

Trolling in the Deep

Managing Transgressive Content on Online Platforms as a Commons

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The figure of the *Ship of fools* is representing, in a symbolic manner, a reality of the fourteenth century: social exclusion from cities faced by the mads, left adrift on rivers (Foucault 2001). On these boats, the fools could freely express their madness in a restricted space, as underlined by most paintings representing the *Narrenschiff* (see Figure 9.1). The mad, in this iconography, could be the one who loses Reason, or the one whose actions, especially laughter, are likely to disturb an established order (Erasmus 2003 [1511]).

There are many commonalities between the Ship of Fools of the fourteenth century and some contemporary websites, where some users called “trolls,” due to repeated marginalization for sharing transgressive content, end up gathering on specific forums, where they can express their taste for transgression.¹ Transgression can be understood here as an extreme region of the action space of individuals, in which formal as well as tacit moral rules are violated, and contributing to add an element of spontaneity to social interactions. Because they generally prove to be a threat to the normal functioning of online forums, they tend to be shunned by most communities, and come together in specific forums such as the one we propose to study in this chapter, the “Blabla 18-25” forum of *jeuxvideo.com*.

This extreme case of a “forum for trolls” will allow us to highlight the fact that trolling is a relative concept, defined insofar as it transgresses behavioral and moral rules established within the community at hand. In this perspective, trolling can’t be considered as inherently negative.² In fact, it depends on the way the community conceives its action space. For example, some creative communities can appreciate

¹ “Trolling may be understood as nonconstructive messages designed to provoke a reaction, to draw targets (and others) into fruitless argument, and to disrupt the avowed purpose of the group gathering” (Coles and West 2016: 234).

² Unlike many contributions in the literature: “Trolling is a conceptually fuzzy term and it is often applied indiscriminately to describe various types of negatively evaluated online behaviour” (Hopkinson 2013: 8).



FIGURE 9.1. Pretmakers in een mossel op zee, Pieter van Der Heyden (1562)

the spirit of transgression provided by trolls, and of course forums well-known for rallying trolls have a very specific conception of the action space, in which transgression can even be encouraged. On these forums (e.g., 4chan, the Blabla 18-25, as well as numerous subreddits), we can talk of a “transgression space,” corresponding to the action space in which interactions between members take place. Depending on its prevalence, transgression in the case of online forums could range from criminal offense (such as racial hatred or cyber-harassment) to controversial statements (such as advocacy of reactionary views).

Our case study will find its structure in the *Governing Knowledge Commons framework* (Hess and Ostrom 2007; Madison, Frischmann, and Strandburg 2009a, b). This framework considers knowledge commons as “arrangements for overcoming social dilemmas related to sharing and producing information, innovation and creative works” (Larson and Chon 2017: 168).³

In our particular case, the *resource* requiring these “arrangements” we will consider is the transgression space allowing members to share the content described above. The main interest of our case lies in the nature of the resource: while regular knowledge commons exist so as to exploit a universally valuable resource (such as knowledge, in

³ Moreover, knowledge is defined as “a set of intellectual and cultural resources” (Larson and Chon 2017: 168).

the case of Wikipedia), transgression is by essence controversial, and is generally considered as a threat to online communities. A transgression space, therefore, might be considered at large as something to be destroyed were it to rise. But some communities, which the 18-25 is an example of, come to structure themselves around this possibility of transgression, gathering outcasts from other communities.

Thus, this resource will entail specific *rules-in-use* that allow for its durable exploitation. Rules-in-use can be defined as “shared normative understandings of what a participant in a position must, must not, or may do in a particular action situation, backed by at least a minimal sanctioning ability for noncompliance” (Hess and Ostrom 2007: 50). In other words, rules-in-use represent what is considered acceptable to do within the community. *The community gathered around the transgression space, along with its rules-in-use that allow its sustainable exploitation, will form the “common” of our case.* We might abuse language and sometimes refer to the transgression space as the common, but it should be envisioned as an overarching concept, including those who exploit the resource.

The 18-25 community includes several types of participants, who have a different impact on these rules-in-use. First of all, the website hosting the resource will implement a set of measures in order to maintain transgression within a specific range (like a charter and a sanction system), constituting the frontier of the “transgression space.” The tension for these websites is encapsulated in the fact that they need to attract as many users as possible (to maximize revenue, the bulk of which is advertisement and data resale) by allowing them to develop a transgression space, while avoiding a shutdown by legal authorities. In other words, the main issue for them is not to prevent transgression, but rather to maintain it at an acceptable level to preserve interactions within the forum without putting it in jeopardy with regard to both the law and public opprobrium. This set of measures is applied through the presence of a moderation team, whose role is detailed in Section 9.3.

The second type of participants are the regular members who engage in various kinds of (possibly *trollesque*) behavior. They have a central role in the definition of the rules-in-use. As a matter of fact, if the website will determine the formal rules delineating the transgression space according to the law, members will determine for their part if they respect these rules and if they participate in implementing them, through social coercion and the report of content that is considered outside the range of the transgression space. More than reporting problematic content, they also actively engage in encoding the transgressive content they share through a complex self-referential culture (Section 9.2), in order to prevent public controversies from arising. This common culture also enables them to exert social coercion toward members who do not respect the rules-in-use.

Finally, on the fringes of the forum, we find what we will call “outside observers,” which are nonmembers who scroll by the forum. They represent the main danger for the resource, as they can contribute, through public opprobrium, to shutting the website down.

