

Online community and the personal diary: writing to connect at Open Diary

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ABSTRACT

Open Diary was the first online diary service to be created, in existence from 1998 to 2014. An ethnographic case study was performed in 2006–2008 to explore community-creation on the site, using the theory of sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004) to analyse site practices and the member experience. The study describes a cohesive community based on a culture of support, empathy and open sharing of personal lives enabled by anonymity and privacy protections. The article discusses these results in terms of community-creation online and compares Open Diary to current forms of life writing online, blogging in particular, arguing that it was the members' and designers' understanding and experience of the traditional pen-and-paper diary that enabled the building of a unique community on the site, creating an experience that is perhaps no longer possible to replicate due to the social and cultural changes that have occurred on the web since 1998.

KEYWORDS

Online community; sense of community; online ethnography; online diary

1 INTRODUCTION

Open Diary was the first online diary-writing service, described by some as the site that began the era of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The site was opened in 1998, coinciding with the beginnings of the blogging phenomenon. However, the site maintained a distinct identity as a diary site throughout its life, building its purpose – and its community – on the practices related to keeping a personal diary. This long-term ethnographic case study explores interaction on Open Diary, to show how the practices that developed on the site contributed to the development of a strong community.

The study employs the theory of *sense of virtual community* (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004) to analyse the site members' experiences, with ethnographic data collected during some of the busiest years of the site in 2006–2008. The data collection was based on long-term participant observation combined with interaction with site members via the communication tools provided by the site itself. Through this approach, the study offers a view into a unique period of online interaction, when the social scene that developed on the site was still extensively affected by the designers' and participants' experience of non-electronic communication; in this case, of the pen-and-paper diary.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Online community

The early discussion on online community often centred on whether communities can be said to exist at all online (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Parks, 2011), linked to the pervading notion that online interaction is somehow less “real” than face-to-face interaction (Hine, 2015; Baym, 2010). At the same time, the discussion has been beset with problems of definition, and much work has been done to develop analytically robust definitions for online community and the experience of community online (Rotman & Wu, 2014; Parks, 2011; see Malinen, 2015 for a review of online community studies). This study focuses on the particular affordances that online interaction provides and associates those affordances with a clearly defined theory of community. In doing so, the study shows that it is the technological mediation of the interaction which in this case enables the experience of community.

The work of defining community that has gone on in the social sciences has often grappled with the overuse of the term by academics, marketers, journalists and members of online groups alike (Baym, 2010: 75). Where “online community” is often used synonymously with “online group”, social scientists look for ways to explain the continued popularity of the term; the element that makes “community” more meaningful than “group”. Typically, these definitions include an emphasis on long-term interaction and relationship-building (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Chua et al., 2011) and a particular feeling that is elemental to the community experience, variously described as, for example, a sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000) or shared identity (Chayko, 2008; Baym, 2010; Cavanagh, 2007:119).

A major strand of online community research has focused particularly on defining and exploring this elemental feeling. The concept of “sense of community” (SOC) was first introduced by Sarason (1974) and later elaborated into its most popular definition by McMillan & Chavis (1986). This definition has also become widely applied in studies aiming to identify and describe community experiences in various online environments, including a popular cooking blog (Blanchard, 2004), online groups for dealing with infertility (Welbourne et al., 2013), a Finnish newspaper forum (Tonteri et al., 2011), YouTube (Rotman et al., 2009), and Twitter (Gruzd et al., 2011). The current case study employs a particular elaboration of the original theory of SOC: the theory of sense of virtual community (SOVC) takes into consideration the particular features of the online environment which the original theory could not envisage (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004).

The theory of sense of virtual community begins with the four key elements of community experiences identified by McMillan & Chavis (1986):

- *membership*: a feeling of belonging and relating to other members of the community;
- *influence*: a feeling of influencing and being influenced by the community;
- *integration and fulfilment of needs*: a feeling that one’s needs will be met through membership in the community; and
- *shared emotional connection*: feelings of shared experiences, history and time together (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

In consideration of the diverse social arrangements and technical solutions that exist online, the theory of SOVC then incorporates the notion of virtual settlement (Jones, 1997), allowing for a close analysis of the

interactional structure of a site as well as the feelings associated with membership. The concept of virtual settlement describes the underlying structure of an online community, requiring interactivity, a variety of communicators, sustained membership and a common-public-place for interaction among members (Jones, 1997). The four elements of SOC are then applied to analyse the experience of participating in the virtual settlement.

This focus on the individual experience of community enables the exploration of any online environment as a potential space for community, allowing for the existence of different technical solutions and interactional phenomena, and therefore provides ground for the development of an understanding of online community as a particular phenomenon underpinned by unique elements that are not present or equally relevant in communities primarily based on face-to-face interaction. In the qualitative case study presented here, it was particularly important to find a definition that would enable a highly nuanced exploration of the feelings and impressions described by the study participants.

The next section describes the emergence of the online diary as a new tool for interaction, discussing the development and fragmentation of the genre and introducing prior studies related to community experiences on similar sites, ending with a description of the basic functionalities of Open Diary.

2.2 The online diary

The personal diary as a genre has a long history. Traditionally associated with entries arranged by date and a self-reflective focus on the writer's life (Cucu-Oancea, 2013; McNeill, 2003), the diary retained these essential features when first brought online. At the same time, the interactivity and publicity of the online arena have caused transformations in a genre previously thought of as primarily private, to be hidden from public view (McNeill, 2003; Miller & Shepherd, 2004). It is these transformations that are key to understanding the social scene on Open Diary, and they are also the distinguishing factor between online diaries, as they appeared on Open Diary, and blogs, which are a more recent development in the historical timeline of the social web.

