University of Tennessee, Knoxville
Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange

Masters Theses | Graduate School

12-2011

Communicating via Knoxblab

Roger Kevin Gray
University of Tennessee - Knoxville, rgray17@utk.edu

Recommended Citation
Gray, Roger Kevin, "Communicating via Knoxblab. " Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, 2011.
http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_gradthes/1071

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact trace@utk.edu.

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Roger Kevin Gray entitled "Communicating via Knoxblab." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science, with a major in Communication and Information.

John Haas, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Virginia Kupritz, Courtney Wright

Accepted for the Council:
Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Communicating via Knoxblab

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Science Degree

The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Roger Kevin Gray
December, 2011

Copyright © 2011 by Roger Kevin Gray
All rights reserved.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to Blabbers everywhere in the sincere hope that it will kill downtown.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge John Haas, Virginia Kupritz and Courtney Wright, all of whom encouraged and aided in the preparation of this thesis. Additionally, I would like to sincerely thank the members of the Knoxblab community who gave me their time and their words in order to assist in this project. Green cubes all around.

Abstract

This study is a Uses and Gratifications based look at motivations surrounding long-term participation in an internet discussion forum and perceived effects of this participation on users' social lives. Members of the Knoxville, TN based web forum "Knoxblab" were interviewed for the study. Participants indicated that the forum is a tool by which social ties are maintained and developed, and they indicated that membership in the forum community is perceived as having positive effects on social activity. Consistent with traditional Uses and Gratifications Theory, results suggest that participants are motivated by reasons related to information sharing and entertainment, though web forums and other forms of computer mediated communication (CMC) expand traditional Uses and Gratifications theory in that users both receive and generate content. Limitations and suggestions for further study are provided.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1 Introduction 1
Chapter 2 Literature Review 4
Uses and Gratifications Theory 4
Virtual Communities 6
Motivations and Gratifications 8
On-line and off-line interaction 10
Rationale 10
Research Questions 11
Chapter 3 Methods 12
Participants 12
Measure 13
Procedures 13
Analysis 14
Chapter 4 Results 16
Table 1. 16
Themes 17
Chapter 5 Discussion 23
List of References 33
Appendix 39
Attachment A 40
Attachment B 42
Attachment C 43
Attachment D 79
Vita 94

Chapter 1

Introduction

The internet has transformed the way we communicate in recent years. No longer limited to face-to-face or telephone based communication and unhampered by the time constraints of traditional postal services, people now regularly use the web to coordinate work and school activities, to share photos and keep in touch with friends. For many, the creation and consumption of user-generated content on the web facilitates not only social networking but also self-identity (Dye, 2007).

On-line user-generated content comes in many forms: social media sites like Facebook and Twitter are ubiquitous on laptops and smart phones. Web forums or message boards (the two terms are used interchangeably) which allow multiple users to interact and "converse" on topics are a common form of on-line interaction (Leung, 2009). The rise of social media and on-line web forums presents new opportunities and challenges for communication researchers. For example, researchers have studied the effects of computer mediated communication (CMC) on loneliness (Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003) and the uses of CMC in crises situations (Shklovski, Burke, Kiesler, & Kraut, 2010).

Research into web based interactions is important because these virtual communities are recognized as being common resources for the dissemination of information, entertainment and social networking (Aikat, 2009; Urista, Dong, & Day, 2009). CMC has become, in a very short time, a guiding influence in the lives of many people (Dye, 2007) and the widespread adoption of new ways of communicating easily

justifies research into the reasons people express for generating posts and interacting on web forums. People are connecting to one another on-line and these interactions are shown to affect people's decisions regarding personal relationships and behavior and people place high value on online interpersonal bonds (Ko, Roberts, & Cho, 2006).

Social networks have grown both larger and smaller due to CMC. (Dye, 2007) People are not necessarily tied to any particular geographic locale, but can and do find others with whom to share particular interests anywhere in the world. While CMC allows for asynchronous communication, it holds the potential for sharing information much more quickly than ever before. Using the internet, a person in Tennessee can send a message to a person in South Korea, and the message can be received virtually immediately—though it is up to the person in South Korea to decide when (or if) he or she will actually read the message.

The goal of this project is as follows: The researcher seeks to explore users' reasons for participation in a web forum and the perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives. This research is based in a "uses and gratifications" theoretical framework. Exploring web forums from the users' perspective will offer insight into the reasons why people choose to use web forums as a means of communication and social networking.

This document is organized around a review of the literature involving uses and gratifications from its inception to its current state. This will be followed by reviews of pertinent literature regarding the conceptualization of virtual communities, the motivations and gratifications associated with participation in virtual communities, and

the effects of modality switching between on-line and off-line interaction.

The rationale for the study follows the literature review and the researcher will then present the research questions. The final section of the thesis lays out the methods performed in conducting the research, describes the research participants, indicates the measures and procedures used and ends with sections of analysis and discussion.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory

The Uses and Gratification approach to media usage has historically been based in the concept of a collective audience responding to media as a reaction to a variety of sociological and/or psychological needs (Westerik, Renckstorf, Lammers, & Wester, 2006). People use media—media doesn't use people—for their own ends and goals; as such, people actively make choices regarding media use and are not simply reacting to a stimulus put before them. In fact, the idea that audience members' are motivated and involved consumers of media has always been central to this theoretical framework (Haridakis & Whitmore, 2006; Rubin, 1993). The uses and gratifications approach assumes that media use is purposeful and that patterns of use reflect individuals' involvement levels and needs gratification (Donohew, Palmgreen, & Rayburn II, 1987). In other words, people make choices about what media to use in order to satisfy their particular needs. What media they choose, and how they use it, will vary depending upon their expectations and how well satisfied they are with the results.

According to Rubin (1993), contemporary Uses and Gratifications Theory rests on several assumptions. Primarily, users are seen as active and goal directed in their choices of media. These choices are made based on what users perceive as being the best choice to gratify their individual needs. These needs are based upon highly individual social and psychological factors, and those factors become a large part of the basis for media choices. Media is, for many, an alternative to other forms of communication, and

people are usually more influential than media.

As media use has expanded into the modern use of CMC, uses and gratifications research has expanded into the use of the internet as a source for seeking political opinion and information (Kaye & T. J. Johnson, 2004), as a social action (Westerik et al., 2006), and, perhaps most importantly, as a source whereby the audience directly affects the medium of communication by become directly involved in the generation of widely disseminated content (Dye, 2007).

No longer is the media user merely an audience member whose choice involves which newspaper to buy or what radio station to tune to. With CMC, the audience member has become directly involved as an active participant in the generation of media. The traditional letter to the editor has been replaced by a comments directly placed (and often immediately published) on a newspaper's web site, and radio callers can now join in a station's message board. Those who traditionally had little voice can easily let their opinions known by direct feedback and audience participation (Klein, 2009) thus potentially changing the very uses to which participants put media. Research into such media usage is generally shown to pertain to motives involving entertainment seeking and information seeking as well as socialization (Chung & Yoo, 2008).

Additionally, research has quite naturally explored factors involving the uses and gratifications of such CMC based social networking sites as Facebook and Twitter. By and large, this literature points toward the, perhaps obvious, use of social networking to maintain social ties (Ross et al., 2009).

While the idea that social networking sites may be used to further social ties may

seem to be tautological, the significance of the role of community and group belonging in web forums should not be taken for granted. The following section of the paper is a summary and synthesis of literature regarding virtual communities which is pertinent to the current research project.

Virtual Communities

The concept of "community" is very common in the world of web forums (Porter, 2004). A cursory look at any number of public web forums reveals that members often very casually refer to themselves as members of an on-line community within the purview of the on-line world. In order to better understand what researchers have regarding the ideas of virtual community membership, this section of the literature review will focus on the definitions and understanding of what virtual communities are and the impact that virtual community membership has on individuals, how geography affects virtual community membership, and the interaction between on-line and off-line social networks.

There is an old joke—sometimes attributed to television's Homer Simpson—to the effect that the internet was created so that nerds could talk to each other about how much they like Star Trek. While this quip is intended to be funny, the humor is based in the common recognition that people often turn to on-line communities for discussion of shared interests.

A "community" can roughly be defined as a social organization of people sharing knowledge, values and goals, and the definition of a "virtual" community can be extended to include those who regularly interact via CMC to while sharing common

knowledge, values and goals (J. Lee & H. Lee, 2010). Porter (Porter, 2004) defined virtual communities as "an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms." The idea of protocols and norms as a defining feature of a virtual community is in line with understanding web forums through a uses and gratifications lens. By establishing group norms, expectations can be easily set and can contribute to choices about media use as a result of those expectations and gratifications. Porter (2004) goes on to describe virtual communities as having some (varying) degrees of the following attributes: a sense of purpose, a sense of virtual or real space, a design of interaction, particular patterns of interaction, and a profit model, wherein users acquire some degree of "reward" for the community participation.

Users of web forums have been shown to have high levels of affect commitment to their virtual communities, which in turn fosters further group participation (Jin, Park, & Kim, 2010). In fact, researchers have repeatedly shown that commitment to on-line communities is seen as a rewarding source of socialization for people with a variety of particular psychological and social needs (Rodham, Gavin, & Miles, 2007; McCabe, 2009; Richardson et al., 2010). Consistent with common definitions and ideas about off-line interpersonal relationships, the idea of trust is considered an important factor in the development of CMC communities. Levels of trust and development of trust are seen as functions of the amount of exchange that takes place on-line and users' perceptions of those interactions (Beaudoin, 2008; Blanchard, Welbourne, & Broughton, 2011).

Not all studies of the roles of virtual communities have focused purely or even

primarily on on-line interaction. Web forums which focus on geographic areas (rather than particular individual interests) are shown to be used as rallying points for social and political activism with both the on-line and off-line communities. That is to say, the on-line forum is used as a public message board for the dissemination of information pertinent to a particular geographic area. Study into geographically based virtual communities has been explored in terms of crises management (Shklovski et al., 2010), involvement in political or social action (Kleinke, 2008; Lev-On, 2010) as well as a general change in the way that people define and think of their social networks (Erickson, 2010; Ratti et al., 2010).

The next section of the literature review will deal with motivations and gratifications currently found to be associated with web forums and other varieties of CMC.

Motivations and Gratifications

The speed with which social networking has become exceedingly common has led to research investigating the motivations for its use and the perceived gratifications associated with CMC. From a uses and gratifications perspective, research clearly shows that people involve themselves in virtual community for a variety of reasons, primarily for the ability to socialize as well as information seeking and sharing, and entertainment (Chung & Yoo, 2008). On-line networking is popular because people see it as a way to maintain on-line and off-line social networks (Urista et al., 2009) while establishing or maintaining social credibility, trust and a degree of psychological empowerment (Jin et al., 2010) that is tied to the ability to manage the amount of information received

(Beaudoin, 2008). The ability to not only consume content as with traditional media sources (such as television, radio and newspapers) but also to generate content is, perhaps unsurprisingly, associated with maintain community ties: those who generate content feel that they are engaging in a conversation with others and are an active part of the communication process (Dye, 2007; Leung, 2009). Those who generate high amounts of content often report self-satisfaction and a high degree of in-group status as a result of their participation (Johnson, 2008).

Still, generation of content is not the sole motivation for people to become involved in web forums or other forms of virtual communities. Writing on a message board is not the same as reading a message board. Not all web users generate content, and relatively few generate high quantities of content (Courtois, Mechant, De Marez, & Verleye, 2009). Lifestyle and socio-economic conditions affect the motivations and situations which guide individuals' media use (Donohew et al., 1987). Frequent participation in a web forum requires time and resources (i.e. access to an internet connection) that may affect one's ability to participate regardless of desire or motives.

With so much attention being paid to the role of virtual communities on-line, we must now turn to the interaction between on-line and off-line behaviors.

On-line and off-line interaction

There are on-line communities that exist purely on-line and in the virtual realm, and there are those whose members interact not only via CMC but also face to face (FtF). These groups with regularly mixed interaction are said to have higher degrees of group cohesion and trust as there is more emphasis on relational development (Matzat, 2010).

In contrast, groups with low or non-existent levels of FtF interaction tend to be less cohesive and users express greater degrees of uncertainty, though perhaps higher levels of idealization (Ramirez & Zhang, 2007). Group communication, as that in a web forum, tends to expand off-line social contacts when high degrees of members' activity are based in off-line networks (Matzat, 2010). Also, literature shows that those who use CMC for highly social reasons, such as to be part of a group and to get a variety of opinions may be less satisfied with a purely virtual community (Pornsakulvanich, Haridakis, & Rubin, 2008). A logical assumption worth investigating would be that those individuals would be likely to seek out FtF interaction with members of their own virtual networks.

Rationale

Based on the totality of the available literature, the current study into a locally based web forum is justified as an exploration of our current understanding of uses and gratifications perspective as it pertains to web forums. As stated above, the goal of this research is to explore users' expressed reasons for participation in a web forum and the perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives, both on and off-line.

In total, the review of the literature suggests that users of a geographically based web forum might use such a forum for a variety of social and information sharing reasons, and that participation in a web forum might affect users' lives off-line. Such research would give greater insight to the processes by which CMC affects decisions made about information seeking, entertainment, and socialization. The Knoxville, TN based web forum "Knoxblab" is an excellent candidate for this research into the uses and gratifications associated with active web forum participation. It is a well established forum with a large, fairly stable and highly communicative membership. Membership is free and open to the public. The researcher is an active member of the community and has personal knowledge that social interaction is highly mixed—many members regularly socialize both on-line and off-line.

Research Questions

After carefully considering the pertinent theoretical concerns present in the literature and the theoretical concerns of the uses and gratifications perspective, the researcher poses the following questions as the basis of this proposed study:

Research Question 1: What reasons do users of Knoxblab give as motivation for participating in the forum?

Research Question 2: What benefits do users of Knoxblab perceive as a result of participating in the forum?

Research Question 3: How do users of Knoxblab perceive their participation in the web forum as affecting their on-line and off-line behaviors?

The methods section will explain the manner in which this research has attempted to answer the research questions.

Chapter 3

Methods

As previously stated, this project seeks to explore users' reasons for participation in a web forum and perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives, both on and off-line. The researcher used in-depth interviews with long-term members of the Knoxblab community (Blabbers) and those interviews have been analyzed for common themes in an attempt to answer the research questions. The interviews provided the researcher with direct testimonials regarding the perceived reasons for participation in a web forum and the perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives. The following sub-sections will outline the participants in the study, the measures used, and the procedures followed in collecting and analyzing data.

Participants

The eight participants in this study were all adult users of Knoxblab. All participation was voluntary. The researcher is an active member of the web forum and has personal relationships with and knowledge of the participants. Participants were chosen to be interviewed until data saturation was achieved. Further rationale is explained later in the analysis section.

