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## **BAKELITE AND OTHER SHIBBOLETHS: eBay LISTINGS AND THE 'POLICING' OF 'AMATEUR' COLLECTING KNOWLEDGES WITHIN THE SPACE OF AN ONLINE OLD RADIO FORUM**

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**Abstract:**

eBay, the online auction site, is composed of thousands of item descriptions constructed by sellers themselves. Sellers may be collectors or antiques experts, but often they are amateurs selling off unwanted items. As such, eBay becomes an unprecedented public space for the performance of amateur collecting and consumption knowledges where experts are being disintermediated by non-expert knowledges. These knowledges have become a major source of discussion on an online old radio discussion forum and the case study presented here contends that amateur knowledges are strongly contested, often in separate online spaces, and as part of identity performance. While a 'cult of the amateur' may be occurring online, it is not happening without a fight over knowledge and its performance. eBay is shown as a relational space to the forum, allowing radio experts to perform their own group identity and related practices - distinguished from those seen on eBay. This paper examines these distinctions in detail - the identifying traits or 'Shibboleths' of eBay amateurs - such as the incorrect spelling of 'Bakelite'..

**Keywords/tags:**

Collecting, amateur, consumption knowledges, Web 2.0, online policing

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge, and its acquisition and performance, are an intrinsic part of consumption and collecting practices, particularly for 'expressive collectors'. 'Expressive collectors' (McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004) collect partly as a form of self-expression, gaining a sense of self and self-esteem from collecting. Collecting involves, according to Cummings and Lewandowska (2000): "...delineating a 'knowable' space within the apparently endless universe of materiality". But these knowledges are also the social construction of dominant groups - concerned with reproducing power relations (Pearce, 1992). Invariably, with the differential acquisition of socially constructed collecting knowledges, some collectors may come to see themselves or be seen as 'experts' (Long and Schiffman, 1997). 'Experts' may then form themselves into groups, as they value the sociality of interacting with those of similar interests (Formanek, 1991). Collectors may perform their knowledges with a certain 'knowingness' - to 'knowing' audiences and others 'in the know' (Gregson, Brooks and Crewe, 2001).

Computer mediated communication (CMC) in the form of subject specific news groups, mailing lists and online discussion forums, have provided new virtual spaces for 'experts' to interact in groups. Previously, 'expert' collectors would have communicated and 'socialised' through collecting events, but CMC allows them to have more regular contact. The ease of group interaction offered by this new media is regarded as one of the most important impacts of the Internet on everyday social life (Watt, Lea and Spears, 2002). However, CMC also affords new virtual spaces for amateurs and therefore interactions between 'experts' and 'amateurs'. Dreyfuss (2001) applies Kierkegaard's writings to the Internet, describing news groups as places where: "all are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere" (Dreyfuss, 2001: 79). Dreyfuss's comments are a precursor to Keen's (2007) arguments in *The Cult of the Amateur*. Keen likens Internet users to infinite monkeys with infinite typewriters - but today with networked computers and the ability to publish a wide range of materials from blogs, music, videos, reviews and essays. Keen suggests this is blurring the lines between the audience and author, expert and amateur, creator and consumer (Keen, 2007). Such a trend is seen as part of the Web 2.0 revolution (*ibid.*). Web 2.0 is a: "supposedly second upgraded version of the web" (O'Reilly cited Beer and Burrows, 2007: 1.3) - with basic features including content created by everyone, and users involved in both production and consumption of Internet content (Beer and Burrows, 2007). Keen argues this user-generated content is decimating cultural gatekeepers such as professional journalists and other 'experts'. He also argues that the more user-generated content there is on the Internet, the more difficult it is to distinguish good and bad. But Dreyfuss and Keen overlook the politics of the virtual spaces of CMC, and the pitting of the 'amateur' against the 'expert' that invariably happens there. If there is a 'cult of the amateur' on the Internet decimating experts, it is not happening without a fight - and experts are generating their own virtual spaces where such amateur knowledges are strongly contested.

A virtual space in which the politics of the 'expert' versus the 'amateur' is strongly apparent, is an online old radio discussion forum - which provides a case study of the 'policing' of amateur knowledges by experts. This politics mostly occurs in a sub-section devoted to discussions about eBay. eBay is composed of thousands of item descriptions constructed by sellers themselves. eBay sellers may be experienced collectors or antiques experts, but often they are amateurs selling off unwanted inherited items, gifts, or speculative purchases. In this, eBay is part of the Web 2.0 trend where consumers rather than retailers create the content and the market (Ritzer, 2007a). Ritzer (*ibid.*) suggests that the idea of the prosumer, where the prosumer produces part of what they consume, is partly associated with Web 2.0 trends and the blurring of consumption noted by Keen (2007) and Beer and Burrows (2007). Other authors such as Laughy (2007) have discussed the role of eBay in relation to 'consumer authority', with a shift of authority from producers to consumers (Abercrombie, 1994). eBay is a consumption space in which 'experts' and 'amateurs' come together - this becomes 'political' most visibly when the sellers are 'amateurs', and the browsers or buyers are the 'experts'.

eBay hosts an unprecedented public consumption space for the performance of amateur consumption knowledges through both textual narrative and photography.<sup>1</sup> These 'non-expert' knowledges, displayed on eBay, have been a major source of discussion on an online old radio forum. eBay listings provide material which allows the 'mavens'<sup>2</sup> of the forum to publicly perform their 'expert' knowledges through the critical deconstruction of 'inexpert' radio category listings, and this paper explores the policing of these 'inexpert' knowledges. It examines the politics of knowledge and the continuous struggle over the performance of an expert group identity apparent through the critical deconstruction of eBay listings.<sup>3</sup>

