

GunNets:

Why a Theory of Heterogeneous Volition Is Necessary in the Study of Digital Communication

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Abstract

Once abstract, theories of human communication as “webs of signification” have been rendered material by digital networks. Because both researchers and everyday users can see and even expand these webs in ways visible to all of us, we are in even greater need of accounting for the makings of those connections than ever before if we are to understand how everyday digital communication works. In this article, I use examples from online vernacular discourse about recreational gun use to propose that we account for the visibility of the different interests that have shaped an everyday online communication by considering each communication event as a network process of aggregating heterogeneous volitional forces.

Institutionally Empowered Tinfoil Hats

On January 29, 2013, a user named Timic posted a new thread on the Guns and Ammo Forum titled: “Tinfoil hats on - Preparing for civil war?” Timic’s post contained a link to a video. He noted:

This is very interesting video...

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ri9ioCbqJCU&sns=fb>

Military practicing strafing civilians? Preparing for civil war? you be the judge. Normally I am not a right-wing conspiracy theory wingnut but lots of things starting to make the hair on the back of my neck tingle!

(Timic 2013)

The Guns and Ammo Forum is an online location associated with a mainstream commercial gun magazine Guns and Ammo. On this forum, individual users share ideas and techniques about recreational gun use. Contributing to these sorts of discussions, Timic’s post might seem like a straightforward sort of everyday communication. In it, he is playfully expressing his sense of unease at the news that the US military is conducting military operations in the midst of a major North American city by imagining himself (and inviting his fellow forum users) to metaphorically don the iconic “tin foil hat.” The tin foil hat is associated with the paranoid conspiracy theorist who hopes the headgear will block the high-tech mind readers she or he imagines are secretly used by the military industrial complex. Timic’s post is, in some ways, not that much different than sitting at the bar with a friend and nervously recounting a news item read about earlier that day. Both the everyday chat at the bar and the online forum post are probably mostly just a way for participants in the communication

event to gain some sense of assurance that it would be a bit silly to be worried about US military exercises in densely populated US cities . . . Right?

Whether we should be worried or not, there are some major differences in the two communication contexts. The potential audience for the online post is far greater than for the face-to-face conversation because the post persists over time where the momentary performance in the bar does not. As a result, potentially many more people might witness the post. This increased power to reach people is, of course, a result of the use of digital network technologies. These technologies also enable the poster to closely link his words to a professionally produced video that gives further gravity to his expression by encouraging individuals to open themselves more fully to his experience of anxiety by following the link and seeing the same video. With a simple copy, paste, and post, this individual's everyday communication is empowered by technologies that allow more people over more time to experience a communication that is amplified by video.

That video, though, is not actually on the Guns and Ammo Forum. Instead, the link leads to another institutional website, Google Corporation's YouTube. Following the link to YouTube, the user can view the 3 minute and 16 second clip of a local Miami television news segment titled "This Just In: Blackhawk Downtown." In it, a seated newscaster in a suit and glasses exclaims: "Blackhawk choppers soaring through the night sky! But this is only a drill!" The scene cuts to apparently live video from downtown (THISISZION42303 2013).

There, another reporter dramatically enacts the motions of an aircraft with his hands and exclaims: "If you've seen one of these drills, it really is like a scene out of one of those action movies; choppers stalking the sky in downtown Miami and the like." The camera turns to capture several police cars speeding by with sirens blaring and lights flashing. The newscaster explains that the helicopters are part of a joint training exercise between local law enforcement and the US military. He tells us that these exercises are intended to: "meet some of the requirements they have to do, also to prepare, for the military side, for some overseas drills, also so that they can make sure all of their equipment is in check" (THISISZION42303 2013).

Then, noting that some people around downtown had been able to capture video of the goings-on with their mobile devices, the scene cuts to grainy footage of helicopters flying by Miami skyscrapers. The newscaster instructs the audience to listen to the audio. Suddenly, we hear the bleeped profane exclamation of the video taker as resounding sharp pops of what sounds like machinegun fire suddenly echo off the buildings. The newscaster comments: "[The police] want us to tell you it is just a military training exercise. But hey, if you happen to see some of this stuff going down, take some video, take some pictures and send it our way!" (THISISZION42303 2013).

To imagine that Timic's post is just an online version of sitting at the bar would not fully account for the several layers of action that work together in this post. To fail to account for this action would be to miss that this increased reach and power is made possible by the Guns and Ammo website. It would also miss the entanglement

of interests emergent in this post. Because Guns and Ammo is a commercial media enterprise that has designed its technology so that it can sell advertising, Timic and his fellow posters are creating the content that Guns and Ammo uses for those sales. In return, the posters and users get access to the more advanced communication technologies.

Guns and Ammo has created this network location for the purpose of drawing individuals who are interested in guns together into a community and showing them advertisements for guns and gun accessories. While sales are a necessary part of the system in any commercial forum like this, the example of Timic's post demonstrates how not just these two interests (his own and Guns and Ammo's) but potentially many more different interests shape a single post. This post is not just the product of the choices made by the poster and the Guns and Ammo Forum. The YouTube poster who chose to put the video up on YouTube enabling Timic to then link to it post has also shaped Timic's communication.