The participants were chosen by selecting members of the Knoxblab community who were known to have experiences that might allow insight into the research questions posed in this study. This was a purposive sample. All participants had at least 1000 posts on Knoxblab at the time of the interview in order to show a long-term association

with the message board. All participants are residents Knoxville, TN or its nearby surroundings. Most of them live near downtown Knoxville; all of them frequently socialize together both on Knoxblab and face-to-face.

Their ages range from approximately 40 to approximately 60, and all are, from outward signs, economically middle-class to upper middle-class—certainly, they all have regular access to the internet. Most have graduate degrees; all have some education beyond high school. All are employed in some professional capacity. Several of them are employed in various facilities in Knoxville print media. Five are men and three are women.

Measures

An interview guide was created specifically for this study. The interview guide was designed to elicit the motivations, gratifications and effects that Knoxblab users perceive to be associated with their use of the web forum. The interview guide consists of questions about the users' general level of participation in the web forum, about the users' motivations for reading and creating posts on the forum, and about the effects of participation on users' lives both off-line and on-line. The interview guide can be found at the end of this proposal as Attachment A.

Procedures

Participants were contacted with a formal request for participation by e-mail. The content of the e-mail is can be found at the end of this proposal as Attachment B. As stated in the request e-mail, the interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis, and the participants' identities remain confidential. Interviews were conducted at the

participants' convenience.

The project, including the above proposed measures and procedures, has been reviewed and granted IRB approval. The IRB number is 8383 B.

Analysis

The individual interviews were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interview transcriptions were then used to perform thematic content analysis. The transcriptions, which have been edited to maintain the participants' confidentiality, can be found at the end of this document as Attachment C. Editing was done in a manner designed to retain as much of the original speakers' verbatim responses as possible while maintaining confidentiality. For example, names were replaced with pronouns.

The thematic content analysis was performed by the researcher using the same principles and procedures developed by Spradley (1979), in that verbatim responses were sorted so themes could be identified. Transcriptions were broken down and individual, verbatim responses (included terms) were assigned to common themes (cover terms) using appropriate semantic relationships. For example, included terms dealing with reasons to create a post were grouped under the same theme. Each response under this theme was grouped with the semantic relationship "X" is a reason to "create a post."

In order to group the included terms appropriately and to discover authentic, meaningful cover terms, the researcher considered direct verbatim responses to direct questions, but also took into account the context of statements made throughout the conversation. For example, the researcher's question "Why do you choose to use Knoxblab?" was often met with a variation of "I use it because of X, Y, and Z." In these

cases, “X, Y, and Z” would likely each be an individual included term grouped under a common cover with an appropriate semantic relationship, perhaps something like “X (is a reason to) choose to use Knoxblab.” Other terms would be included under this cover when the context of the statement made such inclusion appropriate.

Ongoing thematic analysis revealed that redundancy had been reached with the 8 participants initially contacted for participation. Because of the purposive nature of the sample, which required that all participants were socially active both on and off Knoxblab, the achievement of redundancy with this sample size is not surprising (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). The researcher determined that redundancy had been achieved when analysis found that all participants were giving responses that clearly and naturally fell into a limited variety of inter-related and repeated themes with no new categories emerging or included terms dangling on their own. Individuals were giving responses and examples which echoed one another highly. They frequently cited not only similar responses but often discussed the same shared incidents and experiences.

The analysis itself was performed by parsing the transcriptions into short but semantically meaningful phrases which were printed onto individual strips of paper. The strips were then physically sorted into groupings which formed the first basis for the larger themes. These groupings were then refined multiple times in order to find the themes most salient to the study. This analysis ultimately found a total of 18 cover terms derived from a total of 263 included terms. The complete list of included terms, semantic relationships, and cover terms are included as Attachment D in the appendix. The cover terms are explained individually in the following section.

Chapter 4

Results

The interview and content analysis results are presented in this section. As previously stated, individual responses from the interviews were assigned as included terms (or themes) and each was linked semantically to an overarching theme. Table 1 displays an example of each of the 18 themes with an example cover term and the semantic relationship.

Table 1.

Included Term	Semantic Relationship	Cover Term
You always have people around	is a reason to	use the Blab for social uses
You get other people's impressions of things	is a reason to	use the Blab that blends social and information sharing uses
It's a forum for local politics	is a reason to	use the Blab for news related information sharing
Where to get your car fixed	is an example of	personal needs based information requested and discussed on the Blab
Entertainment	is a reason to	use the Blab for entertainment
Are they helpful?	is a way of	determining whether to meet a new Blabber FtF
They never answer any questions	is a reason to	avoid meeting a new Blabber FtF
Anyone who seems intelligent	is a reason to	meet a new Blabber FtF
You have a rep for being credible or not after a while	is a way of	determining if information on the Blab is reliable
If certain people are posting	is a way of	choosing what to read on the Blab
I'm not adding anything that hasn't already been thought of	is a reason to	avoid posting
Just to share something	is a reason to	create a post
Green cubes are pretty much "attaboys"	is a way of	explaining cubes (the reputation feature)
That was great	is an example of	a message sent by green cubes
They want you to go away	is an example of	a message sent by red cubes
Red cubes seem spiteful	is an expression of	attitude about red cubes
Some of them have become friends	is a way that	the Blab has affected off-line social interaction
Off-line discourse is more civil	is a perception of	the difference between CMC and FtF interaction

Themes

Use the Blab for social uses

The included terms that are fall into this category reflect reasons given for using the Blab that stress social connections or a sense of community without emphasizing particular kinds of content. Participants gave these responses when talking about using the Blab for social reasons: "You always have people around." "There's connectivity to the community." "I'm interested in the different people that are on there." "It became a virtual social life." "It's a great way to get to know people."

Use the Blab that blends social and information sharing uses

This theme covers responses that involve an emphasis on the role of community in information sharing. The responses indicate that information retrieval and distribution are perceived to be social activities, not simply a means to an end. Responses include "I've found books, movies, music, food through people's recommendations." "If the road's are icy, somebody's posted about it." "Seeing what people say is important." "I want these people to inform me of what's going on and what their opinions are."

Use the Blab for news related information sharing

This theme covers responses that specifically refer to using Knoxblab as a way of acquiring or distributing information related to news. These interview responses tend to focus on political information as well as local, national and international news items. Responses include: "It's a forum for local politics." "You get news about local events" "There's a lot of local politics." "Local activities." "The Blab can break news faster than

anybody." "My substitute for reading the news." "Political issues that I may not have been informed about."

Personal needs based information requested and discussed on the Blab

The included terms grouped under this cover indicate examples of information to fulfill individual needs. Unlike information about news or political subjects, these topics refer to more common, pragmatic needs and desires for daily life. Responses include: "Good gutter people." "Where to get your car fixed." "Need a job" "I've asked about firewood." "Restaurants, food, cooking."

Use the Blab for entertainment

This cover term includes several statements to the effect that the Blab is, in itself, a form of entertainment. This reason to use the Blab is distinct from cover terms which include statements indicating that the Blab is used to find information about local entertainment related events. They were generally gathered in response to a direct question which asked the participant why he or she chooses to use the Blab. Probe questions often revealed responses which were grouped under other, more specifically appropriate themes. This "entertainment" category was devised to show the commonality of the word "entertainment" as a brief answer to the question. Responses include: "Entertainment" "It's very entertaining." "Entertainment value."

Determining whether to meet a new Blabber FtF

The participants expressed these included terms as factors that would influence their attitudes about meeting a Blabber face-to-face for the first time. Examples include:

"Are they helpful?" "The language they used." "Third-party validation." "How they treat people." "Opinions"

Avoid meeting a new Blabber FtF

These responses all indicate qualities that would negatively influence the desire to engage with a Blabber face-to-face for the first time. Responses include: "They never answer any questions." "Are they just mean?" "Their views are bizarre." "They tend to attack."

Meet a new Blabber FtF

In contrast to the previous theme, the responses that fall under this cover state qualities that would positively enhance attitudes about meeting a Blabber face-to-face for the first time. Responses include: "If they've written stuff over a period of time that I found interesting or funny or snipey." "If somebody has interesting things to say." "Anyone who seems intelligent is worth meeting." "Somebody who is not too confrontational."

Determining if information on the Blab is reliable

This theme covers the reasons given for determining the trustworthiness of information gathered on the Blab. Responses include: "You have a rep for being reliable or not after a while." "Straightforward stuff is pretty reliable." "We tend to assume that, if people post things, they mean them." "It depends on who said what and what sort of credibility do they have to begin with."

Choosing what to read on the Blab

The included terms in this category outline the motivations behind the choice to read or follow particular threads. Responses include: “If certain people are posting.” “There are people whose tastes I respect or I’m interested in their opinions.” “Depends on who starts it.” “I’m interested in threads about local events” “I look for local political things.”

Avoid posting

This cover term envelopes reasons the participants gave for being reticent to create posts. Responses include: “I’m not adding anything that hasn’t been thought of.” “Many people are more knowledgeable.” “Most of what I was saying was redundant.”

Create a post

In direct contrast to the previous theme, many reasons were given to create a new post, either in a new thread or in a pre-existing thread. During the analysis, this theme was broken down into a selection of appropriate sub-themes. Results include: “Just to share something.” “If somebody says “Where’s a good place to eat?” “In response or reaction to something that’s already there.” “If I have something that’s funny.” “If I can explain something.” “If I need to get information out to a large group of people.”

Explaining cubes (the reputation feature)

The Blab contains a system known as “Cubes” whereby users can add to or deduct from the reputation of another user. Green cubes enhance reputation and red cubes detract from it. This theme lists the participants explanations of the cubes.

Responses include: “It’s a good way to message people.” “A system by which other members of the community can approve or disapprove of things that other people have written.” “Red cubing is kind of like you don’t like something somebody writes.” “The green cubes are used to rank users.” “They became a weird social currency.”

A message sent by a green cube

This theme illustrates the symbolic meanings associated with green cubes. Responses include: “That was great.” “You got a point.” “Green cubes are pretty much ‘attaboys’.”

A message sent by red cube

This theme illustrates the symbolic meanings associated with red cubes. Responses include: “They want you to go away.” “You suck.” “You’ve pissed a lot of people off.” “You’re an ass.” “Flat out wrong thing.”

Attitude about red cubes

This theme was derived from the many comments that the participants had regarding the negativity associated with red cubes. Included terms express attitudes held by participants about the red cubes. Responses include: “I don’t like the red cubes.” “I never give red cubes.” “I gave a red cube once when I was a baby Blabber.”

The Blab has affected off-line social interaction

This theme covers the participants’ responses about the ways that they use the Blab for off-line social interaction. Responses include: “Had I not gone to the Blab, I would never have met these people.” “It just becomes another aspect of our relationship

really." "I can't even tell you all the people I've met but it's still going on." "We use the Blab to make social arrangements" "We use the Blab to make plans to meet together." "You meet people through there in real life." "As far as off-line social relationships go, it provides a different dimension for them." "I've met numerous people." "Friends who are friends on the Blab are now my friends in real life."

A perception of the difference between CMC and FtF

The participants listed multiple perceived differences between computer mediated and face-to-face communication. Responses include: "Off-line discourse is more civil." "Subtle nuances" "You can get away with saying things on-line that you wouldn't say to somebody's face." "Nuance and personality don't necessarily come through in an on-line forum." "I much more prefer real life."

Chapter 5

Discussion

This research was originally born from a desire to understand more about the motivations for and the effects of participation in an on-line forum. The researcher is an active member of the forum and wondered if his own attitudes and experiences were typical. As this project developed, the goal of the research evolved formally into an exploration of users' reasons for participation in a web forum and the perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives. Uses and Gratifications Theory has always been about the way that people use media (Westerick, et al, 2006) but web forums like Knoxblab create an interactive medium wherein being a "user" implies not only being an active "audience member" but also an active participant in the creation of on-line content.

The research for this project was conducted by interviewing volunteer participants using an interview guide designed specifically for this study. The interview guideline questions were constructed with the goal of addressing topics pertinent to the three guiding research questions:

Research Question 1: What reasons do users of Knoxblab give as motivation for participating in the forum?

Research Question 2: What benefits do users of Knoxblab perceive as a result of participating in the forum?

Research Question 3: How do users of Knoxblab perceive their participation in the web forum as affecting their on-line and off-line behaviors?

Motivations for participation

With regards to RQ1, participants overwhelmingly gave responses that indicate a

mixture of information seeking and sharing as well as social activity as motivations for participating in the forum. They see the Blab as a source for local information and opinion, as well as a way of socializing both with those individuals whom they know in person as well as those whom they may know only through the forum itself. As such, the message board is seen as both a source for information sharing as well as a form of entertainment. This is highly consistent with previous literature regarding CMC use. That being said, much of the literature focuses on younger people who are often thought to be the primary users of CMC (Dye, 2007; Urista, et al., 2010) but, as previously mentioned, the participants in this study ranged in age from approximately 40 years old to approximately 60 years old.

Statements like "I want these people to inform me of what's going on and what their opinions are." and "You get other people's impressions of things." indicate that Blabbers see the forum not as a single source for information, but as a conduit for communication with individuals.

A common theme found throughout the interviews was that people had come to the Blab initially out of curiosity or upon the recommendation of another person. All interviews suggest that the participants remain motivated to use the Blab due to social bonds which have been constructed either because of the Blab or which were formed off-line but are partially maintained through the forum. Six participants specifically stated that they had learned about the blab from an off-line friend who was a Knoxblab user. Continued membership is affected in part because of the social ties formed on the message board. For example, one participant stated succinctly that "Conversations in the

beginning used to be all [on one subject] all the time, but because I know the people now I have different conversations as well." Another participant said "More and more of the posts became sort of threads and ongoing conversations among the regulars, so I started to interact. Over time…it became more of an interaction in a community, I guess." These comments echo the model of trust building expressed by Blanchard,et al (2011).

Reasons for using the Blab indicated that Blabbers see themselves as a community within the greater community of Knoxville, Tennessee, and as such, much of the information that is shared deals with local politics as well as local entertainment and recommendations for locally available goods and services. Responses suggesting this include such statements as "It's an active community of people in Knoxville who like to talk about things of interest to me." Another participant stated "The Blab can break news faster than anybody. If someone who lives downtown walks outside and sees something going on, he's totally going to write about it."

When choosing what to read, Blabbers looked for a combination of topic and source. Subject matter was important ("I'm interested in political events" and "If it's something I'm interested in" were typical responses) but so too was the source of the thread. Interview comments like "Some people, when I see them on there, I read it right away." and "Depends who starts it." show this. In the analysis, the theme regarding choosing what to read was broken down into two sub-themes, poster-related and non-poster-related.

