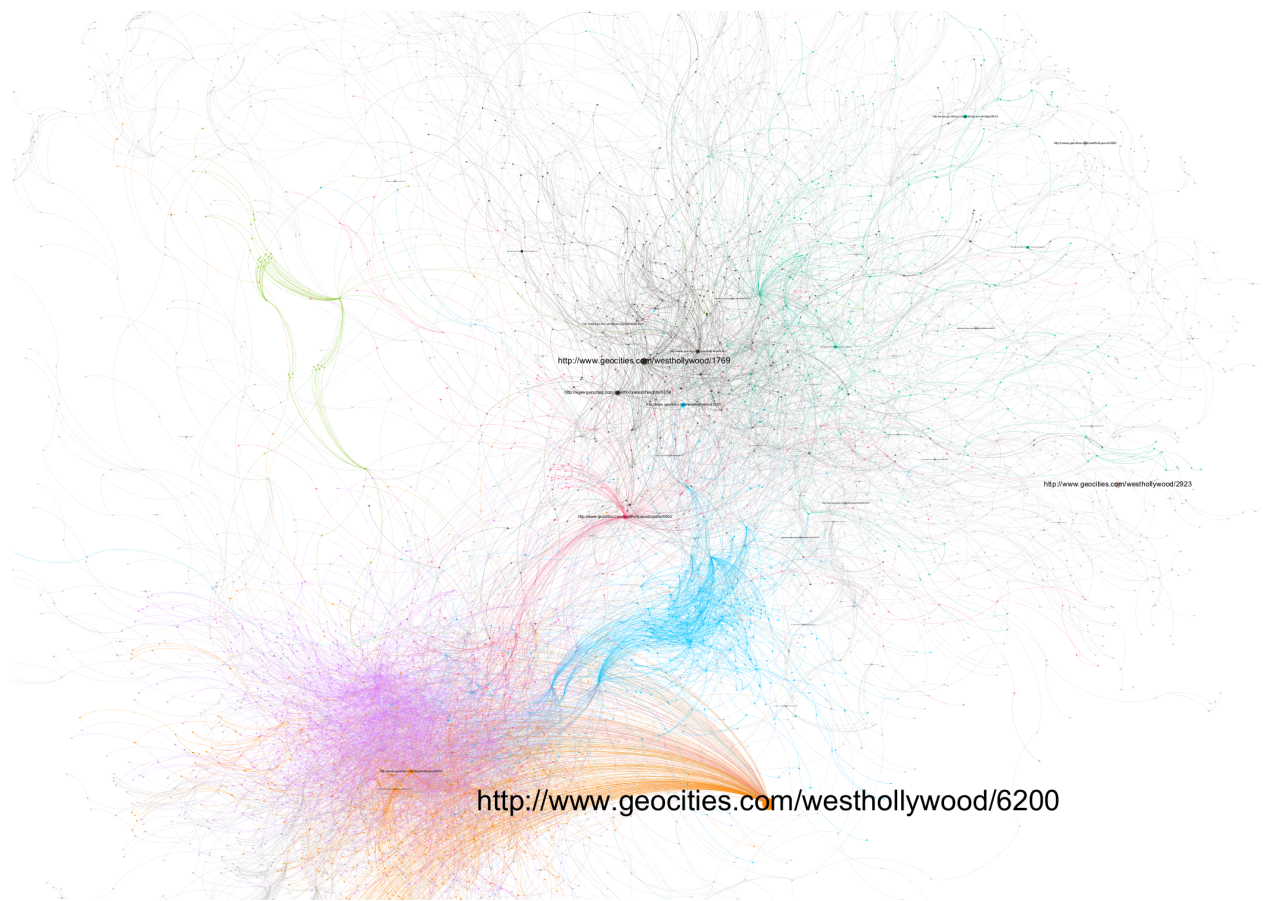
Figure 4.4. GeoCites WestHollywood network graph, generated using Gephi.

The entire network graph for WestHollywood (Figure 4.4) contains some 25 000 nodes and

requires filtering in order to provide a measure of coherence to the visualization. Using Gephi's

"Degree Range" filtering tool, which allows the user to filter out sites according to the number

of connections they have within the network, I have filtered out all sites which only link to

themselves, or do not link to any other webpages. Because it is the interconnection between

sites which is important, these webpages can be seen as outside of the network, even though

they are part of the WestHollywood neighbourhood.

When examining the network graph for WestHollywood, we see several distinct

clusters, along with a small number of highly linked-to sites. Near the bottom of the network

graph, the network is dominated by sites which link to WestHollywood/6200, which is a listing

of transgender personal web pages. The reciprocal linking relationships between this site and

the network as a whole is significant; Homesteaders could submit their site to be listed on this

global directory, and many linked back to the site, almost as a vote of support for the project.

Accordingly, this entire cluster to several degrees of separation is almost entirely made up of

transgender websites, full of biographies and journals, photographs, and resources.

WestHollywood/6200 will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter as a prominent

example of a worldwide community built around shared identity.

This type of network graphing gives an overall sense of where a historian should start

looking when using a large dataset such as this, and provides a measure of context — we can

see what sites were considered most relevant within the neighbourhood, perhaps which sites

were considered most trustworthy, and get an idea of how a community could operate in this

space. Furthermore, by using Gephi's Data Laboratory (Figure 4.5), sites can be sorted

according to PageRank or other factors, depending on need. Once the sites are listed according

to a researcher's criteria, they can then be browsed individually using the Internet Archive's

Wayback Machine, using more traditional close reading techniques.

Id	Label	Interval	Modularity Class	PageRank ▼
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/6200	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/6200		41	0.001264
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/1769	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/1769		63	0.00065
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2923	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2923		311	0.000594
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/6...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/6...		63	0.000449
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/castro/69...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/castro/69...		116	0.000422
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2555	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2555		220	0.000402
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/3660	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/3660		301	0.000363
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/5248	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/5248		41	0.00036
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/4322	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/4322		63	0.00034
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/83...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/83...		172	0.000338
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/9...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/9...		68	0.00032
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2163	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2163		156	0.000297
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/6...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/6...		218	0.000277
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2473	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/2473		342	0.000267
http://geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/2375	http://geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/2375		116	0.00026
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/1039	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/1039		133	0.000256
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/89...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/89...		197	0.000224
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/stonewall/...		76	0.000219
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/3390	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/3390		197	0.000216
http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/60...	http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/village/60...		63	0.00021

Figure 4.5. Gephi's Data Laboratory view.

By using a combination of network graphing visualization, sorting according to PageRank, and close reading of sites that have been identified as important or significant within the neighbourhood, it is possible to view GeoCities WestHollywood as a community of networked individuals connected through hyperlinking relationships.

However, though these network graphs provide guidance on sites of significance and influence within the community, they cannot pinpoint overall trends and shifts in language-use and labelling within the text. In approaching these questions of identity-building, it is necessary to use large-scale textual analysis methods pioneered in the field of literary history.[24] Using the 1.7 gigabyte WestHollywood all-text file, it is possible to get a sense of the words most used in describing identity, the context with which they were used, the topics discussed most frequently in the neighbourhood, and whether certain labels, words, and phrases have a negative or positive connotation when used as part of a self-narrative. By combining these methodologies of network graphing in order to find the most influential sites within the

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[24] This methodology was pioneered by Franco Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005). Matthew Jockers later adapted this methodology in *Macroanalysis* (2013), using Gephi in order to provide new perspectives on style, word use, and nationality.

neighbourhood, close reading of these points of significance, and large-scale textual analysis of language and labelling, we get a sense of how identity was constructed and expressed on WestHollywood.

Personal Webpages and Global Connections on WestHollywood

Navigating through even the most-visited and highly linked-to pages on GeoCities WestHollywood using the Wayback Machine is a lot like browsing through someone's personal diary or private correspondence. The details shared on these web pages are often autobiographical and deeply personal; individuals documented their lives online in ways that would seem shocking to even contemporary social media users. These personal web pages, which make up the majority of sites on GeoCities' WestHollywood, are filled with photographs, journals, biographies, and links to other personal webpages. What really differentiates these personal web pages from later platforms, such as social media, is the question of audience. GeoCities users were presenting themselves in great detail to an audience of largely tech-savvy strangers; the web was still in its infancy and, though usership was increasing at an exponential rate, it was largely limited to a relatively small group of "insiders." In Chapter 3, I discuss the rise of the web directory as a way for users to find their way around the web. Search engine capabilities in the mid 1990s were still rather basic, which made discovering sites by keyword all but impossible. There was no Google, no walled gardens, no blocking of individual users, and the assumption that there was almost no way for their extended family to find their website, unless she was explicitly given the URL. In this way, these GeoCities sites had more in common with earlier platforms like Usenet and BBS than with later Web 2.0 applications. Instead,

GeoCities Homesteaders were writing largely for an audience of their peers — other GeoCities users with their own personal webpages — and the explosion of unabashed self-narrative found on these sites provides fascinating insights into LGBTQ community and identity on the early web. Through close reading of these sites, we can map the ways that individuals navigated and interacted within the community, and how these patterns affected ways of expressing identity and belonging.

Despite the differences in audience and awareness, these personal web pages created on GeoCities are considered to be an early ancestor to blogs and social media.[25] Homesteaders created these sites in order to showcase their own personal lives — photos, journals, biographies, writing and poetry, art, and discussion of their favorite television shows, movies, and sports teams. They were works of personal expression, and ways of communicating with friends and family, as well as perfect strangers. Furthermore, Homesteaders began the process of building their webpage with a blank text box — even the Basic HTML Editor tool only helped with text formatting, line breaks, and adding images. It was the users who decided what content would be added to the site, and very quickly established norms for what a personal webpage should look like. These early Homesteaders mediated many of the pages and categories that we now think of as ubiquitous to social media, such as the biography, the photo page, and the friends list filled with links to other pages. By deciding what information to put on their own personal web pages, and how to organize it, these early users laid the groundwork for how we present ourselves on the web.

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[25] Ian Milligan, "Welcome to the web."

Many of these early sites demonstrate a low level of regard for privacy and safety, reflecting the early perception — and reality, to a certain degree — of the web as a small, close-knit, community of "insiders." Users often included their full name, personal photographs, and sometimes even their home address, phone number and work email. This openness and lack of privacy safeguarding is perhaps particularly shocking in a community that is particularly vulnerable to violence and discrimination; in fact, many of these users do describe prejudice or violence they had personally faced, however these sites seem to be considered a relatively "safe" zone.

We do see evidence of an awareness that users outside of the WestHollywood community could stumble into their site, whether by accident or looking for trouble. Many of the sites include front pages with disclaimers warning about LGBTQ content within; one transgender woman writes at the top of her homepage, "Adult topics pertaining to transgendered issues are addressed. If content of this nature offends you or you are under 18, please go on to another site and have a nice day."[26] Going even further, some sites provided logs of hateful emails that they had received from visitors. One Homesteader, Beverly, posted snippets of email correspondence on what she titled "The Hall of Shame." These logs included the full names and email addresses of individuals sending these emails. Responding to a visitor who gives his full first and last name (or at least a plausible real name), warning that, "what your [sic] doing is sin, I know you don't want to accept it. but its [sic] true God does not see it the way you homos all see it," Beverly responds that, "I do not find your threats of YOUR

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[26] "Bobbi's Transgendered World," *GeoCities.com* (October 4, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20010404033905/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/Chelsea/1021/.

restricted, hateful, vengeful version of a supposedly loving God to be at all upsetting. I just feel

sorry that that is the world that you live in, where you are made to be afraid of your own

humanness, your own individuality, your own free will."[27]

It's clear from looking at correspondence like this that those engaging with

WestHollywood had a similar lack of concern for privacy as the Homesteaders. This can partially

be explained by communication norms during that time period — it was quite possible to

register an anonymous email address or change your name in the email settings, but many

people either didn't know how to do it, or couldn't be bothered to take the time to anonymize

their hate emails. However, this can also be seen as a further reflection of the perception of the

early web as a relatively closed sphere. Despite clear evidence that anyone *could* wander into

WestHollywood, a "what happens on GeoCities, stays on GeoCities" attitude seemed to prevail.