This YouTube poster is named THISISZION42303, and she or he hosts a YouTube page or "channel." THISISZION42303 has posted almost no content in their "about" pages so there is very little known about them as an individual. However, they have posted 4,430 videos since 2009 and generated over 10.5 million hits (THISISZION42303 2009). The posted videos are mostly if not all recycled content from news media and other sources. Though the religious connotations of choosing the name "This is Zion" and a pattern to post news events both suggest this individual might have ideological reasons for posting videos, another likely motive is to make money.

Because the payment structure that YouTube uses has changed over time, we can only speculate, but, based on the number of views, it is possible that this user has earned as much as \$80,000 by recycling this content on YouTube (Priestley 2015). They would have made this money by posting videos, drawing users to view their videos, and those users potentially clicking on the different advertising links that Google Corporation offers through YouTube. This means that the Google Corporation has also shaped Timic's post because it has designed the YouTube platform in such a way that it can monetize the posts that THISISZION42303 makes.

In order, though, for THISISZION42303 to have had any video for Timic to link to, the Miami news team had to first produce the original news spot for TV. It is safe to assume that the original live news video was produced in the hopes of selling advertising to the wholly different audience that was watching live news. In addition to the blanket motive to sell advertising, the newscasters in the video stated their intention to let the public know "this is only a drill" and we need not be concerned about military helicopters apparently firing blank ammunition over downtown Miami. The Miami TV producers also shaped Timic's post. So we have now noted that the TV news producers, the Google Corporation through YouTube, THISISZION42303, and Guns and Ammo Forum are all shaping Timic's post. We have not yet, however, accounted for all the actors here. There are also the everyday people who recorded the video of the helicopters with their mobile phones.

Their amateur video was embedded in the news broadcast that the Google

Corporation hosted through YouTube that THISISZION42303 posted and the Guns and Ammo Forum linked to through Timic's post. However, the reasons that the person shot that video with their phone and then chose to send it to the news team are separate from any of the other actors in the network that manifests as Timic's post. Maybe they wanted to help out by sharing information or maybe they just wanted to get themselves on local TV. Either way, they had no way of knowing that when the news team redeployed that amateur video to make their own commercial content for the local news, it would enable a chain of actors to extend the communication: the Google Corporation through YouTube, THISISZION42303, then Guns and Ammo Forum, through Timic's choice to post the link would all eventually be caught up in different redeployments of that footage; each with its own interests.

Tracing these associations across the network raises a deceptively simple question. Who created the content of Timic's post? In a sense, of course, Timic made Timic's post just as he would have performed his face-to-face communication at the bar. There at the bar, we could have also traced back the associations that emerged in the face-to-face communication event by asking things like: How did the bar shape the behavior of the people gathering there? And how did the language the two people shared give them the means communicate? In this way, we can consider the similarities and differences between the offline and online performance contexts.

At the bar or online, it's not new to note that it's difficult to imagine any communication in as simple terms as a single message that is transmitted by an individual and then received by another (Shannon 1948). And if we are imagining a 21st century barroom conversation, it's entirely possible that Timic would hold up his phone and show the video and thus bring a lot more technologizing agents into the bar: the makers of the phone, the phone company, and so on.

So it's not that network communication technologies have created our webs of signification and so now we must account for something new. Instead, it is that these digital technologies have rendered our webs more visible. Because both researchers and everyday users can see and consciously choose to make these links, we are in even greater need of accounting for the makings of those connections that ever before if we are to understand how everyday digital communication works. In this article, I propose that we account the visibility of the different interests that have shaped an everyday online communication by considering each event a network aggregation of heterogeneous volitional forces.

Visible Webs

I am arguing that network communication is better understood as events instead of media objects because that communication emerges in the interaction of heterogeneous volitions.

To imagine that an object contains and transmits the intentions or ideas of multiple actors is not new or deeply contested. Famously citing founding sociologist Max Weber in 1973, Clifford Geertz defined what we think of as symbolic anthropology stating that humans inhabit "webs of signification" that they have built for themselves

through communication over time (Geertz 1973). While Geertz could not have known it, his web of significance would take an electronic form with the advent of network communication. When it did, that web moved from the abstract realm of theory to the realm of conscious choices made by everyday people like that of Timic above when he linked to that YouTube video (Howard 2015b). Recognizing that individuals can choose to link their symbols together in new ways because of new technologies is an idea at least as old as Plato's myth of the invention of writing, but its more recently memorable from Walter Ong's extension of Marshal McLuhan's work in communication (Ong 1982; McLuhan 1964; Plato 1989). Along these lines of thinking, the ideas a technology creator has become imbedded in the communication that those technologies subsequently mediate. Extending that argument, Langdon Winner posited all human made objects come to us with the ideologies of their makers embedded in them.

In the 1980s, Winner famously proclaimed "artifacts have politics" (Winner 1986). In Winner's most well known example of this observation, he described the Long Island Expressway as enacting racism by its very design. As Winner tells the story, Robert Moses, the designer of the road, built the bridges over the expressway too low for buses or trucks to clear. Based on an interview in a famous biography of the New York city planner, Moses was accused of purposely trying to keep poorer individuals who did not own cars and, in particular, African Americans from taking the bus to the beach. The claim was later brought into dispute because at that time all buses were possibly already prohibited from using those kinds of roads. In any case, the example now embodies Winner's point that material objects can carry politics.