Further themes that include these motivations include "use of the Blab for social reasons," "use of the Blab that blends social and information sharing uses" and "use of

the Blab for news related information sharing," "personal needs based information requested and discussed on the Blab," and "use of the Blab for entertainment."

These themes are all indicative of reasons to use the forum. Many participants stated "entertainment" as a primary reason for using the Blab, which comes as no surprise given that each interview participant has posted at least 1,000 times. It is unlikely that this would be the case if the participants didn't find such participation somewhat "entertaining."

The first theme indicates a purely social aspect of motivation. Put simply, the Blabbers participate in part because it is a way of keeping up with friends and acquaintances. Comments like "It has an almost neighborhood function." and "You always have people around." signify this motivation for participation. As noted in earlier, the theme "use of the Blab that blends social and information sharing uses" emphasizes not only the importance of information, but signifies the importance attached to receiving information specifically from other Blabbers.

Further motivations include basic, less source-based information sharing; both of local "news" topics such as local politics and activities as well as "personal needs" based information sharing such as recommendations for plumbers and restaurants. All interview participants indicated that they used the Blab for these reasons—both for requesting information and for responding to such requests. The belief that one can ask questions and participate in ongoing conversations is certainly a strong motivator for participation, and the research shows that it is also directly tied to some of the main perceived benefits of participation in Knoxblab.

Perceived benefits of participation

This links directly into RQ2, which asks what benefits users perceive as a result of participating in the forum. Clearly, once again the answer comes in terms of information and social connectivity. Blabbers not only feel comfortable sharing information, they also feel that the information shared on the Blab is generally reliable, with a strong emphasis on the source of the material providing that sense of reliability. The veracity of the individual providing the information was said to be the main factor in determining the reliability of information on the Blab, though respondents indicated a strong predisposition to consider recommendations on the Blab was "generally reliable", particularly on topics regarding personal-needs based goods and services. Interview participants discussed such things as advice regarding "good mechanics" and "good roofers" and "books, movies, music" as being generally reliable. As one participant stated, "If you post a request, you'll get 8,9,10 responses, and the ones that get repeated the most win." With regard to news and political information, the emphasis was greater on the individual source of the information. Responses about the reliability of information on the Blab include "It depends on who said what and what sort of credibility they have to begin with." and "Subject to the opinions of the people offering the information."

In the analysis, a theme about the reliability of information on the Blab was broken into two sub-themes (determining if information on the Blab is reliable/poster related or non-poster related) which were distinguished by the included terms' emphasis on the source of the information shared.

The interview participants also saw themselves as receiving great social benefit to participation in the message board. In addition to the directly receiving information, membership in the Blab community is seen as a way to connect to others both on- and off-line. The current study differs from Johnson (2008) in that the current participants expressed no perceived boost in in-group status or self-satisfaction as a result of generating high amounts of content. In fact, current participants tended to downplay their contributions to the forum, despite the fact that they had all generated many times the minimum threshold for inclusion which was 1,000 posts. Perhaps, and this is purely speculative, the fact that all participants have been using the forum for a number of years has tempered the immediacy of the effects of generating so much content.

Social effects of participation

RQ3 addresses the concept of social activity directly by asking "How do users of Knoxblab perceive their participation in the web forum as affecting their on-line and off-line social lives?"

The interview participants see the Blab as being a tool with which they maintain pre-existing social bonds and with which new social bonds are created both on- and off-line. This was indicated by responses such as "Actually through the Blab I've gotten to know several friends and there are several other people…one person, for example, she and I knew each other before the Blab and then realized we were on the Blab together." Another participant said "There are probably a lot of Blabbers who might know each other but rarely see each other."

All of the participants stated that they have met Blabbers off-line whom they had

previously known only in the virtual realm. Additionally, all of the participants were socially active with Blabbers whom they met due to the forum.

Previous experiences meeting new Blabbers face to face were regarded by all of the participants positively, and no negative experiences were recounted during the interviews. Shared incidents of group meetings were recounted by most of the interview participants. These group meetings were pre-arranged face to face get-togethers that were arranged and publicly announced on the Blab at various times in the past. This is consistent with Ramirez & Zhang (2007) who posit that bonds in online groups with strong off-line social ties exhibit greater amounts of cohesion yet less idealization.

Attitudes toward modality shifting from CMC to FtF interaction (that is to say, meeting face to face after having known someone only on the Blab) were generally positive. All participants indicated that their attitude toward meeting a new person would be primarily dependent upon the content of the person's posts ("Are they helpful?" "The Blab gives some kind of qualifier so you can determine whether someone is going to be interesting or not") but that Blabbers were generally open to meeting new people. ("There's not anyone that I wouldn't meet." "There aren't many things that would make me not want to meet somebody.") These attitudes are consistent with Matzat (2010).

Perhaps this in influenced by the participants' perceptions of the differences between FtF communication and CMC. They often referred to CMC as being a less cue rich environment ("I think there are things you miss without face to face…I've always thought you can tell more about somebody spending five minutes with them in real life than from a month's worth of e-mails and posts online." and "even people who know

each other in real life, just participating on the Blab, they are coarser and harsher with each other than they would be in person because there's much more nuance in person. There's the physicality of it. You've got gestures; you've got facial expressions…there is no nuance on-line.") and expressed an awareness that "You interact with people online differently than if you know them in person."

In addition to the pre-arranged meetings mentioned previously, most of interview participants indicated that they saw the Blab as a way of maintaining social ties. One participant said "It just becomes another aspect of our relationship, really." and others pointed out that "We use the Blab to make social arrangements." and "We use the Blab to make plans to meet together."

That being said, another social aspect of the Blab is that, as an ongoing conversation, the subject matter of the day gives people common ground when they do meet one another. Many interview participants stated that mutual friends would often introduce Blabbers to one another. Given the social networking that takes place, this is unsurprising. The Blab based relationship then provides a common point of interest and reference point.

Limitations and further questions

While the interviews do provide substantial insight into the reasons for participation in a web forum and the perceived effects of membership in a virtual community on users' social lives, this study has opened new questions that may be addressed by future scholarship.

The sample chosen for this study was limited to individuals who have posted over

1000 times on Knoxblab. This was done to ensure that participants were not merely casual users, as it is unlikely that so many posts would come without some form of commitment. Indeed, when the interview participants were asked to describe their participation, they spoke initially in terms of how often they post. At the same time, all of them stated that they read far more than they post—which is, of course, unsurprising given the large amount of content generated on the site daily.

That being said, additional research could attempt to locate "lurkers" who read frequently but seldom or never post. Would their motivations for using the forum echo those of individuals who actively engage in the forum by frequently posting? Would their primary reason for reading be to gain information, and if so, what would be the most sought after kinds of information? Blabbers often express a feeling of community; is this feeling shared by lurkers?

Additionally, this study focuses largely on social interaction among a group of friendly acquaintances. Off-line conversations with fellow Blabbers has brought up an intriguing topic for a research into the motivations of trolls. During the course of this research, several comments were made to the effect that "We understand why we're here, but we can't understand why *that guy* is here." when referring to one Blabber who is seen by some as a constant and unrelenting source of irritation.

The researcher hopes that the current study adds to an understanding of the social function of internet forums from a Uses and Gratifications perspective and that may be beneficial to others in the future who wish follow in this field of study. Unlike a newspaper with a staff of reporters and editors acting as gatekeepers, virtually all

messages and interaction in an on-line forum is user generated. This is a recent development in Uses and Gratifications that will require more research as interactive communication technology becomes even more commonplace in homes, offices and schools.

List of References

Aikat, D. (2009). Of Wikis, Blogs, and Social Networks: The Role of Online Communities in Disseminating News, Entertainment, and Information. Conference Papers -- International Communication Association, 1-21. Retrieved from EBSCOhost.

Beaudoin, C. E. (2008). Explaining the Relationship between Internet Use and Interpersonal Trust: Taking into Account Motivation and Information Overload. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *13*(3), 550-568. doi:Article

Blanchard, A. L., Welbourne, J. L., & Broughton, M. D. (2011). A Model of on-line trust. *Information, Communication and Society*, 14(1), 76-106. Retrieved from http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/routledg/rics/2011/00000014/00000001/art00004

Jin, B.H., Park, J.Y. & Kim, H.S., (2010). What makes on-line community members commit? A social exchange perspective. *Behaviour & Information Technology,* 29(6), 587-599. doi: 10.1080/0144929X.2010.497563

Chung, D. S., & Yoo, C. Y. (2008). Audience Motivations for Using Interactive Features: Distinguishing Use of Different Types of Interactivity on an On-line Newspaper. *Mass Communication & Society*, *11*(4), 375-397. doi:Article

Courtois, C., Mechant, P., De Marez, L., & Verleye, G. (2009). Gratifications and Seeding Behavior of On-line Adolescents. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *15*(1), 109-137. doi:Article

Donohew, L., Palmgreen, P., & Rayburn II, J. D. (1987). Social and Psychological Origins of Media Use: A Lifestyle Analysis. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, *31*(3), 255-278. doi:Article

Dye, J. (2007). Meet Generation C. *EContent*, *30*(4), 38-43. doi:Article

Erickson, I. (2010). Geography and Community: New Forms of Interaction Among People and Places. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(8), 1194-1207. doi:10.1177/0002764209356250

Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How Many Interviews Are Enough? *Field Methods*, *18*(1), 59 -82. doi:10.1177/1525822X05279903

Johnson, B. K. (2008). Incentives to Contribute in On-line Collaboration: Wikipedia as Collective Action. *Conference Papers -- International Communication Association*, 1-29. doi:Article

Ko, H., Roberts, M. S., & Cho, C.H. (2006). Cross-Cultural Differences in Motivations and Perceived Interactivity: A Comparative Study of American and Korean Internet Users. Journal of Current Issues & Research in Advertising, 28(2), 93-104. doi:Article

Kaye, B. K., & Johnson, T. J. (2004). A Web for all reasons: uses and gratifications of Internet components for political information. *Telematics and Informatics*, *21*(3), 197-223. doi:doi: DOI: 10.1016/S0736-5853(03)00037-6

Klein, B. (2009). Contrasting interactivities: BBC Radio message boards and listener participation. *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*, *7*(1), 11-26. doi:Article

Kleinke, S. (2008). Emotional Commitment in Public Political Internet Message Boards. *Journal of Language & Social Psychology*, *27*(4), 409-421. doi:Article

Lee, J., & Lee, H. (2010). The computer-mediated communication network: exploring the linkage between the on-line community and social capital. *New Media & Society*, *12*(5), 711-727. doi:Article

Leung, L. (2009). User-generated content on the internet: an examination of gratifications, civic engagement and psychological empowerment. *New Media & Society*, *11*(8), 1327-1347.

Lev-On, A. (2010). Engaging the Disengaged: Collective Action, Media Uses, and Sense of (Virtual) Community by Evacuees From Gush Katif. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(8), 1208-1227. doi:10.1177/0002764209356251

Matzat, U. (2010). Reducing Problems of Sociability in On-line Communities: Integrating On-line Communication With Off-line Interaction. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(8), 1170-1193. doi:10.1177/0002764209356249

McCabe, J. (2009). Resisting Alienation: The Social Construction of Internet Communities Supporting Eating Disorders. *Communication Studies*, *60*(1), 1-16. doi:Article

Morahan-Martin, J., & Schumacher, P. (2003). Loneliness and social uses of the Internet. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *19*(6), 659-671. doi:doi: DOI: 10.1016/S0747-5632(03)00040-2

Pornsakulvanich, V., Haridakis, P., & Rubin, A. M. (2008). The influence of dispositions and Internet motivation on on-line communication satisfaction and relationship closeness. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *24*(5), 2292-2310. doi:doi: DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2007.11.003

Porter, C. E. (2004). A Typology of Virtual Communities: A Multi-Disciplinary Foundation for Future Research. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, *10*(1), 00. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2004.tb00228.x

Ramirez, A., & Zhang, S. (2007). When On-line Meets Off-line: The Effect of Modality Switching on Relational Communication. *Communication Monographs*, *74*(3), 287-310. doi:Article

Ratti, C., Sobolevsky, S., Calabrese, F., Andris, C., Reades, J., Martino, M., Claxton, R., et al. (2010). Redrawing the Map of Great Britain from a Network of Human Interactions. (O. Sporns, Ed.)*PLoS ONE*, *5*(12), e14248. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0014248

Richardson, C. R., Buis, L. R., Janney, A. W., Goodrich, D. E., Sen, A., Hess, M. L., Mehari, K. S., et al. (2010). An On-line Community Improves Adherence in an Internet-Mediated Walking Program. Part 1: Results of a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, *12*(4). doi:10.2196/jmir.1338

Rodham, K., Gavin, J., & Miles, M. (2007). I Hear, I Listen and I Care: A Qualitative Investigation into the Function of a Self-Harm Message Board.

Ross, C., Orr, E. S., Sisic, M., Arseneault, J. M., Simmering, M. G., & Orr, R. R. (2009). Personality and motivations associated with Facebook use. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *25*(2), 578-586. doi:doi: DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2008.12.024

Rubin, A. M. (1993). Audience activity and media use. *Communication Monographs*, *60*(1), 98. doi:Article

Shklovski, I., Burke, M., Kiesler, S., & Kraut, R. (2010). Technology Adoption and Use in the Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *53*(8), 1228-1246. doi:10.1177/0002764209356252

Spradley, J.P. (1979). *The ethnographic interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Urista, M. A., Qingwen Dong, & Day, K. D. (2009). Explaining Why Young Adults Use MySpace and Facebook Through Uses and Gratifications Theory. *Human Communication*, *12*(2), 215-229. doi:Article

Westerik, H., Renckstorf, K., Lammers, J., & Wester, F. (2006). Transcending Uses and Gratifications: Media use as social action and the use of event history analysis. *Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research*, *31*(2), 139-153. doi:Article

Appendix

Attachment A

Interview Guide
Communicating via Knoxblab

Thank you for your willingness to speak with me about Knoxblab. I would like to start the interview by asking you some general questions about Knoxblab.

1. How did you become aware of Knoxblab?

2. Describe your participation in Knoxblab

3. Please describe your use of this site over the average day or week.

Transition – I would like to ask you a few questions about your use of communication with members of the Knoxblab community via the message board

4. Why do you choose to use Knoxblab?

5. How do you decide which threads on KnxBlab to read or follow?
6. Describe your own contributions to the board. What prompts you to create a post?
7. What is your understanding of the reputation feature of the site, also known as "cubes" or "green cubes/red cubes." How did you arrive at that understanding?