Thus, social coercion and the formal system of sanction will be considered as the rules-in-use allowing the monitoring of the interactions within the transgression space. The emphasis on the formal and tacit sanctions system is consistent with several contributions to the knowledge commons framework (Gordon 2009), and the seminal work of Elinor Ostrom (Ostrom 1990; Hess and Ostrom 2007) that underlined the central role of “a system for self-monitoring members’ behavior” and “a graduated system of sanctions” (Hess 2012: 21).

In this perspective, we propose in this chapter to study, through the *Governing Knowledge Commons* framework, the rules-in-use on a transgressive forum as a governance process ensuring the sustainability of interactions within a transgression space. To be more precise, in order to analyze the specific governance structure of those forums built around a transgression space, we present a case study focused on the *Blabla 18-25* forum hosted by the website *jeuxvideo.com*, one of the most active and transgressive forums in France (Section 9.1). The study of transgression spaces is of particular interest because we argue it can be applied to more general situations, constituting the discussion of this chapter (Section 9.4).

9.1 A CERTAIN IDEA OF TRANSGRESSION: TROLLING ON THE 18-25

9.1.1 A General Presentation of the Forum and Its Business Model

The “Blabla 18-25” (hereafter 18-25) is a forum in which registered users can initiate a topic or contribute to existing ones. When a topic is created, the *original poster* is invited to give a title that will indicate the general orientation of the discussion. Everyone accessing the website, even without an account, can browse through topics.

The 18-25 forum is hosted by *jeuxvideo.com*, the main French online video games media.⁴ It was founded in 1997 by three friends, Sébastien Pissavy, François Claustres, and Jérôme Stolfo, within the company L’Odyssée Interactive. The company was initially in a very precarious financial situation, barely surviving thanks to the founders’ contributions. Around the year 2000, however, Internet usage was growing at an ever-faster pace, and quickly began to supplant specialized video games magazines due to its bottomless pool of knowledge and the possibility to interact through forums.

In this growing market, *jeuxvideo.com* distinguished itself by its responsiveness to the newest trends, and quickly established itself as the reference for video games news (Pissavy 2013). Already in 2000, the site caught the eye of some investors, as Sébastien Pissavy sold 80 percent of his shares in the company to Gameloft, while remaining in charge of the company. In 2006, the French company Hi-Media

⁴ “In February, jeuxvideo.com was consulted by 6 369 000 unique users across all supports, according to Médiametrie, the French institute which measures medias’ audience” (Laura Motet for *Le Monde*, April 2, 2017, authors’ translation).

acquired 88 percent of L'Odysée Interactive for €22.6 mn. In 2012, Sébastien Pissavy stepped down as CEO, and was replaced by Cédric Mallet. At this time, the company was one of the biggest video games online media, employing 40 people and hosting 4 million unique monthly visitors.

The website took a major turn in 2014 when Webedia bought L'Odysée Interactive for €90 mn: alongside undergoing a complete reform, named *Respawn*, the website became tied with a company of a quite different caliber. Webedia is a subsidiary for French holding group Fimalac, owned by billionaire Marc Ladreit de Lacharrière. The company owns substantial interests in Germany, Spain, the United States, and Brazil, among other countries. It displays a broad range of activities, such as cinema, cooking, video games, culture, and tourism. In 2018, Webedia ranked third in French media groups, with 27.1 million unique monthly visitors.

Like many forums and social media platforms, *jeuxvideo.com* makes a profit through the display of advertisement and the resale of personal data.⁵ This allows to ensure free access to content on the website for its users.

Jeuxvideo.com hosts numerous specialized forums on various subjects such as politics, sport, music, finance, and many others: there are more than 200 forums, in which there are thousands of topics containing dozens of contributions. “18-25” refers to the suggested age range (although there is no verification of any sort), without predefined topics of conversation. Thus, on the 18-25, everyone can talk about anything, as long as the forum charter is respected.⁶

Before exploring the different aspects of the governance of the transgression space of the 18-25, we have to understand how a transgression space has progressively emerged on a website initially devoted to video games.

9.1.2 *From a Community of Gamers to a Community of Transgression: The Evolution of a Website*

When *jeuxvideo.com* was created in 1997, it quickly became a reference for all video games enthusiasts, as it was the place where they could find reliable information for their gaming sessions. Since the creation of the website, forums were implemented to allow members, most of them teenagers, to discuss various subjects, thus constituting a major place of interaction.

The integration of an interactive component to the website could be easily explained by the fact that many elements of *gaming culture* are so specific that it was sometimes hard to find peers in “real life” also passionate about these subjects, while communities gathered around these topics are likely to encourage interactions

⁵ In June 2018, *jeuxvideo.com* was selling the data to more than 400 partners.

⁶ We decided to focus on the 18-25, and not on the 15-18 or the 25-35 because the 18-25 perfectly embodies the spirit of transgression that we aim to analyze through this article.

and creativity. Moreover, as gaming culture was not as widely integrated in society in the 1990s as it is today, “gamers” could be discriminated against or mocked for their passion and perceived as misfits; these forums provided an alternative form of socialization and integration for them.

As a result, online gaming communities often defined themselves *negatively* with regard to society at large, in the sense that they proudly embraced their common interests and sought to clearly distinguish themselves, even if they were sometimes mocked, from what was “mainstream” culture at the time (which did not include video games). Peers came to gather around common interests, and stayed for the welcoming, like-minded people they found. This situation naturally led discussions to lose their exclusive focus on video games and to embrace all aspects of teenager life. This explains why the most popular forums on the website tend to target a specific age range rather than a specific topic.