The paper firstly explores eBay and the Old Radio Forum in more detail - as the context in which knowledges are policed and politicised. It considers the relevant literature in terms of policing and enforcement, with particular attention to the consumption and collecting context. The criticism of absent third parties is a key characteristic of the radio forum's eBay section, but an 'under-researched' feature in terms of the computer-supported social networks literature. The paper therefore discusses postings about the eBay listings produced by absent third parties - and examines the literature on 'flaming' and in-group/ out-group behaviour - in an attempt to establish the nature of postings and motivations for such posting behaviours. It then explores the principle 'Shibboleths' and key dimensions of politicised knowledge which the forum use to identify the experts from the amateurs, through an examination of postings over a one year period, extracted from screen captures of forum threads.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 EBAY AND THE OLD RADIO DISCUSSION FORUM: A CONTEXT

eBay, the 'world's largest personal online trading community', was initially set up in 1995 with collectors in mind. It enabled easier access to collectables (*vid.* Bunnell and Luecke, 2000) - where the traditional inefficiencies of person-to-person trading such as geographical fragmentation and imperfect knowledge (*ibid.*) could be offset through CMC. eBay initially aimed to improve the market liquidity for collectables, (Chircu and Kauffman, 2001), and became the way to establish prices for collectables with uncertain values (*cf.* Smith, 1989). Collectors are regarded as a natural demographic for Internet auctions - geographically scattered and highly motivated (Herschlag and Zwick, 2002). Zukin (2004) suggests that eBay becomes the antithesis of standardized, fixed price, branded goods shopping; offering a narrative of discovery, exploration and accident - which also fits in with collecting motivations. Ritzer (2007b) argues that eBay, as a notable example of cybershopping, is a new means of consumption. Indeed, eBay has allowed both the buying and selling of collectables by amateurs in a less exclusionary way than traditional auctions, which are notoriously difficult for newcomers in terms of bidding practices and a relatively closed community of knowledgeable persons (*cf.* Geismar, 2001).

The Old Radio Forum was created as a space of knowledge exchange - for 'experts' to answer largely technical queries about the repair of vintage radio items. However, eBay soon warranted its own category on the forum, due to the volume of eBay postings. The forum can be viewed without registration - it is in the public domain. Potential posters must register and choose a user name. The eBay section is just one section amongst many, and this paper would

<sup>1</sup> Collectables were previously sold through classifieds. Classifieds tend to differ from eBay listings - there is often a charge per word which means there is less 'material' in which knowledges are performed. On eBay, there is no word limit and it is possible to list many more pictures than even online classifieds.

<sup>2</sup> Mavens are self-appointed experts in a particular field who seek to pass their knowledge on to others (Wikipedia, N.D.a).

<sup>3</sup> This paper acknowledges that 'experts' and 'amateurs' also come together through eBay's 'ask seller a question' facility', which may lead to questions and answers being publicly posted on the bottom of an eBay listing. However, these interactions give less material for analysis than discussion forums.

<sup>4</sup> Material from the Old Radio Forum is presented in a particular way in this paper. The exact name of the forum is not used in order to obfuscate real identities. Postings are represented as modified text boxes, with a line between postings from different people. Material and quotations from eBay listings, where pertinent, is represented in dark grey boxes, and is marked when not originally part of the posting. Screen captures of actual pages are not used because they could help reveal real identities. Postings used in this paper are too old to remain on the discussion forum in question or in any Google cache. Methodologically, interaction with the forum occurred as both observer and participant (through forum membership), as part of a two year ESRC project on eBay. A post about the study was put on the Old Radio Forum by the author. Interviews were also held with radio collectors, which included questions about the Old Radio Forum's eBay section.

not like to characterise the whole of the forum as operating in the same way – with the same norms and conventions. The general ethos of the forum is about helping others – with knowledge and assistance. In some respects, the 'eBay discussions' section of the forum could be regarded as a separate 'community' – with its own regular posters, mores and conventions.

The eBay section has some unusual characteristics, and a short exploration is necessary to explore the kind of community it constitutes. Usenet news groups have been described as 'speech communities' (Golder and Donath, 2004: 4), subject to social norms concerning types of acceptable speech, a shared set of meanings and what kinds of conversations can be had. The eBay section has elements which make it a 'speech community' – including a set of social norms about how to critique a third party's eBay listings. Critiques tend to operate in defined thematic areas which occur regularly. This notion of 'speech community' is very similar to Hutcheon's (1995) notion of 'discursive communities'. Hutcheon states that we belong to many communities of discourse, each with its own conventions which are both restrictive and enabling. The forum's eBay discussions also relate to its position as a 'community of interest' (Bellak cited Fernback, 1997). Communities of interest are regarded as gatherings of similar people as a form of 'lifestyle enclave'. Using eBay has certainly become 'a way of life' for many collectors, and forum posters also differentiate themselves from people who practice eBay 'unwisely'. The notion of being an 'expert' or an 'amateur', therefore, not only relates to collecting knowledges, it is also underpinned by a knowledge of how to be eBay 'savvy' – such as bidding at the last minute or 'sniping' (Wilcox, 2000). The norms of the old radio collecting community are based around traditional, competitive and elite collecting values. This includes being able to operate 'good taste' (discrimination) (*cf.* Bourdieu, 1984), know the value of items, and have a good knowledge of "important canonical features" (Brown, 1997: 23). Many of those who participate in the forum and its eBay section are also part of a face-to-face community who attend swapmeets – and are largely expert collectors with extensive private collections.

The eBay section of the forum is unusual in comparison to the forum's other sections because it involves 'experts' posting materials about mostly absent third parties, and indeed amateurs, who are unaware of the forum's existence. Critiquing amateur absentee third party listings leads us on to exploring the general notion of 'policing' and how this happens in relation to consumption and collecting. This 'policing' is also occurring on the Internet, a space where anonymity is seen as conducive to problematic interactions (Douglas and McGarty, 2001). It is therefore also necessary to consider how such forum critiques fit into existing conceptualisations of 'flaming' behaviour that are associated with CMC.

### **3 EBAY DISCUSSIONS AND CRITIQUING THIRD PARTIES I: 'POLICING' AMATEURS IN A CONSUMER/ COLLECTING ENVIRONMENT**

The notion of policing in this context can draw from Foucault and his writings on surveillance and power/knowledge. The kind of policing of amateur third parties that can be seen on eBay has strong parallels with Foucault's ideas of panopticism (Foucault, 1977). In particular, panopticism is characterised as being asymmetric – where the observer can see the observed but not the other way round. In critiquing absentee third parties on the forum, there is a high degree of asymmetry, since the amateurs rarely know of the existence of the forum. Panopticism also involves pervasive surveillance where every action is visible all the time. eBay is a 24/7 public website, where it is encouraged to make even answering questions from the audience public. The relationship between eBay and discussion groups which comment on eBay is not, however, a simple corollary to panopticism and Bentham's architectural manifestation of the panopticon, since it is possible for the observed to 'see' the observer in the central tower unlike in Bentham's model – in the form of finding comments on their own eBay listings on the public discussion forum. Beer and Burrows (2007) also discuss such aspects of surveillance in relation to Web 2.0 – in terms of Facebook and disappreciative comments about academic staff in universities.

