

Fanning the Flames? A Study of Insult Forums on the Internet

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Abstract

“Flaming” *i.e.* sending angry, critical, or disparaging messages is computer slang for a much-appreciated activity for a few forum members. Instead of addressing the topic under discussion they set off attacking verbally other members “for the fun of it”. As the phenomenon pollutes the functioning of threads (through the flaming itself and the reactions of average users), webmasters have three options: a) a typical “laissez-faire” policy based on self-regulation; b) a filtering of contributions, which may be perceived as freedom-threatening censorship; and c) a more original decision to create a special thread, forum, or website dedicated to insulting.

I propose to investigate the third option, examining why and how an insult forum is created (is the decision taken by the administrator solely or is it an issue previously discussed on the forum?), how it evolves (is it really successful and if not, why?), and what it more fundamentally implies. What is the usefulness of an insult forum? Can one really insult somebody else, other than on a very short term basis, for no other reason than the pleasure derived from the act of insulting?

Introduction

Insults have been a regular feature on the internet, especially on forums, and a well-documented phenomenon¹. Because of the apparent freedom due to a lax social relationship with other internet users, it is deemed acceptable to overreact to an argument presented on a forum by belittling the author of the argument rather than deconstruct its validity without fearing physical retaliation.

Though netiquette rules² prohibit such verbal behaviour and threaten the abuser with temporary or permanent exclusion from the site, insults proliferate and little can be done to stop their flow. One option deserves attention, though. If it is indeed impossible to stop or control verbal abuse, why not divert it, especially when it corresponds to flaming, *i.e.* when it is produced solely for the sake of gratuitously insulting other users?

Diversion takes the form of what is called an “insult forum”, a place with no other topic than that of insulting one another³, with the hope that flammers, once they have produced their daily load of abuse, will leave the community at peace on mainstream forums.

In a first part I will provide some theoretical contextual background, briefly describing the implications of insults in/as arguments and the specificity of computer-mediated conversation (CMC) as opposed to face-to-face (FTF) interaction. Then I will consider the functioning and content of forums, which lead to the creation of specialised insult threads or separate forums. Finally I will examine the constraints surrounding the creation and operation of such an

¹ Although computer-mediated communication emerged in the 1970s, the actual public launch of the World Wide Web was in 1991, with flaming an immediate characteristic. I have no room for a complete bibliography on the subject. For early references on the flaming phenomenon, see Thompsen (1993). Flaming is a source of interest for psychologists, who examine the reasons why users resorted to abuse so easily on the web. Within a year’s distance Gackenbach (1998) published *Psychology and the Internet*, a collection of papers, while Wallace (1999) published *The Psychology of the Internet*, a monograph, both dealing with the various aspects of CMC. Flaming is also a source of interest for legal scholars, investigating responsibility, especially for cyberbullying at school or company denigrating at work. Those issues are not discussed in this paper.

² Virginia Shea’s classic *Netiquette* (1994) is also available online at <http://www.albion.com/catNetiquette.html>. Though its examples are mainly taken from Usenet newsgroups and sound slightly outdated at times, basic rules remain. See especially the Core Rules (32-46) and chapter 7 – The Art of Flaming (71-80). Additional rules may be defined by administrators.

³ The first insult forums were found in Usenet’s alt.flame domain, but with names such as alt.flame.jesus.christ or alt.flame.abortion insults were expressed in connection to a given topic. Usenet archives are now hosted by Google.

“abusodrome” and see to what degree the naturally chaotic nature of insults is taken into account.

I. Context

1. Insults in/as argument

Argumentation normally entails a two-side intellectual activity consisting in asserting the validity of one’s point of view on a given subject whilst affirming the lack of validity of the other’s point of view, basing one’s discourse on fundamentally undisputable shared facts and possibly more debatable ideological background.