In this perspective, the 18-25 members can be considered as a *community* (with the social dimension it implies), and not simply as the gathering of individuals around a specific topic, as medical forums or computer troubleshooting discussions. The most striking evidence of a *communal* belonging to the forum is the fact that users call themselves “kheys.”⁷ This name is a powerful means of rallying members. Many shared references on the forum are based on this word, and it is a common way to hail other users: “thank you khey,” “he’s a high-quality khey,” “how are you my kheys?” Moreover, the spelling of the word is often diverted, implying that those who recognize themselves with these alternative characterizations could be considered as valuable members of the community, or more precisely as *up-to-date* users, underlining their active participation.

Concerning the progressive assimilation of transgression as a core constituent of the 18-25 forum, it first became associated with the website through one of its forums, the 15-18, the younger version of the 18-25. In the years 2000, it was known as a place where young, and sometimes marginalized, people could meet to prattle about literally anything that could be of interest to them. Due to the young age of the average user and the frivolity of discussions, moderation was known for its leniency, as would be appropriate for a small enclosed community that meant no particular harm.⁸ Particularly so, since all moderators were also members of the 15-18 that

⁷ The Arabic word for “friend, brother.”

⁸ For example, under the direction of Sébastien Pissavy and L’Odysée Interactive, a minimalist approach was taken vis-à-vis moderation instructions: it was a way to attract teenagers by allowing them to debate and exchange with many liberties. Since Sébastien Pissavy himself was both rather young and a video games enthusiast, he understood the intrinsic frivolity of this forum, hence did not see the need for strict moderation. This vision drastically changed in 2014, when Webedia bought jeuxvideo.com. The main objective for Fimalac behind this operation was to create a leading network of online media in France. This ambition, contrasting with the one of Sébastien Pissavy and his company, calls for an entirely different attitude with respect to the “excesses” of the 15-18 or the 18-25. Notably, the risk aversion of big companies pushes them to adopt a non-extreme position regarding social and political matters.

volunteered for it, and faced intense pressure from regular members of the community to sustain this specific transgression space. Many things were stupid, gross, wanton, but served the purpose of the community, in quest for some mindless entertainment. As a result, none of the moderators wanted to act as a killjoy, and their effective power was very much limited, especially since members could easily get back at them through the spreading of rumors and the frequent doxxing.⁹

These peers of roughly the same age played a wide array of games to divert boredom, and submitting transgressive content in order to catch the attention of other members was one of them.¹⁰ Moreover, as anonymity of online participation tends to disinhibit users, transgression is more likely to occur in these forums than in groups of peers in real life, and its intensity likely to be higher.

The establishment of a transgression space on the 18-25 could also be explained with *infrastructural* issues that the forum experienced. As a matter of fact, as underlined by the staff of *jeuxvideo.com*, substantial moderation failures in 2008 can explain the durable development of a transgression culture on the forum:

But why did the forum become as big, and as frequent a source of polemics? “In 2008, the forum was left without moderation during several weeks, it was a chaotic situation, as Gwendal Lerat recalls.¹¹ The moderator who arrived at last tried to recover control over the forum, but it was too late”. Thousands of users found here a space for expression and, starting from 2007–2008, a particular “culture” was born. Fictions, memes, websites... During many years dozens of references emerged from the forum. It actually was a group of cybernauts who had found here the pretext to gather behind a common culture.

(*Le Monde* 2016, authors’ translation)¹²

This event, along with the other factors we mentioned, seems to have accelerated the constitution of a common culture that gathered many trolls of the French web on the 18-25 forum. For a brief moment, the transgression space as a resource had the opportunity to emerge, and users immediately saw the associated benefits; not

To answer the numerous critiques made of the “unruly” members of these forums, a crack-down was performed on practices and language. Along with harsher moderation, the words filter was implemented. However, this kind of policy had very little effect in practice, and new “derivatives” were found for the banned words within a day.

⁹ Doxxing “is the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting private or identifying information (especially personally identifying information) about an individual or organization” (Wikipedia, doxxing, accessed the June 2, 2019).

¹⁰ A similar remark was made for the 4chan community: “Trolling is itself a game, one steeped in riddles, deceptions, and misleading other users; other games played on 4chan, often to fight boredom, involve asking questions, guessing answers, ‘gaming’ the medium itself by predicting post numbers, incorporating reCAPTCHA phrases into discourse, or relating narratives, as in >greentexting or bait-and-switch stories” (Manivannan 2012: §38).

¹¹ Manager of the communitarian forum of *jeuxvideo.com*.

¹² Florian Reynaud for *Le Monde* February 15, 2016.

only the possibility for transgression in itself, but the complex by-products it allowed to generate, especially this common culture shared by the members.

Gradually, trolling came to be a cornerstone of social interactions on the 18-25. As a consequence, it is not only tolerated, but even encouraged:

On *jeuxvideo.com*, the practice (of trolling) is constant, and consists in writing messages considered as stupid, provocative or obscene to generate reactions, but also sufficiently credible so that some users will respond. The aim could be to “trap” a user who would take the troll’s message seriously: it is in this case a sort of a schoolboy prank. The troll wants his message to generate a reaction of indignation or on the contrary adhesion from a gullible user. Sometimes, the idea is just to make other users laugh. A specificity of the forum is that the trolling practice is community-wide: far from being criticized, trolling is encouraged and contributes to the community’s identity. Thus, we are not simply talking about some users who would come to disturb the forum: an important part of the posts is trolling.