Online diaries first began to appear in 1995 on individual websites (Kawaura et al., 1998; McNeill, 2003). In an age of static webpages the early online diarists were radical in two ways: in frequent updates to their sites, and in sharing their personal lives with an unknown public audience (The Online Diary History Project). Yet the urge to share online soon revealed its universal nature: as access to the internet became more widespread, the number of diarists also began to grow exponentially (Firth, 1998). Open Diary was the first dedicated online diary service opened in 1998, attracting approximately 1300 users in the first month of its existence (Seminario, 1998), growing to 166,000 registered diaries two years later. The scene soon proliferated: LiveJournal, Diaryland, DearDiary.net and Blogger were opened in 1999. However, Open Diary is considered as not only the first online diary service, but also the first social media site to exist (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), making it a very interesting and important environment to study, particularly as the site survived throughout the enormous social and cultural changes occurring on the web (McNeill & Zuern, 2015) through the 16 years of its existence, with no major changes to its original design.

All of the sites mentioned above can be said to represent a popular early form of sharing online, providing different interpretations of diary-writing practices, but relying extensively on the familiar genre of the pen-and-paper diary. However, one of these interpretations of the diary genre was destined to become a phenomenon much bigger than that of the online diary: blogging began as a genre building on many "ancestral genres", only one of which was the diary or journal (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; Liu, 2014), but in common usage as well as in the academic discourse the lines between online diaries and blogs soon began to blur (Herring et al., 2005; van Dijck, 2004). Some saw blogs as simply another form of the online diary,

perhaps one less bound by the cultural associations of the traditional genre of diary-writing, but sharing the key features of regular dated entries and a focus on the writer's experiences and interests, and interaction between the writer and the reader (McNeill, 2003). However, blogs were even then seen to be a genre in flux (van Dijk, 2004), and recent research shows that the attributes of blogging as a genre are still fluid and developing as well as dependent on their cultural context (Liu, 2014; Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011). In contrast, this article argues that the generic form of the online diary as seen on Open Diary was not only stable throughout the life of the site, but dependent on the members having a particular understanding of the genre, rooted in the traditional form of the personal pen-and-paper diary still familiar and relevant when the site first opened in 1998. Indeed, Open Diary maintained the use of the word "diary" throughout its existence in describing itself, despite the prevalence of the concept of blogging in popular parlance, and this distinction becomes relevant in understanding the community that developed on Open Diary.

2.2.1 Community on diary sites

As discussed above, there is significant overlap with the terms "blog" and "online diary", and no studies focusing on community-building on diary sites similar to Open Diary exist. However, blog sites and networks have been studied with community in mind; indeed, one of the early studies developing the theory of SOVC was performed on a popular blog site (Blanchard, 2004), and a recent study of community-building on an academic blogging network also refers to the theory (Dennen, 2014). These studies have found that the motivations and means for building community through blogging are the same as will be shown to play a part on Open Diary: finding an audience and reciprocally reading those who read one's own blog or diary (Dennen 2014; Miller & Shepherd 2004). Conversely, Blanchard found a relative lack of sense of community among the readers of the cooking blog she studied, associated with the lack of extensive interaction among readers: the interaction mostly took place in the comments section of the one blog rather than creating reciprocal links between multiple reader-writers, and not all readers participated in commenting (2004).

This study will show that the reciprocity of interaction was also central to community-creation on Open Diary; where Open Diary differs from the blogging environments studied is in the understanding of one's audience and expectations of privacy and respect towards one's writing. These similarities and differences will be explored further in the discussion section.

2.2.2 Open Diary in brief

In March 2008, Open Diary hosted 543,000 registered diaries, out of which 208,317 had been updated in the previous six months. The service allowed users to write diary entries based on text, with options for adding images or video/audio content hosted elsewhere on the web. Users could adjust colours, fonts and graphics flexibly to create individualized spaces for interaction (see Figure 1 for an example diary entry page). The site had privacy settings that could be adjusted for the whole diary and separately for each entry, with four levels of publicity:

1. Completely public
2. Public only to registered users signed in to the site
3. "Favourites only": restricted to those readers marked as "favourites"
4. Private: visible only the writer