It is also a social interactional activity that brings together (at least) two human beings keen on “having the last word” signifying victory over the now speechless opponent, especially if no common ground is eventually found and no reconciliation deemed possible. The emergence of face-threatening acts is thus a way (albeit surely not the best in terms of argumentation quality) to break the deadlock and reach a conclusion.

In that context, insults are typically used with three non-mutually exclusive aims in mind, the first as a way to belittle the other’s argument by metonymically belittling the other himself, which corresponds to something like “You are what you think”, the second as a way to silence the other by not recognising him as an acceptable debating partner, this time as an equivalent to the provocative question “Who do you think you are?”, and third as a way to complementarily assert oneself: “Just think about what *I* am”.

2. Insults as fun

In the first book of his *Art of Rhetoric*⁴, Aristotle describes the three rhetorical genres: the deliberative, connected to politics and the pursuit of the good, the forensic, connected to justice and the quest for the just, and the epideictic (or “ceremonial oratory of display” in Roberts’s translation), aiming at expressing value, either through praise or blame, the latter including devices such as invective⁵.

The rhetorical mastery of insult benefits the blamer himself and, incidentally, provides discourse with an intrinsic value that transcends the actual blamer-blamed relationship, resulting in insulting being considered independently of the context of its apparition.

The next step follows a paraphrase of the old proverb, “Many a rude word is spoken in jest”, and refers to cases when insults are no longer used in such a serious and damaging way and therefore become apparently paradoxical self-justifying insults appearing for no other reason than the pleasure derived from using such socially loaded words.

There are possibly three reasons for this. It can be seen as a product of social interaction, a consequence of the particular nature of social beings or the result of more fundamental characteristics of the psychoanalytical being.

Social interaction leads to the use of insults as part of verbal fencing, from *Beowulf*⁶ and later Restoration comedies like Wycherley’s *The Country Wife* (1675) to the modern “Playing the

⁴ The treaty is available as an e-book from Australia’s Adelaide university, in an edition translated by William Rhys Roberts: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/a8rh/>.

⁵ This corresponds to the difference between *laude* and *vituperium*. For an in-depth analysis, see Trousselard (2006).

⁶ For a diachronic speech act analysis, see Jucker & Taatvisainen (2000), especially section 5 (insults in the history of English), with the distinction found in *Beowulf* between “the ‘senna’ tradition (*i.e.* the formal exchange of insults and threats) and the ‘mannjafnaðr’ tradition (*i.e.* the formal exchange of boasts)” (77).

dozens” game, which is popular among male⁷ Afro-Americans⁸ and involves a balance between set rules (including snap frames such as *Yo Mamma*) and creativity⁹.

Another reason for the jocular use of insults is connected to the nature of social beings and more specifically the fascination with taboo words¹⁰. Since a taboo word is a paradoxical object, both present in everybody’s lexicon and unacceptable in discourse¹¹, temptation is great either to bypass the rule by using the softcore euphemised version or to launch a clear attack on the territory, rejoicing in forbidden pleasure, knowing it is forbidden and therefore contributing to maintaining the border between what is deemed acceptable and what is not.

Such fascination for rude words can be traced back to childhood and the early psychoanalytical being, as if the anal stage found a new, verbal form of development, which both emphasised bodily expulsion (with clear connection to *expletives*), transgression of grown-up rules (another way of saying *No*) and exploration of the seemingly endless possibilities of language.

3. CMC vs FTF

A third contextual element to be taken into consideration before engaging into an analysis of the emergence of insult forums on the internet is the very nature of computer-mediated communication (CMC) as opposed to face-to-face conversation (FTF) and the consequences the difference between the two has on the freedom given to or felt by forum users.

The difference is found on three levels, the first being the basic set-up parameters, the second the operating procedures and the third the filtering elements giving verbal exchange its definitive shape.

The set-up parameters basically oppose unity, typically associated with FTF conversation, and fragmentation, which seems to characterise CMC.