Starting in the 1980s but gaining considerable popularity into the early 2000s, French sociologist of science Bruno Latour complicated Winner's, at the time, challenging claim that a seemingly immaterial thing, an idea or ideology, could be embedded in a material object. Latour became famous for going even further by actually arguing that material objects have their own intentions. Responding to Winner in 2004, Latour writes: "Technology, in other words, has its own intent and import which makes the best (or the worst of intent) drift away" (Latour 2004). Instead of imagining human intentions becoming embedded in technologies like bridges or the internet, Latour asks us to imagine material things as actors in a network. This idea yields Latour's famous version of "Actor-Network-Theory" or "ANT." ANT tries to account for how material objects and human symbolic uses cluster together into networks of meaning that persist for certain groups and at certain times (Latour 2005). For my purposes, attributing intentionality to inanimate objects is a larger metaphysical issue that raises more questions than necessary. Imagining that technologies are dynamic nodes that emerge out of clusters of meaning in a network, however, is extremely useful when thinking about everyday communication.

In 2005, Latour described ANT in more general terms as a method of tracing back "associations" to discover how they emerge into "assemblages" at particular moments in time. For Latour, these assemblages both emerge from and transmit associations. They can be material artifacts, and, as such, they are also actors in Geertz's web of

significance: contributing their own constraints and affordances to the ongoing flow of the network. In terms of everyday communication online, we can consider both the material and symbolic elements of a communication as part of its web of signification.

Taking this perspective to Timic's Guns and Ammo Forum post from above, the analysis can now push its associations further back. We can imagine how each time someone accesses that post, an event occurs that is shaped by not just Timic, the forum, YouTube, the TV news team, and the amateur video takers, but also by the internet as a technological actor itself. The network technologies such the TCP/IP protocols that make that communication widely available are shaping the communication. The ability of a self-selecting audience to participate in the event of following that link is part of the inheritance of the digital age, and that inheritance emerges in the interaction of heterogeneous volitions including those of the designers of network technologies as well as Timic and the forum and all the other actors participating in the assemblage of associations that is that forum post.

Imagining a communication event as an emergent assemblage born of the associations across a network over time applies to off-line communication as well. However, online communication can render those associations into actual network links: from Timic's post to the YouTube video. When I stumbled onto that Guns and Ammo Forum post from some other network event, I could literally see that Timic had consciously made this association between the forum and the YouTube video in the network that we both directly experienced. At that moment, the network of associations was clearly visible. Timic, and most of us, natively understand and use such networks in ways not widely available before the advent of the internet. Now just a mundane part of our daily lives, we don't necessarily pay much attention to how the associations we make online are shaping our communication. But, today, we can pay attention to these associations, and so researchers seeking to understand everyday communication should.

There seems to be, however, a temptation to follow our colleagues in media studies in their focus on specific media objects as if they were already assembled autonomous wholes: the television show has become the "meme" (Shifman 2013). Online, memes and other "netlore" seem to move around much like the folktales and ballads that the early folklorists so fruitfully collected. Those early researchers traced instances of those seemingly object-like performances through space and time. However, they generally failed to place them into their contexts. Without those contexts, we fail to document the networks from where those communication events emerged in the detail or nuance now possible.

Addressing this problem, Andrew Peck has demonstrated that so-called "netlore" can be better conceptualized not as a genre or set of media objects but as an ongoing practice. Defining "photoshopping" as "the vernacular practice of sharing digitally altered images (or photoshops) across networks," Peck has effectively shown that memes are not static entities that move around like objects (Peck 2014: 1640). Instead, they present recognizable recurring elements when they are enacted repeatedly in

different discreet events. In addition to focusing on multiple events as representing a practice, we can dig deeper into the practice by focusing on discreet events as emerging in the interaction of heterogeneous volitions acting across a network. Taking this perspective, then, puts the focus back on individual people as actors.

In this approach, extending Peck's emphasis on practice, we can look not just at what is recognized as the same across several communications but also trace back the different associations that emerge in the specific online communication events. Thinking about online communication as events that occur whenever and wherever a network of associations intersects allows us to account for and begin to unpack the multiple volitional forces and potentially different intentions that are shaping the communication. When those events include elements that members of a community recognize as marking the events as part of larger category of similar events, a genre for example, that event can be imagined as an emic practice, such as photoshopping.

From that perspective, we can understand a series of similar events as an "emic genre" that a specific community can recognize as a specific practice: telling a joke, polkaing, and so on. Taking it a step further, we can imagine each specific moment of expression as the emergence of a network of previous events that were all shaped by the choices of actors in the network. In this way of thinking, each communication event is a discrete moment in time. Its similarity to other events is not an existential fact (what I have previously termed "empirical") but only part of the network of signification that gives rise to the event (Howard 2013: 73-75). In the case of internet communication that persists over time, that event is the moment where an actor interacts with the post and thus activates, with her or his own volition, the network of previous volitional acts that all associate to each other and thus give emergence to that unique communication event. With this perspective, the challenge now becomes how to document and study these emergent networks of volition.