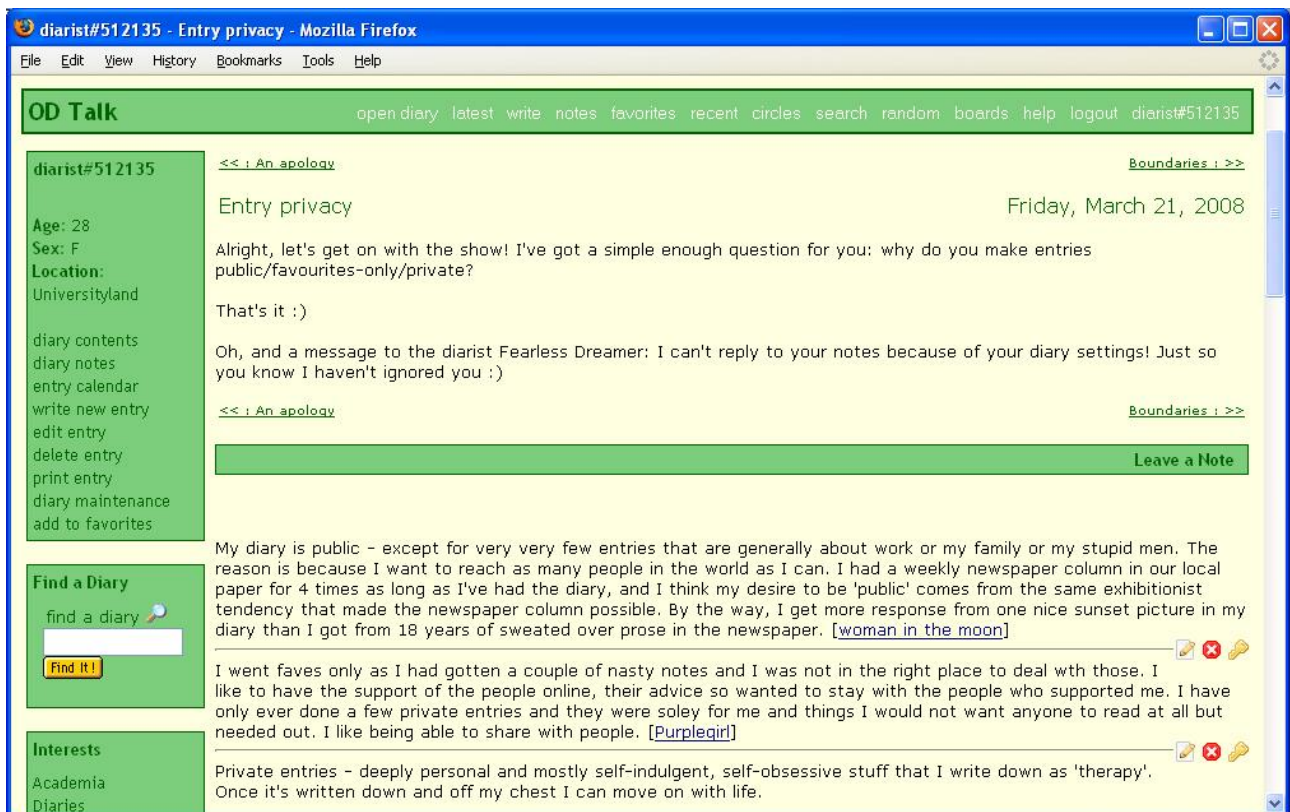


Figure 1: Personalized diary entry page with notes

Entries were listed in reverse chronological order on each user's diary front page. Diarists were able to follow each other through "favourites" and "bookmarks" lists which updated automatically when new entries were posted. A variety of search tools were available to find diaries and entries. The diary front page (Figure 2) promoted entries in categories such as "reader's choice" (entries nominated by members), diary circles (entries on particular permanent themes) and theme of the week (entries on changing themes). A separate bulletin board feature could also be accessed from the front page.

Start a New Diary

Start your own Open Diary - it's **easy and free!** It's a great way to connect with friends, keep your life online, and learn about yourself. The best part is that you get your own interactive diary, with unlimited storage and posts.

If you love your diary, you'll love it even more when you **upgrade to a Plus account**. Get all the free features **plus** no advertising, diary chapters, user blocking, in-diary searching, and more. The cost is \$3 or less per month for a subscription.

Reader's Choice

Diary entries our members think are worth reading

"Hello friends, new and old! I went on a random-diary-reading today in an effort to breathe some new life into this old diary. I also went through and deleted a bunch of bookmarks. Mostly people that have not written since sometime in early '09. I figure if they come..."



entry: [Hi there, among other things](#)
by: [LunaMoon](#)
31, USA

[more readers choice](#)

Diary Circles

Latest entry from our [Depression Circle](#)

"I don't even know where to start. I feel like I am losing my control again. I am taking different kinds of anti-depressants, and I think the side effects suck. When I do sleep, I get up and do things I don't really remember. It's scary. I don't know if it's my medicine that is doing that or..."

Site Announcements

November marks the start of [NoJoMo 2010](#) which is short for November Journaling Month. Now in its 6th year the idea is simple, you just write an entry every day during November to complete the challenge. There are no prizes, but there are also no penalties should you miss any days. Please take a look at the [NoJoMo](#) diary for more information including (optional) ideas for topics to write about in your diary.

Open Diary News

[more OD news](#)
[submit a news story](#)

Boards

Latest post from our [General Conversation](#) board

"I like to bake for people at Christmas - cupcakes, rocky road, rum truffles, shortbreads etc. Do up a little package in a ramekin or some cellophane and you have a tasty (and thoughtful!) gift. ..."

post: [Cheap, Thoughtful Christmas Gifts](#)
by: [Sapphire's Gaze](#)

[more OD boards](#)

Theme of the Week

This week's question:

What were you doing on this day 10 years ago?

"I was in third grade, so I was in school. My teacher's name was Ms. Schneider. We were learning cursive handwriting and spelling words. I remember fooling around with a few friends I had at lunch and recess. I sometimes miss childhood..."

Latest Entries



Better Day
DishRag is off today. So it has been peaceful and quiet, and I am getting so much work done, it isn't even funny! :) I wish every day could be...

[LuckyMe](#)



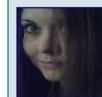
Human again!!
It feels so good to feel normal again! I even made coffee! weee! I still don't have much of an appetite, but I'm sure that will come. I also don't...

[Kpink](#)
39, Arizona



Weekly Goals
I only have a few minutes today to write my entry. I have to leave to get my estimate for my car done and then Nathan and me are doing our...

[hispunkrockprincess](#)
23, Arizona



Blah (or "Too Many Andrews").
I'm over-caffeinated and under-motivated. Is my third night off in a row and I've done absolutely nothing. I need to do dishes and...

[Up-All-Night](#)
27, Ohio



In Flanders Field
In Flanders Fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky The larks,
still bravely singing, fly...

[Waiting For Winter](#)
35, Canada

Day 7: Letter to ex-husband
Dear Mush Mouth, Over seven years have passed since we last saw each other. I left Canada for good in March/

Figure 2: Open Diary front page on 11 Nov 2010

Communication between diarists occurred primarily through "notes", i.e. comments left on diary entries. Note length was restricted to 400 characters, or 1200 characters with a payable subscription. The privacy of notes could be adjusted by the writer as well as the note recipient.

In its later years, the site began to experience technical problems, and user numbers diminished as other forms of online sociality gained in popularity. In February 2014, despite thousands of users still online at any given time, Open Diary was finally shut down due to a lack of resources to perform the technical maintenance required¹. Approximately 5000-6000 diarists migrated to two new sites created by Open Diary members, contributing to the continued survival of the community to some extent.