This openness and lack of privacy is perhaps even more prominent among those most

visible in WestHollywood. The seventh most linked-to webpage on the WestHollywood

neighbourhood belonged to a Russian user, living in South Korea, who referred to himself as

"Johnny the Flower." This website, written in English, included pages on Johnny's favorite bands

and musicians, links to softcore gay male porn, a Russian language textbook for Koreans, and a

journal. On his biography page, Johnny listed his real name and full address in Korea, along with

a list of hobbies — the Internet, music, gay sex, and "dreaming of things" — and the full names

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[27] "Beverly's Homepage - The Hall of Shame: Emails From Idiots," *GeoCities.com* (February 9, 1999). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19990209003433/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/1769/shame7.html
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of his extended family, including his pets. Johnny also writes about the difficulties of living as a

visibly-queer individual in both Russia and South Korea.[28]
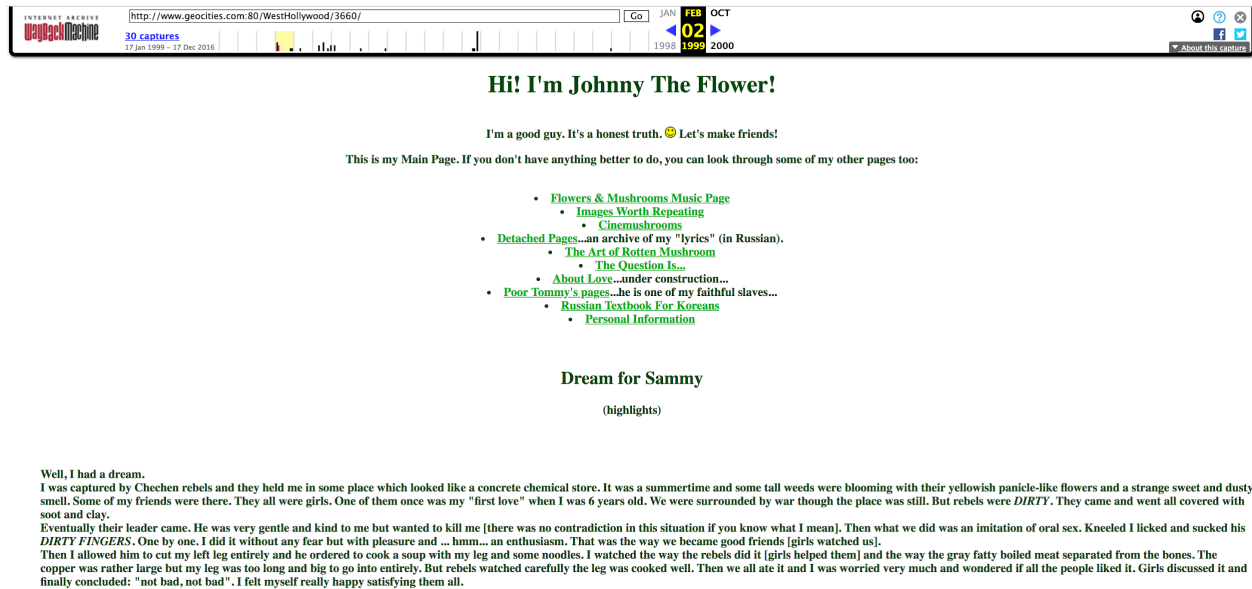
Figure 4.6. "Johnny the Flower," GeoCities.com (February 2, 1999). Internet Archive.

Johnny the Flower's homepage (Figure 4.6) demonstrates many of the challenges and

opportunities to working with these archived personal webpages on GeoCities. The site was

very highly linked-to within the WestHollywood neighbourhood, but we have little indication as

to why. The site is primarily personal, but does contain several resources for other users, such

as the Russian language textbook, and the pornography link list. Furthermore, the site's final

update is listed as several months before the site was first crawled and archived by the Internet

Archive, leaving the first few months or years of the sites' history as a complete mystery. It is

possible that Johnny was simply high-connected within the neighbourhood, with many friends

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[28] "Johnny the Flower," *GeoCities.com* (February 2, 1999). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19990202032502/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/3660/.

with other personal web pages. However, given the site's extraordinarily high PageRank within

the WestHollywood community, it is plausible that Johnny could be considered a public figure

within WestHollywood, despite (or perhaps because of) the lack of a clear indicator as to the

type of content which was causing individuals to link to Johnny's personal webpage. This can be

contrasted with other highly linked pages, such as that belonging to Alan from Toronto, who

operated the site with the fourth largest PageRank in WestHollywood. Alan's site very closely

resembles the content and format of Johnny's — a journal, list of preferences and favorite

things, and a page full of pictures of his cat. However, Alan also ran the webrings for the

Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team, Canadian musician Sarah McLachlan, and actor Leonardo

DiCaprio.[29] In this instance, it is easy to see why Alan's site's PageRank is so high; it was not the

LGBTQ content of his site, though he did identity as gay and included a list of the Toronto Blue

Jays baseball team players, ranked in order of attractiveness, but the other resources that Alan

operated that garnered so many hyperlinking relationships. Alan chose to locate his site within

WestHollywood because of his own LGBTQ identity, but the primary purpose of his site is not

strictly LGBTQ in nature.

This pattern is repeated thousands of times throughout the WestHollywood

neighbourhood. Many of these websites are deeply personal, and contain journals and coming

out stories, chronicling both their own histories, as well as their experience in the LGBTQ

community as a whole. These sites reflect the concerns and anxieties of the LGBTQ community

in the 1990s: acceptance, increasing visibility in the media, marriage, and HIV/AIDS. These users

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[29] "Hyperboy's Hyperchamber," *GeoCities.com* (October 9, 1999). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19991009145122/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/2923/.

also write in a candid way that is rarely seen outside of the Internet. Furthermore, a significant

number of non-North American Homesteaders brings together a diverse set of experiences,

which reflect a surprising level of homogeneity of how these users describe their own queer

identities, despite vast differences in local conditions, acceptance, and safety for LGBTQ

individuals.

Reflecting the reality of being an LGBTQ individual, and particularly a gay male, in the

1990s, the WestHollywood neighbourhood is also home to many HIV/AIDS resource websites,

as well as journals from HIV positive individuals. An early example of one of these sites, "The

HIV Zone," was created by Tony Gardner in 1996. Tony saw this site as an extension of the

educational and community-building work that he was already doing in Dallas, Texas, for which

he received numerous awards. On GeoCities, "The HIV Zone" was made a featured site, singled

out by the WestHollywood community leaders for its content and community impact, in 1997,

and Tony became a WestHollywood community leader himself around the same time period.

The site included resources for talking to your doctor and family about HIV, a chat room, a

memorial page, and lists of links to other more regional and specialized resources. Tony also

documented his own struggles with AIDS, including the stigma surrounding his diagnosis in

1985:

> You see in 1985 the world was just really starting to talk about HIV/AIDS
> awareness, and I was in a high risk category. Mom at first disagreed about telling
> the doctor about me being gay, but did agree I should come in and see him to
> see what was wrong with me. I think at that point my mother had two problems.
> First she still didn't want alot of people to know that I was gay and most of all I
> think she did not want to find out the truth that I may be HIV positive. I didn't
> really want to find that out either, but I ended up seeing the doctor without
> mentioning anything about HIV. The doctor started giving me antibiotics to treat
> my symptoms, but things never got better. I continued seeing the doctor until
> April of 1986. I had changed jobs and was now working as a manager for a major

retail chain, working up to 65 hours a week. I continued to be fatigued and I was losing weight faster than I could eat… I decided to tell my mother that this had gone to far and that I really needed to be tested for HIV and that if she didn't want the family doctor to know then I would go to the clinic and have the test run. I had to know! Mom said she would rather I go ahead and see the family doctor, so I did. When I saw the doctor and told him about my life and that I could have been exposed to the virus, he was furious. He was upset because I had not told him earlier, in his eyes we had just wasted six months of my life when we may have been able to start treating my symptoms from another angle.[30]

Tony goes on to document the start of various drug therapies for AIDS, along with the death of his partner from AIDS in December of 1998. The HIV Zone continued to be updated until 2005, when the site was suddenly abandoned without comment or explanation.

Some of the most prominent sites within WestHollywood's network graph, showing high levels of reciprocal hyperlinking, are those of transgender and non-gender-conforming individuals. These sites were created to describe and document users' transitions, detail personas that individuals took on when performing as another gender, post photos, and share tips and tutorials for transitioning. This fascinating mixture of instruction, reflection, and performance is seen from users all over the world; most of these users are male-to-female transgender, or identify as "crossdressers," who enjoy dressing in women's clothing at least some of the time, but who are not seeking medical sex-reassignment. Significantly, many of the labels used in these personal web pages, including "crossdresser", are no longer widely used by the LGBTQ community. One Homesteader, a "heterosexual crossdresser" named Bobbi Jean, offers a wide range of resources, including make-up tips and tutorials, links to regional support

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[30] Tony Gardner, "The HIV Zone - My Story," *GeoCities.com* (November 2, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19991102230138/http://geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/3390/mystory.html.

networks, and allows other users to submit their own transition narratives, along with pictures and suggestions for local stores and resources where they live. Bobbi Jean provides a detailed biography and journal, where she describes her own identity.

> I don't believe I was born a crossdresser, nor did I have any desire to wear woman's clothing at an early age. I am comfortable with both the male and female aspects of my personality. I love women very much… At this moment I don't have any inclination toward transitioning, but would like to be able to live full time as Bobbi."[31]

Bobbi details the process of coming out to friends and family, and states that she has made many other transgendered friends on the internet. However, many other Homesteaders describe their online existence as the only place where they are open about these aspects of their lives.

In another highly linked-to WestHollywood site, a transgender user named Debbie describes how she tried to come out fourteen years earlier but was met with shock and "disgust" from friends, and so ceased transitioning. She writes of her hopelessness, stating that, "I was neither man nor woman."[32] However, Debbie had recently found a support network through the web; she describes meeting someone who she refers to as "Miss Angel" over the internet and flying from Europe to North America to meet her in person. Though Debbie does not state where in particular on the internet that she met Miss Angel, she does link to her GeoCities WestHollywood website. This sense of community, friendship, and romance between GeoCities Homesteaders is seen very frequently on WestHollywood. Users almost always

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[31] "About Me - Bobbi's Transgendered World," *GeoCities.com* (October 4, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20010404033905/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/Chelsea/1021/interest.html.

