

Dangling conversations: web forum use by a Symphony Orchestra's audience members

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ABSTRACT

Interactive online communication forms an increasingly common adjunct to consumption of products and services, notably arts and entertainment. This paper aims to contribute to arts marketers' understanding of web forum use by arts audience members, in order to guide thinking about the role of online interaction in their communication strategy.

Rather than the participant (or non-participant) observation favoured by "netnographic" research (Kozinets, 2002), the methodology here consists of a discourse analysis of semi-structured telephone interviews with web forum users from the audience of a UK symphony orchestra, adapting methods from Conversation Analysis.

Respondents offer a variety of self-constructions as users of web forums, from "lurkers" reluctant to post for reasons of time poverty, social risk, and lack of cultural expertise, to more active users drawn to forums as a resource for identity management, information and intimacy with performers, organisations and other fans.

Practice implications are that arts marketers seeking to integrate web forums and other social software into a wider audience contact strategy understand and accommodate the variety of meanings that users invest in this activity.

Key words: Audience; online communities; classical music; discourse analysis.

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INTRODUCTION

Interactive online communication, via web-based forums, whether hosted by organisations or run by consumers themselves, is becoming an increasingly common adjunct of cultural consumption (Rudman, 2006), as well as of consumer behaviour in other markets. Its potential to involve consumers and add value to their experiences explains a growing research literature on internet-based communities of consumption for a variety of products and services (e.g. Cova, Pace & Park, 2007; Kozinets, 1999; McAlexander, Schouten & Koenig., 2002; Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Drawing on the work of Maffesoli (1996) and what Cova (1999) terms the "linking value of consumption", this literature elaborates the challenges offered to marketers by a perceived shift in the customer landscape from apparently stable segments to a more fluid, multifarious and dynamic configuration of "tribes" based on lifestyle and brand affiliations "in which individuals share strong emotional links, a common subculture and vision of life" (Veloutsou & Moutinho, 2009, p. 316).

Tribes are united by consumption interests rather than proximity or simultaneity. The place and time flexibility of web-based forums offers an ideal platform for tribal interaction "producing exchanges between like-minded enthusiasts, sharing experiences, swapping views, offering support and fostering a sense of community" (Hewer &

Brownlie, 2007, p. 111). Hewer and Brownlie interpret forums as a resource for reassurance in consumption practices, borrowing Bourdieu's phrase "spaces for the judgement of taste" (p. 112) to categorise them as sites where members air differences and offer mutual support and advice. Arts consumption, refracted as it is through layers of critical judgement, elitism, expertise, and taste, presents itself as a prime candidate for such reassurance – suggesting that online interaction has considerable relevance to audience needs. There is, accordingly, plenty of it going on through autonomous and hosted online communities around art forms, performers and organisations (O'Sullivan, 2007).

Arts marketers have long understood and harnessed the affiliative power of activities such as individual and corporate membership (Slater, 2005). Hosted forums (and other kinds of interaction) can be seen as an extension of such activities, and have become a common feature on organisations' websites, including that of the symphony orchestra which was the site of the present research. The orchestra's communications director was concerned at the relative lack of activity on its web forum, and the research was an attempt to explore this phenomenon. Tomlinson and Allpress (2004) advise organisations aiming to host effective forums to target ready-made communities, for example teachers with an interest in sharing educational resources relevant to a performance. The orchestra's forum was deliberately less specific, conceived as an open platform for audience feedback and discussion, but, compared to forums elsewhere, appeared relatively inactive. The research aimed to explore what those audience members who did

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use web forums about music (though not necessarily the orchestra's own) were getting from the experience, in order to guide future development on the site.