3 DATA AND METHODS

The study proceeded as an ethnography, designed to capture all the elements that made the community meaningful to its participants through long-term immersion in the setting and triangulation of data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hine, 2000). While participant observation continued beyond the closure of the site in 2014, the active data collection phase took place in 2006-2008, using several sources and methods of analysis in order to verify the observations arising from participation in cooperation with the site members.

¹ The site may still be viewed via the Wayback Machine at http://web.archive.org/web/*/www.opendiary.com

A brief initial survey (12 participants) was first performed to gain insight on key areas of interest in the social interaction taking place. A public research diary was then created specifically for the purpose of data collection and maintained over 11 months in 2007-2008. The research diary was used as a tool to gather data in a manner that was natural on the site, and to work on the ongoing analysis in dialogue with site members. Questions and observations were posted in public diary entries, with study participants leaving their responses in notes to those entries or sometimes in longer entries in their own diaries. Using the diary tools meant that participants could see and comment on each other's thoughts while responding to questions, building up to a shared understanding of the social interaction on the site. The diary entries were visible on the front page of the site when posted, and diarists were also invited to participate via personal invitations and messages on the site bulletin board. Once a diarist had found the research diary, they could then bookmark it and be notified whenever a new entry was posted.

The entries in the research diary consisted of questions or requests for comments on assumptions formed during the course of the analysis. A "noting survey" with a selection of questions regarding noting (leaving comments on diary entries) was also posted, as sharing surveys was a common practice on the site. The five elements of the theory of SOVC – virtual settlement, membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection – provided the basic direction for the questions introduced in the research diary, with the participants' responses functioning as leads for further questions, to maintain a conversational tone within the research diary. The following are examples of questions asked:

- "Does it matter to you how many notes you get?"
- "How do you feel about lurkers reading your diary?"
- "Do you always notice if someone hasn't written for a while?"

A qualitative content analysis was also performed on a selection of diary entries to support the observations made during participation on the types of social interaction that took place within diaries. The language of the entries was analysed for evidence of interaction aimed at particular audiences and the types of interaction that took place. Consent to study the entries was negotiated via the research diary. In all, 122 individual members took part in the study through various means, as described in Figure 3.

2006	2007	2008	
Participant observation			
Initial survey		Research diary	
12 participants		110 participants	Content analysis 30 diary entries

Figure 3: Data collection timeline

4 FINDINGS

This section provides a view of the key findings of the ethnography, identifying the overarching themes which contributed to the development of a sense of community on the site. Extensive direct verbatim quotations from study participants illustrate the key findings and provide a sense of the social scene that existed on the site. The chosen excerpts all reflect views that appear extensively in the data. All quotations are anonymous and retain the original spelling and punctuation.

4.1 Virtual settlement

According to Jones (1997), a virtual settlement functions as the foundation for a virtual community, requiring interactivity, a variety of communicators, sustained membership and a common-public-place for interaction among members. On Open Diary, the virtual settlement was based on networks of linkages among the different areas of the site, making it easy to navigate among diaries and to get a sense of current activity on the site. The diary writing genre also contributed to the virtual settlement by promoting sustained membership and interactivity.

The system provided a number of ways for users to find others to read. Entries were publicized in several ways throughout the site, and communications by registered users always included links to their diaries. Individual diary entry pages with reader notes became instances of a network of common-public-places where members were able to engage in group interaction, with the site structure creating a highly interlinked network of these spaces. This also enabled members to find new diaries to read through the notes on a favourite diary, which study participants highlighted as one of the key features of sociability on the site:

- 1) *[...] we are a 'community, and like a group of friends we 'introduce' each other to our friends and they in turn become our friends too...etc. Online life imitating offline life in so many ways.*

The diary-writing genre, as re-imagined on Open Diary, was highly interactive: writers not only expected their entries to be read by others, but also expected readers to have followed their story. Analysing the diary entry texts shows that diarists made references to previous entries and notes received, wrote explicit explanations when introducing new topics, and used language to direct their words to their readers. Open Diary members tended to make an effort to make their lives easy to follow: indeed, linear storytelling is a particular feature of online diaries, in contrast to private diaries which often have a more disjointed style (McNeill, 2003). The site system also supported this feature by making it easy to follow favourite diaries consistently through a "favourites list" providing automated notifications of new entries.

Members interacted within the site through notes. The data shows that noting was prevalent: the sample of 30 entries studied contained an average of 10 notes per entry with each note generally posted by a different diarist, and the responses by research diary participants concurred. Notes often made reference to previous notes or entries. These sequences of communication tended to be long in duration; noters left notes on the diaries they read continuously over extended periods of time, and diaries tended to be maintained for several months or years. All the diaries in the sample analysed for content had been in existence for at least a year, usually several (six years being the longest in this sample).

Next, the analysis focuses more closely on the social structures of the site and the culture which enabled experiences of community. These are identified as a culture of support, truth-telling, shared values, active readership, and privacy.

4.2 A culture of support

The previous section described the high level of interaction on the site. Open Diary gained influence in a site member's experience through continued membership and interaction with other members: as a new diarist gained readers and found others to read, he/she tended to become increasingly involved in the social activity taking place on the site:

- 2) *[When asked about motivation to continue writing] For me it's the interaction. I don't think my diary would have lasted for almost 4 years without it. I've had paper diaries since I was 12 and I would only*

ever put in a handful of entries before forgetting about it. It's my favourites that give me the desire to continue.

A certain code of conduct is inbuilt into the genre of diary-writing: personal diaries are thought to deserve respect and privacy (McNeill, 2003), and even when brought online and made public, Open Diary readers still assumed the same stance. The site rules stressed the importance of respect, and a culture of supportive, positive communication existed on the site. This culture of support is key in understanding member commitment to the community, as well as the foundations of the sense of emotional safety members felt, which enabled them to share their innermost thoughts in a seemingly public forum.