It is indeed the case for space, since internet users, just as telephone callers, can be thousands of miles apart and still enjoy a spoken or written conversation. However, while telephone callers simply use a transitory tool to transfer and receive information, computer users sit before an “independent” screen that serves as a data hub, centralising incoming and outgoing information. Still, be it with telephone or CMC conversation, the correspondent is there only through his spoken or written words, whereas FTF participants expose themselves and have a full view of the addressees.

Unity is also temporal in FTF as well as telephone conversations, as opposed to CMC. Here are the time records of three successive interventions on a forum:

06-01-2008, 06:18 PM

06-01-2008, 06:37 PM

27-01-2008, 02:04 PM

19 minutes separates the first and second interventions, and 20 days, 19 hours and 27 minutes separates the second and third, but this can also be the case with epistolary exchange, without it preventing the exchange from being fruitful and considered by participants as possessing its

⁷ The use of taboo words has been traditionally associated with male rather than female speakers. De Kerk (1992) has shown this is no longer the case.

⁸ See Smitherman (2000) for a detailed analysis of the game. Examples are found by the dozens on the internet.

⁹ An interesting one-way example of the insult game is found in the Monty Python’s *Argument Clinic* episode in which a man who came in for an argument chooses the wrong door and gets thoroughly insulted in the Abuse Department from the very moment he enters the room. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQFKtI6gn9Y>.

¹⁰ Jay (2009) offers a psychologist’s clear introduction to the phenomenon.

¹¹ See Benveniste (1974)’s paper on blasphemy and euphemy. See also the fourth part of chapter 3 of Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1912).

own continuity and therefore unity. Moreover, then again, the screen creates unity by spatially maintaining in a circumscribed area elements that are temporally distant externally. Another element to be considered is that forums permit viewers to observe the ongoing interaction (and possibly intervene at any time) and those viewers pay no real attention to the small-size temporal indications, concentrating on what is being said.

Finally, speaker unity must be considered. While it would appear extremely strange to witness the constant physical arrival and departure of participants of an FTF conversation (though there are close examples of such situations, at cocktail parties for instance), such interactional behaviour is perfectly normal in CMC or at least it is a built-in characteristic the consequences of which are accepted by all participants. Still, it implies one can drop out of a conversation much more easily than would be the case in FTF, for which a more complex politeness apparatus is needed.

The operating procedures include what I call the three Ms, *i.e.* Message, Memory and Moderation.

Message corresponds basically to the length and complexity of the discourse provided. What is interesting is that whether it be with face-to-face conversation or computer-mediated communication, messages can be characterised by their essential content, that is to say a short and effective form, though not necessarily for the same reasons. FTF messages must be short because the attention span of addressees is limited as one-dimensional time must be shared. CMC messages must also be short as screen space must be shared and as it takes longer to type text than to speak. The link with the use of insults is thus obvious.

Memory also plays a role in maintaining the continuity of interaction. While FTF conversation implies an extensive use of short-term memory, which is physiologically limited in live performances, CMC conversation can rely on extensive quotations to make up for time gaps, recreate continuity and produce an accumulation effect that will be a good basis for verbal fencing.

Last, Moderation is a key to the monitoring and guiding of ongoing conversations. It is fundamentally implicit in FTF conversation, being the product of years of learn-by-mistake and/or commandment education, with each participant adjusting their discourse to situational parameters and hypotheses concerning the nature of the relationships between them. In CMC, rules are made explicit with the Terms of use forum participants must agree with before signing in (though they seldom actually read them). Such rules can at times sound strange, as is the case in the following sexual insult forum:

Please note by clicking on "Post Comment" you acknowledge that you have read the Terms of Service and the comment you are posting is in compliance with such terms. *Be polite*. Inappropriate posts may be removed by the moderator. Send us your feedback. [our italics]

<http://www.topix.com/forum/city/blairsville-ga/TDKSTJNENVFGTN6QS>

In connection to what has just been mentioned, filtering elements are there to limit (or not) threatening expression.