(Marignier 2017: §10, authors’ translation)

In a broad sense, all forms of trolling that aim to entertain the community are valued on the forum, or at least considerably more tolerated than on any website of this size in France. However, some practices are still considered as inappropriate, and can be qualified as *flame trolling* (Bishop 2014), in other words harmful for the community. These practices mainly concern trolling actions affecting the readability of the forum, *ad hominem* transgressive humor or the submission of problematic content that is likely to alert authorities and endanger the common and its resource (posting child pornography links is an obvious example). These types of behavior will be frowned upon by members (through tacit coercion) and sanctioned (through formal moderation), constituting the system of rules-in-use that we present in the following parts.

9.2 SHARED REFERENCES AS A TOOL OF TACIT MODERATION

In this section, we argue that shared references between members of the 18-25 play a pivotal role in the management of the resource represented by the transgression space. Most of those shared references have emerged from repeated interactions within the space, contributing to build a strong sense of community, and therefore increasing members’ commitment to protect it.

9.2.1 *Shared References as a Barrier to Entry: The Role of Hermeticism*

In a forum like the 18-25 that is freely accessible to everyone, we could expect transgressive content to reach not only well-integrated members of the community but also “outside observers”; in other words, nonmembers that happen to scroll by the forum (either casual users or people drawn to the forum following one of the numerous public controversies it generated).

While integrated members are aware of the potential transgressive nature of the content, outside observers might be caught off-guard and get offended by it. Indeed, they are not supposed to be aware that they are interacting in a transgression space, and might (rightfully) deem such content to be unacceptable for what they consider to be a regular interaction space.

In order to prevent the multiplication of public controversies, integrated members tend to “encode” transgressive content by using a shared body of references proper to the forum and its community. Due to the community being close-knit, this allows the emergence of quite complex common references that are hermetic for the uninitiated user. They reduce the risk of transgressive content being reported and subject to public outrage, since at best the outside observer will not know that he or she is facing controversial content, and at worst he or she will have to judge intent rather than explicit statements, considerably weakening his or her accusation.

We might remark that what we call here “hermeticism” is closely related to the concept of esotericism developed by Melzer (2014), defined as the “practice of communicating one’s unorthodox thoughts primarily ‘between the lines,’ hidden behind a veneer of conventional pieties, for fear of persecution or for other reason.” Hermeticism here serves a dual purpose: to protect the community from society at large, and to protect society from the particularly transgressive culture of the forum, that is not meant to be displayed to the outside observer. These motivations correspond to the defensive and protective forms of esotericism. Melzer demonstrates in his work the consistency of esotericism through classical and modern times, and its sudden decline during the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, which he explains partly through the expansion of freedom of expression. What makes this comparison interesting in our case is that the rise of hermeticism on the forum was precisely caused by what is considered as restriction of freedom of expression, as attitudes of society toward transgression became more hostile. There suddenly was a need for the community not only to defend itself, but to avoid harming others in perpetuating its culture and catering for its resource.

A typical example on the 18-25 would be the diversion of the word “Arab” in order to express controversial statements with other (innocuous) words. On the 18-25, the word “Arab” first became “tree” (because of its proximity with the French word “arbre”). Then, when “arbre” became polemic (because people knew what this word actually meant), it became “foliage,” and so on: many words linked with the semantic field of arboriculture emerged in relation with this kind of controversial issue. The same technique is used for a wide array of potentially sensitive words, contributing to the hermetic nature of discussions.

This kind of substitution is not limited to single words, and can also concern general statements and opinions. Although the variety of opinions on the 18-25 is surprisingly rich, a lot of users tend to share controversial views on thorny issues such as migration policies, feminism, or national identity (since such views are not welcome everywhere on the Internet, many of these users end up gathering on

the 18-25, implying a strong selection bias). Many threads that share a highly controversial news item and ask for users' opinions will induce a number of standardized replies based on diversion, which are seemingly benign but carry a very precise meaning that is collectively acknowledged by the community.

For example, the forum takes great pride in having a set of smileys proper to the forum and thousands of homemade stickers (pictures used as reaction faces in discussions) that constitute a significant part of its culture (using smileys from other websites is frowned upon). One of the most common smileys used to react in an elliptic way to controversial news is the 18-25's ":",) which, contrary to its counterparts on other platforms, is not meant to signify a positive reaction, but implicitly carries controversial statements that are largely shared by the community, but that would be censored if stated explicitly. Another example of an elliptic reply consists in the following "pavé" (the 18-25's equivalent of a "copy-paste"):

This societal issue is interesting to me and I have an opinion on the question. Unfortunately, I am prevented from sharing it with you due to, on the one hand, laws restricting freedom of speech in France, and on the other, jeuxvideo.com's conditions of use that I had to accept to create my account on this site. As a result, the simple expression of my opinions on this discussion space could entail sanctions from this forum's administrators and possibly from legal institutions. It is therefore with great regret that I will content myself with reading your exchanges, without participating beyond this message.

The massive use of diversion encapsulates the tension that suffuses the forum as mentioned in the introduction: members want to have the possibility to share transgressive content, but are aware of the fact that it is bounded by moral and legal rules, therefore opt for elliptic forms of transgression, denouncing society's "doxa" restricting what they consider to be a simple application of freedom of speech. Without entering the normative debate on this issue, we may remark that the line separating freedom of speech from punishable statements is quite blurry, and this is precisely why a transgression space can coexist along with a legal system.

