

L33t Phreaks and Power Sellers: Locating Status in Social Media

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Abstract:

Since the days of Usenet and IRC, computer-mediated interaction has reflected display and negotiation of social capital, through codified mechanisms such as feedback and reputation systems, hierarchies of titles and roles, and in informal, user-generated status markers. While certain face-to-face status markers such as appearance and accent are replicated online through digital photos, linguistic codes, and discursive constructions, other markers of status like consumption of luxury branded goods are complicated by the lack of face-to-face display. Similarly, community-specific status symbols exist primarily online, such as beta invites to elite communities, front-page recognition on news aggregator sites, or mentions on popular blogs. My dissertation explores the interplay between consumption as a status marker online and offline, particularly with regard to status symbols and reputation mechanisms in social media sites; this presentation takes a historical view of computer-mediated communication and examines status within primarily unimodal, textually performative communities to provide a foundation for work on current social media technologies.

SLIDE 1: Introduction: Speak SLOWLY

- Domo arigato to the Interfaculty Initiative in Information Studies, the University of Tokyo, and Professor Shunya Yoshimi for inviting me to speak here today. (Bow)
- My name is Alice Marwick and I am a doctoral student at New York University's Department of Media, Culture, and Communication.
- My dissertation explores social status in "social media", or "Web 2.0", internet sites. I am interested in how social status and thus social hierarchies, are constructed through technological affordances, such as reputation mechanisms, photos, textual interaction, and so on.
- I am also interested in how websites and technologies themselves have status hierarchies
- For the next phase of my work, I am conducting an ethnography in the San Francisco Bay Area, looking at workers at Web 2.0 companies, and how they view social status.
- This presentation introduces the concept of social status, explains why status is important to discuss with regard to social media, and relates it to some early, textual social technologies.

2: What is "status"?

- The English word "status" comes from the Latin word for "standing" (2)

- “Status” is a common word, and it has both vernacular and sociological meanings. People talk of “status symbols” and “high status” or “low status” things.
- For this reason, it is often said to be very vague – so before moving along, we should look at a few definitions of status.
- A position in society, conferring rights and obligations upon a person as a citizen within a political community (Turner 1988)
 - Status is always relative to a particular society, because it is a marker of place in a specific social hierarchy
- More complex definition: Chan and Goldthorpe (2007): ...a structure of relations of perceived, and in some degree accepted, social superiority, equality and inferiority among individuals that reflects not their personal qualities but rather the degree of ‘social honour’ attaching to certain of their positional or perhaps purely ascribed attributes (e.g. ‘birth’ or ethnicity).”
 - This definition reflects that status is a judgment of value
 - There are privileges or rights that come from particular types of status, or, conversely, privileges or rights that are refused if one does not have enough status.
- So “status” can apply to people, but it can also apply to practices and things: speaking fluent French, owning a rare vintage motorcycle, or knowing how to cook crème brulee could all be high status activities in certain contexts.

It is important to recognize that status is not the same as social class. Both the Marxist and Weberian traditions define class structure as formed by economic and labor relations, whereas social status is a social hierarchy that is expressed through differentiation, such as through different types of lifestyles seen as appropriate to particular status levels. The distinction between the two can be exemplified by David Brooks, a pop sociologist who coined the term “income-status disequilibrium” to describe a person whose income does not match his or her status; Brooks describes a professor earning \$80,000 a year as a higher status individual than a CEO with a GED earning a million dollars a year (2000).

SLIDE 3: technology

Given this, why should we examine status with regards to social technology?

In 1996, Rob Kling and (Suzanne) Iacono wrote a very influential article on “computerization and its link to technological utopianism. Computerization refers to widespread adoption of computer technologies, which is intrinsically linked to the belief that this widespread adoption will lead to positive social change. Kling and Iacono point out that this ignores the fact that computerization is political, that technologies may reinforce or create new types of social inequities, and that there are winners and losers with all technologies.