In FTF conversation, it is clear that the social evaluation which is part of the "looking-up-and-down" process plays a part in the image each speaker is ready to share with others or conversely wishes to hide from inspection, resulting in circumstance-led self-censorship. However, FTF allows for the manifestation of feelings beyond the scope of discourse *per se*, especially with facial expressions and gestures, thus extending the realm of relevant signs and insult-diverting tools.

In CMC, the feeling of impunity is much greater, since no reliable name or address is virtually ever mentioned and the writer runs no risk of physical confrontation with his insulted opposite number. Still, the fear of being excluded from a forum by a strict moderator is real. The fact

that everything is expressed through words (and emoticons¹²) can have two opposite consequences. Either it counterbalances the originally felt freedom by imposing upon participants the necessity to write things down, thus creating a filtering time gap between immediate salient reaction and its written representation. Or it concentrates in words what tension could have been evacuated through other means in FTF conversation.

II. Content

Let us now focus more specifically on the functioning of forums and the more local reasons for the emergence of insult forums. I will first examine forum operation, then concentrate on the phenomenon of forum pollution and its consequences before defining what an insult forum is.

1. Forum operation

To put it bluntly, forum threads live on a tightrope, for three reasons at least: variable contributors, connectedness and topics.

Contributors are regular or random, full-time participants accumulating hundreds of posts and developing special relations with their counterparts or accidental “intruders” that reached the page or topic more or less by chance and decide to (over-)react to a post before disappearing in cyberspace. Because access is open to nearly all and American-style freedom of speech is extensively guaranteed, the contours of the online community are almost impossible to define. However, each post comes with the visible status of the contributor, which more often than not is the sign of a highly-hierarchised organisation which, though it has no incidence on posting rights, creates asymmetrical relationships between junior and senior members that go against the originally egalitarian principles governing the internet, thus paving the virtual road for frustration-driven tension.

Connectedness is also variable in time and space, as shown previously. This has two consequences, one positive and one negative, in terms of communication maintenance. The positive consequence is the bridging of gaps between interventions thanks to the almost invisible separation on the screen. The negative consequence is that threads can be let to die nearly without any warning or remorse, just by lack of interest when topics start to coagulate. In other words, the possibility of threads coming to an abrupt end is not felt as a failure which should be fully fought against but as an almost natural form of death one cannot do anything about, thus partly lifting the pressure off communication-threatening insults.

Finally, topic variation, which is not specific of forums, leads quite easily to a sort of cock and bull(fight) type of interaction in which insults appear as a unifying end-of-the-line element, paradoxically reconciling participants around verbal abuse.

2. Forum pollution

Normally a forum is a place in which participants come and discuss a topic chosen by one of them, basically adhering to Grice’s cooperation principle according to which contributors share a common desire to “inform and be informed”. Reality is often different however, with the appearance of interaction-disturbing flammers and trollers the nature and role of whom will be first discussed. I will then examine the various reactions provoked by their presence on a thread and the actions taken by the administrator to limit their impact on the functioning of forums.

¹² See Derks *et al.* (2007) for a study of emotion display in FTF and CMC and more specifically the value of emoticons in CMC. Interestingly, although the use of emoticons in CMC is similar to the display of emotions in FTF, internet users equally display positive and negative emotions while FTF participants tend to display positive emotions more than negative emotions. The anonymity provided by CMC is presented as a facilitating factor.

Flamers and trolls are two creatures associated with the internet though their origin goes much further back, as suggested in the first part¹³. Their fully-assumed role is to disrupt threads by going against the tide and deliberately fanning the flames of controversy, displaying three attitudes: an anarchist bias aimed at asserting the limitless value of free speech, a potential interaction researcher's interest in the consequences of disruption, and more probably, a much less ideologically mature disposition for breaking things up "for the fun of it".



Signs like this one show the complexity of their role.

