Reflections and Reactions to Social Accounting Meta-Data

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Abstract

How are reflections of computer-mediated behavior used and consumed by participants of threaded conversation repositories? While millions of people contribute messages to repositories like Usenet newsgroups and web based discussion boards, most interfaces to these systems lack tools to reflect the history of participants' behavior. The Netscan system publishes aggregated patterns of behavioral histories of contributors to Usenet newsgroup discussions via the World Wide Web. Through a content analysis of 1,454 messages containing the string 'netscan.research', we explore the ways these reports about newsgroups, authors, and threads are invoked in conversations taking place within newsgroups themselves. Reflections of participant behaviors can act as powerful tools for researchers interested in studying the range of variation of social roles that appear in such environments. These reflections are also of interest and value to the participants themselves who can make use of summaries of their own and others' behaviors as a form of reputation system which can guide the selection and evaluation of content and provide motivation for contribution. We find that users adapt to the availability of behavioral reflections by increasing competitiveness and scrutinizing data about other participants in order to understand unfamiliar users and newsgroups. Counter-intuitively, users modify their behaviors not by opting out of the system or obscuring their identities but rather work to manage their reputation through increased attention to their participation and by maintaining a consistent identifier to prevent reputation fragmentation.