

# Social Norms on the Web

How To Create Productive Digital Communities

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“Altruistic punishment may be the glue that holds society together”

Howard Rheingold

## Introduction

Many diverse communities exist on the Internet today. There are communities that form around cooking, programming, shopping, socializing, and any other imaginable activity. There are even sites on the web that let people create their own niche communities if that community doesn't exist yet. One salient feature of all these communities is their norms and personalities. The norms develop in responses to the community's needs and makeup, and also in conjunction with the site creators. This paper will explore how social norms develop in different web communities, and what commonalities there are between productive communities and their organization that separate them from their snarky and mean counterparts.

Web communities are an engagement between the site's creators and the site's users, and social norms evolve as users create a community identity, and as each individual contributes to the overall brand of the site. The community's norms are also interwoven with community objectives, which emerge as users break and recreate the site's features. Online social communities work when users have an investment in the community through identity and shared goals and have a role in affecting norms. A crucial part of this is the ability to punish cheaters, voice opinions, and be part of a communal dialogue.

## Social Norms From Offline to Online

I interviewed prominent Stanford psychology professor Fred Turner of the Communications department about his research in social networks and norm development. The key element of our interview was his finding that in online sites, user identity is all about branding and success is about maintaining offline to online mappings. Turner mentioned that it is important to, "Anchor people in their real world identities," and followed up later that in social networks, "Anonymity is the straight route to hell." Turner focused on the fact that it was important that companies build online worlds that

are recognizable, and also the idea that much of the mapping is lost when three-dimensional people become online profiles with a set of photos and lists of interests.

The idea that group dynamics and social interaction follow many of the same rules from offline is well supported (Amichai-Hamburger 194), as does the disproportional involvement in certain groups.

Individuals incorporate some of their group identities into their self-concept to a greater extent that they do others. In other words, we consider our membership in some group to be more self-defining and important to us than we do our membership in other groups. “ (196)

This saliency, the amount that users find the group to be self-defining, affects the adherence to communal norms. Even on anonymous websites, high salience leads to an increase in normative behavior, but an anonymous site with low salience does not. This saliency can be seen in what I have termed the Facebook effect. “Individuals behavior will be shaped by opinions, values, and goals... of other group members only to the extent that group membership is important to the person’s identity” (196). Since the Facebook community has become an important part of the identities of millions of users they have a large social capital investment in following norms because of high saliency.

There are some major differences agreed upon by many sources writing on the topic between online and offline communication including the lowered importance of physical appearance, the increased physical distance, and the greater control over the time and pace of interactions. (Amichai-Hamburger 34, Suler). The main point of changing internet interactions is that these factors give users greater control in crafting the online self, or to use the term I heard first from social media expert Danah Boyd, in creating a “complex digital presence.”

## Site Policy and a Return to Traditional Values

Wikipedia:Please do not bite the newcomers

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Take a look at the current state of social norms on the web on popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter and there are countless explicit guides stating and explaining the social networking etiquette. Each person who contributes to this literature has their own spin on the “do’s and don’ts” of the given web community, but there are several salient trends and stylistic preferences.

*Wired*, a popular online and printed tech magazine published a guide called, “How to Behave: New Rules For Highly Evolved Humans.” In this guide, they take a stab at serious and comedic dilemmas of people confronted with never before seen awkward situations on the net. Most of their suggestions promote a balance and virtuous contribution to the online community. Suggestions of “Leave your Wi-Fi Open,” “Remember, Online Conversations Are Not All About you,” and “Be Mindful of Your Personal Space,” all suggest holding a considerate attitude towards fellow connected community members. “Don’t Lie With Your Facebook Photo” suggests maintaining an honest online persona, “Delete Unwanted Posts From Your Facebook Wall” suggests a sense of tidiness, and “Don’t Blog or Tweet Anything With More Than Half a Million Hits” reminds the reader not to fall susceptible to every popular trend. In essence they have hit upon technological correlates of many of the old-fashioned and traditional offline virtues. Another suggestion to “Meet Online Friends in the Real World” is a very popular idea in the space of social norms, because so much of it is about the way that real communities map to digital communities.

What the *Wired* article does is enumerate many of the unwritten social norms that exist on these sites. In no way have they created a definitive guide for the 2010 Web Explorer, but they have captured part of the modern zeitgeist. People want honesty and balance from their online companions. There are two categories of social norms, the implicit ones—the ones learned from experience and repeated visiting to a site, and the explicit ones—the ones stated on a prominent community page. Implicit norms reflect much of the shared sensibility and common knowledge of a community. Common knowledge is a “mutual understanding,” and many social failures are attributed to the lack of common knowledge that would have led to success (“Common Knowledge”).