Flamers form, so to speak, the aristocracy of that not-so-marginal community, managing to produce disruption without being immediately spotted, while trolls can be a less subtle version of flamers, producing obvious and blunt remarks. As part of a user-based analysis of the trolling phenomenon in a 172-million word Usenet corpus, Hardaker (2010:237) proposes the following definition:

A troller is a CMC user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement.

Both flamer and troller can prove extremely difficult to do away with¹⁴.

What type of actions and reactions can be found when flamers are in? There are basically two possibilities, either attacking the source by resorting to fire extinguishing or fleeing its consequences by trying to find a fire exit.

Simple fire extinguishing is usually carried out by contributors themselves through ignoring the insulting remark or posting disparaging posts at the perpetrator. However, the result is a longish string of inflamed posts, which is indeed what the flamer was aiming at by launching his attack: diverting contributors away from the topic. More radical action can only be taken by the moderator and it can assume three forms, depending on how serious the attack¹⁵ and how conciliatory the moderator. The first step is explaining the situation directly to the flamer by reminding him of the Terms of Use he agreed upon at the start. The second step consists in removing the problematic post soon enough so that it does not affect the functioning of the

¹³ See also Vrooman (2002), who shows that flamers should not be simply considered as by-products of CMC but as the latest avatar of long-standing sociocultural types.

¹⁴ See Herring *et al.* (2002) for a longitudinal study of the two-month disruption caused by a male troller named Kent on a feminist forum before he was eventually banned from posting by the administrator.

¹⁵ It must be remembered that flaming is, in Douglas (2008:202)'s words "a relatively benign form of online abuse" as opposed to *cyberostracism*, *cyberhate* or *online harassment*. Flaming is more about expressing one's frustration than attacking.

thread, but that implies constant monitoring. The third step is simply to ban the culprit from posting on the thread or site the moderator or administrator is in charge of.

The amount of energy needed to be devoted to such action through constant awareness and the comparatively little effect it has on a constantly moving community of users that can change identity within a matter of seconds may prompt administrators to an alternative solution in the form of a Fire exit, *i.e.* the evacuation of flammers onto another place where they can freely express abuse without interfering with the normal operation of threads. This is indeed the primary function given to insult forums.

3. Insult forum

An insult forum is a place explicitly dedicated to insulting, with basically two aims: letting off the pressure accumulated by the reading of or participation in forum interaction (especially for those who tend to use insults as argument when they cannot carry on debate on a more socially acceptable level) and depolluting standard forums and threads from flammers.

I'm not trying to encourage pettiness or juvenile behavior, but if people come here and insult, mock and belittle each other, maybe reasonable, logical debate and exchanging of ideas can happen on all the other forums.

Have fun

<http://www.theworldforum.net/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2630>

It can either take the form of an additional special-purpose thread within a forum or be a fully autonomous entity. The advantage of the former is that it does not symbolically ostracise sanguine contributors from the rest of the community while the latter offers playful abusers the opportunity of insulting one another freely.

This is the theory justifying the birth of insult forums. The question now is how this is actually converted into practice. How free is an insult forum and what are the constraints governing its operation?

III. Constraints

There are three types of constraints that apply to the operation of insult forums, each associated with a structural parameter. The first type is associated with the administrator and/or moderator of the forum and it is about the degree of freedom given to contributors and the general rules that are implemented. The second type is associated with users themselves and their reactions to the creation of an insult forum and the liberty that is offered to them. The third type is more general and associated with the situation itself: what does it mean to be able to insult each other freely? Is it a viable form of interaction?

1. Constraints issued by the moderator

It may sound slightly contradictory to think about constraints issued by the moderator when applied to an insult forum. Indeed, why should one try and rule the unruly, especially in a situation in which borders *must* be crossed? There are actually three options.

The first option is minimal ruling. This is typical First Amendment¹⁶ thinking with absolute guaranteed freedom of speech on a par with the historically anchored ideology of *Laissez-faire*, suggesting gradual self-regulation by contributors themselves. In a way, this “Anything goes” option is the ideal framework for an insult forum.