Foucault argues disciplinary power may be used to reinforce internal mechanisms of power. Foucault (1972) discusses the status of the doctor which requires certain criterias of knowledge and competence, including pedagogic norms, as well as a "system of differentiation and relations [...] with other individuals or groups" (Foucault, 1972: 56). Being an 'expert' in



any field, be it an academic discipline or an area of consumption and collecting, involves similar practices of establishing norms and differentiating from others. It is here that we begin to bring in Foucault's concept of power/knowledge. Townley, drawing on Foucault, argues that knowledge "delineates an analytic space and in constituting an arena of knowledge, provides the basis for action and intervention – the operation of power" (Townley, 1993: 521). Pearce (1992) suggests consumption and collecting knowledges are the social construction of dominant groups, rather than having any objective existence – concerned with reproducing power relations as part of strategies of power. Indeed, the fact that this 'policing' occurs in relation to consumption and collecting is also highly relevant to understanding the pitting of amateur against expert in this context. Ritzer (2007b) has also discussed issues of policing and 'enforcement' in relation to consumer culture. He argues that consumer culture involves enforcement – upholding the values of that culture and issuing sanctions against those who do not conform (Ritzer, 2007b), and that control in the consumption domain is subtle, often coming from the comments around us (*ibid.*).

Baudrillard (1998) sees entering the cycle of consumption as actually changing one's being and status. But he also argues that this status behaviour is governed in relation to others, where everyone rises "up the coded rungs of a strictly demarcated hierarchical ladder" (Baudrillard, 1998: 171). Baudrillard contends that the consumption process actually makes competition more acute and violent, because only in a consumer age does competition work on all levels as part of processes of differentiation and super-differentiation between people (*ibid.*). In Ritzer's introduction to Baudrillard's (1998) *The Consumer Society*, he sees Baudrillard as describing consumption in terms of the collective and the group, and in terms of social control. Consumption is seen as a language, and we consume signs not commodities – with a perpetual search not for an object, but for difference (Ritzer in Baudrillard, 1998). Baudrillard suggests there is a system of differences which lead individuals to be both similar to and different from other people (*ibid.*). Consumers have to be capable of reading the system of consumption to gain the knowledge of what to consume (*ibid.*). The difference between the amateur and the expert therefore appears to lie in the inability to know the language of consumption in relation to a particular consumption field.

Baudrillard has also written specifically about collecting, suggesting the relational aspects to collecting: "The boundless passion invested in the game [...] reinforces the opinion that an individual who is not some sort of collector can only be a cretin or hopelessly sub-human" (Baudrillard, 1994: 9). Belk (1995) argues that collecting arose as part of consumer culture, and the objects in collections are luxury consumer goods. Belk notes that collecting is normally a competitive activity, and that as collecting takes place in a much narrower consumption field than general consuming, it may increase competitive fervour. Ironically enough in terms of this paper, Belk then argues auctions are then used to sell collectables, and lead to a public display of this competition (Belk, 1995). Part of the competition in auctions is between competing bidders, but as this paper shows, there is also competition between expert and amateur knowledges.

#### **4 eBAY DISCUSSIONS AND CRITIQUING THIRD PARTIES II: 'POLICING' AMATEURS IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION**

Although there have been calls for the movement of work such as Belk's (1991) *Consumer Behaviour Odyssey* into virtual domains (Catterall and Maclaran, 2001), little literature exists on the impact of the Internet in terms of collecting, and in particular how the 'policing' of collecting culture happens there. The literature that examines issues of 'policing' on the Internet tends to examine the problematic nature of the interaction itself, which has not tended to be in a consumer context. The closest corollary to the situation described in this paper, reported in the news not academia, concerned an inversion of the expert and amateur roles – an Internet chat room forum was used by 'amateurs' to 'police' the writings of an expert. Baby 'expert' Gina Ford, author of a bestselling book, threatened legal action against the Mumsnet.com Internet site, after what she saw as 'defamatory' comments. The website then asked its members to stop discussing the expert and her philosophies (Muir, 2006; Winterman, 2006). The situation raised concerns about free speech (Winterman, 2006) and



the need revise the law on Internet defamation (Muir, 2006)

The CMC literature has not shied away from the importance of knowledge and its politicisation, although it has rarely been considered in relation to consumer culture. Wang and Hong (1996), considering flaming in academic mailing lists, and cite Plotnikoff's basic kinds of flaming, including the 'spelling grammar flame' (Wang and Hong, 1996: 4). Boshier (1990) additionally finds vicarious spelling and grammar correction a part of flaming; and factual errors (incorrect names, spelling or dates) are acknowledged as a category of reproach ('corrective' replies) in newsgroups by McLaughlin, Osborne and Smith (1995). However, no stable definition of flaming emerges from the literature (Riva, 2001; O'Sullivan and Flanagan, 2003). In some papers, flammers are not seen as part of the community (Golder and Donath, 2004). Flaming involves intimidation, controversial speech, aggressive language (*ibid.*) and sometimes shouting (using capitals). Vrooman defines flaming as "the use of invective and/or verbal aggressiveness in computer-mediated communication" (Vrooman, 2002: 52). Definitions of flaming seem to vary in their severity, and O'Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) have been particularly critical of definitions and conceptualisations of flaming. They believe existing definitions are ambiguous and reflect too much emphasis on the message itself rather than its context. Some literature cites past research which supports the idea that CMC is conducive to negative interactions, and that this is related to 'deindividuation' – that people lose a sense of individual identity when anonymously communicating by computer (*vid.* Douglas and McGarty, 2001).

If we consider the 'flaming' literature in terms of the posts to the Old Radio Forum, there is a poor 'fit'. Posts to the forum are certainly not as aggressive as we might associate with traditional stereotypes of 'flaming'. Posts come from members who are part of the online community, not separate from it. Flaming is possible within communities, and this is regarded as a 'flame war' rather than 'flaming' *per se* (Golder and Donath, 2004). However, the 'critical' interaction we observe is not within the community either – it is about a mostly absent third party. O'Sullivan and Flanagan (2003) propose the use of an 'interactional norm cube', which thinks through the interpretation of flames in terms of a sender, receiver and third party, and the 'appropriateness' of the message to each. However, O'Sullivan and Flanagan's (2003) schema does not seem to account for the possibility of an absent third party in the forum's sense. In their conceptualisation, the 'third party' still sees the posts, whereas the third parties on the radio forum are unlikely to be aware of the post's existence, let alone being able to comment on its 'appropriateness'. Some commentators are critical of the proposition that flaming is strongly related to the CMC environment (O'Sullivan and Flanagan, 2003; Vrooman, 2002). Undoubtedly, much of the 'flaming' type behaviour that occurs on the forum is about taste and discrimination in consumption and collecting, in the sense of Bourdieu's classic text *Distinction* (1984) – which in the forum has a public space to be entertained in a 'disinhibited' way (Joinson, 1995). In considering flaming, we must heed Vrooman's call to always situate flaming in the social situation in which it occurs – here consumption and collecting. But while flaming has and does occur in offline environments, interviews with radio collectors who use the Old Radio Forum reveal the perception that CMC is intertwined in the discussions which materialise there:

I think if they were to meet the individual, they would treat him or her in a very different way. But the anonymity of being able to write more or less what you like online, with never having to encounter the individual you are attacking, I think leads to a different approach. (Richard, collector and eBay user).