Transition – I would like to ask you a few questions about your face-to-face interactions with members of the Knoxblab community.

8. Has your use of Knoxblab affected your off-line life? If so, how? If not, why is that the case?
9. Please describe any experiences you may have had that involved meeting new people face-to-face as a result of your participation in Knoxblab?
10. Think about Knoxblab users whom you know both on and off-line. Primarily, have those relationships come about because of the Blab or have they come about independent of the Blab?
11. What factors play in your attitudes toward meeting (or avoiding) a Blabber "in real life" after being familiar with him or her only on-line?

Transition – I would like to ask you a few questions about situations in which your messages take place in both CMC and face-to-face situations.

12. Compare your general communication on-line (not only on Knoxblab) with your general communication off-line. Please explain what you perceive as being different or similar in those two situations.
13. Do you perceive your interaction with Blabbers as being primarily face-to-face or primarily limited to on-line interaction?
14. Please explain your ideas about ways in which Blab-based on-line communication affects off-line communication.
15. Generally speaking, do you consider information you receive on the Blab to be reliable?
16. Is there anything else that you would like to tell about communication and Knoxblab?

Thank the interviewee for his or her time.

Attachment B

Dear _____

I am requesting your assistance in research I am conducting as a graduate student in the University of Tennessee's School of Communication Studies.
My research focuses on the way that participation in the message board Knoxblab (www.knoxBlab.com) affects and reflects users' behaviors and relationships. As part of this study, I would like to interview you to discuss your use of Knoxblab.
Participation in the research is, of course, voluntary. This interview will be audio taped, but the identities of all participants will be kept confidential. No identifying information will be included in any final form of the study. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
I would sincerely appreciate your participation. This research is important because it will help provide new information to scholars and students about the ways in which the use of computer message boards affects users' off-line behavior.
If you choose to participate, please respond to this e-mail. If possible, please include possible times and locations that would be convenient for you to be interviewed. The interview is expected to last approximately 30 minutes.

Thank you,

Roger Gray

Attachment C

Participant 1 Interview

Researcher: First how you started with the Blab?

Participant: Well, I was a member of a [ ] *(sic)* social group and there was a person that posted on that web site that I became an opponent of, and I found out that she was posting bad things about our group on the Blab and the Blab had no representation from us, and I had never done any of that kind of stuff on the internet before I occasionally posted on the social group because it was about events and things we were going to do but it wasn't a real interactive thing. So I went over to the Blab to see what she was up to, and I watched for a while and I couldn't stand it so I signed on because I wanted people on the Blab to know that what she was saying wasn't true and why I knew it wasn't true then over time I kind of liked it.
And that's how I got to the Blab.

Researcher: How would you describe your participation?

Participant: I read a lot. Sometimes I have input into some of the threads if I hear language or something like that that I don't approve of and I do post a lot of information and politics. It's open minded people that are aware.

Researcher: How much do you use age day/week?

Participant: I pretty much post every day and I read every day for sure. Now, it's been 4 or 5 years I've been on. Conversations in the beginning used to be all [on one subject] all the time but because I know the people know I have different conversations as well

Researcher: What else can you say that makes you decide to follow/read new thread?

Participant: If it's something I'm not informed about, because there are an awful lot of people there that know a lot about many things some really legitimate opinions so if it's something I can learn about, I'll follow it if it's something have general interest in if certain people are posting, that will determine

Researcher: when you mention about particular people, part of that is reputation what about green/red cubes?

Participant: I think I've only red cubed somebody once, and I was a baby Blabber then. I probably wouldn't now because it was offensive, but that's a personal edge that I have. Knowing more about that person now and understanding the social dynamics, I would not do that now. What they mean to me is, it's a behind the way scenes of making a comment: "Yeah you got a point"," Yeah that's good"

Researcher: Those are green cubes?
Participant: Right, and red cubes would be for something really totally offensive or absolutely not relevant or unnecessary or flat out the wrong thing to do, immoral or just not right.

Researcher: So people have reputations on-line and sometimes you've met face to face or not, has being on-line affected off-line behaviors?

Participant: Absolutely because now they're my friends. Had I not gone to Blab, I would never have met these people. I might have met some of them, but our social interaction would have been limited.

Researcher: Anything else about meeting new people?

Participant: Some of the people that I interacted with on the Blab that I didn't necessarily have a warm and fuzzy feeling about what I thought they were like. I don't limit that because that's on-line meeting some of those people--my opinion of them changed when I met them in real life. I might not necessarily dislike them but I didn't bond well until after we met in person. It was like "How can you act like that on the Blab but you're really okay in real life?"

Researcher: What would prompt you to want to meet or not meet someone?

Participant: Opinions, how they treat other people...I don't care if I'm on-line or not, I don't think that I've ever been disrespectful to anyone regardless even if they've said [objectionable] stuff or names things like that I try to reverse those things and I'm willing to meet hem in person and not see that till I see them in real life. There are a couple of people that I might not necessarily be real eager to show up.

Researcher: what do you see the difference between communicating on computers vs. face to face?

Participant: I'm bad about taking for face value, and that what they post might not be true in real life what I'm seeing on-line but my experiences have been really limited to the Blab with regard to that and the times that I've met someone in real life that my opinion has changed, it has changed for the better.

Researcher: Of most Blabbers, do you know most only on-line or have met face to face?

Participant: On my facebook page, the most in common is 51 people, and that's all Blab. Those are the only people I know. I moved to facebook to because of the Blab. All those people I know face to face or at least have met. I don't know if this is relevant, but I have two facebook things, for my family and for myself. Because there's a lot of things--my

family policy is don't tell--we don't want to know--and my family facebook is all about how many tumbles my great-niece did and my own facebook is political...you know, the true me. The other one is sanitized. That's another aspect of social media, don't think it's exclusive to me, I'll bet a lot of people have separate pages like that.

Researcher: Do you generally think info is reliable?

Participant: Yes. Where to get your car fixed, good mechanics, good roofers, good gutter people, good shows all kinds of things...doctors...cause if you post "Anybody know a good general practitioner?" you'll get 8,9,10 responses and the ones that repeated the most often wins. And they will also say don't go to this one.

Researcher: Can you talk about any other things that make you post?

Participant: Most is about home improvement, because that's what I do for a living, that's part of my work thing to begin with it's not soliciting business, if I go to your house to fix the sink, when I leave you're going to know how to fix the sink too. So if I can explain something on the Blab or point somebody in the right direction, I respond to people looking for information.

Researcher: Anything else?

Participant: it's a great way...I live on top of a mountain, and I've been stuck up there for weather, and my friends were on the Blab. You always have people around. You know what's going on. If the roads are icy, somebody's posted it so I know when I leave for work in the morning. So that's good stuff.

Participant 2 Interview

Researcher: Could you tell me about how you first got to know about the Blab?

Participant: You've probably heard similar from other folks. The Blab started in, I don't know, '96 or '98 something like that, and I don't know exactly when I became aware of it. But I became friends with [someone] *(sic)* who told me about this message board that people discussed all kinds of topics on. So I joined it and there were some… the main thing at that time there every few people that I knew that were participants. I knew that there were people that I knew on there, but I didn't know who they were. It was mostly anonymous but the discussions were interesting. You heard about local gossip and there were all kinds of things...philosophical arguments. So all that appealed to me.

Researcher: How would you describe your participation? How much and how frequently?

Participant: It's transformed over the years. I used to participate, to get into these...I say philosophical discussions they may be religious they could be disagreements on literature approaches to life, all kinds of things. I used to be much more vigorous about those sorts of things but I realize everybody comes into it with their own point of view. They argue about it and get very worked up about it-in my case, I get very worked up about it, and you go away and realize nothing ever changes. You get annoyed by it, so over time I still participate, but a lot of it is mostly just little quips and observations.

Researcher: When you say over time, what was that you said around 98?

Participant: It's really been in the last, I think, three years that I have really ceased for the most part to participate in the discussions and there's another aspect of that, too. I hope it's okay. One of the things about the Blab is you can just write you can write material. I used to just do comedy bits or humor bits because I didn't...there wasn't any place I was going to publish them or use them so it was an exercise. This is a chance to actually do the practice in front of people, and actually see their reaction to it or to do that kind of practice within a structure. A topic that people were already talking about and see if I could take this angle on it see if I can do an essay on this and see if people like it or don't like it; their criticisms. And my writing eventually led to a job.

Researcher: So you've gotten a direct benefit in that way.

Participant: Yeah I don't really think about it in those terms but that really came about directly because I was posting [ ] *(sic)*, and someone who works in publishing thought they were funny, he let [someone else] *(sic)* know, and [that person] *(sic)* thought they were funny next thing you know I've got a contract job.

Researcher: How much do you use the Blab on an average day or week?

Participant: Still a lot more than I oughta be. The thing is, I actually have several windows open all the time on my computer at work, and one of them is Knoxblab and another one is Knoxviews and the News Sentinel website, and I'm typically just checking these throughout the day while I work which is probably highly detrimental to my actual work.

Researcher: But basically you're using it throughout the day?

Participant: Looking at it. For the most part these days my participation is now strictly related to writing at lunch and after work and I'm not bashing or trashing it but my participation has dropped off considerably in the last two years I think.

Researcher: When you say participation what do you mean?

Participant: Well just simply posting and getting involved in a discussion. I seldom do that most of my posts are now restricted to very short witty, ostensibly witty observations or once a week I post a portion of my commercial writing and link to it.

Researcher: This is a little off the script but when you're talking about participation you seem to be taking about posting, but would you consider reading to be participation, too?

Participant: I hadn't really thought of it in those terms but of course it is participation. You're engaging the entity. You're keeping up with it if you're reading, yes. I tend to read things other people are posting again that has dropped back I skim a lot these days.

Researcher: You mentioned earlier that you use it to practice the writing?

Participant: I used to do that, but I don't really do it much anymore.

Researcher: Okay say, including writing for example, what are some other things you choose to use the Blab for? Why do you go there?

Participant: I use it to hype my inferiority complex! Laughter one of the amazing things about reading the Blab and knowing this is a very, I think not large community of users at all and there are so many very intelligent people writing these lengthy essays about, I mean, this is for no, they're not getting anything out of it monetarily. But they can just spin these thoughts, and they know a great deal about a whole lot. You for instance you have this wonderful knowledge, this great depth of knowledge about comic books and the history of the comic book industry. I used to think that I was knowledgeable about comic books then I started reading your posts.

Researcher: So you're saying it's good for people to show off.

Participant: Well I it's a really interesting thing that's one of the reasons I have shut up, because there are so many people who are more knowledgeable about things that I used to think that I know about. Most of what I was saying is redundant. [One person,] for instance, virtually anything I can say he can say so much more eloquently and seemingly effortlessly and drawing on so many sources. I really do look at that and say there's no point in my participating in the global politics things anymore because I'm not adding anything that hasn't already been thought of.

Researcher: But still you know, we'll mention this more but reading is participating and it might have influences, right?

Participant: Oh yes, I will say that, that's another thing, reading the Blab in many ways is my substitute for reading the global political news, the national news. Reading the Blab and seeing what people are saying is important. What's going on right now: it's an odd thought that I'd just be checking a chat board for news...the Blab's been a very bad influence on me in many ways it's ruined all of my news reading habits, it's made me feel worthless so anyway...

Researcher: Including reading, maybe posting as well, but how do you choose what threads to follow?

Participant: Oh well, I'm most interested in threads about local events, political events, or social commentary, not necessarily social activities...sock hops or whatever. I don't go out to live music much or anything like that anymore unless it's an artist I'm interested in. I'm not going to read those threads. Mostly local, national and international politics I read because I want these people to inform me of what's going on and what their opinions are I quit having an opinion because everybody else already had better ones than me. Let them have them for me.

Researcher: I don't know about that.

Participant: Well, that's my perspective

Researcher: Switching gears a little talking about other people opinions and that sort of thing, what can you tell me about red cubes and green cubes? What do you know about that?

Participant: You've got the carrot and the stick kind of thing. I'm not a big believer in the stick, which I would consider the red cubes. You've got red cubes as punishment, and green cubes as rewards. You write something I like; I'm going to give you a green cube. You write something I don't like; I'm going to give you a red cube. I'd just as soon not give red cubes and also it's something that, I mean, you could simply say "kudos" or say "I disagree with that" without having the cube system. Of course my ego is such that I'm

always gratified to get a green cube it's like a little reward, a little treat. Here's your green cube.

Researcher: One thing is that the cubes are private as opposed to the posts on the forum that anybody can see. Do you think that's important?

Participant: Yes and no. The green cubes are used to rank users, so whoever had the most green cubes would be at the top and I admit to looking at that regularly and saying "oh darn, they're getting more cubes than me I gotta step up and say something really funny so I can get cubes," which I'm sure many other people take a much more mature approach to that because they are essentially meaningless. But obviously they have some weight and I'm sure I'm not the only juvenile sort of person who would be moved by such things and again, it's nice getting the "Hey that was really funny." or "That was really exciting. Thanks for posting." That's a nice little bit to get, but again that could be posted in the thread itself. The whole thing of secretly giving red cubes or green cubes, that seems very odd to me. I don't think I'm ever given a red cube. I think I may have given a red cube once but I it is a curious phenomenon. That reminds me of some of the annoying posters on the Blab and there are a few people that …actually, I should not say they are annoying people because I do not know them in their true selves, in their meat space, and I have a feeling they could be quite different than their on-line personas. The whole thing of attacking these posters with red cubes, I never got that, these people are here despite very strong not just strong disapproval but very strong arguments against their points of view. There's a certain troll who is a good case because despite these overwhelming reasonable, rational arguments he's still here. You give him red cubes. It's only going to make him feel like he's doing what he wants.

Researcher: The question with someone like that might be what are they getting out of it, do they like negative attention?

Participant: You're probably familiar with this but in psychology and physiology, you don't want a zero, you have to have a positive or negative, positive is better both physiologically and emotionally but if you can't get the positive you will seek the negative, you get some kind of stimulus because it triggers things in your body again if you get constant negative stimulus that is supposedly not good for you physically or emotionally, so I do kind of wonder about people who do consciously court that kind of stuff. I can only hope that they're getting lots of positive energy in other aspects of their lives.

Researcher: How can you say Knoxblab has affected your off-line interaction in any way?

Participant: I can't say...less so these days, but more a few years ago, especially when there were all sorts of things going on with county government and there was all sorts of speculation and interaction on the Blab and you would meet folks who participated on the

Blab and you'd be talking about the events of the county and the reactions that were going on. So just in giving people a common theme to talk about for a period of time. There was a lot of discussion that crossed over between the Blab and real life because it was stuff that was going on locally and noteworthy you talked about what you posted about.