The second option corresponds to general ruling. Even when people are free to insult one another on a specific internet site, they should comply with Netiquette rules and more

¹⁶ Here is the text of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

generally the social laws that make it possible for a society to exist perennially. Surely this is paradoxical in the case of insult forum but even insults have rules. There are things you cannot say to somebody, especially when it comes to religion, gender, race or sexual identity. The third option is what can be called specific ruling. This time the administrator transforms the originally anarchical abusing activity into a fully formatted game. The belittling itself becomes secondary to the aesthetic creation of unheard-of insults, thus providing dynamic verbal fencing with a renewed framework.

Specific ruling is surely the most interesting, albeit problematic, aspect of insult forums. While “classic” insults are banned, because of their lack of creativity,

Whatever the topic it seems that eventually it sinks to the level of sexual insult. Maybe a discussion set aside just for that purpose would save time.

Have at it!

Good idea...now F*CK OFF!

Oh come on...you can do a lot better than that!

<http://www.topix.com/forum/city/blairsville-ga/TDKSTJNENVFGTN6QS>

the use of more sophisticated ones can only be the result of clear conditions presented, as is the case in the following forums, which are both based upon *Monkey Island*, a reference in terms of verbal fighting¹⁷ which is provided so that potential contributors set their minds accordingly:

This is based off the Monkey Island series with Pirates and people that have "insult sword fights, insult arm wrestling", basically in the game anything that pirates did has its violence replaced with verbal insults.

<http://forums.weebls-stuff.com/showthread.php?t=70228>

Then the actual rules are given:

The aim of the game is to retort the above persons insult, however they have to be witty and somehow related to the insult given. After you've insulted back, you may make up your own.

The other forum's rules are the following:

here's how it works: Its like insult sword fighting, but there r no swords, and u get to make up your own insults.

It have to rhyme, and theres no swearing

its gotta be short n direct, n its gotta makes sence

<http://www.lucasforums.com/archive/index.php/t-19448.html>

Two elements are worth mentioning here. The first is the creation of continuity. Not only do interventions follow one another, as is to be expected from forum functioning as opposed to FTF conversation with constant overlapping, especially in troubled times, but there is a need for coherence that goes beyond the requirements of normal conversation. The second is the form assumed by insults, with the need for new (*your own insults*), integrated (*it have to rhyme*) and polite (*no swearing*) insults, which can be seen either as limiting the freedom of the speaker and range of production or as the opportunity to show one's wit (*they have to be witty*).

2. Constraints from users

¹⁷ *Monkey Islands* is a generic term that refers to a popular videogame series first introduced by LucasArts in 1990. One feature is the insult sword fighting involving various characters. The Official Facebook profile is found at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Monkey-Island-Adventures/78883723363>.

Seen from the administrator's point of view, the aim of insult forums is basically to foster self-regulation among contributors to ordinary threads. It is now interesting to see how users themselves react to the introduction of such specific product. Though only the most radical users ever post a bill, contrary to the vast silent majority, attitudes range from suspicion to enthusiasm.

Doubts can be summed up in two questions: "What's the point?" and "Where's the point?" Initial doubts are the consequence of the very format assumed by insult forums. As expressed by one user:

And why would we want to insult each other?????

<http://www.uspoliticsonline.net/suggestions-comments-questions-ideas-new-forums/1035-insult-forum.html>

Gratuitous verbal abuse is a problem since insulting is commonly considered as a personal comment upon a situation and the absence of such abuse-raising situation automatically cuts the relevance of insult to the point of nonsense.

[Moderator's launching message: Be as mean as you want]

Who or What are we supposed to be insulting? Can the moron that developed this site start an insulting blog so we have something to insult?

<http://breadcrusts.blogspot.com/2006/01/insult-blog.html>

The only possible way-out, in fact, is if the insult forum itself is considered as a situation, therefore transferring relevance onto a new territory. Here is the first answer to the question asked on *uspoliticsonline*'s insult forum:

Purely for entertainment value. There is much to be said about a creatively written insult.