The anonymity or pseudonymity that is possible on the discussion forum appears to make some members feel they can "hurl insults with impunity" (Dery, 1994: 1). Kim and Raja (1991) discuss the importance of communicating through a computer terminal, which is said to make users forget they are communicating with real people – heightening aggressiveness and self-disclosure.

The members of the Old Radio Forum, themselves, call the criticism of 'unknowing' others various things. One collector, Richard, recounts the story of an unsuspecting man from a television production company asking for advice on Bakelite radios, only to be met with criticism for displaying his relative lack of knowledge:

...the only thing I felt a slight negative about, was the quite savage way in which it is policed. [...] And there was one particular gentleman, who's obviously a very knowledgeable man, and he was very helpful to people. But he wrote such a savage attack on this poor young chap, because he has misspelled the word 'Bakelite', that I thought: 'He's put this person off for life.' Here he is, doing some research for a television programme, and he's done his homework. He's found a forum of knowledgeable people, and he's got sniped at in quite a bitchy way, because he isn't knowledgeable. But the poor man is trying to become knowledgeable, by going to the right places. [...] And that disturbed me a little bit, and I was interested to see a lot of people felt the same way. But there was no contrition, whatsoever, from the prime exponent of the attack. [...] The rules and regulations are quite - you know, 'this is verboten'.

Richard's account is revealing of the interactional norms of the forum, the acceptable conversations of this 'speech community' or 'discursive community' and its rules. This was seen as an acceptable tone to use by the 'knowledgeable' poster in relation to the 'unknowing' TV producer's 'Shibboleth' – the misspelling of the word 'Bakelite'<sup>5</sup> – although not all members of the forum agreed. The term 'Shibboleth', famously used in Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, is used to refer to a word where the pronunciation is critical in revealing members of a group from outsiders, and can refer to the use of specialist jargon within a group (*Wikipedia*, N.D.b). Vrooman (2002) sees flaming as a form of identity performance and creation. Indeed group identities and performances may be the key behind certain flaming behaviours. For the knowledgeable poster, the term 'Bakelite' is a key Shibboleth for an 'elite group' in identifying the 'knowing' from the 'unknowing', the in-group from the out-group, experts from amateurs. Richard, the collector, refers to this as 'policing' and 'bitching'. Later in the conversation, he also calls this 'snobbery' – classic distinction-talk (*cf.* Bourdieu, 1984): "I also often feel very, very sorry sometimes, for the quite snobbish attacks on people who are, after all, only selling something that they don't know something about". Perhaps Andrew, a moderator, is closest to identifying what is going on in the forum – most of the time criticisms aren't conducted with malice, but more in knowing amusement – this is mockery of an 'out-group', undercut with a 'knowing' positionality and for a knowing audience of experts (*cf.* Gregson, Brooks and Crewe, 2001). Such behaviour is referred to as "highlight the wally":

...you always get the - where somebody says: 'I remember listening to', you know, 'Winston Churchill or whatever on this radio', sure you do - you just dug it out of the loft last week, or you just got it from a house clearance or a boot sale. [...] These things always cause amusement in the forum because it's the usual 'highlight the wally' sort of thing.

Mockery is defined as an attempt "to make something appear stupid or useless" (Cambridge University Press, N.D.) – part of the politicisation of cultural and collecting knowledges in the forum.

Douglas and McGarty (2001) investigated inter-group flaming behaviour and in-group, out-group identities. Their study found that when an audience was composed of in-group members only, language was most abstract or generalised when the target out-group member was anonymous and when in-group sources (posters) are identifiable. While posters to the forum are anonymous to the outside world, they are often known to each other, because they tend to meet at swapmeets and often declare their online identities there. Communicators who were identifiable to the in-group used more stereotypical language to describe the out-group than anonymous communicators (*ibid.*). Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998) conclude from psychological experiments that visually anonymous CMC appears to strengthen conformity to group norms, with the reinforcement of inter-group boundaries, and a conscious rejection of out-groups and the production of out-group hostility.

The consumption and collecting literature are relevant here. In Baudrillard's terms, in-groups and out-groups relate to having mastery over the system of consumption and gaining the

<sup>5</sup> Bakelite is an early form of plastic, used for household objects including radios from the 1920s onwards.

knowledge of what to consume. The non-collectors are the out-group and not part of the 'game' - they do not know the appropriate language of consumption with sufficient mastery to go up the coded rungs of Baudrillard's hierarchy (1998). The collecting literature points to the importance of group membership for collectors. In-group/out-group behaviour is an inherent part of collectors' social networks (*cf.* McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004), which is extremely important when considering the formation and performance of expert knowledges and identities, since notions of 'expertise' and 'knowing more' are grounded in other people 'knowing less'. By definition, in-groups require a demarcation to distinguish themselves from out-groups (Brewer, 1999). Sibley (1995) has commented on the exclusions of knowledge, and that power comes from the ranking of knowledges - for example, knowledge is considered to be of a lower order if expressed in a different idiom or inappropriate codes.

Out-groups may be specific and specified, or amorphous 'others' (Brewer, 1999) and 'generalised others' (Sibley, 1995) - where the boundary between self and other is the most important fact. If group status differences are already perceived to be strong and salient, then it has also been argued that CMC may magnify those differences rather than attenuate them (Weisband, Schneider and Connolly, 1995). This paper now explores the performance of 'expert knowledges' on the Old Radio Forum, as achieved by the 'mockery' of eBay listings produced by an absent 'amateur' third party, through an examination of postings to the forum.

## 5 KNOWLEDGE PERFORMANCE ON THE OLD RADIO FORUM: IN-GROUP/ OUT-GROUP DISTINCTIONS

The Old Radio Forum has particular themes which relate to being knowledgeable or unknowledgeable - part of the in-group or out-group, expert or amateur. Some of these are triggered by specific eBay listings and relate to a specific 'other', whilst threads may also refer to a very generalised and stereotyped 'other'. A particularly well-trodden theme relates to 'appropriate eBay practice' - how eBay listings should be done by the 'knowledgeable'. Some of this relates to posters showing 'expert' knowledge about eBay and how to sell there, but also concerns how to list on eBay when you are selling radio items - with all the expected canonical collectors' knowledges about manufacturers and technical aspects. One particularly popular post was called: "Annoying things that sellers put in auctions".