Explicit social norms are one of the regulation mechanisms in online sites, and an examination of the sites rules in comparison with its user community and personality

reveal what sorts of trends lead to productive sites. Hacker News is a social news site about technology and startups, and has a distinct simple and clean interface. In their site rules they say:

Essentially there are two rules here: don't post or upvote crap links, and don't be rude or dumb in comment threads...Which brings us to the most important principle on HN: civility. Since long before the web, the anonymity of online conversation has lured people into being much ruder than they'd dare to be in person. So the principle here is not to say anything you wouldn't say face-to-face. (“Hacker News Welcome”)

In their first contact with new users they set the standard for activity on the site. These sorts of buzzwords appear all over the web in community management. “Don’t be rude,” and “civility” are pleas for an old fashioned sense of virtue.

Stack Overflow is a programming question and answer community site, and it shares many of the same goals as Hacker News. In their Frequently Asked Questions, they state:

**Be nice.** Treat others with the same respect you'd want them to treat you. We're all here to learn together. Be tolerant of others who may not know everything you know. Bring your sense of humor.

**Be honest.** Above all, be honest. If you see misinformation, vote it down. Insert comments indicating what, specifically, is wrong. Even better — edit and improve the information! Provide stronger, faster, superior answers of your own! (FAQ)

The important fact to highlight is a plea for respect, honesty, and an appeal to being a good community member and a good person. These sorts of simple ideas are the backbone of social site policies, but there is a wide variation in how these appear in practice.

Reddit is another, arguably wilder social news site with a strong sense of community and very long comment threads. Within the Reddit community there is Reddiquette, which is a collection of guidelines. Reddit has a longer list of guidelines, many about specific syntax and format of submissions, and others about general voting guidelines. An especially telling part of the Reddiquette under the list of “Please Don’ts” is: “Create an alternate account just to be rude/offensive. If you're up to saying it, say it

under your name, and accept the negative karma.” (“Reddit.com Help”) Here users are encouraged to take ownership of their comments and actions, as this is a key element of maintaining community. The success of this strategy is questionable.

YouTube is a popular video site that suffers from a snarkiness problem. It is known for comments that are mean, rude, and offensive. YouTube’s policy has some similar ideas, but suggests a very liberal tone.

We're not asking for the kind of respect reserved for nuns, the elderly, and brain surgeons. We mean don't abuse the site. Every cool new community feature on YouTube involves a certain level of trust. We trust you to be responsible, and millions of users respect that trust. Please be one of them.

They go on to condemn the posting of videos with illegal activities, and violence, although these are present on the site (“YouTube Community Guidelines”). In response to the types of comments appearing on its site, YouTube recently wrote on their blog, “Many of you indicated that comments could use an overhaul and hoped that was a part of the redesign. We're happy to say that it is. Today, we're introducing a "highlights view" of comments which summarizes top rated comments, uploader comments, video responses and recent comments in a single "front-page story" that you can drill into for more detail. (“New Video Page”) To combat the prevalence of mean comments, they focus on community approved comments, and comments from the video uploader. They also changed a stars rating system to a binary like/dislike button.

Slashdot, another community news site mocks users into signing in and owning their contributions. The site says, “Logging in will allow you to post comments as yourself. If you don't log in, you will only be able to post as Anonymous Coward.” This issue of anonymity in web communities will be crucial in the rest of the paper.

In the popular social microblogging site Twitter, there is a fascinating approach to policy. They list out rules and best practices, but mainly as a focus to keep out types of spam. Twitter says: “You may not use the Twitter service for the purpose of spamming anyone. What constitutes “spamming” will evolve as we respond to new tricks and tactics by spammers (“Help Resources”). In a community that is more socially centered, it is crucial to keep the community made up of true community members.

Facebook, the current most popular social networking site has a “Statement of Rights and Responsibilities” which reads like a terms of service agreement which also harps on the spam issue saying, “You will not send or otherwise post unauthorized commercial communications (such as spam) on Facebook.” They also have a declaration of principles, which reads like a vague constitution:

**Social Value:** People should have the freedom to build trust and reputation through their identity and connections, and should not have their presence on the Facebook Service removed for reasons other than those described in Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities. (“Facebook Principles”)

At parts, this exploration of social site policy is redundant, but the message is loud and clear. What the sites desire in a functioning community is mutual respect between users, trust, and legitimacy. There is a large anti-spam effort, because spam represents those trying to undermine the community with noise. They institute policies to fight the shortcomings of online communities—mainly anonymity—but succeed in varying measures.