The study participants described their reader comments in predominantly positive terms: supportive, positive comments were prevalent, and the feeling of validation created by such comments was a key reward in Open Diary membership. Diarists looked for feedback and as such, were also motivated to give feedback to others.

- 3) *It's much better than an ordinary diary, because people will listen here and help you when you might need it*
- 4) *OD: A place where you lay out your most personal thoughts/feelings/reports for the potential critique of others... a place where you discover that most humans are the sort who will respond positively to authentic vulnerability with reinforcement offered even to those who are honest in reporting social actions of which we generally disapprove in theory...*

The site rules prohibited insulting and offensive language directed at other diarists, and members themselves expressed a strong belief in respecting the personal space of each diarist. Offensive or negative tones in comments were frowned upon and readers were encouraged by diary owners to simply stop reading if they reacted negatively to the contents of a diary:

- 5) *I agree it's great to see people write honestly because in real life it's often difficult to be able to open up to that extent because we may fear it comes back to bite you. I suppose that should extend to views that may not be PC. I mean, the reader can simply choose not to read any entry which offends them.*

Members described taking active role in upholding this policy by ignoring or deleting offensive notes (termed "hate notes" by site members), reporting severe offences to the site administration, and offering support to others who received such notes:

- 6) *[Question: have you ever received a "hate note"?] Of course. In any large group there are bound to be a few members that love to create drama. I just shove it aside, delete the note, and move on. If they lack such intelligence to assault me in my personal domain, they don't even deserve to be acknowledged with a response from me.*

Exceptions to this principle existed: some diarists reported enjoying heated discussions, and often those members would write about topics more likely to provoke discussion, such as politics or religion. To these members, the opportunity to argue with other diarists functioned as a motivating factor in continuing membership. However, the majority of the study participants indicated a dislike of "drama": argumentative and/or offensive commenting.

While diarists upheld certain expectations for others' behaviour in reading and commenting, they also described their efforts to avoid causing offence or "drama" through their own actions:

- 7) *I reckon that most of us censor ourselves in some way once we have a feeling of being in a 'community'. The normal rules of friendship and community then apply - convergence and not wanting to stand out too much in case you get ganged up upon.*
- 8) *I wish I didn't censor myself. [...] Certain entries I only censor because of knowing what I'm about to write would offend some of my favorite favorites. [...] I write partly for myself but mostly to explain myself to people who have become my support system.*

Diarists also reported using privacy settings to keep out those likely to be offended by particular entries, even making entries private in the case of the most sensitive subjects. At the same time, there were no absolute restrictions on subject matter and the “potential to offend” was seen as entirely subjective, dependent on who might read the entry. Diarists were naturally drawn to others who shared similar interests, world-views or life situations. Thus even public entries predominantly attracted like-minded readers, and more sensitive material could be restricted to the readership of “favourites”, who tended to be members that the diarist liked, trusted and usually had a reciprocal relationship with.

- 9) *favourites only for most of mine when I talk about other people or my inner feelings*
- 10) *Favorite Only entries are for a handful of trusted people.*

Diarists also reported using privacy settings specifically to protect themselves from negative comments:

- 11) *I went faves only as I had gotten a couple of nasty notes and I was not in the right place to deal with those. I like to have the support of the people online, their advice so wanted to stay with the people who supported me. I have only ever done a few private entries and they were solely for me and things I would not want anyone to read at all but needed out. I like being able to share with people.*

In addition to privacy settings, the ability to flexibly adjust the appearance of a diary, including the colours and fonts used on the page, contributed to the creation of personal space: the act of reading and commenting on another person's diary involved entering a page, or a set of pages, that looked different from one's own (see van Dijck, 2004 for a discussion on the materiality of diaries). Discussion of privacy settings was common, and many pages on the site displayed access restrictions either expressed by the diary owner or generated by the system, depending on the access rights of a particular reader. Thus members were very aware of being in another diarist's space and a sense of privilege was attached to such access (see quotation #24 below for a reference on “leaving” a diary).

All in all, Open Diary members were highly aware of the effect of their interactions on one another, and they moderated potentially provocative interactions through flexible privacy settings and personal censorship. At the same time, members expected a respectful stance by readers, even towards sensitive topics, and each diary space was seen as personal and thought to deserve respect. This highlights an element of conflict between the traditional view of the diary as a personal space where thoughts and feelings may be recorded with complete freedom, and the human desire to fit in and not cause conflict in a group setting, introduced as the diary is opened up to a reading public. However, Open Diary members appeared able to balance these two aims as described above.

4.3 Truth-telling and trust

McMillan & Chavis highlighted emotional safety as a key element in the feeling of membership in a community (1986:10). Central to the feeling of emotional safety within a community is being able to trust in the truthfulness of others, as well as feeling that it is safe to share one's own truth (Blanchard et al., 2011)

(McMillan, 1996). The genre of diary-writing also evokes notions of honesty and truthfulness, and Open Diary members described a widely shared assumption that other diarists wrote truthfully about their lives. Members offered their trust to others by making an emotional investment in their lives through reading and commenting on their diaries. A discovery that a diarist had been deceptive was felt as a betrayal of that trust:

12) *I would resent the untruthful diarist to some extent if it was a diary that I maintained regular contact with. I start to think of the people as "real" and they are that. I would hate to find out that I was investing so much time & concern in someone that made everything up.*

However, diarists also maintained an allowance for the subjective experience of reading: a diary should be interpreted as a believable story rather than a factual accounting of things that could be proven to have happened. Even when stories were found to be untrue, participants maintained that each diarist had the right to write whatever they wished in their diary – even lies:

13) *'Fraud' or not... It's that person's diary. It's not THEIR fault someone else became attached to their writing. I wouldn't tell someone not to write certain things in a paper journal so I won't do it online.*

The genre of writing itself was thought to include some allowance for embellishment in the name of good storytelling and personal presentation:

14) *Poetic licence. I don't think any of us put the total, unvarnished truth on here all the time. We all elaborate a little bit on the plain truth. However, full fabrication - I don't think a person could keep it up for very long and if they can, then they deserve a book contract.*

Ultimately, it was the subjective truthfulness of the writing within a given diary that mattered to participants; if the diarist told the story well and consistently, the story was seen as "their truth" within the boundaries of that diary. Dennen (2014) also found that the consistency of identity performance is more relevant in creating trust online than presenting a verifiable identity. On Open Diary, diarists expressed a dislike of significant deception, but the reader was always thought to own some responsibility for their interpretation and choice to read:

15) *I've heard rumors over the years (not in awhile though) about fake suicide threats or faked deaths or fake neediness that gets other diarists to actually kick in money or gift subscriptions. I don't believe I encountered these first-hand, and it is sad and sickening to think of. Nevertheless, I believe in freedom of speech even here (withing the scope of the rules we agree to follow, of course) and if somebody wants to waste time and energy on a lie, well, I hope I exercise my freedom of discretion and avoid being a sucker.*

Thus the community-building element of trust played a central role on the site, with members assuming what they read is true unless otherwise specified. At the same time, members described diary-writing as a creative activity, and critical reading skills were called for. This highlights another conflict between the genre of diary-writing and the assumptions involved in maintaining supportive personal relationships. While the one involves total openness spiced with creativity and even poetic license, the other requires truthfulness, authenticity and vulnerability. Again, Open Diary members seemed to be able to deal with this conflict, not least due to the experience many of them had as long-term members of the site: they were aware that people may not always write the absolute unembellished truth in their diaries, and they were able to appreciate each other's writing as a creative production as long as the line to deception was not crossed.

4.4 Shared values, fulfilled needs

A successful community is one which is able to fulfil the needs of its members efficiently. Needs fulfilment is easiest in a group whose members have shared values, as those values serve to prioritize the needs which we seek to fulfil through membership (McMillan and Chavis, 1986:13).

The study participants were very consistent in describing their experience of site membership and the needs it fulfils. The primary need fulfilled by Open Diary membership was of course the maintenance of a personal diary. This need was based on motivations traditionally associated with diary-writing: the ability to process feelings, to reflect on one's life and to record memories. However, the need to also share these reflections and records with others was very strong:

- 16) *I write because it helps me to vent my feelings and process what is going on in my life. It allows me to reflect on what is happening and look back on what I have written in the past. OD is addictive because you get feedback from people which can be very validating.*
- 17) *I write because I have a very real need to COMMUNICATE. I don't enjoy writing if nobody but me is going to read it. That pretty much sums up what draws me to this place!*

Study participants consistently spoke of a need to communicate and be heard, and described the experience of having readers a predominantly enjoyable one, not least due to the culture of support previously described. Positive comments motivated positive responses and diarists tended to find members who shared similar opinions and life situations, making it easy to respond positively. As diarists felt comfortable sharing personal information openly, mutually supportive relationships soon formed:

- 18) *It's this amazing place where you can open up yourself and your life completely, the most awesome thing is that you will find other people some who have the same interests as you and others who can just relate to what you're going through at the time. You travel with them through their lives as well, you feel their pain, share their joys you support each other, learn from each other, comfort each other.*

The validation received from others arose as a key element in many diarists' sense of community on the site. People have a strong need for reassurance that others understand and share what they see, feel and understand (McMillan and Chavis, 1986:11) and members agreed it was easy to get such reassurance on Open Diary.

- 19) *I'd describe it like an interactive diary... you still have the freedom to say what you want and express yourself but the community here that reads it and notes - especially once you have regular readers, validates those feelings. With an old fashioned paper diary... it gets out but you really don't get any feedback that others have the same feelings or it's normal to feel that way or what not.*

4.5 Reading for entertainment, commenting for friendship

While diarists tended to name the need to write and communicate as their primary motivation for using the site, the ability to reciprocally read others became a key element in supporting that motivation as site membership continued. Reading was seen as an integral – as well as thoroughly enjoyable – part of membership:

- 20) *I've always kept a paper diary... and this one was even better. I was "meeting" people and getting in on their lives from the inside out. Completely fascinating.*

- 21) *I like to read diaries of people whose life seem so interesting, people who write often and really give me a glimpse into their lives and its not like I am reading some random persons diary, its like I am reading something a friend wrote.*

Reading a personal diary in secret is traditionally frowned upon, and at the time of this study, a feeling of voyeurism could still accompany the reading of online diaries (McNeill, 2003) – whether this is still the case in today's changed sharing landscape is debatable (McNeill & Zuern, 2015). On the other hand, lurking – reading without making one's presence known – is a prevalent practice online, not seen negatively by participants but rather as a normal part of getting to know a community (Nonnecke et al., 2006). Lurking was also a common and accepted practice on Open Diary. Diarists shared an awareness that everyone reads without commenting sometimes, and site members felt that the intention behind lurking was rarely malicious:

- 22) *One can find another diarist's life fascinating and want to follow along, but not necessarily want to make any comment. It's not a dark, stalkerish thing. It's just a quiet interest.*
- 23) *I sometimes lurk simply because I find what the other person has to say is interesting, even if I know nothing about it.*

In fact, lurking tended to eventually lead to communication between reader and writer. Many described lurking as a method of finding out whether the diarist in question is interesting enough to begin commenting. Leaving a note was seen as a commitment to keep reading, not to be made lightly:

- 24) *I HAVE lurked on people's diaries. For a while, then I either 'leave' or start noting. I like to get to know someone first - my notes to someone I've hardly read won't have much value. Also, I have a lot of favs already. I like to know first whether I WANT to get involved or not. I want to know LIKE them, and have something in common with them.*

Notes functioned as the mechanism for building relationships on the site: according to members, leaving a note on a new diary was not only an indication of interest, but also an invitation to read one's own diary. If the diarist thus approached chose to return the favour of reading and noting, a declaration of mutual interest was seen to have been made. This interest could then begin to develop into the supportive relationships described by the study participants.