As can be seen from Figure 1, the 'sellers' who are creating 'annoying listings' are presented as 'generalised others'. The thread is starting with a 'wink' emoticon in the title - this is not serious flaming but mockery. Distinctions of 'expert' and 'amateur' knowledges creep in from the start, and these 'others' are described as "idiotic sellers", "muppet[s]" and "dumbers". The posters define their in-group qualities as the antithesis of the out-group. The criticisms of 'inappropriate practice' are repeated, and also allude to many of the themed threads which appear on the forum like a running joke. The first post criticises assumptions made about the audience - that they will in fact bid rather than be "just looking" - regarded as poor knowledge of eBay practice. This poster's second comment is related, using sarcasm about sellers listing using: "This is an auction for..." to highlight 'stating the obvious'. These all imply that the poster and the in-group perceive themselves as thinking harder about the practice of selling than the amateur out-group. Comments are also made about too many terms and conditions and general 'bad' Internet practice and 'netiquette' - typing in capitals (shouting) and large fonts.

Another vein of criticism relates to the amateur sellers' perceived 'unprofessionalism' and lack of effort in constructing their listings. These arise from a number of practices which posters identify as 'annoying'. Poor spelling is a major gripe, which posters feel is only laziness. This is parodied in the posting. Other grumbles emerge about sellers not researching their items properly - including not looking to see if the item is indeed 'rare' by searching on eBay itself or using Google, if they are not expert enough to know themselves. Other 'annoying' statements involve misdescription as amateur practice, mostly involving working condition: "untested because I haven't got a battery", "Not tested as doesn't have a plug". As one poster says: "in other words it doesn't work". This is perceived to be constructed 'unknowingness' aimed to create ambiguity around working condition as a form of information asymmetry to help increase the price.

Other grumbles about 'unknowing' amateur listings involve more technical knowledges: "collector's transistor radio with VHF/ FM from the 1930s". This is an extreme example, but highlights

some of the lack of technical knowledge which annoys forum members. VHF/ FM started in the UK in 1956 and transistor radios were in UK production from the late 1950s. Additional gripes centre around other radio-collector Shibboleths, which involve knowledge about set manufacturers. Misspellings, as with 'Bakelite', are again at the heart of the mockery – with the manufacturer Ekco (from E. K. Cole) being misspelled as "ECO", "EKO" and "ECHO" and Philips as "Phillips" (with two 'l's). These are key indicators of belonging to the out-group, for members of the in-group.

It is apparent when examining the "annoying things that sellers put in auctions" postings that there are dissenting voices on the forum who don't wish to perform the conversational norms of the in-group. One dissenting voice supports the case of the genuinely 'unknowing': "I mean, i dont [sic] want to disagree with you lot too much....but not everyone knows stuff about old radios". Another, interestingly, points out that if the 'experts' can identify the errors and be critical enough to be 'interpreters', then they ultimately know the item regardless of the 'amateur' description: "The fact we pick up errors in the description, means that we know what the item is anyway, so what does it matter if the seller (deliberately or not) doesn't get it right". As Borgmann (1999) comments, cyberspace presents prodigious amounts of information, but higher order skills are needed to find the *right* information (*cf.* Keen, 2007).

This thread on the "annoying things that sellers put in auctions" gives a flavour of the construction of a generalised 'other' through a critique of their knowledges and associated practices. This paper goes on to explore in detail the most frequently occurring Shibboleths of the forum, as well as the most politicised dimensions of knowledge in the forum's construction of the knowledgeable/unknowledgeable, expert and amateur. These postings are initially aimed at a specific rather than generalised 'other', through the citation of a hyperlink to an eBay item page at the beginning of the thread.

**Annoying things that sellers put in auctions:** [modified]

After having trawled Ebay last night, looking for various items (not all Vintage Radio related), I have decided that I would like to compile a list of DON'Ts for Ebay sellers, then send it to some of the idiotic sellers there!  
So - what is it about an auction listing that really gets your goat? - I'll start off:

"You are bidding on....."

er - no, I'm not, I'm just looking - please don't presume that I am bidding or will bid

"This Is An Auction For An E\*\*\*\*\*....."

- Is it really? Is that what Ebay does then? Gosh! - and what is wrong with your keyboard?

"1 TYPE IN CAPITLES AN SPEL BADLY AMD DON' USE ENY PUNKTWASHUN ATAL - COS I WAS DILECSIC AT SCHOLL"

no you weren't, your just a lazy bu\*\*er who hasn't found the Caps Lock key and doesn't check their listing before publishing it

There are three things that \*\*really\*\* wind me up.

1/ WHEN THE AUCTION TEXT IS ALL IN CAPS. (There is a well known seller of radios on ebay who always does this, it \*\*really\*\* winds me up)

2/ Where the seller has used html to enlarge the text to the size of a road sign.

**LIKE THIS** so you have to stand at the other end of the room to read it.

3/ Where the seller describes the item in two words i.e. "old radio" and then has a 2,000 word thesis stating his Nazi-esque T&C.

"Don't know much about the item" where typing in the items name into google reveals loads of sites all about it.

"Rare" when the section includes 3 more of them, and usually has several all the time (TV22's spring to mind here).

"Mint condition for year". It is either mint or it isn't.

"I plugged it in and the valves lit up". Muppet !

Using pictures implying that's what is being sold when it isn't.

Dumbers that think they can sell an item with an ad something like "For sale. Car." and not even have a picture (these must be a wind-up, surely no-body can be really that stupid?).

" untested because I haven't got a battery "

" it was owned from new by my grandmother and was working ok when she bought it "

" very good condition but needs a clean "

" collectors transistor radio with VHF/FM from the 1930s "

" handle and knobs missing, tuning scale cracked, dent in grille ..... but could easily be put right I would imagine "

The list goes on .....

Yes, I always notice people spell 'Philips' with two 'l's' [Continued]

Another, possibly worse, one is 'EKCO'

Sellers seem to put the 'K' and 'C' in alphabetical order, hence we end up with 'ECKO'

Then, of course there is 'ECO', 'EKO' and even 'ECHO'

Wow!! So many people getting out of the wrong side of the bed in one day! The fact we pick up errors in the description, means that we know what the item is anyway, so what does it matter if the seller (deliberately or not) doesn't get it right.