Researcher: What about any new people you met because of the Blab? Have you had any experiences meeting new people face to face because of the Blab?

Participant: I don't know if it was directly because of the Blab, but again, there was this period when people got this sense that the main Blabbers were hanging out at the downtown brew pub so two or three years ago there was a frequent "There's going to be a Blabbers at the brewery people might want to come by and see" posts I don't think I've ever organized that or done that, but one person on the Blab--she has posted on the Blab "I'm going to be in town" and "I'm going to be at the brewery. Blabbers please come down and meet me." I can't even tell you all the people that I did meet that way but that's still going on. Just a few weeks ago we met someone. We just met him a couple of weeks ago sitting on the brewery patio. That of course is an interesting connection too that there is this social circle centered around the brewery that people. I don't know how often it's posted any more on the Blab, but somehow people just sort of know if they've been on the Blab for a while that there is this group that I don't think is necessarily the core group of Blabbers but many of them do go down there and hang out people will come by and say I'm such and such.

Researcher: We were talking about meeting people face to face, why don't we shift to this: In general of the Blabbers you know face to face do you think you got to know them more on-line or off-line?

Participant: Several folks I have a much easier time calling their Blab name than their actual name I presume because I see that a lot more often than I see the actual person. There's one person with whom I've had several personal interactions, but took a long time to remember her name, but now it pretty much is her name, but for a long time I could only remember her Blab name.

Researcher: So if you know someone only on the Blab, what factors might influence a decision to meet that person face to face?

Participant: Complicated question--brings into play your own person. I'm shy personally, so meeting someone you don't know is always iffy proposition. I guess maybe in some ways the Blab gives some kind of qualifier so you can determine whether it is going to be an interesting person to meet or not and if somebody is like a certain troll, he would be interesting to meet but he doesn't seem like anybody I'd enjoy hanging around with so you know if you got somebody who has interesting things to say is not to abrasive not too confrontational not too certain of themselves that's probably somebody

I'd be okay with meeting you still don't know what these people are actually like until you do see them. The way that the internet has transformed our interactions is interesting because people create their personas only in that are distinct I think from who they actually are. I can't absolutely say that with a certainty. I certainly don't strive to do anything like that I can't imagine that some of the fold who are the way they are consistently haranguing on certain points like some of the more apoplectic posters on the Blab.

Researcher: You say when they're on the Blab they're like that?

Participant: Yeah, I just can't imagine going through real life like that... many people are, I think in real life, in actual physical being, people can be directed into other subjects and other topics they tend to focus on the things that they fixate on things that really work them up on the Blab seems to me but in person they can actually focus on a lot of different areas to not be so one dimensional like they come across on the Blab.

Researcher: So far we've been talking about communicating on the Blab and face to face, but what do you think is actually different between communicating using computers and face to face?

Participant: It's not just computer interaction, but the anonymity that people have. I think that's an enormous fact. I think about the comments on the KNS site all these anonymous venomous… this constant stream of acidity this destructive process seems wholly designed rather than to promote dialogue, to destroy it. It seems very counterproductive in a society where you have to work with people the anonymity of on-line commentary and interaction can be extremely destructive I think that people participating, even people who know each other in real life, just participating on the Blab, they are coarser and harsher with each other than there would be in person because there's much more nuance, there's the physicality of it. You've got gestures; you've got facial reactions; there's everything that is missing on-line. You've just got the bludgeon of the word. It's an amazing thing how much words, mere words, can affect us because people obviously get very irritated. When I say people, I'm not excluding myself-- I'm a people too. We get upset by the things that people write. They get very worked up and that's why there are threads that go on for page after page after page. So actually, I say its anonymous an impersonal, there is no nuance on-line.

Researcher: Anything else?

Participant: I had many other things but now I don't know...one of the things is the immediacy of it. People post things like theoretically "the grottos on fire", so you get news about local events like the Wests. [Someone] posted that before any of the newspapers got it, so you do have one reason to check. People are posting things there not picked up by media yet, and you've got things like "Elvis sightings" when Elvis Costello was on the square. So you get all these insights into Knoxville life that you

won’t get and I don't know if there are other boards-- I've looked at other message boards that are Knoxville centric-- but none of them seem to have the kind of a lot of different--- I don't want to say perspectives, because it does seem to largely slant liberal-- but there are perspectives in the sense of different interests, people are bringing in a lot of different things. There’s also the personal: where people will post personal crises—“ just lost a job”, “looking for job”, “need a house” “ need a roofer”-- these things that you could get on Craigslist or somewhere else, but there’s some more level of trust perhaps that you get from it being on the Blab and there are other things

Researcher: Would you consider that to be a community?

Participant: It's something not quite a community but more than just a message board and it's that aspect of it that is the question mark.

Participant 3 Interview

Researcher: First, how did you become aware of Blab?

Participant: [Someone] told me about it.

Researcher: Do you know about when it was?

Participant: I was working at a certain place, so that's been maybe 10 years ago, that's when it was MetroBlab.

Researcher: Could you describe your participation in the forum?

Participant: It's been on again off again. In the early days, not so much. It was nutty cause there were trolls and they could really jump you and make you feel totally stupid and then when Conley came and shut it down I probably stated more then. Then I started more under different administrators. I started a lot more and now, well it's blocked from work now so I don't participate hardly much at all anymore unless there's something going on.

Researcher: So an average day/week how much read and/or post?

Participant: Daily probably 30 minutes.

Researcher: reading and posting

Participant: more reading than posting.

Researcher: So what are some reasons for choosing to use Knoxblab?

Participant: The Blab can break news faster than anybody. If [someone who lives downtown] walks outside and sees something going on he's going to totally write about it . The second reason is entertainment value. Some people are just really funny. Some are informative. You know if there's a concert, or if you need roofers-- we actually do need roofers--and I trust these people because I've met most of them in person.

Researcher: That gets into some stuff for later. When you look at different threads, how do you decide what to follow?

Participant: Depends on who starts it, then second, what's the title, where does it look like they're going and if you see one and fifteen minutes later there's 3 pages, something hot's going on and I don't want to be left out.
Researcher: That will have an effect on reading, but what prompts you to create a post?

Participant: That's different. if someone's looking for an opinion, "hey what do you think about mast general?" I love that you can go there and tell people. If I can contribute or if I think something is funny.
Researcher: So the first group, that would be in response? Like a request for info?
Participant: Or just to share something. That was the fastest way before facebook came along. We could post and all of our friends would know immediately what was going on or if I needed to get information out to a large group of people. Our dog had been sick and that was a good way to let people know the outcome without emailing everybody.

Researcher: We've talked about posting and people's reputations. Can you explain the cubes?

Participant: I didn't know for the longest time because people are like "You're [X] in reputation" and I had to ask [someone] because I didn't have a clue what they were talking about. Then he's like "You can go and see the rankings." That was kind of fascinating at first to see what people will go out of their way to click and write a note.

Researcher: Can you explain what it is? red and green cubes?

Participant: There's a little rating right underneath your name when you post and I don't hink it says anything unless you hover over it. You can click on it and choose if you agree or don't agree and you can write a note "That was great"- green cube--and as you accumulate green cubes, you go up the reputation system or the reverse is red cubes. Making fun of you or don't like you. You've pissed a lot of people off or they want you to go away. You can get banned, which doesn't happen very often. The people who're running the Blab…they're not always paying attention so it takes time for things to get back to them so that can be a signal, I suppose, to not just that individual but to the organizers.

Researcher: Do you think that being a Blabber has affected your off-line social life?

Participant: Yeah, we've met many times here for Blab meetoffs, first time met a whole bunch of people when someone came to town.

Researcher: Of the people know on-line and off-line, how do you get to know them more?

Participant: Guess I got to know more on-line at first, we've been to people's house for dinner, and there are people who have been to our house many times. We had a ceiling fan in kitchen that had a spark so next thing I know [a Blabber's] over at the house installing new fan for us...another time, our power had gone off and there was [a different Blabber] who rode his bike over and he found our hidden fuse box so it's been nice and I really enjoy most people we met.

Researcher: Those are people you've known only form the Blab? Did you meet them first on-line?

Participant: Yes. We've made some really good friends out of it.

Researcher: So when you meet somebody on-line, what makes you want to meet or possibly avoid meeting that person?

Participant: Never really thought about specifics, but are they helpful? Are they just being mean? Are they trying to set somebody up? That kind of thing. I've met some people whom I wouldn't want to meet at all if they were really like their Blab personas, but in real life they're different.

Researcher: Those are people you know in real life and on the Blab?

Participant: If I just started on the Blab and only read them online, I wouldn't want to meet them. Some people we met through the Blab but we would have met anyway, probably. There have been a few people that I knew on the Blab and in real life, but didn't realize for a long time that they were on the Blab.

Researcher: That's happened to me, too.

Participant: And k2k was not anonymous, so we knew a lot of the same people.

Researcher: in general, do you know more Blabbers face to face or only on the Blab?

Participant: Of the people that post regularly, I've met almost all of them. Of the regulars. The first page, yes, yes, yes, met once or a couple of times, at a friends baby shower. We're a chatty group. There are a lot of people I don't personally know, but know of them...know who they are.

Researcher: in many ways, some people are very public, use their own names or use a pseudonym, but it's not secret and everywhere in between. So what is difference between face to face and computer communication?

Participant: Nuances, tones, facial expressions, that goes with email and stuff too interaction with friends where we had gotten stuff for a reception, disposable bowls, plates, things like that, I said I don't want any of his stuff back. Throw it away. But someone kept sending me messages saying "Let's meet up, hint hint." And I was sending messages back saying I didn't want the bowls returned. Finally we realized that she wasn't hinting that she wanted to return the bowls, she was just hinting that she wanted to meet up for a drink. I would have not missed that face to face. I felt bad.

Researcher: But maybe also if you'd been sitting there so you wouldn't have needed the hints to meet up because you would already be there.

Participant: Those misunderstandings can happen, though. Someone on the Blab got mad because she thought someone else was criticizing her parenting skills. An anonymous person criticizing someone's parenting skills—would that happen face to face? The Blab really is a large conversation with different aspects and offshoots. If it was someone who did know her personally would someone do something like that "I saw your daughter out the other day and she was wearing too much makeup: in face to face, there are inhibiting factors...a number of things that come into play. I think some people would come up and say whatever they want. On-line it is a different world. People feel licensed to speak to some of your most...I think on-line comments in the newspaper will destroy civilization. It shouldn't be anonymous.

Researcher: Do you thing information on the Blab is reliable?

Participant: Yes, yes, in general, for example with the recent thing about the roofers everybody recommended someone and that's totally going on the list. I trust them.

Researcher: Anything else about the Blab?

Participant: I think facebook has made my communication on the Blab dwindle some, but to me the Blab was the original facebook. Make plans to meet together, make plans with friends or learn about things I'd never know about ...but that part is reduced because of facebook. It's not gone, but I think it has totally taken a chunk away. The last two years has changed a bit, it seems, but I don't know exactly know why or how. Maybe some new people... people used to come on and introduce themselves, but people don't do that anymore, they just pop right in. Perhaps that's part of community establishment. You notice right away when it's somebody new. It doesn't matter that it shows the post number, it's the name, you do it for so long. you automatically know who is new. There have been threads "Is the Blab dead?" but there does seem to be a different quality or tone or something it seems to me.

Participant 4 Interview

Researcher: So can you tell me how you first became aware of the Blab?
Participant: Initially I was just aware of it as something on the Metropulse website. I knew [the person], who had started it…he told me it was there. I used to look at it periodically since I sometimes wrote for Metropulse. It was kind of interesting to see. people would come on there and comment about things on Metropulse itself and I was curious about what readers had to say and so forth and over time I kept looking and I wouldn't post very often. Sometimes if someone had posted on something I'd written I would respond to them, but then over time it started to develop a community of regular posters. You started to recognize names. Still a certain amount of people who came in randomly had read something in the paper and wanted to comment on it but that became a smaller percentage of the traffic and more and more of the posts became sort of threads and ongoing conversations among the regulars, so I started to interact. Over time the fact that I worked for Metropulse became less important and it became more of an interaction in a community, I guess.

Researcher: Could you describe your participation? How much, how often?

Participant: It's fluctuated over the years. There was a period early on where I stopped engaging with it at all because I found it frustrating. There were a lot of people who would come on anonymously and say negative things. So I got frustrated with that aspect of it and I stopped altogether. And then some months later eventually came back and started reengaging. The biggest turning point for me was when I actually left Knoxville for a while and so I didn't have any professional interest in it at all but I had sort of built up a social interaction with the forum and when I moved out of town it became really my primary way to keep up with friends in Knoxville. Also to keep tabs on it because I had the sense that I was going to want to come back to Knoxville eventfully. It was the sort of easiest one stop place to come and see what was going on and what I found was not living in Knoxville I actually posted more. I think because it became a surrogate virtual social life but the things I posted about I was less likely to post on threads that were specific to Knoxville politics or new events or whatever; more likely to look at things that were more broad: movies or music or national politics or whatever. While I was out of town my work and life situation was sort of such that I didn't have a real active social life so the Blab became a great outlet for me…I still liked to engage with this group of people.

Researcher: Average weekly or daily; how much time do you spend on the Blab?

Participant: I'm back in Knoxville now and people who are on there know who I am so I'm aware that anything I write potentially has some shadowing into my professional life. I do post links to my professional writing. I'm conscious of that but you know I would say that the amount I engage has declined a little since I came back to town. I'm seeing people in real life more now obviously so I don't need the on-line engagement with them

as much. It's basically one of the places that I go to on-line on a regular basis. I definitely check into it I'd say in the morning, afternoon and evening just to see what's on there, and if there's something interesting, something that catches my attention, I'll engage with it but it's very dependent on what else I'm doing. If I have a really busy day at the office I might not look at it at all, if I'm busy with the kids or whatever in the evening I might not look at it at all. I would say I definitely look at it everyday whether or not I engage with it is dependent on how busy I am and what the things are that are being talked about there are some things on there that just don't interest me so I don't engage with it.

Researcher: What sort of things do you look for?

Participant: I'd say local political things I will always look at and that's from professional interest because I write about that in my job so I'll always look at those to see what people are saying. I'm a little bit less inclined to get too engaged because of my professional interest. I'll put up a link to use it from a promotional standpoint, which a lot of people do whether it's people who write for local media or involved in local events or music or whatever people do definitely use it to promote whatever they're involved in. I definitely do that. I'll put up links to what I've written. National politics. I usually look at threads- sometime get involved, sometimes not -depending on my level of interest in particular thing or how busy I am and then arts and culture stuff, especially music and movies. There are several people on there who I'm interested in what they think. There are enough people on the Blab whose tastes I respect or am interested in their ideas about music movies, literature, things to do with that, just because I keep a running tally in my head of things people have suggested or recommended or whatever that sound interesting to me. Beyond that a lot of it is dependent on who starts a thread. There are certain people who start a thread and I'll always look at it and other people if they start a thread I'll rarely look at it--you have this hierarchy of posters kind of I'd say it's a mixture of content and the people involved

Researcher: So this follows, speaking of people and their reputations...what can you explain about red/green cubes?