Methods

To document these emergent volitions, I used computational analysis to locate the most common users of the Guns & Ammo Forum by creating graphs that show which individuals most often speak to each other in responding forums posts or "threads." Noting individuals who interact often and individuals who interact less often, I located all the posts by different users and compared the topics being discussed in those posts.

To create these network graphs, I worked with computer programmers to write PERL scripts that download an entire forum and then place its contents into a SQL database. As of in 2016, I have downloaded 15 gun forums for a totally of 34,105,654 individual posts spanning from 2006 to 2016. The Guns and Ammo Forum alone contains 525,219 posts since its inception in 2010. If I were to spend 1 minute reading each of these posts on just the Guns and Ammo forum, it would take me 364 days with no breaks to read them all. To get a good overview of the data on just one of these forums is simply not possible without a computational approach. The computation approach, however, cannot replace close analysis. While numerical representations

of human expression can direct the researcher's attention to important or interesting content, only close analysis brings the subtle and nuance of individual everyday communications to light (Howard 2015a). Combining both the micro analysis of a traditional close reading with the macro perspective of computational analysis, I can more effectively locate and contextualize the clusters of association in this network that I can then subsequently look at in qualitative detail.

While online forums are not the most common nor the newest forum of social media, they do provide an excellent source for this kind of analysis because they typically offer a large volume of vernacular communication in a relatively normalized format. Because forum software uses specific HTML code to create the webpages of the forum, those "tags" can be used by the script to extract information and place it in into the database fields. For example, the text of each post is preceded and ended by specific HTML tags. The scripts recognize those tags and place the text that comes between them into the associated fields in the SQL database. This results in a database with different searchable fields for all the regular parts of the posts: the text of the post, if it was a reply, if it quoted a previous post, who posted it, the attributes of the users doing the posting, and so on. With this database, I can run complex queries that generate data tables that can then be loaded into network graphing software that creates visualizations of the clustering associative networks or "graphs" of who is talking to whom and at what volume.

These graphs visualize when individual users post in the same threads. To generate this graph, a query is run of the database that counts each time two forum users appear in the same forum thread. This generates a table that lists each user as a pair of nodes and assigns each pair a value representing the number of times those two individuals posted to the same thread in the forum. That table can then be visualized. In these graphs, each user is represented by a dot or "node" and the lines between the nodes or "links" represent appearing the same thread. The lines become thicker and redder as number of times those two users appeared in the same thread increases.

In the graph (Figure 1), the researcher can locate interesting groups of people based on the amount of connections they have to others participating on the forum. The strength of the connections is represented by the color and thickness of the lines between the nodes: the thicker and redder, the more times those two users participated in the same topic. The size of the users' nodes also represents the centrality of the user in the network based on a 'betweenness centrality' calculation. This kind of centrality is defined as: 'The centrality of node v is defined as: across all node pairs that have a shortest path containing v , the percentage that pass through v ' (Carley and DeReno 2006: 89). The more between, the bigger the node.

Using this graph, we now have a large-scale view of the discourse on the forum even though we could not possibly have read all the posts. We can tell which individuals talk most and to whom they most often speak. To really get at what each of those individuals is doing on the forum, however, we have to look at what they are actually saying. I have to engage in close analysis to get the microscopic view. That requires actually reading what these different users are communicating and placing those performances into context. More research could even further deepen our data

