CONFLICT, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

By Patrick Lambe

In this paper, I look at how conflict within a community can function as a social device for identity-building. In particular, I look at a conflict that took place in late 2003 in the online public sector community of practice, ACT-KM (www.actkm.com). Callahan (2004) has described the evolution of ACT-KM in general terms. I compare this discussion with a couple of other systematic online community conflict studies (there are not many).

Communities, like people, build their identities over time, and just as we can often account for the kind of person that we are by referring to key defining events in our lives, so a community uses key defining events both to re-examine and re-define its identity.

One critical kind of defining event, which arises from the very nature of community, is the conflict event. For communities that thrive on communication, knowledge transfer and exploration of a shared practice, differences in views are part and parcel of the life of a community. A proportion of these differences will emerge as conflicts, or evolve into conflicts, depending on the nature of the differences, the quality of relationships within the community, and competing ideas about what the community's identity and agenda is.

Community conflicts are much easier to observe and analyse in online communities partly because the online community creates a permanent transcript of the conflict in the public space, and partly because online communication forums lack the conflict moderating cues and strategies that we use in face to face interaction to pre-empt, moderate, tone down or avoid outright conflict.

While conflicts are often distressing events for the individuals concerned, and for the community at large, there is some evidence to suggest that they can, if survived, have positive formative effects on a community's sense of identity.

In 1995, Franco et al studied a conflict (termed a flame) that took place in an online community devoted (appropriately enough) to community development. The conflict had take place during the course of just a few days in March-April 1993, over supposedly sexist comments by one of the correspondents. The authors analysed the postings and identified three major phases to the conflict: first phase, initial protests and rebuttals; second phase increasingly divisive comments; third phase conciliation and community-building communications. However, a second conflict thread on the topic of freedom of speech emerged out the dying gasps of the first conflict (Franco et al 1995).

What was interesting in this analysis was that the identity and shared values of the community became the focus of many postings in the third and final phase. Conciliation was not merely focused on reconciling opposing views on the conflictual topic, but another strand of reflexive discussion and thinking emerged alongside the direct positional statements on the conflict topic. Reflexive discussion refers to discussions that reflect on the nature of the community itself – ie analysis of their own behaviours in relation to each other.

Sherry Turkle has remarked on the way in which the online environment encourages people to think more about how they relate to each other online (reflexively), perhaps because we have so few visible cues in that environment (Turkle 1984). But conflict in particular seems to encourage reflexive thinking – simply put, conflicts help communities define themselves and think about who they are as a community.

As Franco et al comment, "this analysis suggested to us that a flame, rather than simply being noise, might play a positive role in creating a sense of community in an online system by encouraging the active and candid participation of a range of people with diverse personalities, opinions, and beliefs" (Franco et al 1995).

The conflict also helped define the identity and membership of the community in another way: some members unsubscribed because they found the conflict unhelpful and negative. Irrespective of the topic being argued over, conflicts focus attention on the identity of the community and the nature of participation in it, and they can either strengthen a sense of membership, evoke more active participation (inward trajectory), or alienate members, suppress participation, and drive them away (outward trajectory).

In the 1993 case, the conflict was resolved amicably within the community, so perhaps the community-building role of conflict is a little easier to argue. "As with any source of tension, a flame can highlight specific issues in a community, forcing members of the community to deal with the issues. If the community finds a constructive way to deal with the divisiveness … then the flame can contribute to strengthening the community's structure and values." (Franco et al 1995). What about conflicts that are not resolved?

CASE STUDY – COMMUNITY CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY

Since early 2002 (about three years after it started), the ACT-KM Forum has experienced "passionate debates" roughly two or three times a year. Strongly opposed positions combined with direct debating styles and forceful personalities have produced rich and detailed contributions but also considerable discomfort among members (Callahan 2004).

In many cases, these conflicts have not been resolved, and the warring parties have temporarily suspended their debates by agreeing to disagree. This lack of resolution has meant that one or other of the parties has either left the community, or resulting tensions have resurfaced periodically in new, repeated debates on certain sensitive topics. Only over the course of three or four years have the debating parties found ways of relating to each other in respectful and non-conflictual ways. This makes ACT-KM a useful community to study for insight into the identity-building impact of unresolved or slowly resolved conflicts.

Between August 2003 and May 2004, the ACT-KM community experienced a series of three major conflictual debates involving extended flames between three principal protagonists, David Snowden, Joseph Firestone, and Mark McElroy. Each of the first two cycles of the conflict was temporarily defused by large scale interventions from participants, but in the final stage, two of the protagonists had their posting rights suspended by community leaders. This stage of the conflict has been extensively analysed by Firestone (2004).