Participant: I think anybody who's a regular on there...First, I never give red cubes, well ,probably 3 red cubes in my life. I think the red cubing thing is kind of…if you don't like something somebody writes. It's easier to ignore it than to say something or if I don't like something somebody writes I'm more likely to argue with them to post back to them and argue than to send a red cube. Green cubes are kind of a nice thing…it's a way to sort of writes something I like but don't have much to say about, it's a nice thing to do. So I do that a lot. I like the green cubes. I'd probably prefer if we only had green cubes. If I want to argue with somebody I'll aruge with them, I'm not going to sort of do it privately.

Researcher: Do you think being a Blabber has affected your off-line social life? You've kind of talked about it a bit already.

Participant: In the way social relationships do more broadly, movies music books, lots of those things that I've gotten and culture things I've found through people's recommendations the same way that you do with a friend telling you "Hey you should read this, hey that's really cool." or whatever…that's a significant thing you know...I think that as far as off-line social relationships go it provides a different dimension to them so that my friends who are friends in real life who are also people on the Blab. It just becomes another aspect of our friendship basically. Something else you can talk about if there's been a lively discussion on the Blab and then you see that person at the bar who was involved, you might pick it up. It becomes a part of an ongoing conversation that bounces back and forth.

Researcher: Have you met new people because of the Blab? Can you describe those experiences?

Participant: Oh sure, there are a number of people whom I first got to know through the Blab and of course while I was living out of town as new people came on the Blab I didn't have the opportunity to meet them so if somebody interesting came on I would only get to know them through their on-line persona and we could have conversation or whatever but I'd never met them so I didn't know what they looked like or whatever so that was interesting coming back to town after being away several years where I'd bult up on-line relationships with a bunch of people who I'd never met in real life and I came back and a bunch of them I subsequently have met and become actual friends with. Not just virtual friends with, which is a nice thing.

Researcher: What factors motivate to meet/avoid person based on Blab?

Participant: it's over time and you develop a sense of who somebody is how they think, are they interesting or not, but I'll also say that I still relied, as new people came on the Blab and I wasn't living in town after a while if it was somebody who seemed sort of interesting, I would write to friends of mine who were in town and ask them have you met this person, what do you think, sort of look for the outside validation. I would still look for validation of people who were here maybe interacted with them on an actual personal basis and as I would see indications on the Blab that so and so had actually come to the bar and hung out and people liked them.

Researcher: in general, what do you think is different between face to face communication and communication on-line?

Participant: I think that there are things you miss without face to face. On-line communication is really valuable and useful. It gives a partial sense of who they are but of course it's very selectively edited because the person is presenting things to you that they want to present and when you meet somebody in person there's more info available. People can only edit so much about themselves so its I've always thought you can tell

more about somebody spending five minutes with them in real life than from a month's worth of emails and posts on-line. Just because you might have a lot in common in terms of beliefs or interests or we like talking about the same things and that can be great for an on-line sort of relationship and if that's all you're going to do that's all you need, but if you are going to engage with somebody a more intimate level which in person and face to face is just a more intimate level that will carry over to that more personal.

Researcher: Of the regular Blabbers, have you met most face to face?

Participant: I'd say I've met most of them, and of the ones some are close friends some casual acquaintances or we've met once or twice.

Researcher: Generally speaking is info on the Blab reliable?

Participant: I would say that I gauge info on the Blab according to who it is...a whole series, first who says it--some are more trustworthy than others and second is sort of where it came from originally, where are they gathering from I would say it's one source of potential information.

Researcher: Anything else?

Participant: One thing, it's interesting coming back to town how pragmatically useful the Blab connections were in that a lot was. A lot of people use it this way, it's a very useful place for ...I found a house to rent by starting a thread basically saying "I need a house to rent." I bought a car from a guy who I only knew through the Blab who had a car for sale and most recently I bought a drum set and needed a ride cymbal, so I posted a thread saying I need a ride cymbal and somebody sent me an email saying I have one to sell you so it serves a purpose ....an almost neighborhood function...there's a self selected population on there, but largely people who live within relatively close distance, so if you're looking for a recommendation for a plumber or housepainter or a doctor. lots of people start threads like that and I like that aspect of it. It serves a valuable word of mouth function. Also, this is just anecdotal but from people I've talked to, there are some people who don't post, but lurk, it serves that function. Stuff that gets talked about carries a certain amount of weight...like I said, people do go on there and promote their own things, which I do to, but it's generally accepted as long as people are upfront other than that, endorsements are perceived as they really like it I don't think we've seen a lot of guerrila marketing efforts, we tend to assume that if people say things they meant them. It's straightforward.

Participant 5 Interview

Researcher: Can you tell me about why you participate in Knoxblab?

Participant: It's an active community of people in Knoxville who like to talk about things of interest to me, plus it's a way for expatriates to keep up with local stuff in Knoxville.
Researcher: You said "things of interest. Could you explain a little?
Participant: Political issues that I may not have heard about otherwise, or formed opinion on yet, and other entertainment and local activities like say concerts.

Researcher: How would yo describe your participation?

Participant: I login and scan the first page for topics if there are any that seem like I want to hear what somebody has to say about them, I look at those topics I mostly read I'm a relatively infrequent poster.

Researcher: Average day or week, how much do you read and/or post?

Participant: I probably spend 10 to 20 minutess a day reading.

Researcher: Can you explain a little more about what motivates you to follow particular threads?

Participant: If it's a topic that interests me or if it's a topic that I want to read what other people have to say.

Researcher: You said you read more than you post? Why sorts of things do you usually post about? What motivates you to post?

Participant: If I have a specific opinion on a subject I'll throw it out there. If somebody said something particularly that I agree or disagree with I would post.

Researcher: What about for starting a new thread?

Participant: That would be I'm trying to tap the collective knowledge and/or opinions of the Blab or if I see something particularly amusing or noteworthy that others would enjoy.

Researcher: Can you explain the cubes?

Participant: It's a system by which other members of the community can approve or disapprove of things that other people have written.

Researcher: Do you use the cubes much?

Participant: I will green cube if there's something notable. I also use the cubes as a vehicle for off-line comments, like if I want to comment without posting in the thread I will usually green cube and put a comment.

Researcher: Shifting to real life --do you think the Blab has affected off-line life?

Participant: Sure. You interact with people on-line differently when you know them personally. The discourse is more civil and nuance and personality don't necessarily come through in an on-line forum. If you know somebody you can interpret what they write more accurately. Their intended meaning.

Researcher: Have you met new people?

Participant: Numerous people that I didn't know from before.

Researcher: Can you describe any those experiences?

Participant: It's almost always positive, can't think of a negative experience. It’s usually when some event or occurrence is happening and posted about on the Blab and a large number of Blabbers are going to participate or show up there will often be one person who knows that person and will introduce them

Researcher: Do you think you know more people on-line only or off-line as well?

Participant: It depends on whether or not daily paths might intersect case by case

Researcher: What do you think is more?

Participant: Of the people I interact with on the Blab regularly, I'd say I know about 3/4 face to face although a good number of those are people I did not know before the Blab.

Researcher: What would make you want to meet or avoid meeting somebody face to face for the first time?

Participant: General tone of posts. Having different opinions isn't a deal killer, but them being an asshole would be.

Researcher: Makes sense to me. Not necessarily just the Blab, but what do you think is different between on-line and off-line communication?

Participant: On-line you don't have the restraints of being in person with someone and you can sit behind a wall where things ...you can get away with saying things you would not say to somebody face.

Researcher: There's a lot of information on the Blab--generally, do you think it's reliable?

Participant: More often than not--subject to the opinions of the people offering the info and you take that into account when assessing it. but more often than not it's reliable.

Researcher: Anything else?
Participant: In my experience, it's an unusual message board situation in that so many people are on there and know each other. I can’t think of another on-line community that I participate in where that's the case

Participant 6 Interview

Researcher: So how did you get to start with the Blab?

Participant: I knew some people who worked at Metropulse so I learned about it from them, though I didn't start posting very much for a long time.

Researcher: Why do you participate?

Participant: It's very entertaining. There's also a lot of really smart people on there. You know that's how I found out about the Wests getting busted because I was on the Blab a lot of time. Stuff happens and the first place I see it is on the Blab then I'll go and follow the link to the Sentinel of whatever it is. I don't know it's entertaining and pretty informative.

Researcher: What sort of things are entertaining? What sort of information?
Participant: Entertaining: maybe that's not the right word, but a lot of times I'll get on there and I don't spend a lot of time there because I haven't had the net at my house since christmas so it was like at work, five minutes here and there I always look at the photos, the "post a random picture" thread cause some of those are just beautiful as far as the informative thing a lot of its like the local politics things going on in town. I tend to stay away from the big national stuff because it tends to get into name calling.

Researcher: how would you descrbe participation? Mostly reading? Lots of posts?

Participant: mostly read, don't post that often.

Researcher: daily weekly how much time?

Participant: because I'll get on and look at facebook and the Blab, I always look at the Blab every day, but it's usually only a couple of minutes at a time, but throughout the day like when I'm switching tasks at work, I'll glance at the Blab to see what's going on at different times during the day. I probably look at it four or five times a day for a few minutes sometimes at night I'll get on there and read a page of whatever.

Researcher: What makes you post?

Participant: Gosh, I don't know. A lot of times if it's a political thing or whatever I'm in way over my head, I don't have that kind of brain power so most of the things that I post on would be I don't know, more inconsequential things I guess.

Researcher: What do you mean inconsequential?

Participant: I don't know...what do I post on? I post on I don't if someone's made a comment, I'll make a comment on that or like the other day they were talking about roofers and metal work roofs vs shingle, and I have a metal roof but I don't know just every once in a while I'm like "oh wait I can put up something on there and not sound like a dumbass."

Researcher: If you're going read/follow a thread, what kind?

Participant: Don't know, something sounds interesting like that thread right now about the woman who had that sixteenth birthday party and disappeared because that's kind of fascinating—Knoxville's own little most wanted person

Researcher: what about green/red cubes? Can you explain them to me?

Participant: I've never given anybody a red cube.

Researcher: What does it mean? What is a red cube?

Participant: A red cube means you're an ass! Seems mean. Not like I agree with everything everyone posts, but it seems spiteful. But a green cube, like if somebody says something smart and snappy or just funny--I green cube people all the time.

Researcher: What's a green cube mean?

Participant: It's a sign that you've done something funny or that people like.

Researcher: Do you think being on the Blab has affected your social life? How?

Participant: for me it definitely has, mostly in the way of firewood. I needed firewood. A blabber that I didn't know had all kinds of firewood, he came out to my house and he's one of those people--I'm very liberal and he's very conservative in politics and he can come off as kind of a butt on the Blab, but he was like "I've got firewood and he gave us the directions to his house and the code to his gate his own little private Idaho kind of thing and now he's a friend, I see him out socially, a lot of people that I would have never met face to face I've met because of the Blab.

Researcher: What about others?

Participant: oh gosh, yeah, I already knew some people, but I think it was maybe when a blabber was coming to town and it went out on the Blab that that person was going to be here and I must have met that night alone I must have met 20 other Blabbers

Researcher: Do you know more Blabbers only on-line or face to face?

Participant: that's hard...because sometimes people change their Blab names but I didn't know for two months. One of my friends did that-- he said something one night at the pub and I was like “that's you?” and he said “who did you think it was?” and I didn't know, it was just a new person on the Blab I had no idea so I don’t know but I do know an awful lot of Blabbers. I'd say I know a good percentage of them.

Researcher: What goes into wanting to meet or avoid someone that you haven’t met before?

Participant: uhm... I would have to say anyone who doesn't seem like a total but then yea I'd want to meet them I think it's always interesting to meet people that you’ve only ever quote unquote talked to online

Researcher: I've been getting a lot of anatomical reference with that question.

Participant: Yeah, if they don't seem like a total jerk or ass, then yeah! Because there's people on the Blab and I know them in real life too and they’re kind like they are on the Blab but it’s a little more elevated.

Researcher: not necessarily Blab, but CMC in general, what's different between CMC and face to face

Participant: I think people are a lot more willing to say things in an on-line forum than they would be in person. I think if you're using some little pseudonym, people will say whatever whereas maybe in real life they would think about it a little bit

Researcher: you said you knew most Blabbers face to face...do you communicate with most more on-line of more face to face?

Participant: hmmmm...for me I guess because I don't post very often so I'd say face to face but there are probably a lot Blabbers who are never see each they might know each other but rarely see each other

Researcher: but you see the ones you know more face to face?

Participant: yeah. I think so but that’s because I'm not on much.

Researcher: Generally, is information on the Blab reliable?

Participant: yeah, because if somebody throws something out there, someone else will call them out "I need a citation” and someone else will say "this is what I found" on

yadaya...you know? In that respect it's kind of policed. It's a good starting point kind of like wiki it might not all be right here but it's a start if that makes sense

Researcher: Any other things?

Participant: I think it's just kind its own little community and for the most part I feel like I could call anybody on the Blab and say I need help and help would be there. and again going back to the firewood...a whole bunch went out to a blabber's house on a bitter cold day in January...We filled up 5 or 6 trucks full of wood, everybody had firewood, we spent about 3 hours working together you know, one guy got the wood from his yard, a whole bunch of us got firewood. We just made a day of it.

Researcher: all Blabbers?

Participant: All of them.

Participant 7 Interview

Researcher: Alright, so first can you tell me how you became aware of the Blab?

Participant: Well, I've been on-line a long time and at that time there weren't that many websites, especially for Knoxville. Metropulse had one and I knew about it through on-line stuff, working on the sites, so that's how I found the Blab I guess, looking for hyperlocal content.

Researcher: ok so how much do you participate in the Blab? Can you describe your participation?

Participant: Less now than I used to, but anymore because I work at a firm where my boss is on the Blab, he knows if I post during working hours. Plus, there's a lot of things that I just sort of leave alone. I'm a little calmer now than I was years ago.

Researcher: Ok, but not necessarily just posting, but reading

Participant: I probably...there's times that I...I read the Blab usually two or three times a day. I don't read everything--a lot of the music threads I don't pay attention to.

Researcher: Okay, that kind of brings us up to the next questions about using the Blab. What are some reasons that you choose to use it?