We all live in computerized societies. There is no doubt about that. But in tandem with discussions of “social media”, or “Web 2.0”, there is always an undercurrent of belief that these technologies will create positive social changes. They will allow average people to participate democratically in media creation. They will create positive, superior replacements for journalism, news media, and corporate

entertainment. They provide “digital publics” for people unable to interact in physical spaces, and provide checks on politicians through the dissemination of digital video.

<Bryan Pfaffenberger, in his study of USENET, discusses how computerization a>

I believe that social media and “Web 2.0” technologies require an interrogation of how power is distributed, reinforced, or resisted through the use of these websites.

SLIDE 4: WEB 2.0 AS UTOPIAN VISION

Given some of the utopian, positive claims around Web 2.0, my dissertation aims to do the following:

- 1) We must analyze each social media site independently of the others, as each website has its own community norms, practices, and technological structure.
 - a. Avoid looking at social media sites as communities: one site may host many communities, or another site may be simply a tool without community relationships.
- 2) I am attempting to look at how inequalities, or social hierarchies, are created and maintained.
 - a. We can assume through looking at status that every community has a social hierarchy.
 - b. Whose voice is heard?
 - c. What technologies are used, and by who, and why?
- 3) How does technical development affect the creation and maintenance of this hierarchy?

SLIDE 5: STATUS IN A COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

- Status is very specific to a particular community: what is high-status in one community may mean nothing in another community. For instance, knowing a great deal about a television show or comic book may be very high-status in a fan community, but low-status in a fine arts organization. Likewise, presenting at a prestigious conference is a high-status act in academic circles, but would mean very little in a casual social group of friends.
- Every community has a status hierarchy and status structure, no matter how small it is.
- I am drawing on Lave & Wenger’s definition of a “Community of Practice” to analyze status in a social context.
 - Status is thus defined by a community-specific set of variables.
 - The community itself is defined by participation in a common set of activities or practices. For example, an auto shop staffed by mechanics would be an example of a community of practice. A mechanic is thus socialized into this community through his or her gradually learning the appropriate ways to engage in a practice—fixing cars. This socialization may take place through language, hands-on activity, encouraging/discouraging certain types of behavior, and so forth. Becoming a community member is thus a learned behavior.
 - Many social media sites are excellent examples of communities of practice because the sites themselves share emphasis on a particular set of tasks such as bookmarking

internet sites, sharing videos, publicizing interesting links or meeting other people. A study by Susan Bryant, Andrea Forte and Amy Bruckman conceptualized Wikipedia as a community of practice, and looked at how people are socialized into “becoming Wikipedian”.

- Gan’s concept of “taste cultures” is also interesting here: rather than postulating a theory of culture that places some culture as “high culture”—opera, classical music, poetry—and other cultural types as “low culture” – professional wrestling, talk shows, gossip magazines—instead Gans suggests that countries are made up of multiple, overlapping “Taste Cultures” that value different media and cultural products in different ways – thus the status of a particular type of cultural product only exists within a particular (sub) culture.

SLIDE 6: STATUS ASCRIBED VS. ACHIEVED

How is status determined? There is an important distinction between “ascribed” and “achieved” status.

- “Ascribed status”: variables a person has no control over, like age, language, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender
- “Achieved status”: job, education, knowledge, possessions etc.
- I would say this is a less than ideal dichotomy, as there are variables that don’t fit into either category, like wealth (can be ascribed or achieved) and appearance (a certain amount of it is ascribed)
- In social media, we see both “ascribed” and “achieved” status. For example, a certain community may value fluency in written English as a requisite for gaining status, while another may emphasize posting pictures of one’s possessions.

SLIDE 7: STATUS IN EARLY SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to explore this idea, I want to give some examples of how status functions in early social media, specifically USENET groups, IRC and Chat Rooms, and text-based multi-user games, known as MUDs. These technologies, all of which still exist, were popular from the mid-late 1980s to the mid 1990s. They are unimodal and textual: that is, communication between people is based on typed linguistic expressions. At the time, the average user base for social technologies was less mainstream than it is today—the users of these technologies tended to be technically adept, often from the academic or scientific communities, in their 20’s – 40s, and primarily male. Certainly there were significant exceptions to these assumptions, but compared to today’s social media technologies, the user base is older, more male, more American and white than the average user base today.