In the diagram below, we look at one of the earlier flames in the conflict, which lasted from Nov 24 to Dec 19 2003. This analysis is based on the ACT-KM archives (ACT-KM 2006). Posts are identified as belonging to the conflict

discussion if they specifically address other prior posters in the topic discussion, or explicitly address a point made by prior members in the discussion. Each of the posts is individually coded for emotional content, categorised and colour coded into four types:

- Blue – Informational posts, neutral emotional content
- Green – Friendly posts, supporting another member's comments
- Red – Aggressive posts, containing antagonistic or personal language
- Purple – Reflexive posts, commenting on styles of participation or community identity and values.

If a post continues multiple messages, it is coded and counted for each of the messages it contains (eg if it contains a friendly message for one participant and an aggressive one for another, it is counted twice, once as green and once as red). Posts are also coded for gender.
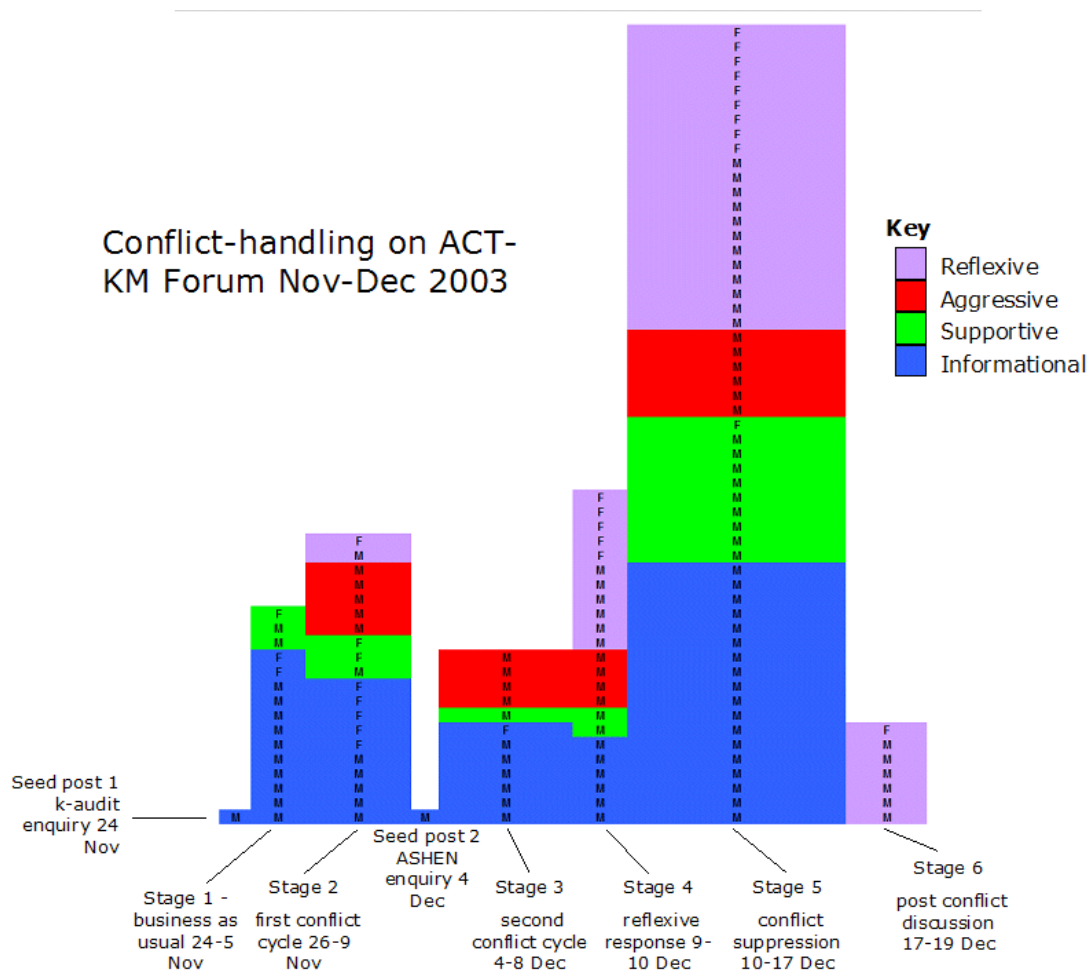

Fig.1 Conflict analysis on ACT-KM Forum Nov-Dec 2003 by Patrick Lambe (unpublished) based on posts at (ACT-KM 2006)

The conflict played out in two major phases, each one prompted by an "innocent" enquiry, termed here a seed post. In the first seed post on 24 November, a member asks for advice on conducting knowledge audits, and initially responses are both helpful and informative (stage 1). However, one of the respondents is criticised by another group member for concealing a vested interest (as it turned out, inaccurately). The exchange is sharp and somewhat personal, and elicits a couple of reflexive comments from members who are concerned about the tone of the debate (stage 2).