[32] "Debbie - My Story," *GeoCities.com* (November 28, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19991128112346/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/Stonewall/4561/story.html.

include a "Links" page; these link lists are often organized into categories, including LGTBQ

resources, pages which help with website design and building, webrings and awards, and,

almost always a list of "friends." These networks of GeoCities users reflect real contacts and

support networks that grew amongst Homesteaders. For many of these people, who had

struggled to "come out" to their friends and families, these were their first contacts as a queer

person.

We also see high levels of engagement with webrings and other community-building

sites on WestHollywood. Webrings were communities which a user with their own webpage

could join in order to find other sites and users with similar themes to their own, and to

increase visibility and hit counts to their own webpage. Membership was normally quite simple:

fill out an application form and then place the appropriate links and graphics on to the main

page of your website. Figure 4.7 shows the site banner for the WestHollywood Webring; users

could then navigate the webring by clicking on "next" or "previous" site links, or choose to

navigate to a random website. These link networks were circular in nature — actually a ring —

and friendships often formed between those users who were close in proximity with the

webring "neighbours."

Figure 4.7. "WestHollywood Webring Banner," GeoCities.com (October 11, 1999). Internet Archive,
https://web.archive.org/web/19991011173442/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/
Castro/6902/.

The WestHollywood Webring was the fifth most linked-to site on WestHollywood; as a condition of membership, users had to link back to the webring through their membership graphics. Interestingly, the WestHollywood Webring had no guidelines on site content or themes as a condition of membership. Sites only had to be part of GeoCities' WestHollywood neighbourhood, or one of the sub-neighbourhoods, and had to abide by GeoCities' terms and conditions. Similarly, the second most linked-to site on WestHollywood included the Women Loving Women Webring and the "Lesbian Goddess Website Award," which was given to, "those sites which have something unique to offer the women loving women community."[33] The fact that these award websites and webrings are so highly ranked within WestHollywood is largely a reflection of the requirement to link back to the award site or webring in order to display the membership or award graphics. However, the high number of reciprocal links is also indicative of the level of interconnection and interaction within the neighbourhood. Though people were likely only linking back to these sites because doing so was a condition of membership, these awards sites were still quite popular and highly-visited within the community. This network graph shows all sites in a linking relationship with the WestHollywood Webring (Figure 4.8). Nearly every site within the network was located within WestHollywood; this likely indicates that these sites were all members of the webring, as non-member sites would have had little reason to link to the ring.

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[33] "The Lesbian Website Goddess Award," *GeoCities.com* (February 9, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20000607170900/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/1769/myaward.html.
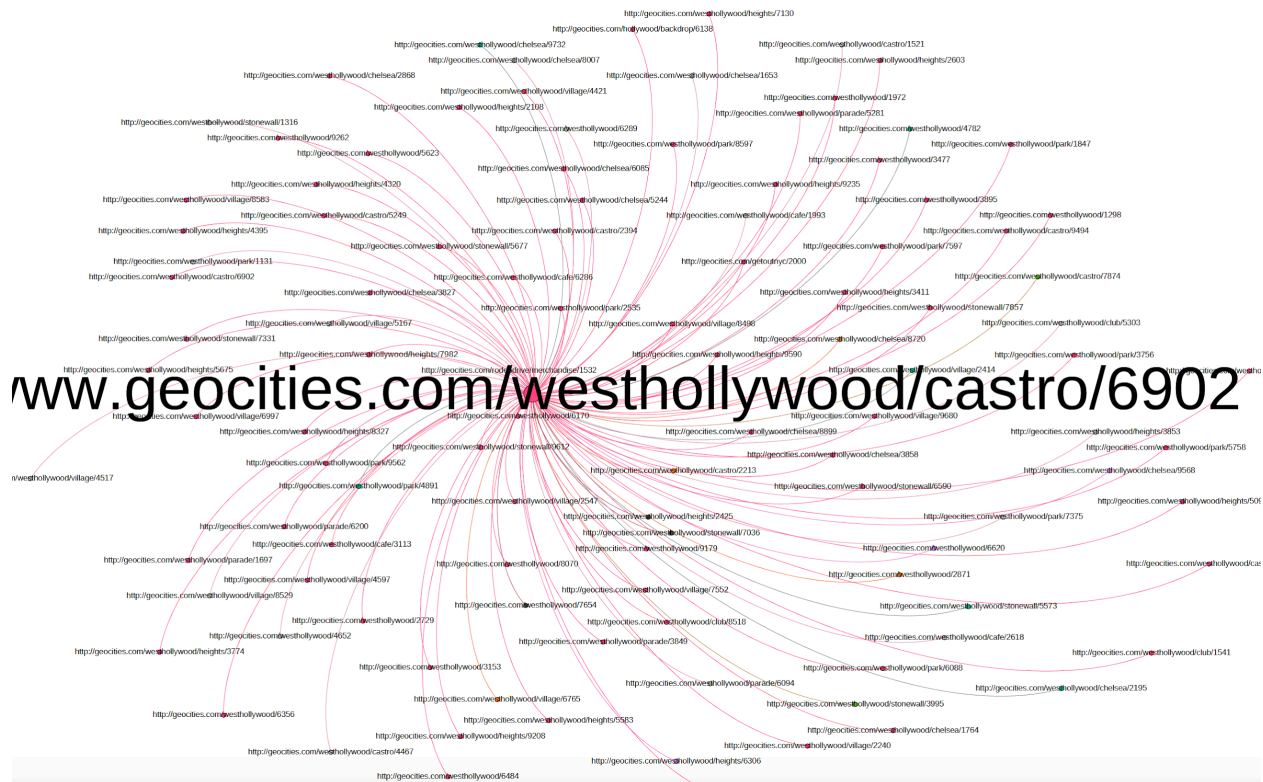
Figure 4.8. Network graph of all sites in linking relationships with the WestHollywood Webring.

WestHollywood can thus be seen as a large-scale network of personal webpages, linked together through directories, webrings, awards, and individual connections. David Bohnett succeeded in his goal, and the results were substantial. It was possible for an LGBTQ individual to find a sense of community on the web, grounded through GeoCities WestHollywood. Furthermore, through the sharing of personal narratives on countless online biographies and journals, the experience of being queer in the 1990s has been immortalized on these GeoCities webpages.

Coming Out on WestHollywood

The result of this vast collection of personal web pages on GeoCities' WestHollywood was a surge of self-narrative, in the form of biographies, correspondence, and web diaries. Many of

these self-narratives follow a similar template, which includes early experiences in childhood, early relationships, and the person or event that caused the individual to recognize their own queerness. Some narratives include coming out to friends and/or their family, and engagement with the LGBTQ community as a whole, while other individuals detail why they are choosing to remain "in the closet" and keeping their LGBTQ identity a secret. These self-narratives provide a fascinating perspective on the experience of being queer, described for an audience of other queer individuals, who likely have similar narratives of their own. The method of writing these narratives, and the language used, is repeated over and over again throughout WestHollywood. This focus on form and language is particularly important in WestHollywood; this explosion of self-narrative highlights trends in how users identified, and how they described this identity to others. Using this self-narrative as a basis of analysis, it is possible to examine how individuals expressed their identity on WestHollywood. Through large-scale text analysis, in order to analyze the tens of thousands of self-narratives published in the neighbourhood — a quantity of text which is far more than one person could read in their lifetime — we see trends in word choice and the ways that these phrases and labels are used to express certain ideas, even in users' non-native language.

Given that many of these personal journals and biographies follow a "coming out" narrative, the use of this very phase is significant and can reveal a lot about how users feel about the process, and why it is considered significant within the community. In her 2009 ethnographic study of queer youth in rural America, Mary Gray describes coming out as "visibility's master narrative event," which is mediated through exposure to online media,

personal homepages, and LGBTQ-centric webpages.[34] It is through the repetition of these

narratives online that queerness becomes "real" for many youth; for many, this is their first

contact with queer people and queer culture, outside of their relatively isolated local

communities. By reading these biographies and journals, individuals learn the "script" for

coming out, which then gets repeated when they tell their own coming out narrative online.

We see nearly 12 000 uses of "come out" (or other similar phrases, such as "coming out" or

"came out") within WestHollywood; the vast majority of these uses are in connection with a

self-narrative of the users' own coming out experience. Perhaps most fascinatingly, we see the

use of this phrase in English even in pages that are written in other languages, such as Turkish,

Chinese, Polish, German, and French. It is unclear whether this phrase is used in English —

often offset with quotation marks — because there is not an equivalent phrase in the writer's

native language, or because "coming out" is a universal concept within the LGBTQ community,

and the use of the English phrase designates a common idea.

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[34] Mary L. Gray, "Negotiating Identities/Queering Desires: Coming Out Online and the Remediation of the Coming-Out Story," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 no. 4 (2009), 1165.

11/22/97 16:51:11
Name: 毛豬
留言給: 多多
從哪兒來: 台北

Comments:
我想大部分的父母在聽到這樣的告白後,都會被傷害到的,問題是,我們想把壓力自己一肩扛或是把它吐給父母一起扛,這無關對錯.
我的表妹幾經掙扎,向父母COME OUT,初時也非常不受諒解,現在將近有兩年(或更久)了吧,她父母也能漸漸釋懷,不和她說話的父親也重新打開了溝通的門.至於我,尚未COME OUT,也是怕父母傷心生氣,但我並不認為告訴他們「我是同志」這犯了什麼錯,頂多我不希望親友關心的壓力一併加到他們身上罷了.
所以別太自責了,去參加「我們之間」,也許能找到一個相守一生的好伴侶呢!

Figure 4.9. "The Good Society Message Boards," GeoCities.com (August 30, 2009). Internet Archive.
https://web.archive.org/web/20090830223500/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Cafe/6070/1997_1011.html. Text appears in Chinese and translates (using Google Translate) as: "I think most parents will be hurt after hearing such a confession. The problem is that we want to put pressure on ourselves to spit it out. It's not right or wrong to upset your parents. My cousin struggled a lot and went to her parents to COME OUT. It's been two years now and her parents have gradually accepted it, and her father who did not talk to her reopened the door of communication. As for me, I have not yet COME OUT, I am afraid that my parents will be sad and angry, but I I don't think it's wrong to tell them, "I am gay." So don't blame yourself too much."

Using large-scale text analysis which maintains the context within which certain words or phrases are used can further illuminate how these online coming out narratives are structured and perpetuated. Using the text-only file from the Internet Archive, it is possible to extract all lines of text that reference "coming out" (or any variation, such as "come out" or

"came out") from the WestHollywood neighbourhood. This selection of text contains 5512

individual webpages and helps illuminate the language used most commonly by individuals

describing their own coming out experiences. Using text analysis software for analyzing a large

corpus of text, AntConc, we can determine the words most frequently used within five words

before and after the phrase. [35] Unsurprisingly, some of the most frequent words used in

connection with discussions of coming out include those people closest to us: parents at "448"

uses, "family" at 247 uses, and "friends" at 655 uses. When examining the context of these

words using the Concordance view in AntConc, we see that the vast majority of users describe

coming out to their parents and other family as a mostly positive experience. One Homesteader

describes how her mother confronted her after finding a love letter from her girlfriend:

> We sat up for three hours and talked about the 'secret' that I had been keeping
> for my entire life. That night my parents met the REAL me. That night, I felt
> closer to my parents than I ever had before. Unlike the freeness that I felt
> when I told Nicole, I went to bed that night and knew...just knew that
> everything would be okay...that I wasn't doing anything wrong...that being gay
> was a part of who I was and something to be proud of.[36]

In another self-narrative, a user named Patrick writes about answering his suspected-

homophobic brother's question of what it was like to be gay with, "Ok, do you want to know

about the love aspect, or about dealing with a society that hates me?" Patrick then goes on to

describe this as the moment where his brother "sobered" and began to accept him.[37] Another

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[35] Laurence Anthony's AntConc, http://www.laurenceanthony.net/software/antconc/.