This set of references acquired by users with the practice of discussions on the forum is a strong *barrier to entry* for newcomers, as topics could appear cryptic (18-25) or off-putting (as on 4chan), while discussion is generally considered as a contribution good. This limitation to openness by words diversion with shared references has a double function: on the one hand, it is a way for users to understand their value in the community ("I have observed during a sufficient time the discussions to understand them")¹³ and, on the other hand, to be able to talk about controversial subjects without threatening the existence of the transgression space.

¹³ This is also the case on 4chan: "Most of these rules encode the obverse of their literal meaning, making it impossible for outsiders to distinguish between the literal and the implicit without consistent lurking and absorption of institutional memory. It is through lurking that 4channers

Once these diversions become a part of the forum's culture, users are able to exert tacit coercion on users that do not use this hermetic way of expressing themselves. In other words, transgression has to be "tamed" for the resource to be durably exploited, and regular members play a complementary role to the one of moderators. Through tacit coercion (usually through the form of scathing or mocking remarks) as well as direct reports to moderators, unacceptable kinds of transgression are shunned by the community.

Conceptually, informal moderating behaviours are related to the idea of community justice, which refers to the processes by which members of geographically bound communities take responsibility for self-policing and responding to crime via social control mechanisms that enhance community life.

(Bateman, Gray, and Butler 2011: 845)

The culture of the 18-25 has another central function: more than a barrier to entry, it is a way to keep in memory content posted before their disappearance in the thousands of pages of archives not read anymore by the users.

9.2.2 *Shared References as a Way to Prevent Disappearance of Content*

The specific body of shared references of the 18-25 could also be understood as a way, in a platform characterized by ephemerality of content, to preserve a collective memory among users. By ephemerality, we mean that, due to the profusion of messages posted on the 18-25, the time of exposition for a topic, with a few exceptions, is no longer than several minutes.

In this perspective, the integration of some fragments extracted from discussions into elements of language, their possible transformation into *memes* (Bernstein et al. 2011: 56), is a way to preserve collective references that would otherwise quickly fade away due to the endless production of content.

Ephemerality is a common feature of forums, but its management takes numerous forms. On 4chan, threads are systematically deleted upon reaching ten pages, and they are ranked by popularity. On the 18-25, content is not systematically removed. However, existing content quickly fades into oblivion, as most of the activity is concentrated on the homepage, containing the 20 most recently refreshed threads. Most users have integrated the specific rhythm of the forum, that is, the high-paced simultaneous interactions on the most recent topics, by constantly refreshing the homepage.

Facing the issue of ephemerality, users of the 18-25 safeguard the best moments of the discussions by integrating them in the collective references of the forum. This is why the language of the 18-25 is so self-referential: the most interesting contributions

are exposed to institutional memory and acquire collective knowledge and cultural capital for themselves" (Manivannan 2012: §30).

are turned into catchphrases in order to be used by members. Moreover, these contributions are included in archives that have been created to preserve these ephemeral references. We may cite the user-managed *wiki.jvflux.com* that references all “key moments” of the forum, maintaining its collective memory.

More than the overproduction of messages, another aspect of the disappearance of content is linked to the fact that as discussions grow longer, the likelihood that they will transgress the rules-in-use rises, implying a removal by the moderation team. This “law of charter violation” was observed by a current moderator of the 18-25 forum, Odoki, interviewed by *Le Monde*:

(Far-right members of the 18-25) have perfectly internalized a characteristic of online debates, quite close to Godwin’s law:¹⁴ the longer the discussion, the less inhibited it becomes. They do not even need to do their propaganda themselves, only to sow the seeds for a toxic debate and reap the benefits.¹⁵

As a matter of fact, when a discussion grows longer and users are invited to express their opinion about an ever-growing subject matter, the probability of referring to transgressive ideas approaches one, as one of the very links that bind this community together is precisely this disposition for transgression.

This disposition for transgression implies that while the bulk of the content that is shared is not exclusive to the forum, its interpretation often is. To put it differently, the transgression space allows for an alternative view on current events and societal issues, and from the many interactions stem fundamental ideas about how to perceive and reflect upon the world. These ideas and attitudes vastly differ from the ones produced on other discussion spaces and challenge them, whether they want it or not. These alternative attitudes become constituent of the community’s identity, and quite logically are reflected in its alternative culture. Thus, elements coming from what is considered as the “mainstream culture” will be rejected. For instance, Instagram smileys and Twitter links will be frowned upon, popular pastimes such as Netflix ridiculed. This is to prevent culture from falling into oblivion, or worse, being somewhat integrated into mainstream culture, which would cause the destruction (or restriction) of the resource, the transgression space.

Obviously, a great deal of the shaping of the rules-in-use and culture is the prerogative of regular members themselves, using tacit coercion with regard to what is to be accepted and what is not. A functioning hermetic culture as a barrier to entry is enough to contain most transgressive behavior within the transgression space, but not all of it. Over the last years, antisemitic or misogynistic content has become relatively frequent on the 18-25, leading newspapers to denounce this toxic

¹⁴ “Godwin’s Law of Nazi Analogies states, ‘As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one’” (Ip 2011: 218). This *reductio ad hitlerum* that dismisses an opinion or a person by associating it or him or her with Hitler is especially present in online forums.

¹⁵ Laura Motet for *Le Monde*, April 2, 2017.

environment, such as *L'Obs*,¹⁶ *Libération*,¹⁷ or *Le Monde*.¹⁸ As a result, moderation ended up being questioned on its efficiency, and frequent calls were made for Webedia to enforce stricter and stricter rules, thus threatening the transgression space as it was defined initially by members of the forum. We will see in what follows how moderation evolved over time, under pressure from Webedia and civil society, progressively transforming the contour of the transgression space through a formal sanction system.