## Coevolution of Social Norms and Technology

Upon examining current social practices, it is clear that social network features are a product of user and creator interaction. Many of Twitter’s core features are user-generated features that Twitter has officially adopted. An example of this is the hashtag, which was a community-generated idea to group related tweets. The retweet is also a user-generated feature to give credit to a fellow Twitterer who came up with a good idea. This feature has also been officially recognized by Twitter and made into an explicit site feature. These features are now inseparable from what Twitter is, and proper use of these features is defined intrinsically within the community.

The entire space of social network and social sharing is now the norm, and these sites did not even exist a decade ago. Before there was technology to share your every thought it wasn’t the norm, or even possible to do so. Facebook is an example of a site

that is trying to actively shape Internet norms as they see them evolving. Facebook and its users are in a two-way conversation shaping the norms. The technology effects how the users interact with the site, and this in turn effects Facebook's design decisions.

Mark Zuckerberg recently interviewed with TechCrunch and commented on the way that Facebook shapes and responds to changing social norms.

When I got started in my dorm room at Harvard, the question a lot of people asked was 'why would I want to put any information on the Internet at all? Why would I want to have a website?' "And then in the last 5 or 6 years, blogging has taken off in a huge way and all these different services that have people sharing all this information. People have really gotten comfortable not only sharing more information and different kinds, but more openly and with more people. That social norm is just something that has evolved over time. We view it as our role in the system to constantly be innovating and be updating what our system is to reflect what the current social norms are... We decided that these would be the social norms now and we just went for it."

Facebook sees its role to actively *decide* the social norms, but Zuckerberg acknowledges the rate at which users' preferences have changed. The creation of sites like Facebook and Twitter have ushered in the possibilities for new norms. Facebook, however, operates in stark contrast to Twitter. While Twitter's most well-known features evolved organically, Facebook's features, the news feed and the Open Graph project, have been essentially forced on users. This norm evolution is bidirectional—sites make changes, then users respond—and then the cycle repeats. After the user backlash to Facebook's recent privacy changes, the site responded by adding a simplified interface for the privacy settings. This response was crucial for Facebook, because successful norms emerge only when communication between users and the site is two-way.

## Voting as a Regulatory Mechanism in Online Communities

Several of the social sites considered implement a voting policy for content moderation. There are several obvious benefits to voting, mainly that it sorts between the

useful information and the garbage. But there is a large social psychology element that makes both upvoting and downvoting useful.

A site like Hacker News only uses upvotes, Reddit uses both up and down votes, and Stack Overflow uses up and downvotes. A critique of the only upvote system is that much of the information is lost and a vote number is ambiguous:

The advantage of this system is that nobody gets downvoted, but at a steep cost: we've lost half the potential information. If a post has zero upvotes, does that mean it's bad? incorrect? uninteresting? mediocre? There's *no way to tell*, because zero has multiple meanings." If you add back in the negatives, suddenly the range is doubled. An evil or incorrect post is now *different* than a mediocre or uninteresting post, because it will have downvotes and a negative score. (Atwood)

Atwood, one of the creators of the Stack Overflow site, argues that downvotes are a critical filter, and necessary in the less than idealistic Internet world:

Sure, it stings a bit to get downvoted. I've been downvoted myself on Stack Overflow. And each time, it makes me pause. But that's *good!* That's necessary! You have to believe there are potential consequences for every post you make — both good and bad. This is how things work on real playgrounds; why would we expect our web playgrounds to be any different?

The last part of Atwood's comment about the playground analogy is critical—we need systems that preserve real world mappings of behavior. Actions that have both positive and negative consequences are more informative to the community. Atwood encourages "responsible downvoting," an echo of the altruistic punishment of sociology and biology. Stack Overflow gives users ten points for upvoting and takes two points from the downvoted user, and one point from the user who makes the downvote. In this way there is an incentive to help distinguish the good and the bad when you are invested in a community, but rampant negative feedback is prevented by making it a cost to the downvoter.

Atwood responds to the Hacker News setup by arguing that, "The lack of a downvote removes far too much of the critical community feedback loop from the system. And in the longer term, that will do more to tear down your community than build it up." Continued exploration of the social sites shows that a critical and responsible community is vital to creating productive social norms.

