



Newsgroups as a forum for the decision of health risks

ESRC E-Society Programme

Citizens of the late 20th and early 21st century have been invited to apprehend life as a hazardous enterprise and to pay attention to news and information about public health issues so as to make lifestyle choices from an informed position. Amongst the possible sources of news and information we can include the world of electronic on-line communication. Kay Richardson from the University of Liverpool explored the uses made of Usenet newsgroups for the interactive discussion of health risks online. Focusing on the use of newsgroups aimed at sharing information and opinion on health risk issues associated with mobile phones and cancer, SARS, and the MMR vaccine and autism, the research assesses the value of newsgroups for risk communication.

- Discussions on newsgroups related to the specific issues were more active when the particular condition had been reported in mainstream media.
- Discussions of the topics were not just restricted to specialist newsgroups with a health connection. There was evidence of discussions of the topics taking place in hobby newsgroups and fan newsgroups.
- Contributors to newsgroups often sought to ground their claims about the safety or otherwise of MMR, airline travel or mobile phones in aspects of their own personal identities.
- Writers would also seek authority for their claims in other public texts including mass media sources and websites.
- Websites maintained by the World Health Organisation, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention and the British Broadcasting Corporation, as well as the websites of research institutes at Universities were quoted much more often and with more authority than blogs or other websites maintained by individuals.
- There was evidence of a contradictory relationship with mass media. On the one hand there was extensive uncritical reliance upon mass media as a source of information. On the other hand there were arguments against the reliability of the mass media and their responsibility for producing unwarranted general public scares.

Background

Usenet newsgroups, a form of electronic message exchange, have a long history with the earliest groups dating back to 1981. This particular type of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is interactive but unlike online chat which is conducted in 'real time', participants contribute to discussions and post comments at the time of their choosing.

Health risk communication is an interdisciplinary area of study focused partly upon the sources of risk communication agencies, partly upon mass media as intermediaries between sources and the public, and partly upon recognition, that is what people make of what they hear and read about health risks. Discourse analysis has an important contribution to make in exploring the character of health communication. Some of this focuses upon face to face communication, some of it upon the discourse of the mass media, but very little has looked at the *new* media in relation to health communication. The internet in particular, looks set to play an important role in the future of health communication.

One central issue of concern in the risk literature is that of *trust*. Some sources are trusted more than others: newsgroup discourse, because it is interactional, gives a perspective upon the negotiation of trust in one particular context, as contributors in their different ways articulate their credentials to speak on particular subjects and are variously challenged or accepted in doing so. It also gives an additional perspective on the credibility of the mass media, as contributors variously cite mass media sources in relation to their own doubts and beliefs. Like email, newsgroups allow for a form of written

communication which shares many of the characteristics of face-to-face interaction, and the communication is often based on very little by way of acquaintanceship between the participants.

The Project

The research conducted was grounded in linguistic discourse analysis as a branch of (applied) sociolinguistics and informed by media studies. The key objectives of the research was to explore the use made of Usenet newsgroups in sharing information and opinion on health risks (mobile phones and cancer; SARS; MMR vaccine and autism) and to use the results in an assessment of the value of newsgroups for risk communication.

The research involved:

- The discovery of where, across the entire range of Usenet groups since 1981, significant 'electronic conversations' about the health risks identified have taken place; the profiling of these conversations in terms of newsgroup, number of messages in thread, number of participants etc.
- The investigation of discourse strategies used to display/construct expertise on the newsgroups, as well as the strategies used in responding to displayed expertise (acceptance/rejection/challenge).
- The investigation of references to mass media sources in these conversations, with particular reference to the degrees of trust/scepticism displayed, and the interactive negotiation of such trust/scepticism.

Implications of the research

Use of Usenet groups for health related discussions

The three topics were found to vary in when they produced the most active online discussion. SARS was discussed most intensively between March and June 2003 when the outbreak was most intense and prominent in international news. MMR provoked some discussion prior to 1998 but much more after the publication of a paper in the Lancet which seemed to give scientific support to the idea of an MMR/autism link. Mobile phone/brain cancer discussion began in 1993, after US television devoted to some time to a court case based on this hypothesised connection, and has continued ever since. All three topics were discussed in specialist newsgroups including some with a health connection and some with a technology connection, especially in the case of the mobile phone debate. All of the topics were discussed in newsgroups with a focus upon a particular region or country and all were discussed in newsgroups with no obvious point of connection with the particular topic, such as hobby newsgroups and fan newsgroups.

Discourse strategies

It was found that writers in newsgroups often sought to ground their claims about the safety or otherwise of MMR, airline travel or mobile phones in aspects of their own personal identities. They would support their answers

with reference to their own jobs, their relations' jobs, their hobbies, or their experiences of their extensive reading of the relevant professional literatures. In addition, writers would also seek authority for their claims in other public texts, including mass media sources and websites.

The research found that 'respectable' websites such as those maintained by the World Health Organisation, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the British Broadcasting Corporation, as well as the websites of research institutes at Universities, were quoted much more often and with more authority than blogs or other websites maintained by individuals. On the issues investigated, particularly the MMR and mobile phone issues, material sourced from personal websites or blogs were more likely to be presented in a controversial or challenging style when arguing for or against the existence of a particular health risk. However, the partisanship of more official websites was more likely to be presented in a more detached style.

Trust/Scepticism in mass media sources

The research found that in all three topics studied there was a dual stance towards the mass media. On one hand there was extensive uncritical reliance upon the mass media as a source of information. On the other hand there was evidence of a focus on the untrustworthiness of the mass media and indeed, their responsibility for producing unwarranted general public scares.

Policy Lessons and Future Research Agenda

The internet looks set to play an important role in facilitating interactive discussion of health risk and discourse analysis has an significant contribution to make in exploring the character of health communication in new media. The Newsgroups studied as part of this research allow for a form of written communication which shares many of the characteristics of face-to-face interaction, and the communication is often based on very little by way of acquaintanceship between the participants. The research provided an opportunity to consider not just what was being said about SARS etc. in newsgroups but also the significance of saying these things within this particular context.

The research has led to identifying some issues that require future research. Firstly, the need to address what constitutes 'flaming' online and from whose perspective this is to be identified. Secondly, to study other newsgroups, for example GM foods and health risks, to further examine how individuals use the internet to discuss health risks.

Further Information

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The e-Society Programme

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and co-ordinated by the Department of Sociology at the University of York, the e-Society is a multidisciplinary programme of research that seeks to investigate how institutions, practices and behaviours are being changed by the technologies that constitute the digital age. This £5 million programme draws on the expertise of leading academics from across the UK. Launched in October 2003, the programme will run until the end of October 2007.

Further details of the projects in the programme can be found at
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E-Society Briefing 7

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