9.3 IN THE KINGDOM OF TROLLS, THE MODERATOR IS KING

Now that we have described the construction of the transgression space of the 18-25, and how the shared references are operating as a set of tacit rules preserving this common resource, we will touch upon the formal system of sanctions, which is a central feature in the *Governing Knowledge Commons* framework (Gordon 2009).

The moderation team of the 18-25 has a double function: to promote content by pinning it on the homepage of the forum, for example, and to remove content that is incompatible with the charter. This *two-pillar* moderation is a common feature of online forums. However, promoted content is generally one that embodies the *editorial line* of the forum while content that gets removed is broadly considered as harmful for the sustainability of interactions on the forum. In other words, there is usually a *clear* distinction between what should be highlighted and what should disappear. In a community of transgression however, the situation is more complex, as what should be removed is often close to what the users are interested in (i.e., what they would like to see promoted). This tension is precisely why the study of transgressive forums is interesting, and could be applied to many other kinds of platforms sharing transgressive or illegal content: P2P networks, Sci-hub, 4Chan, etc.

Moreover, this tension calls for the greatest possible care in the moderators' selection process. The moderation team of the 18-25 (five members in September 2019), composed of volunteers, is under the supervision of a team of *administrators*, employees of *jeuxvideo.com*, and the tasks are clearly divided between them:

First at all, the moderator cannot ban. If he is connected as a moderator, his requests are prioritized by administrators (who are able to ban), it is not guaranteed they will be accepted. Then, the moderator is not untouchable, he is before anything else a user. A moderator can be dismissed if administrators judge that he is no longer worthy of his role.

(“La modération,” JVFlux, authors' translation)

¹⁶ Thibaut Petit for *L'Obs*, September 27, 2015.

¹⁷ *Libération*, January 6, 2017.

¹⁸ William Audureau for *Le Monde*, March 31, 2017.

However, both moderators and administrators' main focus is to cleanse the forum of unacceptable content; this entails punishing users who share such content. *Jeuxvideo.com* possesses a quite complex formal system of sanctions, called the *system of management and treatment of alerts*, along with a reputational score for users, the "karma score," that acts as a criminal record, and which is used as a basis for the "graduated set of sanctions," defined by Charlotte Hess as a core component of the knowledge commons (2012: 21).

On the forums of *jeuxvideo.com*, the selection of moderators is based on elections. To be more precise, users can ask on the forum devoted to moderation of *jeuxvideo.com* to organize the ballot in the forum they would like to manage. The request is examined and accepted if there is a need for additional moderators, and if the applicant's motivations and vision of the forum are judged compatible with the website's. During this voting procedure, users vote by regular message posting: in other words, users have to post a message on the forum with the name of the candidate in order to vote, implying that the vote is not anonymous. In this configuration, more than voting, users can also argue about the election, sparking massive debates on the applicant or the general orientation of the forum. Relatively inactive accounts are ruled out of the election process, to avoid ballot stuffing (by the creation of thousands of ghost accounts). This access restriction to the vote can be legitimized by the fact that active users are those who are the most able to understand what kind of qualities are required to manage the transgression space.

After the voting procedure, the winner has to be approved of by administrators. This last control is implemented to ensure that no "troll" winner has emerged, which could easily occur on a forum such as the 18-25, and in fact has already happened in the past. These trolling moderators are characterized by *trolling in the speech* and/or *trolling in the acts* (using moderation tools). In the first case, as users must regularly interact with moderators to remove a sanction or to contest a decision, the moderator can mock a user to entertain others (some moderators are indeed known for their caustic behavior). In 2018, a user was brought up for trial for an offensive post on the 18-25, and was ironically thanking moderators for this mishap.¹⁹ A moderator then answered by asking him for a *dedication in court*.²⁰ The second case corresponds to various abuses of power against the community: systematic suppression, arbitrary sanctions, or benevolence to obvious charter infractions, etc. A remarkable example of such form of trolling is the *new year eve scandal of 2017*. A popular *fad* on the forum is to post the message "*post at the same time*" when two or more users are posting a message during the same second. On New Year's Eve, users try to post simultaneously at midnight. This communal action is

¹⁹ Topic entitled "Je passe au tribunal le 27 Novembre à cause du forum," November 20, 2018.

²⁰ The dedication practice in the 18-25 consists in asking a user to mention his or her pseudonym while performing a real-life action, such as during a classwork presentation about the forum. In this context, it was of course a sarcastic request.

particularly important for users, as some of them present on the forum at this time are alone during this time of celebration. That day, 800 users were connected to the topic. But, just before midnight, the topic was closed by a moderator called Oswald with an arrogant message mocking users. This incident initiated an important controversy about the election of moderators, and proved that even the moderation team is no stranger to transgressive behavior, which is quite logical on a forum like the 18-25.²¹