[36] "A Long Difficult Journey...," *GeoCities.com* (August 30, 2009). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/20090805145308/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/5119/coming_out.html.

[37] Patrick Gorman, "One Small Step for Bearkind, One Huge Leap for Me," *GeoCities.com* (August 5, 2009*). Internet Archive,*
https://web.archive.org/web/20090805160401/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Stonewall/8443/frames_out.html.

user who refers to themselves as "Whitey" writes that they haven't come out to their family

yet, but spends "hours thinking and imagining how I will come out to my parents as a girl, how

they will be amazed and rejoice, what dress I will wear as a girl…"[38]

These positive and uplifting narratives written by queer youth about their coming out

experiences dominate WestHollywood. Even in instances where the writer describes facing

disappointment or rejection by their families, they often end with an optimistic turn. In one

narrative, the Homesteader describes how her older sister reacted to her coming out with

"shock and disbelief" and "cried for days" after hearing the news. However, this Homesteader

urged her sister to go to the library to do some research and goes on to describe how her

relationship with her sister changed afterwards.

> She opened her mind and her heart for me, and did what she could to try to
> understand who I was, and how important it was for me to share this part of
> myself and my life, with her. I can't believe to this day that I almost lost her
> forever. But the fact is...we are now best of friends, which is what I'd wanted all
> of my life. It's wonderful! The funny thing is...that I had assumed that she would
> have accepted it without any problems and that my other sister would have
> flipped out! IT was the OTHER way around...that taught me to never assume
> anything!!! Both my sisters now are very supportive, loving and accepting of
> both me and my girlfriend. And to my surprise, the one who didn't take it well at
> first, showed up at the gay bar one nite to come and watch the DragShow with
> me and [my girlfriend]!!![39]

Given the dominance of these positive narratives in the WestHollywood neighbourhood,

one could assume that all LGBTQ individuals who came out to their families in the mid-90s were

met with love and acceptance. Of course, we know that this was not always the case; the

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[38] "Whitey…. Just Whitey," *GeoCities.com* (August 30, 2009). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/20090830184935/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/6104/eng.htm.
[39] "A Coming Out Story," *GeoCities.com* (August 30, 2009). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/20090830153316/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Village/8271/conclusion.ht
ml.

mainstream media and academic literature has traditionally portrayed the heterosexual family

as a homophobic environment, and the coming out process as characterized by conflict, and

even violence and expulsion.[40] These types of narratives are reflected in some places on

WestHollywood, particularly in message boards, guestbooks, and published emails to website

owners. "It's so easy to feel isolated in all of this...thanks so much for your inspiration!" writes

one visitor to a GeoCities site for South Asian lesbians living in the United States; she also

admits that her own coming out to her parents did not go well, which had "torn [her] apart."[41]

These messages are a stark contrast to the overwhelmingly positive ways that GeoCities

Homesteaders describe their own experiences on their websites.

Building on a vast body of work by feminist and queer theorists on autobiography, queer

and literary theorist Jen Bacon posits that the sharing of coming out narratives with other queer

individuals is central to queer identity and sense of self. Furthermore, Bacon argues that the

writing and telling of these narratives creates a rhetorical self which helps solidify individual

identity and offers a "way of negotiating identities within hostile contexts, preserving dignity,

and working toward a queerer way of seeing the world... Our `truths' are simply the lies that we

have agreed upon as a community. And so no one really thinks of these things as lies when they

are telling them, even when they don't correspond to the lives they are living."[42] Coming out

narratives are not written for a heterosexual audience, or even a close, private audience. These

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[40] Andrew Gorman-Murray, "Queering the family home: narratives from gay, lesbian and bisexual youth coming out in supportive family homes in Australia," *Gender, Place, and Culture* vol. 15, no. 1 (2008).

[41] "Desi Dykes Guestbook," *GeoCities.com* (August 29, 2009). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20090829173504/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/9993/bellybook.html.

[42] Jen Bacon, "Getting the story straight: coming out narratives and the possibility of a cultural rhetoric," *World Englishes* vol. 7, no. 2 (1998), 253-254. This work builds on the work of Martin (1993) and D'Emilio (1993). Martin argues for the role of coming out narratives in lesbian community building, while D'Emilio argues that gay and lesbian experiences, including coming out, have been conceptualized in terms of identity.

narratives are part of a public performance by queer individuals, and for other queer

individuals, in order to reinforce community and self. The overwhelming optimism found in the

personal web pages of WestHollywood reflects the creation of this cultural rhetoric. These

Homesteaders are choosing to tell their own stories, as part of their own personal identity, but

also because the community expects it. The sequence of events is the same in nearly every

narrative, and the conclusion is one that reflects the world that WestHollywood Homesteaders

wanted to live in.

Bacon describes coming out as an inherently political action. By stating that they are not

part of the heterosexual hegemony, a queer individual takes a step from private to public, and

from silence into speech.[43] If this individual outing is a political action, than the coming out

narrative, written after the fact, performative, and implicitly aware of its own audience, is

doubly so. By posting these narratives on GeoCities, and then choosing to link to other

Homesteaders, along with joining webrings and other directories, these users carefully crafted

their own audience of other queer individuals, thus further constructing this cultural rhetoric.

Even if this rhetoric does not reflect the lived reality of all visitors, as evidenced in the message

boards and guest books, it invoked a world that was just a bit friendlier to LGBTQ users,

provided hope to visitors who were closeted or questioning, and suggested a way forward in

the future.

The other purpose for writing these coming out narratives, at an individual level, was as

a way of constructing and reinforcing identity. Feminist theorist Biddy Martin describes coming

out stories in lesbian autobiography as narrating the journey to coming to know something that

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[43] Ibid, 251.

has always been true. Moreover, Martin asserts that there is a tendency for writers to "remember differently" when writing these stories — not lying, but reflecting nostalgia upon their situation, and the events that led to them discovering and constructing their own identity.[44] When looking backwards, it is easier to identify events, behaviours, or people that contributed to the formation of a queer identity, no matter how murky these concepts were at the time that events were taking place. The eventual or gradual acceptance by a friend or family member can be colored very differently when looking at that individual in retrospect. Similarly, we see the use of specific language and labelling in these narratives as a way of solidifying identity. By using these words in a coming out narrative, explaining them, and possibly linking to others who also identify in the same way, that identity is constructed and reinforced. Martin reflects on the constructed nature of these identities, writing that "the 'happy end' to internal struggles, doubts, and contradictions in many coming out stories depends, in part, on forgetting that "the community" and the feminist literature on which it relies construct rather than simply reflect the truth of experience and identity."[45] Each time a user writes down or tells their story, it further strengthens these constructions, both on an individual and community level.

With similar techniques as above, and the text analysis software AntConc, we can examine the labels that people were most likely to use when describing their coming out experiences. The words, uttered during the actual outing, and then written down later when reflecting on that moment, can provide perspectives on the reflection of these rhetorical selves,

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[44] Biddy Martin, "Lesbian Identity and Autobiographical Difference[s]," *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* ed. Henry Abelove (Routledge, 2002), 279.

[45] Ibid , 281.

and how individuals want to be perceived as an LGBTQ person. Using AntConc, I calculated those words used most frequently in close relation to phrases such as "come out" or "coming out." Though this methodology does not find all instances of the use of these identity labels, it gives strong indicators as to how individuals characterize their own sexual orientation when articulating how they tell other people, or how the words that they would use. When looking at the label that Homesteaders chose to use in their writing, it was most common for users to come out as "gay," which came up 663 times within five words before or after a phrase that signals a coming out narrative in the text, compared to lesbian (frequency of 129) or bisexual (frequency of only 28). The reasons for this disparity in word choice are apparent when examining some of the actual narratives: quite often, even those individuals who identify as a different label often choose to use the label "gay" when coming out to others.

The label "bisexual" occurs relatively rarely in close relation to a phrase signalling a coming out narrative; nevertheless, an analysis of the narratives reveals that this term is particularly fraught. "I actually told her that I was bisexual and stuck with that story for a few years, though I am a lesbian through and through. Somehow I guess I figured that that 'news' would be easier than hearing that I was a full-fledged lesbian. I also think that it was easier to lie to myself as well," writes one user, when describing coming out to her friend.[46] For some, bisexuality is described as a transitory phase on the road to discovering their true identity. However, we also see the other side of this perspective; other users vehemently defend their bisexual label. Holly, a twenty-seven year old bisexual woman, describes feeling supported by her friends, family, and husband, but fears ostracism from the LGBTQ community.

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[46] "A Long Difficult Journey…"

> Being bisexual is not a "cop out" or a "phase" as so many people think. Bisexuals have to deal with queerphobia, discrimination and queerbashing. And we get biphobia from lesbians and gays to top it all off. The point that gays and lesbians usually forget is that straight society is not more lenient on bisexuals, it is as harsh, if not harsher.[47]

In these personal narratives on WestHollywood, the use of the bisexual label is almost always accompanied by explicit discussion or disruption of the implicit gay/straight binary within the coming out narrative. Given that these narratives are not written for a wider heterosexual audience, but are intended to be read by other queer-identifying individuals, the target of these assertions is clear. The process of coming out has often been portrayed as a developmental model, where an individual proceeds from an assumed heterosexual identity to a public homosexual identity. Work in the 1990s in the field of sociology challenged this model, suggesting instead that the coming out process does not signal the end of a journey of identity formation, but merely part of a "ongoing dynamic process of describing one's social location within a changing social context."[48] Interestingly, many of the users on WestHollywood who do identify as bisexual, at least at some point during their narrative, echo these contemporary academic debates which occurred during the 1990s.

Surprisingly, gender non-conforming labels come up very infrequently, in relation to a phrase signalling a coming out narrative. From close reading of the text, we see that it is less common for individuals to use a word like "trans" or "transgender" when writing about how they described their identity to friends and family, but instead to describe the gender identity

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[47] "Bisexuality…" *GeoCities.com* (August 5, 2009). Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/20090805160058/http://geocities.com/WestHollywood/Stonewall/5573/bisexuality.html.

[48] Paula Rodriguez Rust, ""Coming Out in the Age of Social Constructionism," *Bisexuality in the United States: A Social Science Reader* ed. Paula C. Rodriguez Rust (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 531.

or behaviours that they associated with their gender non-conformation. Labels such as

"crossdresser" show up frequently, primarily by users who otherwise identify as heterosexual

males. Susana Marques, a public figure within WestHollywood's transgender community, writes

in their biography that they told their wife that they liked to wear women's clothing from the

time that they were a child, and identifies themselves as a crossdresser, stating, "I am and I will

always be heterosexual."[49] Otherwise, many Homesteaders instead use phrases that describe

the gender that they identify with, or don't identify with, as the case may be.

WestHollywood's large collection of coming out narratives allows for fascinating

perspectives on the use of identity labels, along with the context of how these labels appear in

the text. Furthermore, in acknowledging that these narratives are constructed — we are not

looking at the outing itself, but in the ways that an individual recalls the outing and describes it

for an audience of other queer users, linked together through the web — we see powerful

indicators of identity and community norms and rhetoric. However, it is when we examine the

interplay of this rhetoric with local language, race, and ethnicity, that we begin to see the

growth of WestHollywood as a place where intersectional LGBTQ identity was mediated.