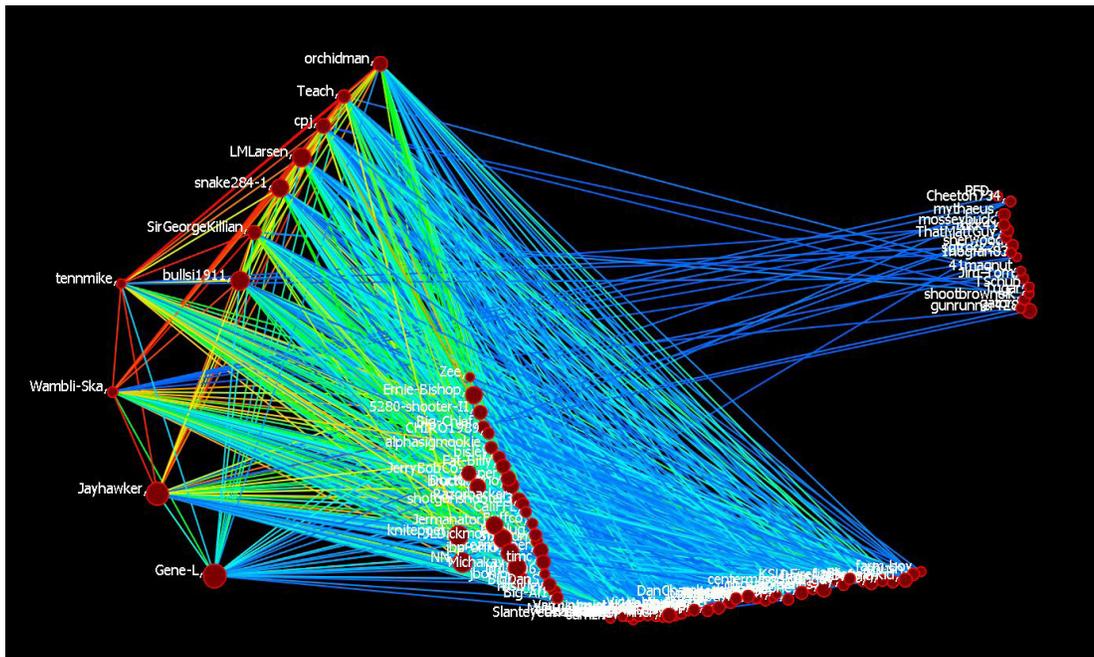


Figure 1. Guns and Ammo Forum user-by-cothread graph

with interviews by adding more context about the individual, their perception of the forum, their other media use, and so on. To locate the posts, I can simply search for all the posts posted by a particular user or users and read them. Picking users that represent central or otherwise unique positions in the forum discourse based on their number or the kinds of connections they have with others, I searched for and read the last 100 posts that users posted on the forum. Then, I located and read the entire thread where those posts appeared. Looking at these threads, I can gain any overall sense of the kinds of communication happening on the forum. In the next section, I will contextualize the overall forum and then look more closely at some of those exchanges.

The Guns and Ammo Forum

The Guns and Ammo forum is only one of many gun oriented forums. In addition to forums, Facebook, Reedit, and YouTube each have their own large volumes of vernacular discourse about guns. Further, these media overall host a large community of online gun enthusiasts who often interact across forums as well as across media. Online forums are an older and in many ways less high-tech form of social media. As a result, they cannot represent all forms of online communication and thus can only offer a window in this complex online community. However, they are excellent for computational analysis because they offer very regularized forms of text that is easier to download for analysis than the complex videos of YouTube or the intermixed media controlled by a wide range of possible privacy settings on Facebook.

Among gun forums, the Guns and Ammo Forum is in many ways a more mainstream forum. The forum is part of the Guns & Ammo Magazine website. First published in 1958, the magazine offers a largely United States audience “content covering the complete spectrum of firearms, accessories and related products.” It claims to be “the most respected media brand in the firearms field” (Outdoor Sportsman Group 2015). The online forum appears to have started in 2011. It is moderately sized compared to other gun forums I have documented with about seven thousand members and just over half a million posts as of the summer of 2016. Other forums are location specific like CalGuns.net which focuses on California gun users with 92,697 users or gun model specific like GlockTalk.com that focuses on the Glock brand of handguns and has 191,992 users. These users often have user accounts on more than one of these forums, and thus move across these and other media to form a larger online gun community. Based on a nationally marketed magazine, Guns and Ammo Forum gives a view into this community through this moderately sized forum that contains a broad cross section of many kinds of online gun discourse.

By looking at what was being talked about in the above analysis of the users that most commonly posted together across on the Guns and Ammo Forum, three topics of discussion become clear: 1) How to . . .; 2) Which is better?; and 3) Politics. Posts that I categorize as part of the “How to . . .” topic general feature individuals discussing specific techniques associated with recreational firearm use including hunting techniques, experiences with loading their own ammunition, or techniques that would aid in shooting guns accurately. The “Which is better?” topic generally features individuals discussing which guns and which gun accessories to buy. In these discussions, different brands or styles of guns were discussed in terms of which are better or worse and sometimes intense debates emerge about which item is best. “Politics,” the third major topic, focuses on discussions and predictions of the introduction of new gun laws. At the time of this research, the focus was on the possibility of new and more restrictive gun laws in the United States. Closely associated with this topic, were discussions of mass shootings that might spur gun control legislation and conspiracy theories about the US government’s desire to disarm US citizens much like the thread where Timic’s post above appeared.

Looking the above graph of all the users, we can see who the overall leaders in the discourse are based on how between they are and how many times they are linked to other users. Users who appear to have larger dots are more between while users that have redder dots have more connections. Looking that graph reveals a lot of interesting information. Most obviously, it shows that there are a few individuals who are highly connected: those with the heavy red lines between them. Those users post a lot and they post a lot in a relatively few number of threads. On the other hand, the graph shows that there are a lot of users who post in a wide range of threads but they post far less often. Focusing just on those who seem to be posting the most and are posting in the same threads very often, three individuals jump out for a closer look: Jayhawker, Wambli-Ska, and Gene-L.

Jayhawker is interesting because he has the most between connection among the most highly connected group appearing on the graph. The rest of the users with lots of red lines between them (those that talk to one another a lot), do not have very big nodes. That means they talk to each other, but not to a lot of other people. Drilling down into this discourse to see what is being talked about, we find that this group of interconnected heavy users is highly engaged in talking about politics. Jayhawker is the most between and in a sense can be seen as the over all forum leader because he is both heavily engaged with this group that is the heaviest users, but he also engages with a wide range of other less heavy forum users. He posts on the full range of topics: the guns he likes and the guns he likes to buy, hunting and techniques, and issues surrounding gun control and gun rights. A US military veteran and retired, Jayhawker spends a lot of time offering advice and he seldom meets with disagreement.