Even if these cases are marginal, they nicely capture the tensions in the governance of a transgression space. As a matter of fact, moderators, as members of the community, carry the inherent tension characterizing the common at hand. While they also display a taste for transgression, and recognize the fact that it is one of the core constituents of the community, they were elected precisely to control it, so that the resource could continue being exploited, and by-products such as shared references could keep being generated by interactions on the forum. Even though one could argue that, since the Webedia takeover, and following the numerous controversies, moderation has become increasingly strict, resolute attitudes toward free speech still stand among members of the moderation team. We may take the recent example of the *numéro anti-relous* (“anti-creep phone number”) scandal. In October 2017 two feminist activists, Clara Gonzales and Elliot Lepers, set up an automated phone number that women could give to admirers who would not take no for an answer. An automated reply would then let the suitor know that they made the person feel uncomfortable and ask them to reconsider their behavior. They announced their action on Twitter.²² Members of the 18-25 quickly picked up on it (“raided” it, in their terms), and flooded the line with more than 26,000 messages over the course of three days, forcing the activists to temporarily shut the service down.²³ The affair caused significant public outrage, and while most recognized the wrongdoings of said members, many still stood by the free speech argument, including a moderator that we quote here:

Nobody tackled this issue, but in many of these raid-like situations, we remark that the victims call for the government to regulate the Internet. It is funny how the very same persons that need freedom of speech, demand it to be restrained. I am not in France and there is no actual regulation on the Internet where I am. It represents a free space of discussion for people to grow. Why would you want to regulate that?

(authors’ translation)

We observed similar reactions from the host of the forum. As a matter of fact, during the controversy, *jeuxvideo.com* as well as Webedia were asked to break their silence about the issue of cyber-harassment and moderation on the 18-25. Cédric Page, head

²¹ Regularly, some topics are created and called “Oswild, never forgive, never forget.”

²² @Claranote on Twitter, October 27, 2017.

²³ Renée Greusard for the *Nouvel Obs*, October 30, 2017.

of the “gaming” division of *Webedia* and director of *jeuxvideo.com*, while condemning the situation, defended the website nonetheless:

(In reaction to 18-25 members boasting about spamming the *numéro anti-relou*) This is not very clever, and *Webedia* obviously condemns these schemes, even if all the people that claimed affiliation with the forum were not necessarily among its members. I refute the idea that this humor of questionable taste is specific to *jeuxvideo.com*. This forum is the largest social media for young people in France, and what one finds in there is simply this youth’s expression. On this forum, as in the rest of society, the most extreme positions often provoke the most reactions, hence are the most visible.

(Vincent Matalon for France Télévision, October 31, 2017, authors’ translation)

Moderators on the 18-25, as part of the knowledge commons, are there to design and implement sanctions for behavior violating the rules-in-use of the community but aim above all at preserving the resource that binds the community together, and allows the commons to exist in the first place. Their task is not easy, especially since the delimitation of free speech is blurry as we mentioned. Also, their actions are limited as they are mere volunteers, that still depend on *Webedia*’s approval, whose motivations do not fully align with the community.

This last point hints that, in order for a transgression space to be sustainably exploited as a resource, there has to be a conjunction of several factors that do not depend exclusively on the community itself (defined as users of the forum). We now propose to discuss the conditions for this peculiar kind of resource – the transgression space – to thrive.

9.4 TRANSGRESSION SPACES IN SOCIETY

In every particular social situation people may find themselves in, they see their action space limited in two ways: by legal restrictions, which prevent them from engaging in any illegal action (without fear of consequences at least), and by restrictions based on social norms (most of them tacit), which stem from the collective acknowledgment of what is expected of a man, for example, when he is engaged with a given group of people. We should rather say, what is *not to be expected of him*. These tacit social norms can be observed in any social group, and effectively restrain the action space, often more compellingly than the law does: indeed, while no police officer will watch every move of the individual, he will systematically be judged on his actions by his environment, often leading to strong coercion, namely, due to the threat of exclusion.

We can consider these “etiquettes” as *restrictive norms*, which are constructed and acknowledged norms restricting the action space further than simple legal frontiers. This concept immediately calls for its opposite, that we might call *permissive norms*, which, instead of restricting the action space further, extend it in some selected

aspects beyond legal frontiers. An action space equipped with a permissive norm is what constitutes a *transgression space* in our approach.

The specific combination of permissive norms will also define what is socially accepted in the transgression space: some aspects of the transgression space might be perfectly legal, but considered unacceptable in it. Moreover, not every type of illegal behavior will be deemed appropriate. As we have shown for the specific transgression space of the 18-25, transgression still needs to be “controlled,” in the sense that not every kind of trolling will be tolerated on the space. It has to abide by specific codes, which are part of the forum’s culture.

The key point here is that transgression spaces are not fundamentally different from traditional action spaces, but they just happen to take a different stance on what are considered “acceptable” actions. This notion of transgression space is therefore meant to be *local*, in the sense that it has relevance for a subset of the action space. This locality concept nicely extends into the GKC framework that structured this chapter: transgression spaces can be considered as *local commons*, since the only people that will deem them valuable are precisely members of the community acknowledging the permissive norm governing the space. Outside observers, either abiding by a restrictive norm, or even a different kind of permissive norm, would consider some behaviors taking place in the transgression space as unacceptable, and quite logically would advocate for its closure.

These peculiar types of commons call for an entirely different type of organization around them. A central point is related to the *openness degree* of the transgression space compared to other action spaces: due to the common being “local,” the community around it, unlike other common-centered online communities (such as Wikipedia for example), has a substantially lower interest in expansion or even visibility. As a matter of fact, while more visibility might attract more contributors and expand the pool of knowledge (i.e., enrich the common) in the case of Wikipedia, it endangers the common in the case of the 18-25, because it increases the probability that problematic content oozes out of the transgression space, for (most likely hostile) outside observers to see.