Global Connections and Transnational Identity

Through this combination of network mapping and large-scale text analysis, it is possible to see

evidence of a transnational queer identity on WestHollywood. Network graphs, which highlight

the interconnection through hyperlinking, reveal global connections forged through shared

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[49] Susana Marques, "Story of My Life," *GeoCities.com* (June 21, 2000),
https://web.archive.org/web/20000621105314/http://www.geocities.com:80/susanamarques/bio_e.htm.

identities and experiences. These connections persist beyond limitations of language; moreover, we see evidence of a global language of LGBTQ labelling, based on English words and phrases. The proliferation of these English language labels can be seen as further evidence of the dominance of English — and American and western culture — on the internet, however the narratives posted on WestHollywood indicate that these English labels were used by non-English-speakers in order to inform themselves and others of who they are. Thus, we see the creation and perpetuation of a transnational queer identity, built and spread through the World Wide Web.

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted the site WestHollywood/6200 as being extraordinarily highly-connected within the neighbourhood; this site has the highest PageRank in WestHollywood and dominates a large section of the neighbourhood's network graph. WestHollywood/6200 is a directory of transgender personal GeoCities web pages, run by Susana Marques, a GeoCities member from Portugal. Through a combination of network analysis and close reading of the sites which link to 6200, a fascinating picture of transnational transgender community emerges. The directory is organized not only by GeoCities neighbourhood, sub-neighbourhood, and street address, but also by country of origin. Through this directory, preserved in the Wayback Machine, we can navigate through these transnational connections. Furthermore, because 6200 was crawled and archived numerous times between 1996 and the site's last update in 2001, we can see change over time, as new countries were added to the directory in increasing numbers. In 1999, the directory had members from 62

countries; the majority of these users were from the West -- primarily North America and

Europe -- however we do see considerable membership from South and Central America.[50]
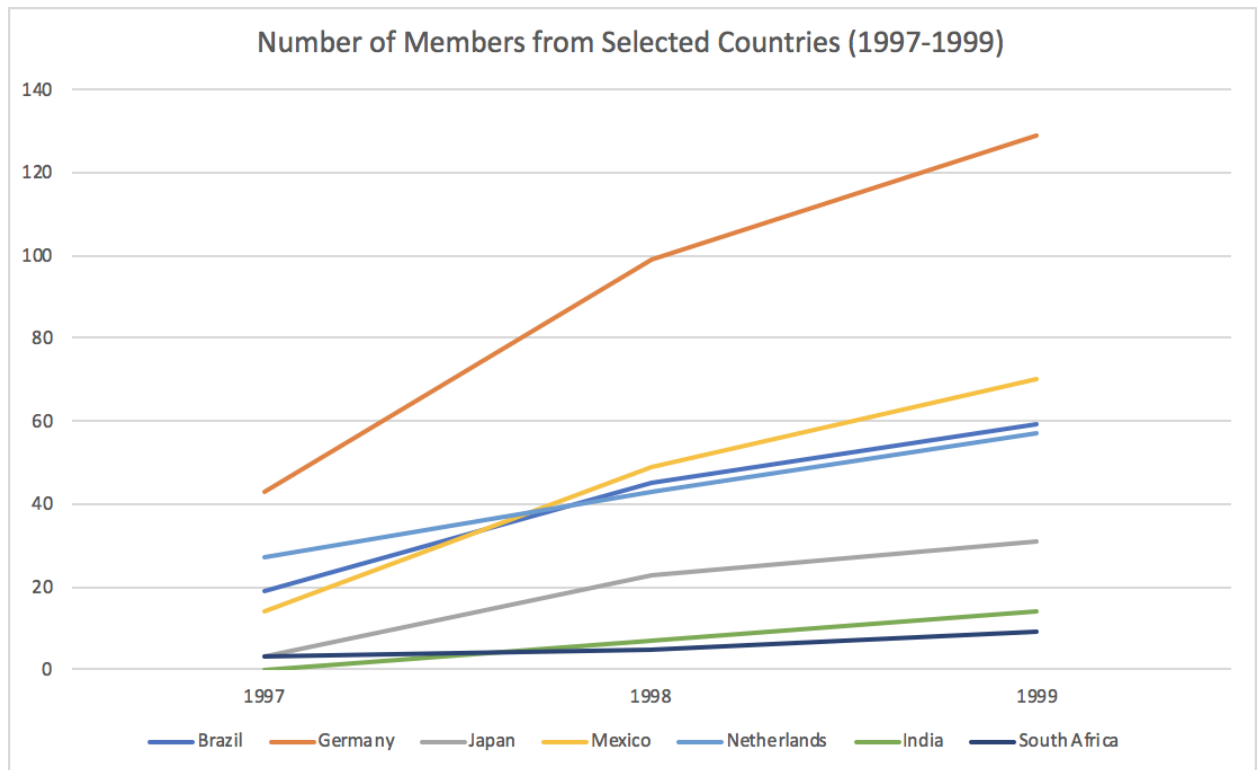

Figure 4.10. Number of members of the transgender directory from selected countries.

Figure 4.10 demonstrates the increase in membership in Susana Marques' transgender

directory for several sample countries which showed moderate levels of representation.

Unsurprisingly, the most enthusiastic membership was seen in countries where English was the

dominant language, or a widely-used secondary language. However, it is interesting to note the

sharp increase in membership in both Mexico and Brazil in 1998.

While the Wayback Machine provides a snapshot of the evolution of this global

directory over its life, we can also use network graphing to see who was linking to this website.

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[50] "Susana Marques' TV/CD/TS/TG Directory," *GeoCities.com* (August 19, 2000). Internet Archive.
https://web.archive.org/web/20000819080129/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/6200/country.htm.

Using the Ego Network filter in Gephi, which narrows the network graph down to all of the sites

connected to one specified node, I can perform more targeted close reading of sites linking to

6200. These sites are a fascinating collection of transgender personal web pages, as well as

collections of photos and fetish sites, from users all over the world. Though many of these

Homesteaders are writing for a nebulous or purely local audience, we still see evidence that

many of these individuals are writing for international users, with the expectation that the

content that they're providing will be consumed by the rest of the world. Many of these sites

contain a mixture of transgender resources, personal content, and local information. On a site

titled "Chula's Island Paradise," one could find resources for transgender Jamaicans, along with

more general geographical and tourism information about Jamaica, including links to local

tourism bureaus.[51] Many sites, even when written in the user's local language, contain an

English-language version, translations, or the use of English words within the non-English text.

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[51] "Chula's Island Paradise," *GeoCities.com* (October 2, 1999). *Internet Archive*,
https://web.archive.org/web/19991002062342/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/Village/9201/420.h
tml.

Figure 4.11. "Metamorphosis: Male to Female," GeoCities.com (April 6, 2001). Internet Archive. https://web.archive.org/web/20010406043540/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/ Chelsea/1027/index2.htm.

In this example (Figure 4.11), we see the use of the acronym "MTF" (male-to-female) within the Japanese language test. Similarly, we see the use of other acronyms, such as "CD" (crossdresser) and "TV" (transvestite) used when writing in other local languages. Susana Marques, the owner of the GeoCities transgender directory, even offers versions of her own biography in English and Portuguese. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Portuguese-language version of the biography is quite a bit longer and more detailed, however several English words and phrases, such as "crossdresser" and "come out" do appear even in her native Portuguese.[52]

The uses of this Ego Network graphing methodology in Gephi really becomes apparent when examining the third most highly linked-to website within WestHollywood. WestHollywood/1769, "The Equality Project", includes a webring, mailing list, and link list of

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[52] "A Historia da Minha Vida," *GeoCities.com* (February 10, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19990210085127/http://www.geocities.com/westhollywood/4090/bio_p.htm.

websites which "recognize that we do live in a global village and that we all, from our different social climates, our different races, our different cultural basis, our different sexual orientations, and our different genders have to join together in honor of equality for all humans."[53] Though the Equality Project's explicitly-stated goal is to be inclusive of all sexual orientations, the site's location on the WestHollywood neighbourhood has the effect of biasing membership towards users who identify as LGBTQ, Of their 1,217 members, 801 identified as LGBTQ or "other". Because the Equality Project required placement of a graphic as a condition of membership, but not necessarily a link back to the Equality Project page, we can see reciprocal linking as a vote of trust, or support. Using Gephi's Ego Network filter, we can narrow down to only those sites linking to 1769, which reveals a fascinating collection of personal webpages created by users who are writing about intersectional queer identity.

These GeoCities sites linking to The Equality Project show evidence of the engagement of sexuality with race, religion, language, ethnicity, and nationality. In a site titled, "The Lord is my Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay," a black woman from Chicago provides scripture references and support and resources for other Christians struggling with acceptance. In her justification for creating her site, she writes:

> I am a Gay Black woman who is proud to serve as a Deacon at Good Shepherd Parish Metropolitan Community Church in Chicago. I joined the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in 1984 because I needed (and still need) to Worship God without feeling like a second-class citizen either because of my gender, race, or sexual orientation. Despite what many "well meaning" people say, I believe that who I am is no accident. My sexuality, like

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[53] "The Equality Project," *GeoCities.com* (February 3, 1999). Internet Archive.
https://web.archive.org/web/19990210094025/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/1769/.

> my gender and my race, is a deliberate creative reflection of God, not an
> accident, not a sin, not a sickness.[54]

It is interesting to note that this site loaded a midi music file of the "Afro-American National

Anthem" as the background music for the main page, a common practice on GeoCities

homepages. By bringing race and religion in conversation with sexuality, this site engaged with

a dialogue of intersectionality for American LGBTQ individuals.

On yet another site linking to the Equality Project, two married bisexual men living in

the United States and Malaysia, while in a long distance relationship with each other, discussed

the prejudice they both faced as bisexuals, polyamorous, in a multi-ethnic relationship, and in

their own hometowns in Georgia and Kuala Lumpur.[55] Roland and Billy met through a web-

based chat room; their choice of WestHollywood as the location to share their story, along with

hosting a message board where others could meet and discuss similar issues and challenges, is

significant. Furthermore, we can see evidence of visitor engagement through the site's

guestbook; visitors from all over the world commented on the site, sharing their own

experiences and interacting with Roland and Billy directly. "Don't forget to visit me when you

come to Australia," comments one visitor.[56] Other visitors wrote directly to Roland and Billy

through the guestbook to ask for advice on their own long-distance relationships, leaving

personal phone numbers and home addresses. When looking at these types of two-way

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[54] "The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay," *GeoCities.com* (January 29, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19990129005707/http://geocities.com/westhollywood/heights/1734.

[55] "Roland and Billy's Homepage," *GeoCities.com* (November 27, 1999). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/19991127123930/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/8510/index1.html.

[56] "Roland and Billy's GeoBook," *GeoCities.com* (July 20, 2001). *Internet Archive*, https://web.archive.org/web/20010720171845/http://www.geocities.com:80/WestHollywood/8510/geobook.html.

conversations taking place on GeoCities, the importance of these communities becomes

evident. Homesteaders opened up their personal lives to their visitors, shared their own stories,

and became important to the community.