## Keeping Out the Cheaters

What does it mean to keep out the cheaters on a social community site? It means that people who will undermine the community values or disrupt the community goals are prevented from doing so. In many cases spamming is synonymous with cheating in social networks. For example, in a site like Twitter or Facebook, a spammer ruins the experience of trying to stay updated with your friends. In pure social sites such as Facebook or Twitter where the user is strongly connected to his or her online identity, this identity actually serves as a self-regulating mechanism to prevent abusive behavior. This is because the punishment you receive is not a loss of points to your site reputation such as on Stack Overflow, but on your real world identity. If one has an excessive number of comments, or all negative posts, a user's friends will see this. Since your actions are tied to your identity in a pure social site, your poor behavior online reflects negatively on you offline. This is why undermining the identity on a pure social site ruins the network.

When people are not connected to their identity on a site like Facebook, they are not bound by the self-regulating mechanisms that keep other users in check. Users are not constantly doing stupid things on their profile, because in theory, if they were connected to their online identity, they would be embarrassed to have these negative actions associated with them. On the other hand, a user with a fake account is essentially in the same sphere as a fully anonymous user who do not face any of the same socially normative concerns or repercussions.

In group sites with a non-social focus such as programming question and answer on Stack Overflow or news sharing on Reddit, a moderating element is more important because user identity is less a part of the fabric of the site. However, there are other ways to regulate behavior.

[A community] enforces the behavior it requires primarily through appeal to the common enterprise in which the participants are engaged, coupled with a thoroughly transparent platform that faithfully records and renders all individual interventions in the common project and facilitates discourse among participants

about how their contributions do, or do not, contribute to this common enterprise. (Benkler and Nissenbaum 398)

In the case of Stack Overflow, what this means is getting users invested in the common goal that they have rather than an individual identity. Time and again it is clear that successful community norms emerge when users have an investment in the site, either through connection with their identity or a connection with the content.

Paul Graham, founder of Y Combinator and Hacker News argues that it's also important to keep out the bad behavior from the site. "It's bad behavior you want to keep out more than bad people. User behavior turns out to be surprisingly malleable. If people are expected to behave well, they tend to; and vice versa." Graham argues that it is important that sites set a precedent for expected user behavior in the community.

It's pretty clear now that the broken windows theory applies to community sites as well. The theory is that minor forms of bad behavior encourage worse ones: that a neighborhood with lots of graffiti and broken windows becomes one where robberies occur. I was living in New York when Giuliani introduced the reforms that made the broken windows theory famous, and the transformation was miraculous. And I was a Reddit user when the opposite happened there, and the transformation was equally dramatic. (Graham)

Graham highlights the idea that behavior is set by precedent. If a social site continuously disallows spam and moderates inappropriate behavior, it will do a lot to frustrate the community cheaters. He provides Reddit as an example of a site that without precedent for cleanliness, attracted more coarse content. Site creators must create tools that perpetuate the community image that they seek.

## The Psychology of Social Norms and Game Theoretical Models

Social norms in web communities involve many of the same considerations that social norms in real communities face. Many of these observed online behaviors can readily be explained by the findings in other domains such as game theory, psychology and evolutionary biology.

Game theory attempts to model strategic situations between players, and such canonical game theory examples provide model situations to analyze the evolution of

social norms in online networks. Many of these games model the way that players trust each other and how much they are willing to invest in a team, both of which are key factors in social communities.

The issue that appears in many of the networks is that there is no trust between users, and there are many cheaters undermining the community goals. A simple example to model this is the prisoner's dilemma where two prisoners are in separate rooms and have two options, to help or cheat. If they both help, they get a 1 year sentence, if they both cheat they get a 5 year sentence, but if one cheats and the other helps, the cheater gets no sentence and the helper gets a 10 year sentence. What is important here is the relative numbers, and that the Nash equilibrium is a cheating strategy for both players. In an iterated prisoners dilemma, cooperation can develop, but only under certain circumstances of an unknown number of rounds. It has been demonstrated that a forgiving Tit-For-Tat strategy is optimal here, which is to cooperate initially, and then follow the other player's action. The significant takeaway from the prisoner's dilemma is that a cheating strategy is dominant, even though both players would have been better off if they had chosen to help.

Another economic example is the tragedy of the commons, whereby a public good is abused because no one cares for it enough to protect it, even though everyone benefits from it. An example here is a grazing field, or a public restroom.

In games like these, it has been demonstrated that rational players will choose the cheating strategy, even though the community would be better off with participants choosing to help. The gap here is to get trust and involvement in the community. In his TED talk, writer Howard Rheingold mentions these game theoretical situations as a community failure, but a suggestion of where they can possibly be fixed. He presents the ultimatum game, a game where there are two players in separate rooms. One is given one hundred dollars and is told to propose a split. The other player then has the option to accept or reject the split. If it is accepted they both get the money, otherwise they do not. What is noteworthy from this experiment is that although it would be considered "rational" to accept any monetary amount above zero, this is not the case. Proposals that are deemed fair are accepted, where fair ranges by culture, but unfair proposals are rejected, in attempt to punish the cheaters. This is their key finding for social norm

management. The player in this game has the opportunity to set the rules straight by not allowing the player to cheat. Much like downvoting in Stack Overflow, the ability to punish cheaters, is what prevents people from repeating this behavior. Rheingold references scientific studies saying, “Altruistic punishment may be the glue that holds society together.”