4.6 Privacy

As noted, the personal diary is commonly seen as a private object to be hidden from prying eyes. Why were Open Diary members then happy to put their diaries online, making them potentially accessible to a vast number of anonymous readers?

While some diarists used their diaries to communicate with friends and family, the majority of study participants said they wished to keep their diaries hidden from those they knew outside of Open Diary. Yet most of these users felt comfortable keeping public diaries.

- 25) *I don't want family and friends to read my diary because I want to write anything and everything here. I don't care if strangers know because they don't know who I am.*
- 26) *Whether I'm online or offline, there is no part of my life that I keep a secret from anyone.. The only thing I DO keep a secret is where I write online, and what my diary name is.. While people in my life know I keep a diary, I just don't want them READING it.*

It has already been noted how the site rules and culture resulted in a feeling of emotional safety; negative feedback was unusual and diarists trusted that their writing would be treated with respect. The feeling of safety was strengthened by the existence of clear boundaries on the site, in the shape of expected behaviour as well as access restrictions. An important role was played by the privacy settings available to the user: settings could be adjusted for each entry separately, allowing the diarist to restrict access to some entries while leaving others completely public. Note privacy could be similarly controlled: many respondents only allowed comments by registered site users. The site was also set up so that diary contents were not made available to search engines, making diaries practically impossible to find unless a link was provided by the owner. Members described a sense of seclusion thus created: although a diarist might keep a completely public diary, visible traffic (in the shape of notes) from outside the site was likely to be low, and the likelihood of a family member or friend finding the diary – as long as the diarist did not inadvertently give a clue to its whereabouts – almost non-existent.

However, by far the most often cited protector of privacy by study participants was anonymity. The site rules discouraged posting of personally identifying information, and most members protected their identity by inventing pseudonyms for the people and places they mentioned in entries and supplying only generic location information or none at all. As a result, users could post photos if they so chose, and talk in great detail about their daily lives, yet disclose no information that could be used to identify them. Study participants described this as liberating: protected by pseudonyms, they felt they could share their thoughts freely, no matter how intimate the topic:

27) *This is completely as anonymous as you feel like it should be. You can write about ANYTHING. If you want to write about something completely graphic and too personal but are afraid of people knowing who you are, just don't tell anyone.*

This did not prevent diarists from forming close relationships with one another. While diarists avoided full identification based on name and location, they did not abstain from personal disclosure, but wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings openly. According to participants, privacy settings allowed for highly confidential topics to be discussed:

28) *Here on OD I have much more freedom because of the anonymity to be myself... to reach out to others... to share myself with others in a much deeper way and to have them share themselves with me. I get an awful lot of private notes... from people who share very private information. And I am touched and stand in awe of their trust in me.*

Diarists reported that the friendships formed through this trust and openness often extended outside Open Diary, to other forms of communication and face-to-face meetings. Pseudonymity and the site settings merely allowed users to maintain boundaries between outsiders, fellow members and trusted friends. In the end, this flexible identification allowed site members to write with complete openness. Diarists described feeling liberated from the restrictions placed on interaction in their everyday lives:

29) *I don't 'like' to write here; I need it. I'm fresh to this site, but already I have been able to release demons that not even years of therapy could help me with. This is a place where you can be completely honest and completely unknown. You could be reading your next door neighbor, and you'd never know it.*

It was this ability to share one's most personal feelings and experiences openly that functioned as the cornerstone of the community on Open Diary.

5 DISCUSSION

The results of this long-term ethnographic study display Open Diary as a website that inspired a sense of community in its members, based on the traditional values and rewards of diary-writing combined with the affordances of an online environment. This sense of community was built upon the openness with which diarists shared their thoughts and feelings, and the respectful and supportive stance they took towards each other's writings. Open Diary members felt safe in subjecting their thoughts and emotions to potential criticism from readers, and being able to read others, for entertainment as well as relationship-building, provided additional motivation to participate. The flexible privacy settings and the ability to extensively control the appearance of one's diary gave members a sense of control over their own spaces and contributed to a sense of respect towards other members.

Members developed strong bonds with each other, strengthened by the culture of support that existed on the site. Diarists tended to display the same attitude towards others as they expected to receive themselves, and supportive and respectful behaviour is highly rewarding: as members received positive feedback on their writing, they felt supported and validated. The site provided many ways to find other like-minded members, further reducing the likelihood of conflict when discussing sensitive topics openly. Lurking was seen as a sensible step to take before committing to readership: truly supportive and insightful feedback could only be given based on an established relationship.

Members' emotional safety was also protected by the boundaries existing on and around the site. These included site technical features which enabled members to restrict entry access and create a sense of seclusion, and a lack of search engine crawling, so diarists were able to trust that unwanted readers would not find their diaries even when they were totally public. This sense of seclusion was enhanced by the site policy of anonymity. Members protected their identity through the use of pseudonyms and lack of identifying information in public entries, allowing them to write with freedom and honesty.

Open Diary represents an important period of internet history: the beginnings of the era of social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In the late 1990's, different forms of autobiographical writing online began to emerge, with online diaries and blogs at the forefront (McNeill & Zuern, 2015). Open Diary presents a particular example of the personal diary being reinterpreted online. Through the tools that the site offered, along with the site rules and descriptions and the members' own understandings of diary-writing, practices developed on the site that resulted in the unique community described here. These tools, descriptions, understandings and practices are what distinguished Open Diary from other life writing sites, including other diary sites and blogs.