It is perhaps when examining these transnational connections on GeoCities

WestHollywood that we can really understand the effect that the web had on LGBTQ

individuals, and the community as a whole. The increasingly global nature of GeoCities, and the

web in general, over the mid to late 1990s, meant that many of these users were articulating

what it meant to be queer in their own location for a worldwide audience, often for the very

first time. Furthermore, the construction of their own narratives reveals evidence that these

identities were not passively mediated, but that users actively presented themselves in the way

that they wanted the rest of the world to see them. Through the use of specific language,

labels, and sometimes frank discussion on *why* they are choosing to describe themselves in the

ways that they do, we see evidence of an increasingly homogeneous global queer identity on

these WestHollywood personal webpages.

Conclusion

Leveraging new technologies that allowed users to not only post their thoughts, but to create

lasting (though perhaps only through outside web archiving efforts, as the closure of GeoCities

made all too obvious) archives of their own identities and experiences, Homesteaders

responded by writing these self-narratives en mass, immortalizing their thoughts for an

audience of their peers. Furthermore, it was not only the creation of these sites by users who

acted both as creators and consumers of content, but the ability to link these sites together

that created a community out of a web hosting directory. By choosing to organize GeoCities around thematic neighbourhoods, Bohnett laid the groundwork for a substantial community. However, it was through the sharing of resources, stories, and friendships that WestHollywood became significant in shaping the ways that queer individuals around the world described their own identity.

Through this large-scale analysis of self narrative, and particularly the coming-out narrative, we see evidence of community. More than that, we can also see the creation of a community rhetoric which further perpetuated the ways that people structured and wrote their own coming out narratives. Through the use of similar narrative structures, along with what became a codified English-language vocabulary for discussing queer identity, GeoCities Homesteaders actively mediated what it meant to be queer on a worldwide level. Furthermore, GeoCities' "blank page" approach to providing web hosting space allowed users to dictate how their own personal identity would be showcased on the World Wide Web in ways that were increasingly homogenous, both within WestHollywood and in later personal webpage and blogging platforms. These narratives, repeated over and over as individuals described their own journey from knowing to speaking, came to characterize WestHollywood, as well as later queer spaces on the World Wide Web such as blogging platforms like LiveJournal, as well as social media site Tumblr.

Using methodologies which highlight interconnection, through the use of network graphing, as well as large-scale text analysis which emphasize tends and similarities in word choice and writing style, we can clearly see how WestHollywood's Homesteaders from all over the world interacted through their personal webpages. These pages, written for an audience of

other GeoCities users, provide a fascinating perspective on how identity and, perhaps more

interestingly, a transnational identity, was mediated on the early web during the mid and late

1990s.

Conclusion

The internet represented dramatic change for the LGBTQ community. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, a dramatic shift unfolded in the ways that LGBTQ individuals explored and narrated their own identity. Similarly, the ways in which communities sprang out of these shared connections were also transformed. Instead of relying on often-risky in-person methods of communicating and organizing such as clubs, bars, and protests, individuals could now do so from the safety – and, increasingly, anonymity – of their own homes and computers. All of this was happening in a context of rapid platform change. Between 1983 and 1999, internet usage shifted from a relatively small network, primarily dominated by academic and institutional users, to large increasingly-global networks of users with access to the "killer app" of the internet – the World Wide Web. This flood of new users which became known as the Eternal September had real implications for communication, discourse, and the spread of new platforms and technologies.

Throughout my dissertation, I have argued that this flood of new users revolutionized the ways that LGBTQ individuals communicated and the very conversations that they were having, as the community grew from a small number of homogeneous users to a massive population of queer people who demanded new labels, new hegemonies, and indeed expanded the very definition of what it meant to be queer. These users rejected the very foundation that net.motss had been built upon – a unified online presence for gay, lesbian and bisexual users, for the purposes of promoting visibility – and created new groups and communities based on a multitude of gender and sexual orientation identities. From net.motss' small community of mostly gay English-speaking men, to the twenty-five million global Homesteaders in GeoCities'

WestHollywood neighbourhood, the discourse occurring online shifted in revolutionary and

even radical ways over the sixteen years we have explored in the last few chapters. Yet the

story did not end there. In this conclusion, I show how many of the themes that we have seen

in the 1980s and 1990s continue to have deep resonance on today's web.

Web 2.0 and Queer Community

GeoCities was only the tip of the iceberg, an indication of the type of communication and

interaction that would come to transform the web. The early 2000s saw the rise of a new era of

user interactive web design: Web 2.0. Through the popularization of dynamic web content,

search engine optimization, and the large-scale migration of users on to extremely large user

interaction platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the World Wide Web underwent a dramatic

change -- while the early web had been characterized as impossibly wide but shallow, the post-

2000 web is now narrow but deep.[1]

This same time period has been characterized by a "mainstreaming" of queer culture.

Simply put, the goals of the LGBTQ movement have been largely accomplished in many parts of

North America and Europe to the point where separate queer communities and media are no

longer needed, and instead have been incorporated into mainstream culture. Some

contemporary theorists have even suggested that western society is now in a "post-gay" era, as

evidenced by the decline of the once-common gay and lesbian bar, the changing face of gay

enclaves in cities like San Francisco, and the popularity of gay-focused TV shows such as *Queer*

Eye and *RuPaul's Drag Race* amongst segments of the heterosexual population.[2] While these

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[1] O'Reilly, "What is Web 2.0?" *O'Reilly*, https://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html?page=5.

[2] This trend has been noted by many scholars. Amin Ghaziani's work of sociology *There Goes the Gayborhood?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014) argues that political gains and a changing social climate has led to

changes have affected the lived reality of LGBTQ individuals, other scholars argue that the

mainstreaming of queer culture has even affected how individuals see and perceive their own

sexuality, prompting the increasing popularity of non-traditional sexuality and non-binary

gender labels. Increasingly, youth are choosing to bypass traditional labels like gay, lesbian, and

bisexual, in favour of newer and more diverse labels like queer, pansexual, asexual, and labels

which distinguish romantic orientation from sexual orientation.[3]

The movement of users on to large-scale online platforms throughout the early 2000s

Web 2.0 period further homogenized and mainstreamed queer identity, even as it has

broadened and diversified the range of identity categories available for queer individuals to

describe who they are. Additionally, users are much less likely to use the graphics and other

visible signifiers that had populated GeoCities, such as rainbow banners and pink triangles.

Instead, LGBTQ social media users tend to use a brief description of a few carefully-chosen

labels, rather than graphics or long self-narratives.[4]

The large-scale introduction and migration on to social media has also once again

brought issues of privacy and outing into the forefront. In the 1980s and early 1990s, Usenet's

reliance on institutional email addresses forced its LGBTQ users to grabble with how "out" and

publicly identifiable they wished to be, as discussed in chapters one and two. As Usenet grew in

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many queer individuals and families moving out of traditionally-gay neighbourhoods. Similarly, in her 2013 article
"A 'Post-Gay' Era? Media Gaystreaming, Homonormativity, and the Politics of LGBT Integration," *Communication,
Culture, and Critique 6 no. 2 (June 2013)* new media and gender and sexuality scholar Eve Ng examines the role of
the LGBT television network Logo in the shift from queer-centric broadcasting to television programming with a
larger heterosexual appeal, resulting in what Ng argues is a remarginalization of queer viewers.

[3] James S. Morandini, Alexander Blaszczynski, Ilan Dar-Nimrod, "Who Adopts Queer and Pansexual Sexual
Identities?," *The Journal of Sex Research* vol. 54: 7 (2017), 916-920.

[4] Jonathan Alexander, *In their own words: LGBT writing the world wide web*, (New York: GLAAD Center for the
Study of Media and Society), 2014.

popularity, many users chose to use anonymous relayers or free "throw away" email addresses

in an attempt to maintain their anonymity when participating in online discussion. This

dichotomy of public and private online personas came to the forefront on GeoCities.com,

where there was no need for users to share their real identity, yet many Homesteaders chose

to list their name, email address, and sometimes even their home address. This relatively open

atmosphere was promoted by the perception of GeoCities.com as being a safe space, where

most personal webpages were rather obscure and unlikely to be happened upon by random

users who were not part of the community. Web 2.0 and social media once again provided a

perplexing privacy landscape for LGBTQ users to navigate as they sought to collapse various

parts of their online social network and identities. These privacy concerns have largely

determined which platforms have been most used for fostering LGBTQ community.

The question is, where did LGBTQ users go within the new landscape of Web 2.0? With

many choices of popular platforms, it's unsurprising that queer users are found on all of the

major social networking platforms that were created in the mid-2000s. However, some

platforms emerged as more popular with queer users than others, for reasons that mostly

involved issues of privacy and visibility. Scholars have examined the impact of the popular social

networking platform Facebook on building and maintaining queer community. Facebook is the

most well-known social networking platform. Founded in late 2003 by Harvard student Mark

Zuckerberg, it had grown 2.45 billion global users at the end of 2019 – a userbase larger than

any one country and meaning more than a third of the global population is online.[5] However,

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[5] "Facebook Reports Third Quarter 2019 Results," *Facebook Investor Relations* (October 30, 2019), https://investor.fb.com/investor-news/press-release-details/2019/Facebook-Reports-Third-Quarter-2019-Results/default.aspx (accessed January 8, 2020).

despite this massive global reach, scholars have argued that Facebook's impact on LGBTQ

identity and community-building has been uneven and situational. Alexander Cho argues that

Facebook's policy of, "hyper-privileging extant offline networks, hewing strictly to state-

validated identity,… and even broadcasting one's actions to one's network without one's

knowledge," privileges a design bias towards "default publicness" which marginalizes and

endangers some users, particularly those identifying as LGBTQ.[6] Because users cannot easily

separate the information that is broadcast to one's friends, family, coworkers, and

acquaintances, users must assume a default publicness of anything that they choose to post.

Margaret Cooper and Kristina Dzara further argue that, though Facebook offers new

opportunities for users to join networks, groups, and support "causes," the privacy settings

open up new concerns about inadvertent outing through participation in these very entities,

presenting a troubling dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion.[7]

    Facebook is an enormously popular social networking tool, and yet it has failed to

capture LGBTQ engagement and discourse, such as the type of candid narrative and community

found on earlier technologies like Usenet and web communities like GeoCities. However, other

social networking platforms, though less popular than Facebook overall, have had much more

success with growing LGBTQ community. MySpace was founded in 2003 and from 2005 to 2009

was the most successful social media website in the world, surpassing even Google for daily

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[6] Alexander Cho, "Default publicness: Queer youth of color, social media, and being outed by the machine," *New Media & Society* 20(9), 2018, 3184.