Wambli-Ska stands out for the opposite sort of reason. He appears on the graph as a fairly small dot with several very orange and red lines. He posts a lot, but mostly in threads where the other core group members are posting. Drilling down to look at his actual posts, he is far more narrowly focused on political issues. Often calling for specific actions, like boycotts or contacting a political representative, he comes across as an aggressive activist. While many on the site seem quite hostile to institutions generally and law enforcement in particular, Wambli-Ska focuses far more narrowly on the issue of gun control. As a result, he is more connected to the core group that focus on the politics topic, but he is not very connected to the much larger group that is more interested the "How to . . ." or "Which is better?" topics.

A sort of mirror opposite to Wambli-Ska, Gene-L appears on the graph as a large dot with a lot of small blue links. Gene-L is highly between and he posts a lot. However, he does not appear regularly in the same threads with any other specific people. He appears as a big dot with no red links at all. When I drilled down to look at what he is posting about, Gene tends to talk about the "How to . . ." topic by giving advice on how to best clean guns, how to best mount a telescopic sight, and how to cast one's own bullets out of lead.

Observing the differences between these users, it is clear that the core network group is core because of its interest shared interested in politics. At the same time however, the vast majority of individuals in the forum are far more interested in specific issues to do with recreational gun use. Those individuals engaging in the "How to . . ." and "Which is Better?" topics interact less with one another and thus form a more diffuse network. Jayhawker is unique because he is highly connected both with more political core users and with the more hobbyist oriented users. Wambli, on the other hand focused on politics and thus he is much less connected with those outside the political enclave. Gene doesn't talk politics much, and this keeps him from interacting with the heaviest forum users, but, at the same time, it allows him to connect with wider diversity of people.

The hobbyist discourse is the more common form of discussion on the Guns and Ammo Forum. It seems to generally emerge when individuals come to the forum looking for specific advice. Discussing hunting specifically, for example, an individual

asked “how much authority does a game warden have”? A forty-five post discussion ensued where users discussed if typical search and seizure rules applied to game wardens as they do other law enforcement agents (Jeff in TX 2016). In another example, a user asked about how to effectively clean a particularly difficult part of his handgun. In that case, 37 other users (including Gene-L) replied offering techniques for gun cleaning (Uncle Fester 2016). The “Which is better?” topic also elicits a lot of hobbyist posts that begin with considerations of what guns or gun accessories are better. While not as divisive as the politics topic, some individuals do enter these discussions with strong opinions that seem to go beyond simple advice. For example, a user posted a “Range Report!” about his first shooting experience with a new handgun he had purchased. For the following 87 posts, individuals expressed agreement with the poster’s, mostly positive, assessment of the gun or offered reasons for why similar or different versions of the gun might be better.

Timic’s post from the first part of this article is clearly part of the topic that also animates the mostly highly connected group on the graph: politics. While Timic’s post only marginally suggests any particular politics, a common constellation of ideas on this gun forum and others emerges among expressions of concern that the US government including its military and law enforcement personnel intend to place the country under marshal law and, either before or after, confiscate all guns in the country. A typical example of this is a post titled “ATF Morons!” where individuals discuss an misguided ATF raid on a toy gun seller. Sixteen posts in, a user states: “The BATF is monitoring this site and have access to our real identities, read the Terms/Agreements you said YES to when you created an account” (NCFUBAR 2012). The poster seems to be being sarcastic . . . I think.

In another post, a regular user named Jaywatpti posts a common rumor in the online gun community:

Jus[t] got a e-mail from a friend who checked this out on snoops and some other site’s. Marlin is closing it’s doors, Marlin is owned by the Freedom Group, which also owns Bushmaster, Remington, DPMS, Dakota Arms, & H&R. Freedom is owned by Cerberus Capitol Corp. wich is owned by George Soros, who is as you know anti-gun and obamas financial advisor. Anyone heard anymore about this ??” (jaywapti 2013)

In another post, a user provokes a series of common rumor expressions by asking why ammunition is so hard to find in stores at that time. A discussion ensues where one poster describes knowing someone “highup” at FedEx who claims billions of rounds are being shipped secretly from the US to China. Another poster counters with a more common rumor claiming that the shortage is because of:

The Homeland Security purchase of 1.6 Billion rounds of ammo - what they gonna do with a 100 year supply of ammo - ‘cept to keep it out of our hands. PBS reports they are buying all sorts of stuff - .22LR up to .50BMG. I’m not saying there is a conspiracy - but if it smells like a fart, it probably is a fart (D. Kelley 2013).