Participant: Well, there's the connectivity with the community primarily. That is, you learn news, you get other peoples impressions of things, you find out about things that you might not otherwise know was going to be happening or aspects of them. It's one of the forums for local politics that's not national politics or something like that. News and entertainment.

Researcher: You mentioned before that there are some threads that you don't follow. How do you determine just from looking at it?

Participant: Well, the Wednesday 5, for example, is a recurring thread posting of five songs, and I just don't particularly care what five songs people post for whatever reason and then other things you don't know until you get into them and it's some long debate about musical instruments or foot pedals for guitar or something and I'm just not particularly interested in those discussions.

Researcher: Other than just reading, if you're going to make a post, what prompts you?

Participant: Well, if it's something...most of the posts are in reaction or response to something that's already there. Starting a new thread it's usually something either a gripe I have or a complaint.

Researcher: What about red cubes and green cubes? Do you know what they are and how they work?

Participant: I know what they are, I really think they are…the old Blab wasn't the current software, you didn't have red and green cubes. I think they became a weird social currency that I don't particularly care for.

Researcher: Can you explain what it is?

Participant: It's a ranking system where members of the forum can add or subtract from someones reputation by selecting an icon and if you add to someone's reputation it increases their green cubage and if you detract from it you have to provide a reason that they can read later and it takes away from their reputation so more green cubes is more high reputation among your peers.

Researcher: So that's on-line and that has to do with reputation but if we start talking about off-line stuff would you say that the participation in the Blab has affected your off-line life?

Participant: So many of the people that I know on the Blab are people I know in real life and other than maybe some conversations about Blab threads I don't really think that it's...that is maybe its extension into real life but other than that you know of course you meet people through there in real life, so that's probably worth something.

Researcher: Can you describe any of those experiences? Of people you met through the Blab?

Participant: Well of course I met a certain blabber and I've met a number of people that I don't know as friends, but I can put a face with a name. Some of them have become friends.

Researcher: Those people that have become friends, do you think you got to know them more on-line or off-line?

Participant: Mostly online.

Researcher: if you're going to meet somebody that you've just known on-line, what factors into your wanting to meet or not meet someone?

Participant: Well, there's not anyone that I don't want to meet. I'm not averse to meeting someone even if we've had harsh words on-line. To me they're two different worlds. Sort of. But anyone who seems intelligent is worth meeting. There are a few characters on the Blab that I always thought would be interesting to meet, but never did. It was based on the quality of their posts, the language they used, the way they put words together, expressed thoughts in writing and using the media in a contemporary way, you know.

Researcher: Not necessarily just the Blab, but what do you think is different between on-line and off-line communication?

Participant: Well, everything that's on computer in a forum like that has to be reduced to writing so quality of one's ability to write really reflects how intelligent they come across in general. Whether you're reading a paper or book or anything, the better writers people are the more interesting they are to read and that's not necessarily the case in real life. I know a lot of people who can speak very eloquently or come across very differently because of the casual nature of the conversation, even though the Blab is a conversation but an oral conversation is different.

Researcher: Most Blabbers that you know, do you interact more face to face or on-line?

Participant: Most that I know? That's hard to say. I think about you, and I see you quite a bit but I probably read you on-line more or post to you on-line almost as much. It would depend on the individual. I interact with some people way more in real life than on the Blab but other people I see a lot less often.

Researcher: Which is more common? People you see frequently or infrequently

Participant: I imagine in terms of sheer numbers it's infrequently.

Researcher: Generally, do you think of info on the Blab as being reliable?

Participant: The nice thing about info on the Blab is you get a number of perspectives on it so it gets vetted. Something like the market square thread, the "holy shit batman" thread, yeah you had news there. I didn't doubt that at all, because I knew who was writing and they weren't going to make that up. It all depends on whose voice it is, who said what, what sort of credibility do they have to begin with you have a rep for being credible or not after a while.

Researcher: Do you think there's anything else, any other ideas about how using the Blab affects any other off-line communication?

Participant: I think that depends. For some people it has more than me. I go by my real name on-line and I try to keep sort of a single front to the world I think. When I was using a pseudonym on-line, I was more likely to say things--even to people who knew

who I was--likely to say things that I wouldn't necessarily say under my real name. it keeps me in check but if I've said something on-line now, it's the same as I'd say to their face and vice versa
Researcher: Is there anything else you want to say about the Blab?

Participant: It's been interesting to watch it evolve, having been on there a very long time, seeing it go...at first it was bothering me more, but I had to back off when people started posting images with nudity or something; that didn't happen on the old Blab. One reason not is that the former administrator kept a real big lid on that so consequently you didn't get filtered at work place firewalls or other firewalls, but once something like that starts happening... I was at a car dealership one day waiting for my car and I went on their computer and it wouldn't let me go on the Blab there. There was a group...there are a whole lot more women on the Blab than there used to be which has colored the conversation somewhat.

Researcher: Can you explain what you mean?

Participant: It's affected the Blab in the same way that it's different when you have more women in a room...conversations happen that just wouldn't happen, that men just wouldn't get into that much. I guess that's about it.

Participant 8 Interview

Researcher: How did you become aware of the Blab?

Participant: I originally started out with Metropulse's Metroblab and pretty much lurked because I was unfamiliar with the concept of the forum and all that and then I may have jumped in maybe once or twice and then it went from there to Bubba Blab and I followed it there. I became a little bit more active and then it went to the Knoxblab and I've been a lot more active on it there.

Researcher: You said that you were lurking before? Can you explain why you did that before you became active posting?

Participant: I was unfamiliar with the concept. I had never really dealt with a forum or something like this before, I just happened to come across it one day several years ago and it had it seemed interesting, it was just one of those things you are looking at and you know I kept going back to it but I was a little intimidated because I didn't know anybody on it and I didn't know...frankly, metroblab was pretty hardcore. You'd get on there and people could rip you a new one pretty quickly and so I was a little leery about getting on there and everything so I basically just lurked.

Researcher: What about now? How much do you participate?

Participant: I participate a fair amount. I'm on it I'd say everyday and I use it for all kinds of different things. I'm interested in different people that are on there and some people when I see them on there I read it right away some people--I only have one person on my ignore list, because that guy's an idiot and I tried to stay with it for a while I really did but finally I had to say screw this guy. But you see enough that he writes anyway because people copy what he says but yeah, I'm on it every day. In my job, I do a lot of programming and I run things, so I'm just sitting there watching my machine, the cmm, run, so I have time where I can't really go anywhere or do anything except sit there so I'll get on it and sort of watch what's going on and sort of glance at the Blab here and there.

Researcher: So you're doing both at the same time?

Participant: Yeah, just a matter of keeping sure that things are running.

Researcher: Everybody that I've talked to has at least 1000 posts, so just off the top of your head, about how often do you think you post--once a week, everyday?

Participant: Maybe once a week. I don't really jump in to the political stuff. that much, my political opinions are pretty bland and I don't have any strong feelings one way or the other as far as some of those guys and I'm not that big on jumping on somebody's case so my main reasons to get on are like if something like restaurants, food, cooking,

something like that cause I like to cook. If there's a concert or something going on or somebody's asking about where to get their car fixed that kind of stuff.
Researcher: You mentioned a second ago that there are certain people you always read, but in general, what might make you want to read or follow a thread?

Participant: Well, the fact that it's new I'll glance at to see if it's something that I want to follow at all. A lot of times it will be 3 or 4 pages before I even get to it. Like I said, if it has something to do with...if somebody says something like "Where's a good place to eat?" or "I need to get my car fixed" or somebody might say "Who all's going to see Sundown?" or "Who's going to the Bob Dylan Birthday bash?" Or somebody might say something that's funny or something that strikes me weird or something

Researcher: It seems like those are mostly responses. Would you ask for help if you needed your car fixed or something?

Participant: I have. I asked for ...what was it...it's been a while ago. Some construction I think. Yeah, somebody on the Blab who is a contractor jumped on and I sent him a text before...and firewood. I was asking about firewood and all that and that's a certain Blab friend and I got involved. She wanted me to come get firewood.

Researcher: I don't know why, but apparently firewood is a big deal among Blabbers.

Participant: Right, well, this one person pretty much heats her house with it and she's got a ton of firewood and another guy goes over and helps and several people, they help her cut it and we're fixing to have a whole bunch cause of that tree that fell down in the storm, so there's a lot of firewood.

Researcher: Is there anything else you can think of that would make you want to create a post?

Participant: Responses...like random thoughts or something that strikes me as weird or somebody says something that I find particularly funny or hits me, I might say something about that. Just snarky for the most part, I don't really get serious about it and I don't think I've started that many other than the firewood one and maybe...I've responded to the scam ones.

Researcher: What sort of scam?

Participant: Where the guys knock on your door and give a sob story...stuff like that. We've had those people around

Researcher: Other people were talking about that?

Participant: Yeah, I've told my story about that happening. Several examples.

Researcher: You've mentioned that there are some people you like and maybe at least one person you don't like so much and that gets into the red cubes and green cubes situation

Participant: I don't really red cube. I think in all the years that I've been on it, I've red cubed twice. Once was that certain guy who is sometimes just a total idiot and once was that other person and I ...that's when I realized I don't even like this guy, I don't need his stuff

Researcher: Can you explain in your own words what red and green cubes are?

Participant: Green cubes are pretty much attaboys, they're "Oh, I like what you said." Way to go, good response it's a way of...it's also a good way to message people. so you might green cube them but you might say "Call me" or "Get in touch with me" something like that Red cubes, to me, are primarily disapproval I don't like what you said, you suck, something like that I never told anybody they suck, but I've told people they were idiotic. That's about it.

Researcher: Thinking about off-line, in real life so to speak, do you use Knoxblab in any way with off-line activities?

Participant: Oh, yeah. Actually through the Blab I've gotten to know several new friends. You, for example, and there are several other people...[one person], for example, she and I knew each other before the Blab and then realized we were on the Blab together Another person, who I've known for 20 something years, told me who he was on the Blab and I was like "Oh, No shit, that's you." so I've used it a lot. Somebody will mention a concert or a show they're doing—there's someone who is big about that and I'm going to go see him tomorrow. One Blabber's spouse is a well known local musician, and I'm a big fan of his, so if she says they're playing I'll try to go see them, that kind of stuff.

Researcher: You went right into the next question, which was about meeting new people. Are there any other examples of meeting new people that you can think of?

Participant: One person stayed with us time before last when she came cause we offered to let her stay cause she was supposed to stay with some other folks but they were living in their old house and they were real concerned about room so we said just come here. That's where that picture came from, everybody was standing outside.

Researcher: I know the photo you're talking about

Participant: You were here weren't you?

Researcher: I don't think I was here.

Participant: So anyway, I met her through that and we've become very good friends and she's always sending something. I've met her husband and played golf with him, he's a nice guy. We've sort of developed a relationship there. Another person, met him on the Blab first and then met him at the brewpub. A lot of people I kind of knew not on the Blab, and then found out they were on the Blab, and then there was a long period when you'd meet somebody and ask them "Are you on the Blab?" Or you'll meet people and you can't remember their real names but you remember their Blab names. One guy is a good example, I run into him all the time but for the life of me I can't remember what his name is. And another guy, I helped him move because I knew him from the Blab. I said "As long as there's beer available, you got my help." there was a bunch of us who showed up.

Researcher: If you see somebody on-line, what factors would go into wanting to meet somebody or avoid somebody?

Participant: Well, if they've written stuff over a period of time that I found interesting or funny or snipey like me, something like that, then I'd be interested to meet them I'd be curious, and generally, I don't think I've ever sought somebody out on the Blab to meet them just because of that. I've met a lot of people from the Blab, but not because of the Blab, if you know what I mean. I've met them and then found out and said "Oh, so we've got something else in common." and through mutual friends a lot...if you go to the pub and there are new people sitting with people you know, then people will introduce and say that's so and so and all of the sudden we've got perspective here.

Researcher: That’s a good way to put it. Is there anything that would make you not want to meet somebody?

Participant: There aren't that many...there aren't many things that would make me not want to meet them. There are some that I wouldn't go out of my way to meet...but if I met them, I'd be civil.

Researcher: Just to explain a little with those particular people, what is that they do?

Participant: The things they say on the Blab, their responses. They never answer a question that somebody asks, they're constantly deflecting it to make it sound like you're attacking them. Their views are rather odd and in one person’s case, they're just plain bizarre. I just don't understand in the face of all kinds of reason and evidence, they still cling to these ridiculous points of view and try to defend them, and not well, and after a while you just get tired of hearing it. Plus, they tend to attack. When they can't get their point across or it gets refuted a lot, instead of saying "Okay, you got me" or something, they attack they attack personally. That’s the sort of stuff that’s really red cube worthy.

Researcher: That's how I'd think of it, too. So, other than just the Blab, but computers in general, what do you think is different between computers and face to face communication?

Participant: I much more prefer real life. I do it on the computer with facebook. I wasn't on facebook for a number of years--apparently I was on it at one time and I'd forgotten my password and everything but my daughters, when they moved out of town they said "Oh Dad, you gotta get on facebook." cause that way we could stay in touch, so I had to create a whole new account, and then I found out that I could keep up with my brother and nieces and nephews and I have a lot of friends who are both on facebook and on the Blab but it's a way to keep up and find out what's going on. We have friends in Florida and stuff. But if I had my druthers, I'd rather be face to face.

Researcher: Can you go into a little more about what's actually different between FtF and CMC?

Participant: I think interaction is one thing. You can see facial expressions. You can understand nuances in face and voice. Sometimes, especially when you're on the Blab, you can't always tell if somebody's kidding or they're just being a jerk or what but face to face, you can tell so I'd say that's one of the main things. There are some people on there that go into two page essays and explanations and all that stuff. If I can't get it said in 2 or 3 sentences, max, and mostly just one line, then I'm probably not going to respond. But conversation, you know I can talk so there's that aspect to it. I'm lazy, in that regard. Also, a lot of the time when I'm looking at the Blab, I'm at work, so I don't really have time to sit down and think of a thoughtful, thought out response to something, other than a snipey comment or some quick little thing. And what's odd is I'm hardly on it at home. I have other things to do. The only reason I'm on at work is because I'm just sitting there and I'm watching something and I'm bored so that's primarily it.

Researcher: Do you think that using facebook and text messages, etc, has an effect on the way people communicate face to face?

Participant: To some degree. I think a lot of it depends on how much you are active on the computer as opposed to face to face, but you hear a lot of computer terminology and things creeping into conversation. that are FtF, you hear a lot of ...people make a lot of assumptions based on their computer information, facebook or the Blab information about people that face to face, you wouldn't necessarily make those assumptions about and I was shocked, shocked I tell you, to find out that some people actually have two and three sock puppets on there. It just never...and I guess I'm just naive to the computer world although I'm not, it just didn't occur to me that you might have three or four accounts on there and I mean, that's got to keep you busy.