There are good reasons for marketers to want to take an active role in managing forums. Chiou and Cheng (2003) conclude that the benefits of hosting discussion forums on an organisation's website outweigh the risks posed by negative messages (at least for a strong brand), seeing them as a source of consumer insight, and as a credible means of influence on consumer attitudes (analogous to word of mouth, and with similar dynamics of influence). Algesheimer, Dholakia and Herrmann (2005), in the context of offline marketing, also diagnose marketers' interest in engaging brand communities as motivated by learning and influence. Facilitating such communities allows firms to check how they, and competitors, are doing, sway opinion and disseminate information. Engagement with voluntarily interested consumers can impact key strategic functions such as innovation. Franke and Shah (2003) illustrate how communities of minority sports enthusiasts have collaborated in new product development with manufacturers. A quarter of such innovations achieved commercialisation, but the innovators appear to have simply wished to advance the sport rather than gain any kind of return for their intellectual property. Given the importance of innovation in the arts, and the non-commercial framework in which much arts activity takes place, this model of altruistic collaboration holds considerable promise in an arts marketing context.

To date research on web forums has taken the form of ethnographies of online interaction: an approach christened "netnography" by Kozinets (2002). The focus of such

work is the gathering and analysis of data from online exchanges themselves, but this neglects the behaviour of the vast majority of forum users – those who read messages but seldom, if ever, write. The present paper aims to fill this gap by using interview data instead of online discourse, in order to explore the meaning of online interaction to this comparatively, but not completely, silent majority (known, somewhat derogatorily, as “lurkers” in the jargon of online communication). It is important to note from the outset that the value of media such as web forums is by no means limited to those who post messages. Just as in elearning (Thorpe & Godwin, 2006), legitimate meaningful participation can consist in reading and relating messages to one's own experience, either as a preliminary stage to more visible participation or just as an end in itself.

Furthermore, the data in this study reveal users who have been active on different web forums at different times. A lurker may be a poster elsewhere. An important finding from this research is that arts organisations seeking to develop deeper engagement with audiences should not approach the issue of online interaction with too preconceived a notion of what participation looks like.

The contribution of this paper is to further our understanding of how web forum users drawn from a symphony orchestra's audience construct their online behaviour, identifying barriers and incentives to online interaction. The affordances of online communication are subject to rapid change and development, but the findings here about web forum use have analogies with blogs, wikis and other forms of web-borne interoperability. And, while the research is site-specific to a symphony orchestra audience, its conclusions might be applied to audiences of a wider set of arts

organisations. One interesting finding was that, in spite of their shared interest in the symphony orchestra, the respondents claimed widely diverging and very catholic musical tastes.

The emerging picture is a model of the arts consumer as caught in a constant play of negotiations around time, knowledge, self-confidence and aesthetic experience, often struggling to manage conflicting personal and professional identities. The research reveals the complexities of audience members' needs, and the way in which they assemble and draw upon individually-customised bodies of first-hand and secondary experience around cultural consumption. This has important implications for the way in which arts organisations understand and serve their patrons, encouraging a more participatory engagement with audiences in which their online presence will be an increasingly important element.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this study consist of eight digitally-recorded telephone interviews, subjected to a discourse analysis using methods adapted from conversation analysis (CA).

Discourse analysis is the "close study of language in use" (Taylor, 2001, p. 5) – a way of analysing language which attends to its status as action as well as to its literal meaning.

Such analysis applied to interview data asks not just what is said, but what the interactional detail of the interview itself means. In this section I propose to justify this method given the nature of the data and the topic of the research. In particular I wish to

anticipate a potential objection to drawing on CA (a particular form of discourse analysis), that its legitimate use is restricted to discovering the structure of interaction as determining meaning, rather than allowing for participants' agency in creating meaning.

The focused, intimate nature of a telephone interview – where the structural conventions of conversation are overlaid by a further level of etiquette peculiar to the telephone itself – provides clear opportunities for both interviewer and research participant to create meaning not only from what they say but how they say it. Silence and non-verbal communication (through pitch, pace and non-verbal sounds, in the absence of visual cues) are as important as speech in this kind of qualitative interview, but conventional methods of transcription and interpretation fail to acknowledge them.

CA goes further than such methods to reveal how speakers' manipulation of the unspoken rules of conversation can achieve particular objectives in interaction, alongside the literal content of their words (Wooffitt, 2001). Events such as interruptions, discontinuities and verbal patterning establish and sustain relations between speakers, creating meanings parallel to the literal meaning of the words in question and emphasising the social, dialogical nature of meaning making. Adapting CA to analyse interview data involves attending to how the researcher performs the business of interviewing as much as to how respondents perform being interviewed as they jointly negotiate the process.