Much of what distinguished Open Diary from other similar sites is related to privacy; on Open Diary, the traditional understandings related to diary-writing – total privacy and hiddenness – influenced the design to a much greater extent than seen in modern-day blogs, for instance. Bloggers generally use pseudonyms to protect their identity, in order to be able to write openly (Dennen, 2014; Hollenbaugh & Everett, 2013). While pseudonyms were also important to Open Diary members, the flexible privacy settings and the lack of search engine crawling functioned as a much more powerful tool in creating a strong sense of private space, allowing for the very open sharing of highly personal information seen on the site. In her study of a blogging network, Dennen (2014) found that the bloggers were more sensitive regarding their audience and the level of openness with which they share personal insights; although pseudonymity protected them to some extent, a perceived increase in readers still caused some writers to restrain themselves. Additionally, her study found that blogging has a public element which was largely missing from Open Diary: some bloggers viewed their writing as a tool for political discussion and spreading awareness more widely. Although political discussion

occurred on Open Diary, the more closed nature of the community meant that it was rare for a diarist to gain exposure outside the site, and for the majority of members the experience and aim of writing remained purely personal.

Despite the differences in being able to know one's audience, *having* an audience was just as important to Open Diary members as it is for bloggers (Miller & Shepherd, 2004; Dennen, 2014). However, simply having readers is not enough for community-creation, as Blanchard's study of the popular cooking blog showed; the relatively loose linkages among the readers did not suffice to produce a strong sense of community (2004). In contrast, the links between members on Open Diary tended to be reciprocal: finding a new reader for one's own diary meant also finding a new diary to read. The site culture promoted the finding and retaining of an audience that responded with empathy and support, and the relationships that were thus created contributed significantly to the stability and longevity of the community on the site.

Thus, the genre of diary writing was instrumental in creating a feeling of affinity among the diarists, as it strengthened their expectations of openness, honesty and respect. Rotman et al. (2009) studied video-blogging on YouTube and found similar feelings of affinity and a sense of community even in the absence of extensive ties with other members, suggesting that the immediacy and intimate nature of the visual genre of video-blogging as practiced on YouTube resulted in a feeling of connection to the surrounding social landscape. These results suggest that open, authentic and reciprocal sharing is at the heart of building meaningful human connections online, and the challenge for developers who wish to encourage community-building is to provide tools that enable and inspire such sharing.

When open and authentic sharing can be promoted, and relationship-building enabled as it was on Open Diary, the lifespan and reach of the community thus created can extend beyond the technology that first enabled it. Having been first opened in October 1998, Open Diary was permanently shut down in February 2014. The increasing technical problems arising on the site prior to its closure had motivated two site members to begin developing new sites to replace Open Diary. Some 5000-6000 users migrated to EasyDiary² and Prosebox³ after the closure of Open Diary, and preliminary observation of these sites suggests that many of the practices and relationships created on Open Diary have survived the move to new locations. Facebook groups devoted to Open Diary are also still active in April 2016. Apart from the continued life of the community in new technological surroundings, the Open Diary community also engendered many face-to-face meetings throughout its history, showing that the relationships created on the site had the tendency to extend outside the site.

It must be stressed that this study refers to a time when the sharing of personal information online had not yet been transformed by the developments in social media usage, availability and variety seen in recent years. If Open Diary members began their writing practice influenced by their experience of keeping a pen-and-paper journal, today's social web tends to transform individuals into self-documenters engaging in "everyday autobiography", with pieces of personal experience being recorded in multiple ways on multiple sites (McNeill & Zuern, 2015; Kitzmann, 2015). In this landscape, it is difficult to see a future for the simple, long-form, self-contained diary entries found on Open Diary, lacking in images, widgets and links to the world outside the site; and particularly for the empathy, respect and community-building that accompanied those diary entries, which depended on the members having a particular understanding of how other people's writing should be treated. Prosebox and EasyDiary inherited these cultural understandings from Open Diary

² <http://easydiary.ewsentinel.com/>

³ <https://www.prosebox.net/>

through the members who crossed over to the new sites. They have thus been able to keep alive the legacy of Open Diary to some degree, however, the new sites have not gained significant audiences comparable to Open Diary at its most popular.

The rate of technological development and its unpredictable effects on online social interaction therefore makes it crucial that analysts and developers understand the historical and cultural landscape that surrounds the creation of a particular social environment. Since the performing of this study, the changes that have occurred and continue to occur in how we use the internet have produced new thinking on the nature of life writing today (McNeill & Zuern, 2015, and other articles in the same issue) as well as on the function and applicability of the theory of SOVC in the changing circumstances in which interaction online now takes place (Rotman & Wu, 2014). While this study has described a social environment largely unaffected by the changes these writers discuss, it also argues that, due to these changes, such a social environment may be difficult or even impossible to recreate. This speaks strongly to the importance of performing such long-term studies that aim to capture and describe community phenomena online, to understand their impact on human sociality, accompanied by continuing theoretical development to improve our understanding of how humans interact and form meaningful connections online.

6 CONCLUSION

This study has described the community at the historic online diary site Open Diary. The concepts of the theory of sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus 2002, 2004) were useful in identifying and describing the cultural and technical elements which contributed to the unique community experience created on the site. The study highlighted the role of the genre of the personal diary, familiar to the members (as well as the developers) of the site in the late 1990s and early 2000s, in shaping the activities and the attitudes of the site members. The study argues that this early form of sharing online, and the stable, strong community it engendered, may be difficult to replicate in the current social landscape of the web, due to the vastly different experiences and expectations of modern technology users.

The study confirms that online interaction can offer particular tools for building strong community feelings: Open Diary provided unique affordances for sharing and mutual support which would not be available in a strictly offline setting. An increased (and continued) understanding of these sharing practices in producing experiences of support and community is crucial, as it has many applications in e.g. increasing participation in society and providing various types of social support more flexibly and speedily. The case highlights the power of the diary as a tool not just for self-reflection but for connecting individuals, encouraging empathy, and building strong support networks when shared. However, to share is not enough; the sharing must be supported by a sense of security in the technical and social environment, created through established practices and shared understandings of appropriate behaviour among the individuals involved.

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