For each technology, I consider the following:

- 1) How does this media/technology constitute a Community of Practice?
- 2) What mechanisms are available for status display?
- 3) What practices are considered high-status or low-status?
- 4) How is social hierarchy created or maintained?

SLIDE 8: USENET

USENET is the term for a series of discussion forums, known as “newsgroups”, devoted to particular topics. USENET is organized in a 8-part hierarchy, with the prefix delineating the general topic and the newsgroup’s name including further sub-topics.

For example, comp.security.firewalls deals with security issues around computer firewalls, whereas rec.arts.tv.soap-operas is a discussion group in the recreation.arts category about soap opera television programs.

- How does media/technology constitute a Community of Practice?
 - Each newsgroup’s particular set of activities differs, but it is generally discussing, sharing knowledge, or compiling information about a particular topic of interest.
 - Each newsgroup typically has its own body of knowledge, known as the FAQ or Frequently Asked Questions. This is maintained by a member of the USENET group.
 - Membership is delineated by knowledge of community norms and linguistic markers. These are learned by “newbies”, who are encouraged to “lurk”, or read messages without posting.
 - Some of these norms are common to USENET in general, and are known as “netiquette”. For instance, in most newsgroups, it is considered rude to post to the newsgroup about a question that is in the FAQ, to post off-topic, or to post in ALL CAPS.
 - However, most newsgroups have their own unique codes and practices that participants are expected to learn or adhere to—“group specific norms”. Nancy Baym writes that these types of norms may be influenced by several factors, including the purpose of the group, the members' characteristics, or the preferences of systems programmers (Baym, 1995). One example of a group-specific norm is that online groups dedicated to the discussion of television shows or movies often utilize the normative device of including the word "spoiler" in the subject line to avoid giving away the plot to those who have not yet seen the movie or program.

- Michele Tepper’s study of alt.folklore.urban discusses how community boundaries are maintained through the use of linguistic codes that function as insider/outsider markers.
 - Status display "must be accomplished through asynchronous textual production, with none of the verbal or visual cues that are so crucial to traditional notions of subcultural formation"
 - For example, the ability to engage in sophisticated wordplay was seen as a demonstration of intelligence and education, and was a highly valued requisite for group acceptance.
 - The practice of “trolling”, or posting an inflammatory message designed to incite anger or debate, was used to identify those “in the know”, and thus belonging in the community, to those not in the know.

- Insiders, or higher status participants, possessed enough knowledge to recognize when a person was “trolling”. Responding to the troll was a way to look foolish in front of others, or be marked as a lower-status participant.
- The inability of outsiders to spot a troll demonstrated that they lacked requisite cultural capital deemed most useful by the elite.
- Nancy Baym’s study of rec.arts.soap-operas, a “friendlier” community than alt.folklore.urban, had different status markers.
 - What were the status markers?
 - TIME was a significant status marker. For instance, the number of years a person had been posting to the newsgroup gave them a certain authority and other people would defer to their statements or assumptions during discussions.
 - Since soap operas are long-running television programs, some in the United States having run for more than 50 years, a long-term engagement with the text under discussion was also high-status.
 - Knowledge about both the group and the newsgroup was also high-status.
 - In Tepper’s study as well as in Rhiannon Bury’s study of an x-files news group, facility with written English and the ability to engage in verbal wordplay was valued. This was due to the unimodal nature of the newsgroup.
 - How was status displayed?
 - Status was primarily displayed through interactions with others, as USENET lacks any particular type of built-in status mechanism.
 - Contributing or maintaining shared knowledge repositories like FAQs, or posting summaries of television episodes, were both high-status practices. For instance, in Baym’s study, the shows under discussion ran every day on Monday through Friday. A different person was “assigned” to post updates each day. This was a coveted activity and although it took a significant amount of time and effort, was something that gained its participants significant social status in the community.
- What types of technological mechanisms are available for status display?
 - Very few. Status mechanisms were **emergent**, coming from interactions with others and community norms, rather than built into the technology.
 - Due to the purely textual nature of the medium, and its rather simple interface, linguistic status displays were highly prized.