CA has its roots in ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967) – the investigation of the everyday rules (or methods) of social behaviour which allow members of society to create and share social reality. Early CA researchers hit upon recordings of telephone conversations as data for analysis not because of the intrinsic interest of their content but because they were readily-available, repeatedly-accessible (and thus minutely-analysable) examples of social behaviour which might reveal the systematic rules of engagement of this particular form of human activity, and from that, clues to the more general ordering of social life. Harvey Sacks, one of the method's pioneers, emphasises this focus on structure as transforming the analyst's view of events "from a matter of a particular interaction done by particular people, to a matter of interactions as products of a machinery. We are trying to find the machinery. In order to do so we have to get access to its products. At this point it is conversation that provides us such access..." (Sacks, 1984, p. 27). Sacks' interest is not in the content of the interaction but in what the interaction's form might reveal about the machinery behind it, the yet-to-be discovered rules of social behaviour as enacted by participants. As Svennevig and Skovholt (2005) point out, this implies a deterministic view of conversation – that the machinery behind conversation is driving the participants' utterances quite apart from, perhaps even in spite of, their intentions.

Elliott (1996) echoes this in his description of discourse analysis (of which CA is a variety) as "in one sense radically non-cognitive, in that discourse is not assumed necessarily to reflect underlying attitudes or dispositions; instead the focus is on the discourse itself, its construction, the functions to which it is put, and the consequences

that arise from different discursive organisations.” (p. 65). Potter and Wetherell, whose work Elliott references here, emphasise the way that “people use their language to *construct* versions of the social world” (1987/2001, p. 199, original italics). Clearly the structure of discourse disciplines the creation of meaning, but Elliott’s reference to “the functions to which it is put”, and Potter and Wetherell’s implication of active construction, allow for agency alongside structure. Participants, more or less consciously, manipulate the rules. To return to Sacks’ image of “machinery”, the machinery may constrain what is possible, but it needs an operator.

Thus, to adapt methods from CA in analysing interview data as discourse does not imply jettisoning the idea of human agency or cognition. We have cognitive intentions in speech – indeed a qualitative interview is guided by such intentions. But attending to the discursive structure of the interview as a source of meaning (like attending to, say, details of its setting in ethnographic research (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 143)) allows a fuller interpretation of the available cognitive elements. CA understands the conceptual content of a conversation as an “*occasioned* phenomenon” (Edwards, 1997, p. 86, italics in original) whose meaning stems from its position in an interactive sequence. But an important part of such meaning is wrought from artful performance by the speaker. Acknowledging how meaning is occasioned in an interview allows the emergence of a more nuanced picture of the identity being performed by a respondent (contingent, of course, on that performed by the interviewer) than would be available from the same data treated simply as verbal content divorced from the context of its production. The present study does not focus exclusively on the ethnomethodology of telephone interviewing, as

might a “pure” piece of CA. Instead it foregrounds the interactional aspects of the interview data as an interpretive resource in an effort to create a fuller understanding of the meanings of web forum use for respondents than would be the case with an approach to data limited to words alone.

SAMPLING, METHOD AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Respondent recruitment took place via a link to an online survey which was embedded in an email newsletter sent by the orchestra each month to its elist (regular attenders and others who have requested to be included). The link opened into an online questionnaire covering demographic and behavioural characteristics, including music-related internet use, and with a free option for respondents to confirm their willingness to be contacted for future research. Web forum use (of any kind, not necessarily of the orchestra's forum) was indicated in only 16 of the 106 usable responses to the recruitment instrument. The researcher managed to reach eight of these for telephone interviews. The other eight either refused or were impossible to trace in the time available.

One of the challenges of investigating an emerging phenomenon such as web forum use is that of sample size. But while forum users are a minority compared to audiences as a whole, a comparison with available figures for national audience demographics suggests that the 106 respondents to the recruitment questionnaire (who all have access to the web by definition) are not unrepresentative of UK live classical music audiences (Arts

Council England, 2003). Ethnicity (respectively 80 and 84% white) and age profile were very similar.