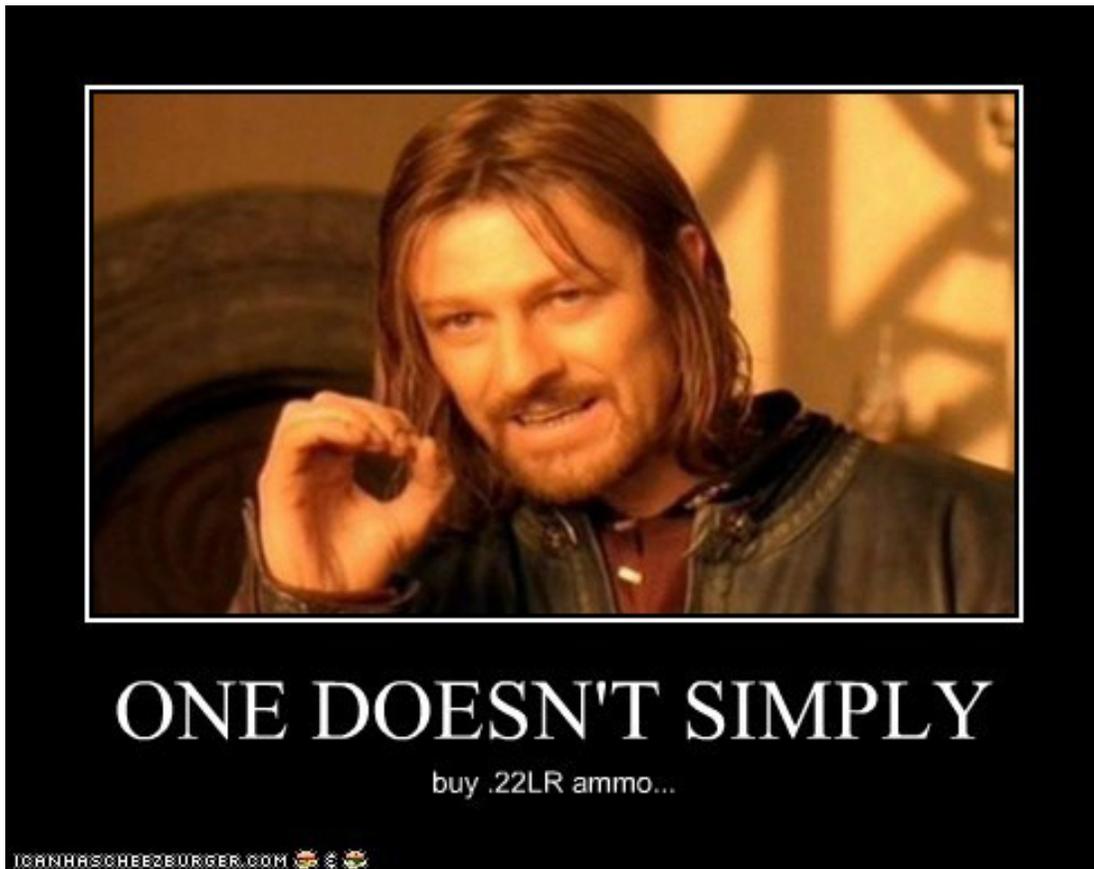


Figure 2. Ammo Shortage Meme, 2013

Nine posts in, a user offers what many would immediately recognize as a graphic meme. Depicting an actor portraying a popular character in the Lord of the Rings movie series, the meme always includes the text, “One does not simply . . .” and the user creates a punch line by adding their own topically specific text (Figure 2). In this case, the joke is about the difficulty of by a particular kind of ammunition: .22 caliber long rifle.

Taking each of these posts on their own, we could treat them the way folklore has historically been conceived, as what Michael Owen Jones and Robert Georges call “transmissible entities” (Georges and Jones 1995: 93). Rumors are a sort of communication that is particularly prone to being imagined as objects and traced as if they were autonomous wholes. Even more, however, so-called “netlore” like this “meme” beckons us to think of it as an entity that moves around being slightly altered by those who move it.

To think of these network events as media objects, however, obscures their networked nature. It obscures how they are momentary emergences of interacting volitions including, in most if not all cases, different volitional entities with different

and possibly even conflicting interests. Imagined as emergent nodes in a dynamic network necessitates that we contextualize these communication events by following back their associations just as I did at the outset with Timic's post. Now armed (as it were) with the network analysis above, we can see how the post is part of the Guns and Ammo Forum. That forum is, of course, part of a larger gun community including that of the forum makers and the forum's advertisers. Those individuals all have at least commercial interests in Timic's post if not ideological ones. Beyond that, the technologies themselves have imported their own ideological influences into the event (Howard 2012). And the researcher could, of course, keep following these associations taking different paths through our shared web of signification.

The Network Corrective

With Timic's post now contextualized in a wider range of associations than it was before, what does this network approach do for our understanding of that specific communication event? Taken individually, Timic's video could be seen as an idiosyncratic expression of an individual. Any student of vernacular culture would quickly point out, however, that Timic's post forwards a rumor associated with conspiracy theory beliefs which themselves have a long history (Barkun 2013; Howard 2011, 15). However, we can't stop there.