What is important to me is that I understand what I'm buying, that I have tried to remove any doubt that it's a legitimate auction and that I am happy with the starting price. I achieve this mainly by asking the seller lots of questions. Sorry if my spelling & grammar is not up to scratch on this one.

[Roger] (who always starts his auctions with "You are bidding on....")

I think that it's not too bad. I mean, i dont want to disagree with you lot too much....but not everyone knows stuff about old radios.

I mean...someone might find an old radio in their attic, and not have a clue what it is. They might even not know what the difference between valves and transistors is (they might even think that transistors are big glass tubes).

Not tested as doesn't have a plug 🗑️ in other words it doesn't work. 🗑️ And as [x] mentioned earlier DANSETTE STYLE, what was so special about Dansette anyway. 🗑️🗑️

Another thing that really annoys me is when the seller thinks he is selling a gold nugget, which is in fact nothing special.



OK, so you may say he knows nothing about vintage radio, fair enough. But he has the whole WWW at his fingertips to search. All he has to do is enter the make and model into a well known search engine and he will get information aplenty. I don't know if its laziness, ignorance, or pig headed-ness; or a combination. He hasn't even been bothered to search ebay to put the \*\*\*\*\* thing in the correct section, or to see if one has sold recently and to see what it went for!!!

"Its worth X and I won't accept a penny less">>> I hate people with that attitude.

**Figure 1: The generalised 'other': "Annoying things that sellers put in auctions"**

## 6 BAKELITE AND OTHER SHIBBOLETHS

Bakelite is the key Shibboleth of the Old Radio Forum, and occurs regularly as a theme in the form of a 'running joke'. "Anyone for brakealite?", is such a thread, pointing out the misspelling as another curiosity - "I can't remember who's keeping the list of variants, but I've not seen this one before". The next poster mocks the affordances of the spelling "brakealite" as being easily broken. The thread "New bakelite variant" (see Figure 2) reports another Shibboleth sighting on eBay, this time of the misspelling "backo light". Again, the posters aim to wittily mock the misspelling by concentrating on its affordances:



**Topic: New bakelite variant** [modified]

...Perhaps he calls it that because the dial lights are very bright and shine through the card slots in the back... (groan, groan) 😞 [back-a-light]

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Perhaps it's an Irish bakelite derivative Back o'light...

What's with the Newcastle Brown Ale?

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Probably helps with the spelling ??? 😞 I hate to think what it would be like without it 😞😞

## Figure 2: The spelling of Bakelite as a principal 'Shibboleth'

In these two instances, there is clearly an in-group, out-group division, based on knowing how to spell Bakelite correctly, and competition in offering the wittiest deconstruction of the misspelling. Meir (2002) also notes that 'Bakelite' or 'Bakelit', as is the correct German spelling, is commonly misspelled on eBay.de, with frequent spelling variations, including "backelit", "bakalit" and "bagelit".

In Figure 3, "How many ways can YOU "spell" bakelite?" there is more criticism of the out-group via the vehicle of a 'knowledgeable' seller's 'keyword spamming' of misspellings of 'Bakelite'. This, of course, confirms to the in-group that their proposition of the 'unknowledgeable' amateur out-group is correct. In the second post, the majority of 'eBay punters' (the audience) are elided with being 'unknowing': "There's an implicit assumption here that a proportion [...] of the visitors to this sale are likely to be incapable of recognising Bakelite when it is spelt correctly [...] He appears to consider that many Ebay punters are of the unlettered variety. Sadly, he may be right". The fact that the eBay audience is considered "unlettered" by the poster clearly demonstrates that hierarchies of knowledge are involved.

**How many ways can YOU "spell" bakelite? [modified]**

This chap obviously knows his market. Look at his multiple "search magnet" spellings of bakelite, halfway down the "History" paragraph.

"People spell / describe Bakelite in different ways, B akerlite, Bakalite, Bakolite, Bakerlight, Bakelight, Bakalight, phenolic" [Snippet from eBay page to illustrate the text mentioned, this was not on the original posting].

Well, I think he's missed *a few*. Maybe we should e-mail him our suggestions too 😊

There's an implicit assumption here that a proportion - possibly quite sizeable - of the visitors to this sale are likely to be incapable of recognising Bakelite when it is spelt correctly. (Capital 'B' surely - as it is actually a trade name for phenol formaldehyde, belonging to the Bakelite-Xylonite Co., though I admit that it has slipped into common usage, like 'hoover' for vacuum cleaner!) He appears to consider that many Ebay punters are of the unlettered variety. Sadly, he may be right

**Figure 3: Bakelite spelling and the 'out-group' audience**

Another key 'Shibboleth' on the Old Radio forum, as mentioned previously, is the spelling of the radio manufacturer's name Ekco, after E. K. Cole. Figure 4 shows posters discussing its misspelling as "Ekoo" and some other spelling/technical inaccuracies (F. K Cole instead of E. K Cole, A.G mains instead of A.C mains). But there is interesting dissent from the critique, on the grounds that the seller is "a lady". Being "a lady" appears to mean that no knowledge about radio-related technology is expected from that positionality, and the posting tries to be 'charitable'. The 'lady's' unfortunate spelling of 'aerial' as 'ariel' (a UK brand of washing powder) makes the poster mockingly elide her knowledge to that of the domestic technologies of the home – the washing machine. Being 'a lady' makes her part of an unknowing out-group of amateur eBay sellers. Although the out-group is often characterised as a 'generalised other' with stereotypical tendencies to do things which are inappropriate or 'idiotic', being a woman is the main axis of social differentiation associated on the forum with being 'unknowing' (although appearing relatively infrequently). Indeed, in a January 2006 posting, it is made clear that certain groups are regarded as targets for critique, but certainly not those of a particular 'race' or religion, which is regarded as unacceptable: "Audiophools<sup>6</sup> (as a group, not specific people) seem to be fair game for almost any sarcasm we care to inflict on them though if audiophoolery were a race or religion I think we would be more guarded. I'm glad that religion and politics have never made any serious appearance in the forum".

<sup>6</sup> Audiophools are those regarded as paying very high prices for valve audio equipment.

**Ekoo radio [modified]**

I found this description rather amusing :-

[cites eBay page] I see the radio was made by F K Cole Ltd, at their Ekoo works and it's for use on AG mains. Maybe it's just because the lettering on the radio's label is just unclear as he's obviously tried to extract information from that. For a change, 'bakelite' is spelt correctly though 😊.