Telephone interviews were an appropriate means of data collection because of the geographical dispersion of respondents, some of whom lived over a hundred miles from the symphony orchestra's home venue and either relied on touring performances or travelling considerable distances to hear it play live. As we shall discuss later, web forum use may possibly be connected with relatively infrequent physical attendance – but opens up the possibility of personalised contact with even the most distant and irregular audience members who may nevertheless be highly involved followers of an organisation and its work.

Semi-structured telephone interviews allowed respondents to talk in detail about their experience of, and feelings about, music-related web forums. Frey and Oishi (1995) advise that scripting a telephone interview needs to balance two fundamental priorities: relevance to research objectives, and conversational flow. As we shall see, what actually creates meaning, even in a semi-structured interview led by the deliberate agenda of a series of topics, is the highly contextualised conversational process taking place between interviewer and respondent.

The telephone is an intrusive medium, whose use in research is likely to raise ethical issues. The project's planning took account of guidelines from the Statement of Ethical Practice for the British Sociological Association to inspire good practice in conducting

data collection (British Sociological Association, 2002). With regard to informed consent, respondents had already indicated their willingness to take part in further research via an option on the online questionnaire and had provided their telephone number and email address in earnest of this. The researcher established his identity at the outset of each call, explaining the purpose and likely duration of the interview, as well as the right of non-participation or withdrawal at any time (Frey & Oishi, 1995). However, it could be argued that being called unexpectedly by a researcher puts respondents at a disadvantage. Analysis of one interview in this study suggested it had been underpinned by respondent concerns about anonymity (perhaps as a result of an over-hasty agreement to proceed). The respondent resurfaced the issue of confidentiality at the end of the interview, and, as the researcher repeated the assurances provided at the start, he began to see the hesitations and uncertainties which had characterised the respondent's replies (and, consequently, framed his questions) as a form of defensive, anonymising strategy.

Telephone interviewing raises issues of privacy, potential harm and exploitation.

Interestingly, a number of respondents to the recruitment questionnaire provided email but not telephone in their contact details, suggesting a concern for privacy (perhaps as a defence against the marketing use of such data). Four of the eight telephone respondents agreed to conduct the interview right away. The other interviews took place as call backs at a mutually agreed time.

There is never an entirely convenient time to be interviewed on the telephone. For example, one of the agreed call-backs clearly interrupted the progress to bed of the

respondent's infant son who joined the conversation at one point. The researcher read this as a sign of mild resistance to the previously agreed interview. On the surface it confirmed the respondent's openness to the project, reflecting the pervasion of information and communication technology into the domestic sphere – an issue for him as a home-based web designer. On the other hand, it introduced a disconcerting tension around finishing the interview more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A number of key themes emerged from the interviews, grouped in the following discussion as barriers and incentives to participation. The extracts transcribe interactional details as well as the words themselves, using the system devised by Gail Jefferson in the 1970s (Taylor, 2001). It can look obscure to readers unfamiliar with its conventions, but these will be explained as appropriate in the discussion. The interviewer is denoted in each case as **T**, the respondent as **R**. Any names (including those of organisations or performers) have been changed.

Barriers to participation: time, expertise and risk.

Respondents consistently resisted the implication that their online participation reflected idleness or irresponsibility in their use of time. One (male, 35 – 44) explained his habit of visiting web forums while he was on hold on the telephone – thus inserting the activity into redundant time from the working day. Another (male, 25 – 34), who regularly followed several forums, nevertheless avoided protracted discussion:

Extract 1

- 1 **R** Erm (.) I s'pose there's a lack of immediacy↓ (.) erm when you're
2 discussing online. Erm I think personally I, I, I probably don't
3 so much get into discussions though (.) I tend to, if I, if I have a
4 comment I tend to post it
5 **T** Right.
6 **R** um or I tend to re:ad other people's. I don't tend to enter into
7 lengthy discussions (.)
8 **T** OK
9 **R** =on the whole.
10 **T** I see, yah (.) I see what you mean
11 **R** Errm that's probably a time issue as much as anything.