SLIDE 9: CHAT ROOMS

- How fits “community of practice” definition
 - Like a newsgroup, a chat room is a primarily textual space.
 - However, unlike USENET, chat rooms are synchronous, but not persistent.
 - In other words, people type back and forth to each other “in real time”, but there is usually no record kept of their chats.

- Thus, membership is constantly changing as people join and leave the room.
- So unlike a newsgroup, the accumulation of knowledge is not highly valued, although some chat rooms did maintain Frequently Asked Questions.
- Primarily, chat rooms exist to create and maintain social connections between people.
- Some chat rooms are ephemeral and would hardly constitute a community, but others exist for years and have deep community norms.
- What mechanisms are available for status display?
 - Like USENET, status is primarily displayed textually.
 - However, Internet Relay Chat, one particular type of chat room protocol, allows participants to assign “operator” status to trusted or valued members.
 - In IRC, small programs called “bots” would hang out in a chat room, or “channel”, and give “operator” status to valued members when they entered the channel.
 - The members who were given operator status generally had spent a long time in the chat room, and were considered valuable members of the community through their textual contributions or social connections to others.
- What is high status or low-status behavior was highly dependent on the chat room itself. However, multiple studies of chat rooms have found that gender is the primary variable when determining a participant’s status. I will review a few of these studies.
 - Soukup’s ethnographic study of sports-related chat rooms found that traditionally masculine styles of interaction, such as dominance, confrontation, displaying toughness, using sexual humor, profane language, and “shocking” comments were highly valued. The ability to “win” verbal games or the exchange of insults, to “hold the floor” or maintain conversational dominance for long periods of time.
 - Conversely, conversational tactics such as friendly chat, compromise, or valuing alternate points of view were seen as demonstrating weakness and were met with derision, labeled “feminine”, and considered low-status.
 - Soukup also studied a discussion group for early 20s women. This had completely different status norms. High status practices were those that built relationships, such as compassion, empathy, and intimacy. Low-status practices included typing in all-caps, making inappropriate sexual remarks, and using profanity.
 - Users who violated these norms were first threatened, and then placed in what was called “the ignore closet”, a software mechanism that allowed the users to define other members whose messages would be “ignored”.
 - Thus, social hierarchy is created and maintained through encouraging adherence to gendered norms of conversation.
- However, in chat rooms, women sometimes participate more actively and get more responses than males because they are objects of flirtatious attention (Bruckman, 1993; Rodino, 1997).
- A 2003 study by Panyametheekul and Herring found that in a particular Thai chat room, women were given higher status as shown through “turn allocation” and rate of response from others. This was due to their minority status in the chat room and their perceived value as potential romantic or sexual partners. Panyametheekul and Herring thus concluded that this chat room could be empowering for women since it provides them with a space to discuss.

- Other studies of IRC and chat rooms have found widespread sexual harassment of women in chat rooms, thus making women less likely to participate. The high-status ascribed to masculinist norms and ways of behaving can also have a deleterious effect on the participation of women in these spaces.

These types of norms show how ascribing status to particularly gendered forms of communication may disallow certain people from speaking, or having significant impact on conversation. It also shows how adhering to normative kinds of gender roles may be necessary in order to participate in particular conversations.

SLIDE 10: MUDS / text games

- I'm going to discuss MUDs very briefly. They are multi-player textual games, typically fantasy or science-fiction oriented. MUD stands for "Multi-User Dungeon".
- MUDS have a distinct hierarchy of users.
- Users with higher status have privileged access to particular commands, purportedly so they can maintain order and authority. These users are known as immortals, "Wizards" or "Gods". Only a Wizard can make another player a Wizard.
- Wizards can ban users from the MUD, restrict the actions they can take, alter other player's names or change their description to be ugly or distasteful. Lynn Cherny's study of a particular MUD found that Wizards themselves refer to their Wizardhood in terms of responsibility, calling the role "janitorial," while non-wizard users view the Wizard role as prestigious and powerful.
- McKenna and Li's 1995 study of MUDs explained that while some MUDs have only gods and wizards, while others have apprentices, archwizards, greater gods, lesser gods and so on. Since an "immortal" is an extremely high-status position, "it is one of the coveted goals of the majority of mere "mortals" who play the games to be able to rise in skill and experience and one day achieve wizardhood."
- This hierarchy is thus built into the technological structure of the MUD and influences the types of play that is encouraged or discouraged.
- Wizards are treated with great deference. One Wizard wrote in 1992:

Most players on LambdaMOO, for example, upon first encountering my wizard player, treat me with almost exaggerated deference and respect. I am frequently called `sir' and players often apologize for `wasting' my time. A significant minority, however, appear to go to great lengths to prove that they are not impressed by my office or power, speaking to me quite bluntly and making demands that I assist them with their problems using the system, sometimes to the point of rudeness.

- A survey of Wizards in the early 1990s found that only 16% of Wizards were women, suggesting, again, a significant gender bias in ascribing social status and maintaining hierarchy.
- However, in other MOOs, female Wizards were common.

- Regardless, the types of regulated, elaborate social hierarchies found in MUDs are a form of status display that, again, is built into the technology, and makes certain assumptions about power.

SLIDE 11: STATUS IN WEB 2.0: REPUTATION

So given that I've talked about a lot of old-fashioned technologies, what about technologies of today? Generally, we can divide status mechanisms into two types:

- Emergent mechanisms, which come out of user behavior, such as linguistic markers, citation in an FAQ, or deference shown in social behavior.
- Features built into the software, such as the MUD Wizard hierarchy, the IRC Operator status.
- This page shows another type of status feature, the reputation mechanism.
 - This is prevalent on today's social media sites: Amazon, Epinions, EBay, Digg
 - See how the individual's worth is assessed through whether they are helpful, the number of other reviews they have done, the number of positive comments that are made about them and their ability to report a story "first".
 - All of these measures are value judgments of what is considered high status actions.
 - It is an example of status that is quantified, measured against others, and done to supposedly assess an individual's "reputation"
 - But we should ask what types of practices are considered high status or low status to see how these reputation mechanisms can privilege certain types of interactions over others.
 - We should also ask the strengths and weaknesses of a quantifiable, measurable status mechanism.

SLIDE 12: STATUS SYMBOLS

- In face to face interactions, branded luxury goods, automobiles, clothing, etc. all contribute to other people's assessment of your status.
- This visual assessment works differently online. A major part of my dissertation is examining how so-called "conspicuous consumption" operates in on-line spaces.
- For example, here we have a MySpace layout that uses the Christian Dior logo, an expensive luxury brand.
 - But the layout is free, not exclusive, and kind of tacky, so it does not connote the same type of status that a physical Dior-branded object would.
- Therefore status symbols online operate differently.
 - For example, here is Dopplr, which is a web community / social media site for frequent travelers.
 - Not only is frequently traveling *in itself* a status symbol, the site is in beta and "invite only"
 - Therefore, having access to the site is high-status.
- On Facebook and social networking sites, the number of friends you have, or, on Facebook, where those friends are from, are also a measure of status. Having only a few friends, or indiscriminately friending thousands of people you don't know, are both considered low-status practices.
- Here is a Facebook application called "Compare People" which allows you to pit your friends against each other and judge which one of them is "better" at certain things. This allows for a public and quantifiable demonstration of social superiority or inferiority through a technology.

SLIDE 13: CONCLUSION

- So what are the implications of studying status?
- When we make claims about “democracy” or “equality” in social media, we must be more specific, look at the site, its users, its communities, and its technological affordances to determine the social hierarchy and power relations within the community.
- When working with technologies, we should be mindful of how certain types of technological affordances affect the creation and maintenance of social hierarchies.
- And finally, we should understand that the technology industry is in itself a social hierarchy. Certain types of applications and software are higher-status than others. Certain companies are higher status than others. This affects overall the types of applications that are created and popularized.

Questions.