Insult for insult's sake is deemed acceptable as it evolves into a creative contest. The second answer confirms that view, while retaining a self-regulation value:

That's right. I've always taken great pleasure in throwing flames back in the face of the flamer, except in a wittier fashion.

Actually the gap between insult and argumentation that had been mentioned first is not that big when considering this use of insult: one shows his superiority through his wit, and such superiority, revealed in abuse design, can be exported to other fields.

The second form of doubt has to do with the impact the introduction of an insult forum on the presence of abuse elsewhere. Is its presence useful? The following reactions contain several counterarguments:

I've been a regular on a lot of forums, and I've never seen an Insult forum that either effectively contained all the insults on it, or has failed to lower the tone of discourse for the rest of the board.

They just give jerks an excuse to be jerks, and promote ill-will all around.

<http://www.uspoliticsonline.net/suggestions-comments-questions-ideas-new-forums/1035-insult-forum-2.html>

Well, naming a single thread as a place to ... release waste ... doesn't work. I've tried it.

In the best case people don't wash their hands when they exit the thread.

<http://www.theworldforum.net/viewtopic.php?f=2&t=2630>

Three elements emerge. The first is slightly disturbing: why should an insult forum "contain all the insults on it"? If creation is the key, then it is naturally open-ended. The second, though strangely expressed, points to the problematic alternative status of insult forums. Is it

exclusive or inclusive, a specialised almost elitist place or an easily accessible pressure-lifting area? The former is bound not to have much impact on other forums since it will simply attract different users. The latter might be more appropriate. The third element shows the complexity of the relationship to abuse language. The introduction of insult forums is a form of quantitative if not qualitative recognition and though it may be historically justified by the existence of a long tradition of fencing it is surely not rhetorically acceptable. Efforts should rather be directed at replacing insults in argumentation.

Still, other users express basic or more sophisticated enthusiasm at the introduction of an insult forum.

Basic enthusiasm is typically on a par with the basic sexual insults one finds on such forums:

A: My penis is bigger than you.

B: You're a cunt.

<http://www.hitmanforum.com/index.php/topic/47538-insult-forum-posting/>

It is also a fairly clear indication of the level of maturity and age bracket of the individuals involved, as next declaration suggests:

What do we want! insults! when do we want em! now! sometimes you just need a place to scream randomly at people, after all, its not asif people would HAVE to go to the insult forum, it would be a nice option to have thou, to throw reason out of the window and just verbally abuse everything

<http://www.uspoliticsonline.net/suggestions-comments-questions-ideas-new-forums/1035-insult-forum.html>

Sophisticated enthusiasm brings us back to witty verbal fencing, as expressed in the following insult:

You're so slow you couldn't catch a cold.

http://www.hitmanforum.com/index.php/topic/47538-insult-forum-posting/page_st_10

The corresponding declaration provides a fruitful reassessment of the link between insult and argumentation:

Creatively written insults are hardly ever removed. That is because creative insults are never based on insulting a person, but on revealing what is wrong with their arguments.

So it's not "you are incredibly stupid".. but for instance satire or hyperbole of their arguments, which reveals the flaws inherent in them.

<http://www.uspoliticsonline.net/suggestions-comments-questions-ideas-new-forums/18532-insult-forum.html>

Such insults serve a triple purpose: an underlying attack on the intelligence of the abused, an explicit attack on the quality of his discourse and a contrastive expression of the intellectual and rhetorical superiority of the abuser. It diverges from pure verbal fencing with the stress laid on the connection with the original text (thus justifying its position on an ordinary thread) and from basic flaming with the sophistication of its content.

3. Constraints from situation

Finally there are limits to the implementation of insult forums that are to be found in the situation itself. The limits are threefold, general, specific, and paradoxical.