And at least he hasn't been fiddling with the insides if he thinks the two round cloth-covered holes at the back hide a couple of tweeters. 😊😊😊 Unless now they do... 😊

Maybe we are being a little over critical here, I think the seller, a lady by the way, has done a fair job of describing a piece of unfamiliar technology, her description of the Zenith radio also on offer, is honest and a lot better than most on ebay:- [cites eBay page]

[Snippet from eBay page, this was not on the original posting]. [...] THERE ARE NO LEA DS. THERE IS ALSO AN ARIEL FROM HANDLE [...] I AM A LADY SELLING THIS FOR OUR CHURCH FUNDS I HAVE NO IDEA IF IT WORKS BUT IT DOES LOOK INTERESTING INSIDE AND OUT.

I wonder how many of us could accurately describe an unknown washing machine without confusing our Aerial with the Ariel! 😊😊

I wonder how she's managed to acquire these? Given that she clearly knows nothing at all about radios she seems to have stumbled on two quite rare and desirable ones, albeit not in perfect condition. If she's just a car boot raider she's been lucky this time 😊

**Figure 4: Misspelling 'Ekco' and being "a lady"**

## 7 KEY DIMENSIONS OF POLITICISED KNOWLEDGE

"Yes, there's one thing we can count on from Ebay: amusement. What did we do in the days BE (before Ebay?). Forget 'Big Brother' or 'I'm a Celebrity, Get Me Out Of Here'. The crazy on-line auction antics - and expectations - of the minority of buyers and sellers are surely far more entertaining" (Regular poster, thread 'Overpriced?').

Apart from key contentious terms which are misspelled regularly and become 'Shibboleths' to denote the expert from the amateur, there are also repeated dimensions of knowledge about radio which are highly politicised on the forum, and denote expertise. This also moves beyond amateur selling practices to amateur buying practices – enjoyed by the regular poster in the quote above. One such dimension is price, which is highly contentious amongst collectors at the best of times, since no established price guides exist for radios. Figure 5 shows this in practice, and clearly stereotypes eBayers as having certain amateur characteristics and practices. Their 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983), as imagined by the posters, is even described in territorial, geographical terms – "planet Ebay". eBayers are stereotyped as paying "over the top" for items they could get significantly cheaper at physical second-hand venues. This stereotyped tendency is even constructed as a disease (humorously): "Online Auction Prاتبidiatitis", with the emphasis on "prat" and "bid", again describing their behaviour in derogatory terms. Posters then start imagining who the eBay bidders may be for a repro radio – people who want the reliability and convenience of a repro set, and also those who are regarded as 'not one of us', part of the out-group of amateur "non-collectors".

**Topic: Ebayers are strange..** [modified]

Odd really - A really nice TR82 goes for £26 [cites ebay page]  
And yet I've seen so called "vintage" or "retro" 70s/80s rubbish (plus TR82/97s) go for ridiculous prices lately. Planet Ebay is a weird place!

This does not really surprise me, it is part of the on- going ebay trend of people paying over the top for items that they could get cheaper elsewhere. £26 is probably about right for a TR82 on ebay, I bought one for £8 at the car boot on Sunday 😊.

Some Ebay buyers suffer from a disease call *Online Auction Pratbidiatis* typical symptoms include having no sense of item value and a willingness to pay over the odds.

Cure: Stop logging onto Ebay, get some fresh air to revive brain and visit the local flea market/car boot or visit a vintage radio swapmeet. Full recovery expected (on buyer and bank account) provided they avoid Ebay



I think that some ebayers want stuff that just looks the part, but they also want modern convenience or are fearful of an old set breaking down. That's why a repro Bush goes for more, so people can listen to Radio One and their other favourite FM stations on it!

A problem with items on Ebay like radios also attract bids from the non-collectors as well, having a look at the bid history of bidders is quite revealing.

### Figure 5: 'Planet eBay' as an imagined community

Another politicised dimension of knowledge on the Old Radio Forum is taste. Negotiations of taste are underpinned by distinctions formed through legitimate knowledge. Most often, politicisation is centred on reproductions of original sets, which are not regarded as 'legitimate culture' (cf. Bourdieu, 1984). These include reproductions of Wells Coates' classic round Ekco and the 1960s Bush TR82. In these instances, the sets themselves are mocked as well as the imagined 'amateur' buyers. In the case of a round Ekco repro, one poster comments "Wood/plastic/faux brushed aluminium cabinet! Hideous. Can we presume the high bidder is some kind of charity that buys this stuff for subsequent crushing to avoid causing alarm and distress to other members of the public who might stumble across such abominations without warning?" The in-group of radio collectors like to establish their credentials as 'tasteful' collectors, and do so particularly by 'othering' the repro set as "hideous" and only fit to be crushed rubbish. 'Othering' again occurs through associations with dirt and defilement - Sibley states that disease and other signifiers of defilement have a significant role to play in defining self and the construction of stereotypes (Sibley, 1995).

The final politicised dimension of knowledge on the Old Radio Forum, to be discussed in this paper, concerns technical knowledge. Criticisms of eBayers on the grounds of genuine or constructed 'unknowingness' on technical matters involves many areas – such as claims to hear Radio 1 working on pre-FM sets, to comments that valves are fully working even when the vendor has no valve tester. Technical inaccuracies are mostly deconstructed and the 'real' truth revealed by the posters, as in Figure 6 below, which discusses over-use of the term 'Bakelite' for describing plastic (or even wooden) radio sets.

**If it's old, it must be bakelite !** [modified]

I have just sold one of these little Marconi jobs and can confirm there is not one bit of bakelite anywhere on them, despite this sellers title and description :- [cites eBay html]

The main body of these is in fact diecast zinc alloy, whilst the two 'lids', the facia and what few other plastic parts they contain are made from some other plastic, probably Urea Formaldehyde.

Whilst I accept the name 'bakelite' has become something of a generic term, why do we have to tolerate this common assumption that if it's old and it's plastic it *must* be bakelite ?

Quote:

Originally Posted by [x]

*Whilst I accept the name 'bakelite' has become something of a generic term, why do we have to tolerate this common assumption that if it's old and it's plastic it must be bakelite ?*

Or, still worse, if it's old and wooden ... 🤔🤔

[cites eBay link] [wooden radio described as bakelite]

I don't know the model, but from the look of it I'm ever so nearly certain the cabinet's made of wood: I've never yet seen bakelite give so convincing an imitation of mirrored veneering as this would be 😊

I think that in 'Ebayese' the word Bakelite (or any variations of the spelling) can be used to describe any set which is not made of wood, or in fact for any set if you think it makes a nice description.