This is confirmed by several evolutionary biology studies. “Cooperation flourishes if altruistic punishment is possible” because people now have incentive to keep out cheaters for the good of the group which ultimately benefits themselves (Fehr and Gächter 137). It is in a person’s self interest to maintain the group structure. In a public goods game, they find that almost all of the subjects used the punishment, and the trend was that it was above average contributors punishing below average contributors and punishing harshly (137). Fehr and Gächter found that, “The punishment of the non-cooperators substantially increased the amount that subjects invested in the public good” (138). The more you invest in a site or community, whether time, money, or identity, the more you care about its success, and will strive to maintain it. Here they acknowledge the problem of public goods, but suggest a solution:

Everybody in the group will be better off if free riding is deterred, but nobody has an incentive to punish the free riders. Thus, the punishment of free riders constitutes a second-order public good. The problem of second-order public goods can be solved if enough humans have a tendency for altruistic punishment, that is, if they are motivated to punish free riders even though it is costly and yields no material benefits for the punishers. (137)

Finally, this study hits upon the main reason for the success of the Stack Overflow model, one where a punishment is of a cost (two reputation points) to the punisher. Fehr and Gächter write:

Thus, the act of punishment, although costly for the punisher, provides a benefit to other members of the population by inducing potential non-cooperators to increase their investments. For this reason, the act of punishment is an altruistic act. (139)

To complete the Stack Overflow analogy, what is happening is that although the user loses points in his own reputation by downvoting, he is providing a service to the community by pushing people to make better posts, and providing information about post quality. Ultimately they find that the proximal mechanism for altruistic punishment

is negative emotion—in essence the sense that *it's just not fair* if I put in all this effort and they put in nothing. In the ultimatum game, *it's just not fair* if you get \$95 and I get \$5. Presenting the opportunity for the user to participate in responsible altruistic punishment is key to creating a working self-governing community. It has also been shown that altruistic punishment and cooperation is sustainable in very large groups, which is important to web communities (Boyd et al.).

However, the key consideration in these findings is that users be connected to their online identities for an extended period of time. If they become anonymous, then any iterated interactions or punishment is worthless because they create a new meaningless account. A punishment to an anonymous user doesn't do anything, and this is why the foundation of a successful social norm system depends on legitimate identities.

Anonymity is the key factor that creates the online disinhibition effect, where users feel able to reveal more information or be meaner than they might be in person because many of the real world groundings are lost. Dissociative anonymity explains why the tie to one's legitimate identity is what holds communities together:

When people have the opportunity to separate their actions on-line from their in-person lifestyle and identity, they feel less vulnerable about self-disclosing and acting out. Whatever they say or do can't be directly linked to the rest of their lives. In a process of dissociation, they don't have to own their behavior by acknowledging it within the full context of an integrated online/offline identity. (Suler)

A site promoting successful social norms will try to minimize the online disinhibition effect by tightly connecting users to their online identity in the community. A site that has successfully done this is Facebook, which many regard as safe because people are presenting their true selves there, or as much as possible. We have seen that when this is the case, when users are connected to their identity, their behavior is self-regulating.

As is evident from the iconic New Yorker cartoon, that “On the internet no one knows you're a dog,” (Steiner) a key concern with social norms is to know that the person you are talking to is not a dog. It is important to know not only that, but their reputation as a productive community member.

## Conclusion

Social norms reflect the personality and evolution of an online community. As an online network sifts through its goals and users attempt to form public identities and brands, they take part in creating a gestalt phenomenon, the site's norms.

Several things are crucial for the successful development of social norms in an online community. First, it is important that the users be attached and invested to their online identity, and that it is an accurate and honest representation of their self. Alternatively, the users must have a critical investment in the goal-oriented activity on the site. Second, it is important that a feedback mechanism is implemented such that the users can maintain a strong community. There must be a way for users to engage in altruistic punishment, not just punishment for its own sake, but punishment with an ends of fortifying community values. The site must come out initially with clear guidelines that promote traditional communal values.

But this isn't all. As has been made clear, technology and communities evolve, and it is crucial that norms and site administrators are in constant discussion about how to properly meet the users needs.

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