[7] Margaret Cooper and Kristina Dzara, "The Facebook Revolution: LGBT Identity and Activism," *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper (New York: Routledge, 2010).

pageviews in the United States in 2006.[8] Despite this early popularity, MySpace was ultimately surpassed in usage by Facebook in 2009, leading to the rapid decline of the service.[9] MySpace originally aimed to link those who shared similar political, social, and entertainment interests and was particularly popular among students and Latino users.[10] Furthermore, because users could change the appearance of their MySpace profile through simple code changes, adding personalized graphics, colours, and layouts, MySpace had more in common with webpage hosting platforms like GeoCities or blogging platforms like Blogger and LiveJournal. These simple personalization options appealed particularly to younger users looking for ways to express their identity on the web.[11]
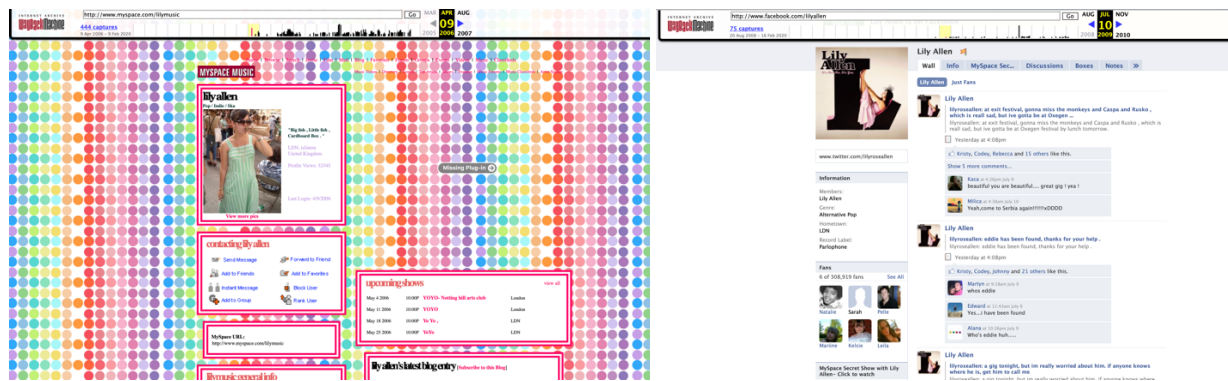

Figure 5.1: English musician Lily Allen's Myspace (2006) and Facebook (2009) profiles highlight the differences in design and the expression of identity on the two platforms. MySpace allowed much more opportunity for customization, while Facebook provides one profile option which has changed very little in the time that Facebook has been active.

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[8] Pete Cashmore, "MySpace, America's Number One," *Mashable.com* (July 11, 2006), https://mashable.com/2006/07/11/myspace-americas-number-one/ (accessed January 13, 2020).

[9] Ian Milligan, "In A Rush to Modernize, MySpace Destroyed More History," *Active History* (June 17, 2013), http://activehistory.ca/2013/06/myspace-is-cool-again-too-bad-they-destroyed-history-along-the-way/ (accessed January 13, 2020).

[10] Stephanie Rosenbloom, "On Facebook, scholars link up with data," *The New York Times* (December 17, 2007), https://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/17/style/17facebook.html.

[11] Kate Miltner and Ysabel Gerrard, "MySpace Had Us All Coding: A Nostalgic (Re)imagining of Web 2.0," Research Infrastructure for the Study of Archived Web Materials 2019 Conference, University of Amsterdam, June 21, 2019.

MySpace was simultaneously more private and more open than Facebook's network model. During the first few years of MySpace's growth, users identified themselves with a username and their real name was hidden from their profile page. This allowance — and even encouragement — of anonymity permitted users to be more open about other areas of their lives. Unlike Facebook, which allowed users to specify that they were "interested in" men, women, men and women, or simply leave the field blank, MySpace specifically asked their users to label their orientation from a drop-down list of keywords.[12] Furthermore, because MySpace allowed users to search for other users by keyword, it was possible to find other users who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or queer through a simple search. In a 2010 study, electronic media scholar Bruce Drushel examined interaction patterns amongst queer MySpace users. His research found that users who self-identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or "unsure" had roughly the same number of friends and the same geographical dispersion of friends and contacts as those users identifying as straight.[13] Though Drushel acknowledges that a number of factors influence friending patterns among users, he does suggest that this nearly equal number of local and distant contacts indicates the building of virtual networks of support among users who are open on MySpace about their sexual orientation. Keyword searches also identified over 43 000 distinct LGBTQ MySpace groups and communities; unsurprisingly, users who self-identified as LGBTQ were more likely to be active within those groups.[14]

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[12] For a discussion of sexual orientation, privacy, and Facebook advertising, see Carter Jernigan and Behram Mistree's "Gaydar: Facebook friendships expose sexual orientation," *First Monday* 14(10), October 5, 2009, https://firstmonday.org/article/view/2611/2302. Steve Jones et al. examine the use of drop boxes to describe identity in "Whose space is MySpace? A content analysis of MySpace profiles," *First Monday* 13(9) September 1, 2009, https://firstmonday.org/article/view/2202/2024.

[13] Bruce E. Dushel, "Virtually Supportive: Self-Disclosure of Minority Sexualities through Online Social Networking Sites," in *LGBT Identity and Online New Media* ed. Christopher Pullen and Margaret Cooper, 2010, 69.

[14] Ibid, 68.

Amid competition from Facebook, which explicitly requires users to use their real name on the social network, MySpace began encouraging users to use their real name alongside their username, though they never required it.[15] This shift, though entirely in line with other social networking platforms, was decried by users who had been drawn to MySpace by its anonymous nature. As MySpace began to decrease in popularity, queer users began searching for a new semi-anonymous space within which they could find others like themselves and build community through identity and self-narrative. The solution to this problem would prove to be rather surprising.

Tumblr and Queer Identity Discourse

Tumblr was launched in February 2007 as a microblogging platform that allowed users to publish short text or multimedia posts, organized around tagging. Tumblr creator David Karp described Tumblr as similar to the blogs that had become popular on platforms like Blogger and WordPress, but without the commitment to create, style, and include, "meticulously formatted links and images," along with frequent updating and cultivating a reader base.[16] Instead, users could create and post simple quick entries that shared their, "thoughts, creations, experiences, and discoveries," to their Tumblr dashboard, as seen in Figure 5.2, and then these posts could be further "reblogged" by other users, creating an easy venue for widely sharing content of all types.[17]

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[15] Michael Arrington, "MySpace Quietly Begins Quietly Encouraging Users to Use Their Real Names, " *Tech Crunch* (December 17, 2008), https://techcrunch.com/2008/12/17/myspace-quietly-begins-encouraging-users-to-use-their-real-names/ (accessed January 13, 2020).

[16] David Karp, "Tumblr – something we've always wanted," *Davidville* (February 19, 2007), https://davidville.wordpress.com/2007/02/19/tumblr/ (accessed January 21, 2020).

[17] Ibid.
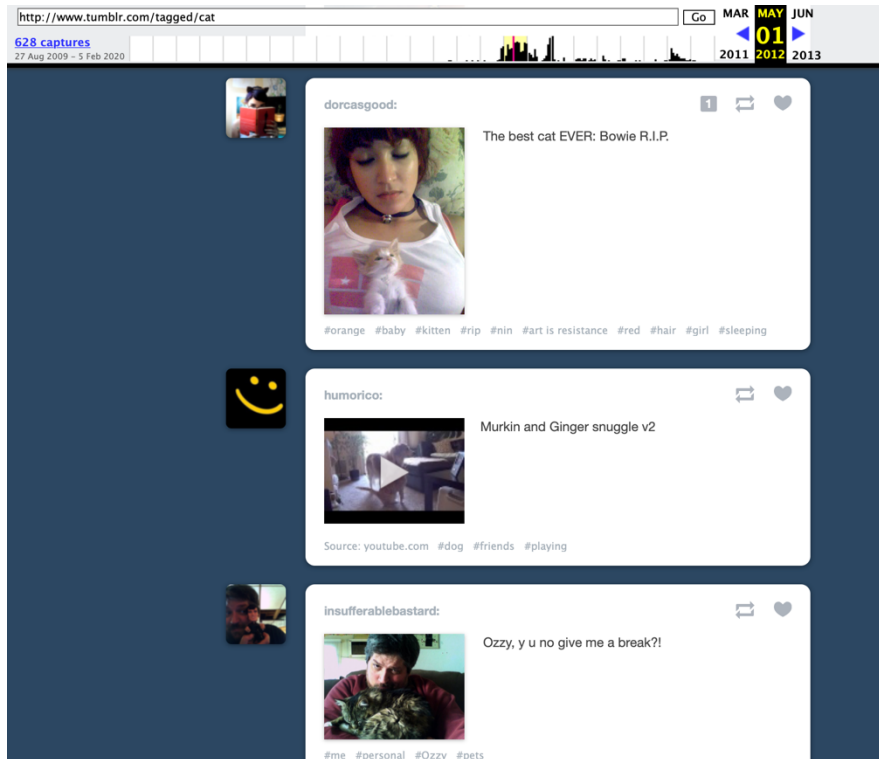
Figure 5.2: Tumblr's microblogging platform allows users to share photos, thoughts, links, videos, artwork, or longer writings, without the need for the time consuming formatting and aesthetic work associated with blogging.

Tumblr very quickly collected a reputation for being a queer-friendly space, with many LGBTQ users and LGBTQ supporters. This popularity among queer users has been attributed by scholars such as Alexander Cho to the site's encouraged anonymity, largely visual nature, lack of rules and regulations on pornography, and the ability for users to create like-minded echo chambers of "safe" content, by following and reblogging only that content which supported their own worldview.[18] A 2010 Urban Dictionary post on the "Rules of Tumblr" lists rule number eight as, "Tumblr isn't for homophobes."[19]

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[18] Alexander Cho, "Queer Reverb: Tumblr, Affect, Time," in *Networked Affect* ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna, Paasonen, Michael Petit (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2015), 43-50.

[19] "Rules of Tumblr," *Urban Dictionary* (December 29, 2010), *Internet Archive* (crawled August 7, 2011), https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=rules%20of%20tumblr.

A key feature of Tumblr is the ability to tag posts, similar to many other social media and blogging platforms. However, Tumblr's tagging structure not only serves as a way to organize information and promote conversations, but as a kind of commentary system.[20] Unlike other platforms that allow social tagging, Tumblr's tagging system allows for spaces between words; as a consequence, tags are often many words or even sentences long. When another user reblogs a post, the original tags are not reblogged along with the content, leading to users choosing to add tags as a way of adding context, commentary, or even explanatory footnotes, which are attributed only to their own posting of the content, and not subsequent reblogs by other users. For example (Figure 5.3), the "Tag Yourself Meme" took off on Tumblr in 2016, when users began posting images with several different choices and inviting other users to reblog the post with a tag indicating the image they most identified with.[21] In this case, each user's tags were irrelevant to the post itself and represented only their own personal identity and personality; because tags are not carried with each subsequent reblog, the post essentially became a "blank slate" for new users to add their own comment.

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[20] Avery Dame, "Making a name for yourself: tagging as transgender ontological practice on Tumblr," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 33:1 (2016), 27.

[21] Brian Feldman, "What Tumblr Has Done to the 'Tag Yourself' Meme is Pure and Beautiful Insanity," *New York Magazine* (January 27, 2016), https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/01/tag-yourself-is-tumblr-insanity-distilled.html.

OVER IT STEVE
- slowly crumbling under the pressure
- doesn't see the point of exams anymore
- hasn't seen the sun in ages
- lives off Red Bull, coffee and two minute noodles

EMOTIONAL AMY
- is prone to mood swings
- takes naps because they're so stressed
- studies for 30 minutes but then takes a break for five hours
- desperately in need of a good cry

LAST MINUTE LUKE
- unpredictable sleep schedule
- crams all their notes the night before an exam
- makes everyone else stressed because they're so chill
- always forgets to bring their pens in a clear pencil case

FED UP DANIEL
- grumbles a lot
- is mad that they have multiple exams on the same day
- has studied way too much that their brain is mush
- just wants everyone to leave them alone

RESPONSIBLE JANE
- makes neat and organised notes
- has done all the past papers
- complains that they haven't studied enough but then finds the exam easy
- somehow still finds the time to exercise

"THIS IS FINE" LYDIA
- smiles but is internally screaming
- goes to the library to study but gets no work done
- on the verge of a mental breakdown
- can't stop eating chocolate

○ **findx**

tag yourself i'm over it steve

Figure 5.3: Each "tag yourself meme" often generated thousands (or even tens of thousands) of reblogs. In this case, the individual's tag "I'm over it steve" is the poster adding their own commentary to the post.