The general limit has been alluded to previously. How relevant is it to call someone a redneck out of the blue? If the insult forum is designed as a virtually isolated thread, with no reference whatsoever to a good reason for abusing somebody (apart from the almost gratuitous *Monkey Island*-style fencing), there is no reason why someone should ever start doing so as it goes against any argumentative logic.

The specific limit is directly connected to the first. Even if an insult forum is launched, it needs to be fuelled and the thread kept alive. This is when things start to go wrong, because contributors soon dry out for two reasons. One is because it paradoxically takes time and energy to design a creative insult, just as much as it takes time and energy to reconstruct an emotion in an unemotional context, the other is because creativity is hampered by the lack of external resources to tap, *i.e.* the absence of discourse content to derive one's insults from. Finally the paradoxical limit is that even within insult forums one regularly encounters pollution, with the introduction of irrelevant posts, resulting in a circular polluter-getting-polluted situation which comes as a confirmation that nature abhors a vacuum.

Concluding remarks: The life and death of insult forums

The origin of insult forums lies in the resentment felt by the supposedly perverted usage made of freedom of speech on ordinary forums. By polluting interaction either through overreaction to arguments presented or through deliberate gratuitous abuse, as in the case of flammers and trollers, insults are doubly vigorously pointed at as socially and interactionally inappropriate language and discourse.

The solution imagined by some moderators has been to offer abusers full freedom on a relatively remote insult island, a sort of verbal penal colony in which anything goes as long as it takes place at a safe distance from civilised interaction.

However temptation is great to format even that specific form of freedom, either because it is felt that overall Netiquette regulation should apply to that otherwise fundamentally unregulated discourse production or because the point is to recreate civilisation and realign insults on the great verbal fencing tradition dating back to the Antiquity.

As a result of the settings of those various parameters, the operation of insult forums proves difficult and their effect on other forums almost non-existent. The reason for this lies in what an insult is fundamentally: a harmful comment on a given content. Without content to base abuse upon, there can be no genuine insult and the only type of product one will encounter will be short-lived strings of gratuitous playful offense, which is the contrary of non-response eliciting insult. It may appeal to witty contributors and readers as a fully staged form of discourse but it no longer is the same speech act.

Finally, the idea of an insult forum is basically counterproductive, because giving users the freedom to insult one another is in fact imposing a lack of freedom, with opposed reactions, from above-mentioned atonement to excessive vulgarity, seeking to attack freedom itself. Hence, the following decision:

Insult Forum Closed

Moderator: Brian

Wed May 05, 2010 4:40 pm

Frankly, I'm tired of this.

I thought people would be able to keep it within the bounds of human decency, but alas, I was incorrect. Lesson learned.

put it back, PULEEEZE!!! we knew it wouldn't be sunshine and lollipops.

Please please please please please

please pretty please??

please please Brian, you are so adorable and cute and reasonable and sexy and smart!

Sorry, LC. It's closed. End of story.

<http://www.24hourforums.com/viewtopic.php?f=1&t=1030>

Additional data

Here are two examples of strings of insults taken from

http://www.hitmanforum.com/index.php/topic/47538-insult-forum-posting/page_st_10

*Looks like I've pissed off everyone on this forum
and everyone in the forum has pissed on you.
all bow down before me.
Bow down and suck my cock you fat abortion.
I win at life.
You'll soon win at death too
I'm awesome
Just because your mother told you that, doesn't make it so.
Prepare to suffer a fate worse than death!
I already am, suffering the stink of your breath.*

*Your posts are boring, retarded and bland.
Compared to me you look like a troll!
I've seen your penis - it just made me lol.
Your skin is an unpleasant, rough shade of orange.
You look like you just ate a shit lozenge.
I'll hack you apart with my might pork sword.
You mean you've still not removed your umbilical cord?
I fight with one eye, and breath just like Wrigley's!
Wrigley has been dead for years!
I'm not going to take your insolence sitting down!
I fucked your mother while dressed as a clown.*

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