The Philco (which from the numbering system I suspect was made circa 1953-4) is definitely a woody - I wonder if someone should e-mail the seller to ask if has treated the 'bakelite' for woodworm? 😊

## Figure 6: Technical knowledges used to construct the out-group from the in-group

Again, the in-group/ out-group, expert/ amateur divisions are evident: "why do we have to tolerate this common assumption that if it's old and it's plastic it *must* be bakelite?" eBayers (shorthand for amateurs) are even constructed as having their own 'language' as a defined community – "Ebayese" – which is elided with 'unknowingness' about how the term 'Bakelite' should be used, and even misdescription in order to sell the set. Misdescriptions of wood as Bakelite are mocked on the basis of give-away signs: "I've never yet seen bakelite give so convincing an imitation of mirrored veneering as this would be", and forum members angle for the humorous 'reveal' of their incorrect listing: "I wonder if someone should e-mail the seller to ask if has treated the 'bakelite' for woodworm?"

## 8 CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON EBAY DISCUSSIONS

This paper has aimed to explore the 'policing' of perceived amateur knowledges by some members of the Old Radio Forum in its 'eBay Discussions' section. While a clear sense of in-group/out-group distinctions has emerged, based on key Shibboleths and the politicisation of certain dimensions of knowledge, other interesting social constructions are evident based on the notion of a 'knowing' versus 'unknowing' community. Amateur eBay buyers and sellers are associated with their own 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) on the forum. They are perceived to have their own virtual space or territory – "planet Ebay" – where specific practices occur which are seen as the antithesis of those performed by the forum 'experts'. This includes paying more than its socially constructed value, buying the 'inauthentic' and lacking technical knowledge. eBay sellers are even said to have their own language – "Ebayese" – because of their perceived 'amateur' use of technical terms, and purposive 'spin' of their item descriptions to incorporate words which attract eBay 'lookers'. The virtual eBay community is ironically

imagined to have many of the elements of a nation state. A detailed social construction of an 'unknowing' community is recovered from the forum's postings. Yet a simple in-group/out-group distinctions based on being a 'wise' eBay user (buyer or seller) with the radio/audio 'knowledge' versus those without it, is somewhat a false dichotomy for the Old Radio Forum. Some forum posters even admit to doing some of the practices associated with "planet Ebay", such as starting a listing with 'this is an auction for a...', suggesting that the expert and amateur dichotomy is unstable (*cf.* Keen, 2007). The fact that collectors are notoriously competitive (*cf.* McIntosh and Schmeichel, 2004), particularly male collectors (Belk, 1995), also tends to lead to the break down of a stable and unified in-group, with frequent 'dissenting' postings.

In exploring the policing of 'inexpert' collecting knowledges, this paper has also sought to understand the nature of so-called 'problematic' interactions that occur in the eBay discussions section. However, it is simplistic to suggest that this is, in fact, the 'dark side of CMC' (Riva, 2001), since this is a forum in which a great majority of the discussion is concerned with a creative and reflexive negotiation of self, identity and community - taking place through the politicisation of knowledge which in turn emanates from eBay listings. This paper also conceptualises these particular interactions which occur in relation to absent third parties - an under-explored area of the CMC literature - as 'mockery' in this instance. Mockery is a discourse with a historical trajectory based on distinction-talk that pre-dates CMC, but is strongly intertwined with new media spaces such as the discussion forum - which allows the citation of public web sources without the knowledge of the authors of those pages, by anonymous posters. The posts to the Old Radio Forum are quite different to those associated with stereotypical 'flaming' behaviour. There is a need to be careful of what we label as flaming, which as a concept has the tendency to work as a 'chaotic conception' (Sayer, 1992) - hiding more than it reveals, and decoupling the pre-CMC discourses on which it is based (*cf.* O'Sullivan and Flanagan, 2003; Vrooman, 2002). For the most part, posters use such humour to make their point - in the form of 'running jokes' like the misspelling of Bakelite, and use of emoticons for irony. Humour is used as a way to address 'difficult' topics while producing amusement in an audience (Sev'er and Ungar, 1997). Emoticons play a large role in taking 'the edge' or harshness from the posters' critiques in the forum - presented in relation to eBay listings which make them laugh or smile, or are used when things are said 'tongue in cheek'. Wolf's (2000) study of emoticon use showed that male use of emoticons tended to involve only teasing, sarcasm and humour - this is perhaps part of the forum's masculine performance.

The fact that this is an online community of 'experts', where knowledge is the key to esteem and reputation, may mean that as a group they are also reflexive and 'knowing' enough to be concerned with their own group self-image, and how they are perceived by the watching world outside their community. They would not wish to be judged too harshly for judging too harshly, and humour and emoticons aim to soften their critique, lightening an otherwise tense situation (*cf.* Sev'er and Ungar, 1997). However, the use of humour and emoticons has not ultimately protected them from the third parties whose items they discuss. Mockery subtly drifted and slipped into third-person character comments, and a small number of third parties hit back with the threat of libel action as with the Mumsnet.com case, when they were made aware of the existence of the forum. The previous panopticism and power asymmetry the forum had enjoyed was disrupted when the observed were able to 'see inside the windows of the central tower' and view publicly the observers and their comments. The eBay discussions section, in then reflecting on its own future and what it was 'appropriate' to discuss, began to self-destruct. The content of *all* eBay-related postings became highly politicised - from whether it was acceptable to talk about third party eBay sellers at all: "The problem when discussions move from items and eBay generally onto specific eBay sellers is that the seller is often unaware of the discussion", to whether comments relating to eBay sellers' knowledges are appropriate or an assault on character. This includes the forum's running joke about the spelling of Bakelite, its own particular Shibboleth for identifying the in-group from the out-group: "...how many conversations (laughs) about the misspelling of bakelite have we had? Surely we are, unintentionally, insulting the seller's intelligence?" The eBay discussions section of the forum ultimately fragmented in this process - with its defining conversational norms under attack, and its inability to perform an expert and 'knowing' group identity in the usual way. However, it was the presence of some of the previously 'unknowing' third parties as forum members themselves and their infiltration and continuous monitoring of postings as a sceptical audience that ultimately led to the eBay



discussions section being erased and locked. This left the 'experts' without a space to perform their collecting identities in relation to the eBay 'amateurs', and raises questions about free speech and 'formalised' policing in the form of the law on defamation on the Internet. Keen's (2007) assertions that in the age of the amateur, the authority of experts is undermined, may be correct - if the vagueness of the law on Internet defamation continues to silence even legitimate forms of discussion by experts on amateur user generated content - such as factual and technical inaccuracies.

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