The transcription captures the deliberate pace of the respondent's speech, indicating shifts in pitch (a shift down at the end of "immediacy" in line 1, hence the downward arrow), emphases (relevant syllables or words underlined), elongated words (indicated by a colon as in line 6's "re:ad") and, crucially, pauses. Jeffersonian transcription indicates pauses of less than 0.2 of a second as a full stop within brackets. Longer pauses are given in seconds within brackets. Here, "lengthy" discussion online (line 7) is contrasted with the implied spontaneity of face-to-face contact ("immediacy" in the sense of something that happens and is done with). There is a noticeable concern to avoid being classified in any settled sense as a forum user ("I tend to" in lines 3, 4 and 6 refuses a fixed status).

To the interviewer's "OK" which appears to confirm the respondent's self-description as a non-discussant, he immediately adds the qualification "=on the whole" (the = sign indicates an immediately contiguous piece of speech). This further refusal of simple classification is expanded by his response to "I see what you mean" at line 10, which can be read as the interviewer's smoothing reaction to the turbulence (interrupted or hesitant speech) evident in the respondent's answer. Turbulence is often associated with difficult or embarrassing topics (Silverman, 1997/2001). The interjection could thus serve the discursive purpose of closing this episode in the interview before moving on to less difficult territory in another question. Instead it elicits a time-based explanation for not getting involved in discussions. This might be read as a way to eliminate other possible reasons for avoiding discussion (such as lack of confidence or expertise). However, elsewhere in the interview (cf. Extract 5) the respondent elaborates his complex professional identity as part-time musician. Extract 1's deliberation and indeterminacy can be read as a verbal strategy in keeping with the fluidity necessary to this.

Categorisation of people who post on websites as more leisured or expert than the speaker was a recurrent feature of the data. The following extract comes from an interview with a retired doctor (male 65 – 74). It follows on from a suggestion by the respondent that people who post on forums tend to be seasoned concertgoers. The interviewer starts by asking how their discussions might differ from those of people, like the respondent, who prefer to discuss music face to face. Note in line 3 some turbulence

The convoluted question which opens this sequence shows the interviewer at pains to shape the question appropriately – is it about thinking or feeling, is the question too closed or open, is the respondent likely to be irritated at this worrying away at a particular point? (hence the parenthetical apology in lines 1 to 2 (the marks > and < indicate an increase and decrease in pace respectively)). The complexity of the question elicits a pause (line 7) (of confusion?) as the respondent begins to position himself as inexperienced relative to online discussants – someone impervious to the “fine details”, and thus incapable of expressing specific opinions, compared to the expert online discussants. As with Extract 1, the unsettled verbal texture evokes phatic, smoothing interjections from the interviewer at line 6 and 10 (in the latter case over talking, indicated by beginning square brackets in lines 9 and 10). In spite of being a life-long concertgoer, this respondent was diffident about discussing music either online or face-to-face. Instead he used accounts from web forums (including that hosted by the symphony orchestra) as comparators for his own experiences – an example of the consumer “reassurance” noted by Hewer and Brownlie (2007).

While this user derived benefit from web forum use, he was deliberately not a poster because of his perceived lack of expertise. Yet even experts may be reluctant to commit their thoughts online. The following respondent, an established composer (male, 54 – 65), was a keen follower of a forum devoted to contemporary music, but reluctant to post messages himself:

Extract 3

- 1 **R** Well (.) I don't really feel as if I am a member of a group (.).
- 2 I mean I don't contribute much, I mean I re:ad but I don't
- 3 contribute↓ and I suppose basically I'm a, I'm a shy person
- 4 and I .erm (.) hh I don't really like sticking me neck out
- 5 **T** Sure, yeah
- 6 **R** So you know, I'm always aware that as soon as you put
- 7 something in print, even if, you know, whether it be in a
- 8 newspaper or on a, on a bulletin board or whatever you want
- 9 to call it. As soon as you put it there↓, it's there forever, really,
- 10 and people can shoot you down if they don't agree with you.
- 11 So I'm always a bit cautious of contributing.