The second seed post on 4 December is an enquiry about the use of the ASHEN framework for knowledge audits. The author of the framework, Dave Snowden is one of the respondents, and he is attacked by two community members who have had sharp debates with him on other occasions (stage 3). These members were not involved in the initial conflict after the first seed post.

In stage 4 of the second conflict cycle, the direct arguments continue, but the community seems to be trying to counterbalance the conflict as well as other informational exchanges on this topic by weighing in with reflexive posts expressing concern about the style and nature of the discussion. Only one of these posts, towards the end of stage 4, is from a moderator. The others are mainly from active members of the community.

In stage 5, the conflict is de-escalating, but still active. However, the other types of post are all increasing in intensity. The intensity of "friendly" posts increases, largely stimulated by alliance behaviours among people favourable to the warring parties in the conflict. However, "well-behaved" informational and discussion posts also increase, almost as if the community is compensating for what it sees as "bad" behaviours by displaying model behaviours. Interestingly, however, the volume of reflexive posts increases markedly, making the single largest type of post. Reflexive posts are still mostly focused on the behaviours and style of participation of members, but now they involve more non-regular contributors.

In the final phase, the conflict has ended in an apparent stalemate. Stage 5 ended with one of the debating parties expressing frustration at the "suppression" of opinion by the community members at large. In stage 6, the discussion is purely reflexive, and has generalised beyond individual behaviours and participation styles, to discussion on the nature and identity of the ACT-KM community itself.

The gender balance is also marked. In the early, pre-conflict stage of the ACT-KM discussion, men and women are contributing to all types of post. The emergence of conflict seems to drive female participation out of all forms of participation except the reflexive type of post. In this cycle, the conflicts themselves are exclusively dominated by men.

This observation is consistent with Robin Dunbar's argument that human social behaviour in communities is driven by evolutionary biology, specifically by our primate geneaology: that females are more prone to become involved in community-building and identification, and males are more prone to use a public forum as an opportunity for display (biologists call a public display of male prowess a *lek*), conflict being one obvious form of display (Dunbar 1996:176).

For our purposes however, the major point of interest is the way in which relatively few aggressive posts pushing personal agendas can stimulate a disproportionate number of moderating, community identity focused responses, which eventually suppress the conflict, even if they do not resolve it.

The ACT-KM community has clearly survived its internal conflicts, but not always by resolving them. In almost all cases the community self-manages itself past the conflict with minimal public intervention by community leaders. The mechanism by which the community self-manages conflict seems to involve the emergence of reflexive discussion at the conflict's peak from a wide range of members (many of them habitual lurkers) on the nature of the ACT-KM community, its identity, and acceptable patterns of participation within it. The events themselves also contribute to the shared history of the list, another indispensable identity-building contributor.

Such issues do not simply belong to online communities. In their study of a community of Indian IT professionals, Fayard and DeSanctis point out that the community evolution and maturation process draws on conflict almost as a necessary mechanism for helping a community form its sense of identity. They analyse the use of conflict in the community in terms of the well known team dynamics framework developed by Bruce Tuckman in 1965: *Forming*, where the team first comes together and agree on their goals; *Storming* where they discover their differences and resolve conflicts; *Norming* where they align their objectives in support of a common goal; *Performing* where they use their new team identity and better group knowledge to achieve their objectives. Tuckman later added a fifth phase to team development, *Adjourning or Transforming*, which is echoed in the Wenger et al community lifecycle we reviewed at the beginning of this lesson (Fayard and DeSanctis 2005; Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977).

MOVING FORWARD

What then can we suppose based on this discussion and analysis? This is just one small addition to the tiny literature in this area. However, there are some fascinating questions at issue here, including whether conflict can be a good thing, and whether our online behaviours are indeed conditioned by our genders. Taule et al (2004) have already raised the question of gender participation patterns in the ACT-KM Forum.

I think the following areas warrant further study:

1. Similarities and differences in the relationship of conflict to identity-building in face to face and online communities
2. Lek (display) behaviours and gender roles in online communities
3. Conflict and display as inhibitors or elicitors of community building and participation behaviours
4. The relationship between community maturity, sense of identity, and its ability to self-moderate conflicts

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