It is easy to note how this example as well as others recounted here suggest a certain pervasive paranoia in this discourse community that is coupled with an underlying threat of violence and, often, a disrespect for institutions. What we might miss, however, is the powerful corrective force operating here. For example, the rumor performance recounted above claiming that "the Homeland Security['s] purchase of 1.6 billion" rounds of ammunition is part of a government conspiracy to subvert the United State's constitutional protection for firearms ownership did not go unchallenged. Instead, it was subsequently countered by a rush of responses from within the community—and some responses were even from law enforcement and military people. For example, one user counted up the number of rounds he believed were used by US law enforcement agencies in training. He noted: "Doing some conservative estimates here, [. . .] I get a little over 9 million rounds per year per training center just for handgun ammo" (wildgene 2013). Another user extended the resistance to the rumor by questioning the validity of one blog that reported the 1.6 billion number:

For one I don't really consider [the website] infowars to be a trustworthy source of information. All of the links go back through a bunch of crazy conspiracy theory websites. The only actual document from DHS [The Department of Homeland Security] I found in the links limited the contract to a maximum of 70 Million rounds [of ammunition] per year of many different calibers including .223, .357 sig, .40, and 12ga. (wildgene 2013)

Corrective voices also resisted the performance of the rumor that "Marlin is owned by [. . .] George Soros" who is now forcing the closure of the company. One user noted: "It's an old rumor from 2011. George Soros has no connection." Then he offered a link

to the website Snopes.com that houses a collection of documents demonstrating the claim is false (jaywapti 2013).

Returning to Timic's post specifically, the response to his performance of the rumor that the US military is planning to attack its own population by "practicing strafing [on] civilians" was, actually, less corrective. More than half the responses to his post seemed to agree that the government may be preparing to put down a civil war in the U.S. A striking theme emerged in these conversations where individuals imagined rural Americans pitted against urban ones with comments like: "If anyone thinks they'll flee to the hills. i can tell you the people who live in the hills have thought this through and they don't want you and they ain't gonna share." Or:

Rural folks have a tendency to share skills, and value people who are able to contribute to the well-being of the general community. Dealing drugs, stealing, collecting welfare, begging for handouts, fathering litters of illegitimate children, and other inner-city skills are not particularly needed in our communities. Experts in those areas need not apply for citizenship out here! (Timic 2013)

However, many users offered a host of reasons, both tactical and more broadly anti-conspiratorial, why the idea of the U.S. military attacking civilians is simply not reasonable. Given the many law enforcement and military individuals on the forum, it was not surprising to see a debate emerge about if the US military and law enforcement would support a fascist American government takeover. One user reminded the others of the extremely positive image of so-called "first responders" that has become widely accepted in post-9/11 America. He referenced the previous posts specifically hostile to law enforcement officers by sarcastically depicting himself as a fascist "thug": "On 9/11/01 I was one of the jack booted thugs involved in the evac[uation] of Battery Park City [adjacent to the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City], herding people up and transporting them to shelters . . ." The most strident poster opposing the possibility of a civil war in the United States stated bluntly: "The notion of a civil war is so absurd it beggars the imagination." He did go on, however, to openly hope that a "COUP against OweBama will go much much smoother" than any direct US military attack against American civilians would (Timic 2013). Nonetheless, these examples can now be seen placed in a broader context that includes not just the singular performance of a common rumor but also the corrective force of heterogeneous voices in the community resisting paranoia, the acceptance of violence, and hatred for institutions.

For those of us researching online communication, considering each of these events as a network aggregation of heterogeneous volitional forces acts as our own corrective. This network correction operates in at least two ways. First, it reminds us that we too are the folk and the folk know it. We all share in the visibility of network associations and the linking that these technologies have made possible. We can contribute to public discourse by pushing those associations further out in ways that provoke discussion by asking questions like what role TCP/IP plays in our daily lives or if the Guns and Ammo Forum should be responsible in any way for the content

that is selling its advertising. We can ask that the publics to whom we speak consider these complex integrations of volition even as they look at their previous actions and consider enacting new links. We are, just as are they, in this network.

Secondly, this approach extends our understanding of recurring network events as community-based practices to include how specific events emerge from a whole range of potentially very idiosyncratic sets of associations. Among these associations, one may be the sense that the event is part of larger and recognizable genre or practice—that it is “folkloric” or “traditional.” Including the “folk” or vernacular element of a post as just one of its network associations allows us to recognize how institutional, commercial, and technological forces are also part of everyday communication practices. Because a network event emerges from potentially infinite associations, this approach allows us to choose to explore the set of associations that we think are important without denying the potential importance of other associations that have also shaped that communication.

In the case of Timic’s post, I think it’s important to consider that online gun communication can seem to foster a disturbing paranoia and even potentially some sort of violence. That post, however, emerged associated with many others. In its network of associations, the most pervasive topics surround a hobbyist culture of recreational gun use that seems to benignly focus on which products are best and how to do engage in relatively safe and nonviolent recreational activities. And even for those communications that are conspiratorial, and thus not benign, the gun community itself offers the corrective of reasoned and thoughtful responses—at least for those who are fully engaged in the forum and thoughtful about its content. Looking just at individual posts expressing fears of conspiracy or rumors of wars, we would miss the fact that we are dealing with a folk culture that at least allows and maybe even encourages reasonable discourse. The effect of that discourse occurring across the network seems to be that these individuals at least largely reject conspiratorial beliefs. A network approach offers us a fairer view of gun users than does a media-object, “netlore,” or network practice approach alone.

Notes

- 1 Non-standard language in the quoted material has been left intact in an effort to present these online communications as accurately as possible.

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