The turbulence (hesitations and repairs in lines 3 and 4) surrounding the respondent's self-categorisation as "a shy person" perhaps bears this out by indicating a struggle with his customary reticence to self-disclose. There is also a sense of conflictedness about membership – he does not feel part of a group (line 1) but the individualistic gesture of sticking his neck out (line 4) is not available to him either. Later in the interview he explained his reluctance to post with an anecdote about the negative reaction drawn by a forum post he had made opposing plans to tour a country whose political regime he regarded as repressive. His patterning of language in the extract, the repeated "as soon as you put" (lines 6 and 9), combined with line 8's three-part list format of "newspaper", "bulletin board" and "whatever", conveys a sense of justified finality about his reluctance to post which prepared the way for this explanation. Three-part lists are a conversational

form imparting a finality often received as a cue for turn taking by another speaker, or even applause from an audience, depending on the context (Heritage & Greatbatch, 1986). Here the list emphasises the exhaustiveness of a set of ways of writing an opinion. Even though the list here includes the offline medium of newsprint, the real issue behind the respondent's caution about posting was the personalised response it might stimulate – a characteristic above all other media of interactive online communication. To post is to become visible, and immediately (and permanently) accountable for a message.

Thus the social risk involved can act as a disincentive to posting. Social risk also occurs when, as Kozinets, (1999) points out, the search for information which first tends to draw people into online communication is complemented by their developing sense of the social element of the medium. This can spill over into “real life” encounters, an issue particularly relevant to web forums focused on performing arts organisations or performers themselves.

Another respondent (female, 54 – 65), was very positive about real-life friendships that had resulted from forums – suggesting that the virtual versus real-life social presence is a dynamic continuum rather than a dichotomy. Many of her friends originating from web forums lived abroad or were widely dispersed around the United Kingdom, meaning that relationships were mainly conducted by email, telephone and text messaging, except for the occasional visit or meet at a concert. Also, even purely virtual identities were fleshed out by the exchange of photographs and family news online. However, the transition from virtual to physical encounter had not been so satisfactory in at least one case:

Extract 4

- 1 **R** Yes you do form em: a sense of what they're like, yes,
2 although I did actually em (.) .hh become friendly with a woman
3 who's act- who's actually, ahm an English woman, and when I met
4 her she was nothing like I expec[ted, and she's turned out to be
5 **T** [heh heh
6 **R** quite a complex character↑ ah (.) very strange and she has
7 >does actually have some mental problems< and er (.)
8 I no longer correspond with her ah I found out she's had a,
9 a strange influence on other people as well.

In this extract the hesitations and repairs (actions to resolve problems in speaking, hearing or understanding such as rephrasings or restarts) provide further examples of how speakers construct delicate objects in talk (Silverman, 1997/2001) -- in this case an individual displaying challenging behaviour. Note, in particular, the speeding-up and slowing down in line 7 where the effect is to create something like an audible set of parentheses to contain the difficult information about mental health. Line 2 features a sigh/intake of breath (“.hh”), as the respondent recalls getting to know the woman in question. Line 5 features quiet laughter from the interviewer, an acknowledgement of the ambiguity of what is being talked about, and reflected in the respondent’s “very strange” immediately afterwards (against the implied normality of being English in line 3).

In summary, respondents' accounts for their reluctance to post messages online included a perceived lack of time, lack of expertise and fear of troublesome reactions from other members. The social risk attached to participation, even for experienced users, was exacerbated by the uncertainty attached to online identity. There was, as evidenced in all four extracts here, a consistent categorisation of posters as somehow "other" than the speakers, whether leisured, expert, aggressive or complex.

Incentives to participation: identity, intimacy and information

One respondent (male, 25 – 34) combined playing and teaching violin with shift work. Web forums about music were an important way of maintaining his professional identity as a musician. He presented his online interaction as driven by informational needs (e.g. equipment reviews). Nevertheless, forum membership was clearly an important way for this musician to define and maintain his social identity. In this extract he is discussing a heated online exchange about the rival merits of two virtuosos on a specialised site:

Extract 5

1 **R** Looking at the site as, as a professional pla:yer (.)
2 em (.) obviously I, I sort of look at it in one way=I think somebody (.)
3 eh perhaps who who wasn't a player was was simply a member of the
4 pub↑lic looking on and reading this might (.) either get completely
5 confused em by the fact that all these people are saying >well

interests. Furthermore, the speaker justifies his right to contribute alongside such figures in the social context of “other people there that are like me” (lines 4 – 6).