Researcher: Too many passwords.

Participant: Yeah, but there are people there. I know one person who has at least three and another person who has had as many as four, and to me that's just too much work. And I think that's part of it. I just...it's just different face to face. But the main thing is to see how a person's responding

Researcher: We've talked a lot about the information that's on the Blab. Generally speaking, do you think the information on the Blab is reliable?

Participant: I think it depends on the question. if you're asking for a good place to get your car fixed or you're asking for a restaurant you're asking what's going on tonight, if you're asking who is playing where if you're asking about firewood or who is good at home construction or who can fix--what was it somebody asked one time, how to build a chicken coop--that kind of straightforward stuff is pretty reliable but then you get into people and why they want to spread their personal lives across the computer world, I have no idea but I know people who do it they start talking about their relationship or they start talking about "Do you think so and so is goofy?" or some people have been instigating and some people have been the butt of smear campaigns or whatever, so I don't know all the ins and outs of it. There was [one person], and she came on there and I thought she was reasonably okay, a bit crazy but reasonably okay, but man, she and several people got into it and they were saying things like she was tracking their iP address and that kind of stuff and casing their home...I don't know if it was true or not true but I do know that I didn't want to know anything about it

Researcher: That got crazy for a while.

Participant: And then there was that, I'm assuming it's a girl, that [other person] who came on for a while. She was just insane. She would write stuff on there that made no sense whatsoever. And then would jump in on conversations with stuff that made no sense whatsoever to the conversation. So I thought she was a bit odd.

Researcher: With doing these interviews and the research, I'm looking at basically people with at least 1000 posts, but it would be interesting to talk to some of those people. The whole research is trying to figure out people's reasons for doing what they do. You do something for some reason and you continue because you get something out of it.

Participant: Yeah, that certain guy would be good to research. He get's beat up on a daily basis. Why would he continue? I don't understand. That most recent person…I'd frankly be a little afraid to be alone with.

Researcher: Somebody like that...I know when it first started, it's hard to tell if somebody is serious or if it's a joke, but that one I think it wasn't. You never know.

Researcher: That's about it, is there anything else you'd like to say about the Blab, or why you use it?

Participant: I like it because there are a lot of people I know on it, from Metroblab on, and it's a good point of conversation. I can't tell you the number of times I've met somebody that's on the Blab and we've at least had a conversation a common ground that we can start from. I use it a lot for finding out about what's going on around town, even though we get lots of other sources. There are a lot of musicians on there and a lot of artists and writers, so that's good and I enjoy some of the stuff that they put on there so I think it's a useful too. I think there are some people who get way too serious and way too enraptured with it, but that's them not me

Researcher: Why do you think they get so serious about it? What do you mean?

Participant: I don't know. I come back to that cartoon where's 3 in the morning and some guys at his computer and his wife is saying come to bed and he says "But there's somebody on the internet and they're wrong!" it' like that. I can see the same people on the Blab...it's like why do you care? I don't know why. I know a Blabber who is like that sometimes. I've asked him “Why do you even respond to this guy?” You know already and from the get go that this guys going to be A. wrong, B. misinformed and C. he's going to attack you, and it doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong, it doesn't matter why do you even respond and he says "I don't know, I just can't help myself." I've never quite understood the psychology of it. I've never understood that part.

Attachment D

Included Term	Semantic Relationship	Cover Term
-You always have people around -There's some more level of trust -It has an almost neighborhood function -Stuff that gets talked about carriesa certain amount of weight -I think it's just kind of its own little community -It serves a valuable word of mouth function -There's connectivity to the community -It became a virtual social life -It's a great way to get to know people -I'm interested in different people that are on there -It became a way of maintaining some adult conversation -There's a lot of smart people on there -There are so many very intelligent people writing -Some people are really funny -There are a lot of people I know -You can write material for an audience -I like it because there are a lot of people I know on it	is a reason to	use the Blab for social reasons

Included Term	Semantic Relationship	Cover Term
-You get other people's impressions of things -I've found books, movies, music, food through people's recommendations -It was sort of the easiest one stop place to come and see what was going on -I want these people to inform me of what's going on and what their opinions are -If the roads are icy, somebody's posted about it -Seeing what people say is important -It's interesting how pragmatically useful the connections were -It's an active community of people in Knoxville who like to talk about things of interest to me	is a reason to	use the Blab that blends social and information sharing uses
-It's a forum for local politics -You get news about local events -There's a lot of local politics -Local Activities -The Blab can break news faster than anybody -To see what's going on right now -There's the immediacy of it -There are different perspectives	is a reason to	use the Blab for news and information sharing

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-I'm interested in social commentary -My substitute for reading the news -It's straightforward -Political issues that I may not have heard about otherwise -News -You find out about things that you might not otherwise know was going to be happening -You learn news -It's a way for expatriates to keep up with local stuff in Knoxville -Political issues that I may not have formed an opinion about		
-Good gutter people -Where to get your car fixed -Good shows -They'll say "Don't go to this one" -Where to get your car fixed -Good mechanics -I found a house by starting a thread -Need a roofer -Restaurants, food, cooking -I bought a ride cymbal because I posted that I needed one -Need a house -Good roofers -Just lost a job -Need a job -I've asked about firewood	is an example of	personal-needs based information requested and discussed on the Blab

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-Entertainment -Entertainment value -It's very entertaining -Entertainment -Just snarky responses, I don't get serious like some people -You can write material for an audience -It's a chance to write for people and see their reaction	is a reason to	use the Blab for entertainment
-Are they helpful? -The language they used -Different opinions isn't a killer, but them being an asshole would be -Third-party validation -How they treat people -I would still look for validation of people who interacted with them on a social basis -There's not anyone that I wouldn't meet -General tone of posts -Opinions -Attitudes -The Blab gives some kind of qualifier so you can determine whether someone is going to be an interesting person or not -The way they expressed thoughts in writing -Based on the quality of posts -Are they interesting or not? -If they don't seem like a total jerk or ass -There aren't that many things that would make me not want to meet somebody	is a way of	determining whether to meet a new Blabber Ftf

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-You develop a sense of who somebody is -How they think -The way they put words together		
-Are they trying to set somebody up? -They never answer any questions -They tend to attack -They're constantly deflecting to make it sound like you're attacking them -Their views are bizarre -Are they just mean?	is a reason to	avoid meeting a new Blabber FtF for the first time
-If they've written stuff over a period of time that I found interesting or funny or snipey -It's always interesting to meet people face to face that I've only ever "talked" to on-line -If somebody has interesting things to say -Anyone who seems intelligent is worth meeting -Somebody who is not too abrasive -Somebody who is not too confrontational -Somebody who is not too certain of themselves	is a reason to	meet a new Blabber Ftf for the first time

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-You have a rep for being credible or not after a while -It depends on who said what and what sort of credibility do they have to begin with -We tend to assume that if people post things they mean them -Subject to the opinions of the people offering the information -According to who it is coming from -Some people are more trustworthy than others -It all depends on whose voice it is -I trust them	is a way of	determining if information on the Blab is reliable (based on the poster)
-It depends where it came from originally -Kind of like wiki—it might not all be right here, but it's a start -Straightforward stuff is pretty reliable -If you post a request, you'll get 8,9,10 responses, and the ones that get repeated the most win -If someone throws something out there, someone else will call them on it -It's kind of self-policed -You get a number of perspectives, so it gets vetted	is a way of	determining if information on the Blab is reliable (non-poster related)

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Term
-There are people whose tastes I respect or I'm interested in their Opinions -Depends on who starts it -Some people are informative -Some people, when I see them on there, I read it right away -There are several people on there whose opinions I'm interested in -If certain people are posting	is a way of	choosing what to read on the Blab (related to poster)
-I read about arts and cultural things, especially movies -Some things you don't know about until you get into them -If you see a new thread and fifteen minutes later there are three pages -I'm interested in political events -If it's something that I have a general interest in -If it's a topic that interests me -If it's something that I'm not informed about -I'm interested in threads about local events -If it's something I can learn about -If it's something that sounds interesting -depending on my interest in the subject matter -I look for local political things -If it is a topic that I want to read what other people have to say -It's a mix of content and people involved.	is a way of	choosing what to read on the Blab (not related to the poster)

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-I'm not adding anything that hasn't already been thought of -Many people are more knowledgeable -Most of what I was saying was redundant -It gets into name calling	is a reason to	avoid posting
-Just to share something -If I have something that's funny -If I see something and think it's funny -If I see something particularly amusing or noteworthy that others would enjoy -If there's a concert or something going on -If I'm trying to tap the collective knowledge or opinions of the Blab -If I need to get information out to a large group of people	is a reason to	create a post (entertainment/social reasons)
-If someone has a question and I can respond -If somebody says something like "Where's a good place to eat?" -In response or reaction to something that's already there -If somebody is asking where to get their car fixed -If somebody says something like "Who's going to the Bob Dylan Birthday Bash?" -If somebody said something that I particularly agree or disagree with -If I can explain something -If I have a specific opinion on a subject	is a reason to	create a post (in response or reaction)

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-If I can point somebody in the right direction -If someone is looking for an opinion -If I can contribute		
-A promotional standpoint with my writing -I post links to my professional writing -It's a writing exercise	is a reason to	create a post (self promotion)
-Green cubes are a nice thing to do -You write something I don't like, I'm going to give you a cube -It's a signal sent not just to the individual but to the organizers -It's a good way to message people -A vehicle for off-line, private comments -A system by which other members of the community can approve or disapprove of things thatother people have written -You can write a note -Green cubes is kind of a nice thing -Red cubing is kind of like you don't like something somebody writes -As you accumulate green cubes you go up the reputation system -You write something I like, I'm going to give you a green cube -The green cubes are used to rank users -Red cubes would be for something totally offensive -They became a weird social currency	is a way of	explaining the cubes

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-More green cubes is a higher reputation among your peers -It's a ranking system where members can add or subtract from someone's reputation -A green cube—if somebody says something smart or snappy or just funny -I give a green cube if there's something notable -You've got red cubes as punishment and green cubes as rewards -It's a behind the scenes way of making a comment -Red cubes are primarily disapproval		
-Ha ha that was great -Yeah, that's good -Yeah, you got a point	is an example of	a message sent by green cubes
-They want you to go away -I don't like what you said -You suck -You've pissed off a lot of people -Making fun of you -People don't like you -You're an ass -Absolutely not relevant or necessary -Flat out the wrong thing -Something was immoral, just not right	is an example of	a message sent by red cubes

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-I've never given a red cube but I give green cubes all the time -Red cubes seem spiteful -I don't really like the red cubes -I think I may have given a red cube once -I gave a red cube when I was a baby Blabber. -I don't think I've ever given a red cube -I never give red cubes	is an expression of	attitudes about the red cubes
-I've met a number of people that I don't know as close friends but I can put a face with a name -Some of them have become friends. -Had I not gone to the Blab, I would never have met these people -We met a whole bunch of people when an out of town Blabber came into town -It just becomes another aspect of our relationship really -It's usually when some event or occurrence is happening and posted about on the Blab -As far as off-line social relationships go, it provides a different dimension to them -We've gotten a lot of firewood -There are a lot of people I know on it -You meet people through there in real life -We met someone on the Blab and she stayed at our house when she visited Knoxville	is a way that	the Blab has affected off-line social interaction

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-The times that I've met someone in real life and my opinion has changed, it has changed for the better		
-I can't even tell you all the people I've met, but it's still going on		
-With the Blab, I've gotten to know several friends		
-Some Blabbers have been out to our house many times		
-We use the Blab to make social arrangements		
-We use the Blab to make plans to meet together		
-There are a number of people whom I first got to know through the Blab		
-There were a number of people I got to know by their on-line persona and subsequently we have met and become actual friends		
-Can't think of anything negative		
-I have met a whole bunch of people that I would never have met otherwise		
-I've met numerous people		
-[Meeting Blabbers] is almost always positive		
-I really enjoy most people we've met		
-We've met many times for Blab meet-offs		
-Now, they're my friends		
-You talk about what you posted about		
-We use the Blab to make plans with friends		
-Blabbers know there's a social circle centered around the brewery		

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-Friends who are friends on the Blab are now my friends in real life -People will come to the brewery and say "I'm such and such" -Many Blabbers go to the brewery and hang out together -Somebody will mention a concert or show they're doing, so we'll go see them -We've been to dinner at people's houses -We've made some really good friends out of it		
-Off-line discourse is more civil -People create personas on-line that are distinct from who they actually are -An anonymous person criticizing someone's childrearing skills—Would that happen face to face? -I much more prefer real life -There's everything that's missing on-line -You can tell more about somebody off-line -The fact that you connect with somebody on a virtual basis doesn't guarantee that you're going to have that connection that will carry over to the more personal -Quality of one's ability to write really reflects how intelligent they come off in general -Everything in a forum has to be reduced to writing -Subtle nuances -It becomes part of an ongoing conversation that bounces back and forth [between CMC and FtF]	is a perception of	the difference between CMC and FtF interaction

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-You can get away with saying things on-line that you wouldn't say to somebody's face		
-There's much more nuance		
-On-line it's a different world—people feel licensed to speak out		
-The better writers they are, the more interesting they are to read, and that's not necessarily the case in real life		
-Nuance and personality don't necessarily come through in an on-line forum		
-It [CMC] shouldn't be anonymous		
-You've got facial reactions		
-What they post might not be true in real life		
-Anonymity of on-line commentary and interaction can be extremely destructive		
-People participating are coarser and harsher with each other than they would be in person		
-You've got gestures		
-You can draw inferences from what somebody writes and how they behave on-line		
-It is anonymous and impersonal		
-There's no nuance on-line		
-There are things you miss without being face to face		
-It [CMC] gives a partial sense of who they are, but of course, it is very selectively edited		
-On-line doesn't have the restraints that face to face has		
-Face to face is just a more intimate level		
-You've just got the bludgeon of the word [CMC]		

Included Terms	Semantic Relationship	Cover Terms
-If you're using some little pseudonym, people will say whatever whereas maybe in real life they would think about it a little bit		
-I think people are a lot more willing to say things in an on-line forum than they would be face to face		
-You interact with people on-line differently when you know them personally		
- I didn't bond well until after we met in person		
-You've got gestures		
-You've got physical actions		

Vita

Roger K. Gray is originally from Knoxville, TN. He received a Bachelors of Arts with a major in English from the University of Tennessee in 1994. From 1995 until 2008 he taught English as a foreign language in South Korea. While there he taught at Sang Myung University in Cheonan and at Soongsil University in Seoul.