 Thus, tags on Tumblr allow a user to comment on a post without altering the original post, and in a way which is public but only in a limited capacity.[22]

New media scholar Avery Dame has argued that Tumblr's tagging system is used as a way of signifying identity and claiming visibility on the platform. By using a particular tag on a particular post, users, "are often not only tagging and identifying the information in their posts—they are also tagging and identifying themselves… I am identifying myself and my self-

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[22] Elli E. Bourlai, "'Comments in Tags, Please!': Tagging practices on Tumblr," *Discourse, Context & Media* Vol. 22 (April 2018), 46-56.

narrative… in order to be recognizable to you as such in this moment."[23] Furthermore, the tags used by subsequent rebloggers on a particular post or image do not always reflect the actual content or intention of the original post. For example, a user might tag an image of an attractive man and woman with the tag *#bisexual*; this tag likely reflects the sexuality of the user using the tag and not the image itself. In this way, users are organizing information in novel ways, but also making their own identity visible to users viewing their posts. Dame further argues that this practice can be problematic, such as when tags are used in different and conflicting ways, like tagging exploitive porn with the *#transgender* tag, which is primarily used by trans users discussing and describing their own identity and transition experiences.[24] This conflict has led to the creation of new identity category labels and acronyms on Tumblr, such as "MOGII" for Marginalized Orientation, Gender Identity, and Intersex, further diversifying the ways that users express and describe their identity online.

In this way, Tumblr's tagging system can be seen as an extension of the discourse found within the content of the posts, much in the same ways that cross-posting on Usenet reflected deliberate attempts to link groups and information in new and sometimes unpredictable ways. When a user tags a Tumblr post, they do so knowing that their post will show up alongside other posts using similar tags, even if their tags are irrelevant to the content or merely explanatory or personal in nature. And, just like on Usenet, where users demanded and created new groups to encompass new identity categories, these practices have changed and diversified the ways that queer individuals describe themselves and find others like them.

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[23] Dame, 31.
[24] Dame, 30.

Abigail Oakley argues that Tumblr users are much less likely than other social media users to describe themselves as "male," "female," "straight," or "gay," but instead use a much more specific and nuanced set of labels. Instead of gay or lesbian or bisexual, Tumblr users describe themselves as pansexual, non-binary, biromantic, demisexual, or gray-asexual, among countless other label choices. This direct disruption of binary gender and orientation labels is seen in both tagging practices as well as in Tumblr "About Me" pages, where users often provide unprompted and unstructured information about themselves, choosing labels which best describe their gender, preferred pronouns, sexual attraction, and romantic attractions.[25] Furthermore, Oakley argues that this form of self-labelling serves more to create or use labels that precisely describe an individual, rather than attempting to fit oneself into existing hegemonic structures.[26] In this way, Tumblr can be seen a significant space for queer self-narrative and identity; the platform had both a large proportion of queer users, and also a population of queer users that are choosing to label themselves differently from those on other platforms and communities.

Until December 2018, the question of where to go to find queer self-narrative on the internet had a simple, if quirky and non-intuitive, answer. However, in late 2018, Tumblr announced that it would be introducing a ban on content including nudity. This decision was met by an immediate backlash by a large proportion of the user-base, citing Tumblr's reputation as a safe space to explore identity and sexuality. In a December 2018 interview with *The Washington Post*, one user mournfully characterized Tumblr's content as, "women and

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[25] Abigail Oakley, "Disturbing Hegemonic Discourse: Nonbinary Gender and Sexual Orientation Labeling on Tumblr," *Social Media and Society* (July-September 2016), 2.
[26] Ibid, 10.

LGBT creators exploring sexual concepts that they didn't feel comfortable sharing anywhere else."[27] "While the conversation focused a lot on kink and sex, there were plenty of times I got the opportunity to talk to people about how to get healthier, how to try to date, or general questions about being gay without having a strong support network," reported another user to *The Washington Post*.[28] Scholar Stephanie Duguay argues that the pornographic elements on Tumblr even further served as instructive media which helped LGBTQ youth discover their own identity and preferences, in a world where there is often little opportunity for queer youth to explore these ideas and acts. By integrating the pornography into a community with other non-pornographic content, the pornography served to normalize LGBTQ sexuality for youth.[29] Though the ban focused on nudity and pornography, and not a ban on LGBTQ content as a whole, it was this open policy on sexual content that drew many queer users to the microblogging site in the first place, and many feared an erosion of the community once the porn had been removed. "So even though I never liked Twitter, I forced myself to get an account because everyone's leaving Tumblr to Twitter. Here we are, I guess," wrote one user in a December 4, 2018 tweet.[30]

From December 2018 to December 2019, Tumblr saw their average monthly traffic volume drop by 49 percent, and their Android app usage drop by 35 percent.[31] In part, this

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[27] Abby Ohlheiser, "Before Tumblr announced plan to ban adult content, it was a safe space for exploring identity," *The Washington Post* (December 4, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2018/12/04/before-tumblr-banned-adult-content-it-was-safe-space-exploring-identity/.
[28] Ibid.
[29] Stephanie Duguay, "Why Tumblr's ban on adult content is bad for LGBTQ youth," *The Conversation* (December 6, 2018), https://theconversation.com/why-tumblrs-ban-on-adult-content-is-bad-for-lgbtq-youth-108215.
[30] I Lie in April, Twitter Post (December 4, 2018, 6:27am), https://twitter.com/livinglittlelie/status/1069916174673199104.
[31] Kaitlyn Tiffany, "Tumblr's First Year Without Porn," *The Atlantic* (December 3, 2019), https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/12/tumblr-year-review-2019-nsfw-ban-memes/602911/.

decline has been attributed to poor image recognition quality control, resulting in many non-

pornographic (and sometimes images that didn't even include human figures at all) being

deleted from the platform. As a result, many blogs which primarily posted visual materials

chose to cease uploading due to the ban. However, though the core culture of the site – with an

emphasis on fandom and meme culture– continued relatively unchanged, the creation of

content and traffic showed a marked decline in the first year after the ban on nudity. Despite

many blogs continuing to operate as they always had, Tumblr users reported that the site

simply felt different – like something fundamental about the service had changed. In a

December 2019 article with *The Atlantic*, former Tumblr user Madeline Holden, who had

operated a blog popular with trans people, described the roots of the change: "There's a

certain kind of social-justice sentimentality that people just call very Tumblr. There's something

about Tumblr that was more earnest, particularly around the topic of sex and sex that was a

little bit at the margins."[32] With the porn ban, that earnestness was now gone, leaving behind a

community based around memes.

    As of the end of 2019, no one platform has emerged with a reputation for hosting and

fostering LGBTQ content. In what has been called the post-gay era, this LGBTQ content is

indeed found across nearly all online spaces. However, as Tumblr's rise and fall has proved,

there is still a desire for dedicated queer-friendly space, where individuals can engage in

discourse with relative anonymity and freedom to post content which users find relevant.

Moreover, these queer-friendly spaces have proved to be extraordinarily influential in the

mediation of queer identity. When there is the expectation that nearly everyone identifies as

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[32] Ibid.

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queer in some way, there is an expanded need for a diverse vocabulary, even for those users simply articulating the ways that they identify as heterosexual. It remains to be seen whether a new online space will emerge, or if we are truly seeing the mainstreaming of queer culture into existing online spaces.

Networked Identities

Through a combination of close reading techniques and macroanalytical methodologies like text and network analysis, I have argued throughout this dissertation that 1983 to 1999 emerges as a critical period for the large-scale mediation of queer identity through networked communication and community-building. Because of the scale of these extraordinarily large source bases, as well as the intricacies (and difficulties) of using the archived internet and web as a historical source, it is necessary to adapt and create new tools and methods for exploring these narratives. In these Usenet and web communities, we see the transition from a relatively homogeneous gay and lesbian online population to one that increasingly embraced a diversity of identities, including sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, and language. These support networks formed through reciprocal relationships of hyperlinking and shared self-narrative led to the expansion of the options for labelling and describing identity, further diversifying the queer experience, both online and off.

In the first part of this dissertation, I followed Usenet's transition from a handful of queer users who took part in the creation and mediation of the first archived LGBTQ online community, net.motss, to a large-scale network of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender newsgroups. This evolution was not without its challenges and disruptions. From the beginning

of its existence, net.motss struggled to include diverse identities, including women and individuals who identified as anything other than "gay," despite regular entreaties for a visibly-unified gay and lesbian presence. As Usenet's population grew, so did these challenges. What had been exponential growth turned into an explosion of new users in the fall of 1993 in what has been referred to as the Eternal September. This sudden flood of users disrupted existing communities and practices, even as they demanded and created new communities to encompass a diversity of queer identities. These new users were not content to conform to long-held rules and hegemonies that had largely been mediated in order to keep the peace; the resulting conflict had the potential to transform, as users stated and restated their own identity and beliefs.

This disorder on Usenet would pale in comparison to what was to come. The large-scale introduction of the World Wide Web in 1993 revolutionized internet use, both for existing users as well as the public as a whole. Leveraging new technologies that allowed information to be linked together in novel ways, users and large corporations transformed the queer community, both online and off. The second part of my dissertation offered a comparison between the commercial search engine and affinity portals of the mid to late 1990s, and the user-created community of WestHollywood on GeoCities. Gay and lesbian internet portals like PlanetOut and Gay.com attempted to create community based on the existing hegemonies of the queer internet and, for a time, captured large segments of the LGBTQ internet population. However, WestHollywood's user-created structures and support networks allowed for much more diversity and acceptance of other languages, nationalities, and identities. This GeoCities neighbourhood would provide of glimpse of what was to come with the post-2000 internet.

Finally, an examination of the queer community found on Web 2.0 platforms, such as Facebook and Tumblr, highlights the importance of developing tools and methodologies for working with the archived web. These types of methods will be necessary for understanding these communities and narratives, both online and off, as networked communication becomes even more interwoven into everyday life.

The Eternal September that dawned in 1993 has become our everyday reality. As we look forward into an uncertain future of online networked community, we can also look back to the dramatic changes that took place online between 1983 and 1999. Will new and emerging technologies continue to bring us together? How will identities continue to evolve? And how will LGBTQ individuals integrate themselves into existing platforms, or change them to make the platforms their own? As we both turn to the digital humanities to make sense of marginalized peoples and the ways that they interact online, as well as reflecting more generally around the implications surrounding the expansion of online cultural and global community, these questions will become even more pressing.

We have come a long way since Elizabeth Holman joked about shoes on Usenet in September 1994, inadvertently creating one of the largest lesbian communities on the early internet. That joke led to a 30,000-strong community of lesbian communication, part of a broader trend which ultimately enabled the mediation of a transnational LGBTQ identity. Imagine how many have followed in Elizabeth's shoes: the countless LGBTQ people today tapping away on phones or sitting at laptops, forging a global networked identity.

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