This intimacy with insiders and amateurs fulfils needs similar to the information needs which Kozinets (1999) argues gets people started on web forums. But, of course, rubbing virtual shoulders with Beatles producers is a strong social incentive as well. The demarcation which Kozinets makes between informational and social motivations for online interaction is clearly a fluid one in practice.

Respondents' explanations for participation and posting in web forums thus ranged from sustaining (professional) identity, enhancing musical experience socially (for example by finding concert going companions, or gaining access to key figures or performers) and obtaining privileged information (linked as these last two are).

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Information technology is radically altering relations between producers and consumers in many knowledge-based industries (Hogg, Laing & Winkleman, 2003). In the arts the Web has created new space for interaction amongst consumers (both laterally and with producers) in a cultural policy environment which is placing increasing emphasis on engagement and participation rather than simple attendance (cf. Knell, 2007). But the terms of such interaction have to be understood from a consumer perspective. As we have seen, participation in web forums is by no means necessarily a visible process (although

the “views” statistics available on some forums evidence the level of browsing). Whether or not to post messages, as evidenced in the talk of the respondents to this research, is part of a complex negotiation of identity relative to the tribes (e.g. fan, player, composer, forum member) within and between which arts consumers move. Their sense of their own individualities (variously instanced in the data as hybrid professional musician, inexpert concertgoer, shy person or hack) depends on comparison with other posters in the classic Derridean sense of difference cited by Newholme and Hopkinson (2009) and is itself open-ended: “Identities, defined through opposition, therefore remain fragile or undecided” (p. 442). The provisionality of such individualities is expressed and, indeed, constructed, in respondents’ talk here, as variously enacted in different forums – through writing or browsing, at several levels of visibility and engagement. Just as their musical tastes ranged from Cliff Richard to New Country alongside the symphony orchestra, so respondents’ reported online behaviour varied widely.

The central practice implication is, then, to take diversity into account when thinking about hosting web forums (or other forms of online interaction) as part of an arts marketing strategy. As we discussed in the introduction, one solution might be the targeted approach advocated by Tomlinson and Allpress (2004), matching different groups with different offerings. But to meet the more fluid opportunities presented by tribal consumers, other configurations may be appropriate which emphasise the common interests of different groups, or even different combinations of them at different times.

An example might consist of hosting event-driven, time-limited interactions, centred on a specific occasion (such as a season of performances and related projects). Creating a clear context for activity reduces risk in participation and majors on information and intimacy directly stemming from the arts organisation. It would require substantial online presence from the organisation to manage relevant dialogue with members. An alternative format might be to move away from the decentralised model of a forum to an online resource such as a blog where reading, rather than posting, is acknowledged to be the prime activity, but which invites comments. This creates an overall framework for the kind of discontinuous participation with which respondents in this research seemed most comfortable. Commenters can engage in dialogue with each other but the direction and agenda is set by an official writer. More labour intensive than a forum (so perhaps best handled by a series of guest bloggers in conjunction with particular events), this solution to managed interactivity may be a better route to the content-led “stickiness” which Chiou and Cheng (2003) see as one of the prime marketing justifications for hosting forums on an organisation's website. It also legitimises the idea of participation through reading rather than posting.

Arts organisations need to integrate social software such as web forums or blogs into the kind of internet-based facilities (such as ticket sales and programme information) which already have a proven value in facilitating consumers' access to the arts. Web-based interaction, positioned appropriately alongside existing affiliative marketing such as friends organisations or subscription/ party booking systems, has the ability to offer clear frames of reference for participants. Arts marketers, no less than any other marketers,

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face the continuous challenge of how to make their offerings indispensable. In whatever technical form it might assume, hosted online interactivity provides a distinctive opportunity for arts organisations to position themselves as an essential resource for consumers' elaboration and management of complex identities, as well as sustaining and enhancing arts experience.

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