Transgression therefore needs to be confined in some way, to increase the stability of the transgression space, and because members of the community do not want to expose unprepared outside observers to transgressive content or activities. In the case of the 18-25, it takes the form of a complex and elliptic culture as we saw, combined with a general hostility (through mockery) toward those who did not internalize it.

Some general properties of transgression spaces can be highlighted from the case study of the 18-25. First of all, most of the time, a transgression space exists due to an ambiguity vis-à-vis the legal context. In the 18-25, with the exception of a few obviously illegal posts, most content is actually implied rather than explicitly stated, as we have underlined, making any legal stance blurry, as a result. Of course, judging intent rather than acts is indeed much trickier. Moreover, even if online hate speech is now starting to be condemned with the same gravity as its “real life”

counterpart, the law is still faced with a plethora of new cases that it has yet to fully integrate, meaning that there is still quite a lot of uncertainty with regard to what is or is not legally punishable on the Internet.

Then, the transgression space is the result of tolerance with regard to activities within the space. This tolerance can be explained by the fact that the increase in opportunities for interactions, due to the extension of the action space, is not too costly for the rest of the society. To a lesser extent, it can be tolerated because the situation would be even worse for the rest of a society with a traditional action space. On the 18-25, internal moderation of transgressive content, with no systematic report to legal authorities, can be understood as tolerance for the sake of some mindless entertainment.

Finally, we want to remark that the existence of a transgression space is always threatened, due to its very nature. Sooner or later, the transgression space's existence will come to be questioned, usually through public outrage caused by transgression oozing out of the space. As a result, there are eventually only two outcomes for the evolution of a transgression space: either the law will be amended to integrate the transgression space, which makes it disappear as a transgression space, or tolerance will be found inappropriate, in which case coercive measures will be taken to shut down the space. Thus, transgression spaces mainly exist due to this *status quo* with regard to tolerance in a particular context: some might argue that yes, it is illegal, but some positive aspects emerge out of it (at least locally), so maintaining it for now would be still profitable. This tacit agreement can always be questioned, and if it is the status of the transgression space will be threatened.

A famous example might also help us understand these issues related to transgression spaces: it concerns the legalization of prostitution in the Netherlands in 2000. It gave cities freedom to decide on which forms of prostitution would be allowed and more importantly their location. In most cities, prostitution came to be concentrated in a specific district (De Wallen in Amsterdam for example). Many other illegal activities, which often gravitate around prostitution, also came to cluster around these districts. Cities displayed varying levels of leniency regarding these activities, but very few actually showed the will to eradicate them, as they considered it as somewhat inevitable. Restricting prostitution to a specific space leads other criminal activities to be confined there, and allowed to "buy peace" for other parts of cities. Showing tolerance with regard to some illegal actions, like money laundering, provided they happen in a strictly delimited space, is exactly the attitude one would have with regard to a transgression space, which is indeed what these districts quickly came to be. But these areas are constantly threatened by officials who are concerned about the lack of security in these parts of the city, and are at the center of numerous heated debates. A parallel can be drawn to the 18-25: allowing this transgression space, on which trolling is acceptable to a larger extent than most of the websites, might be a way to confine transgression to a specific space. One might fear that in the case of a shutdown, the 18-25 trolls would spread to other online

platforms, provoking much more damage than the actual configuration of the transgression space.

As a final remark, the combination of a functioning barrier to entry and a tolerant host appears to be necessary conditions for durable transgression spaces to emerge. We see a delicate balance at play in the case of the 18-25, allowing the common to exist. As we saw, the elliptic culture of the forum is not enough to contain transgression within the transgression space, and moderation must compensate for its limitations. Moderators, as members of the community built around the commons, want on the one hand to implement harsher control, but on the other hand to stay moderate in their action, in order to preserve the commons that binds this community together.

9.5 CONCLUSION

In the literature on knowledge commons, the commons at hand is considered as a *good* (as opposed to a *bad*), in the sense that it is universally understood that this resource has value, and that infrastructures should be built around it in order for the community to enjoy it to the fullest while protecting it.

What makes the case of the 18-25 interesting in this context is the fact that the transgression space and its community – the *local commons*– is controversial by essence: while it is highly valued within the community, society at large does seem to consider it detrimental, and would like to see it reformed, or shut down.

Moreover, if the common culture as the by-product resulting from the management of this resource is anti-rival by definition, it only takes its full meaning when it is enjoyed and developed by a community that defines itself negatively vis-à-vis society at large. Hence, the tension that suffuses the whole infrastructure around the transgression space is also found in its culture.

On the one hand, there is a general will for members to promote the development of the commons and of the community around it, in order to increase the opportunities of interactions. But, on the other hand, there is a collective acknowledgment that the very existence of the commons is only possible because its community is marginal, destined to stay on the fringes. Indeed, the commons here is not threatened by the usual rivalry concerns but rather by a rivalry between its proponents and its detractors. Promoting the uncontrolled development of the commons increases the chance of putting it under the scrutiny of its detractors: the outside observers. As we saw, every mechanism involved in the exploitation of the commons includes this additional concern.

From this case study we proposed a more overarching concept of *transgression spaces*, to explain what would be the characteristics displayed by any community centered around a local commons characterized by an extension of the action space. Through our analysis, two fundamental points emerge with regard to the governance of the commons: the need for some kind of *barrier to entry*, effectively

containing transgression within the transgression space, and the crucial importance of the host's attitude toward the transgression space, which allows to preserve the *status quo* in which the space can survive. Tolerance, in this regard, is a central notion that could be justified through a number of arguments from both the host and the community: libertarian values, freedom of expression, or even the more pragmatic "containment" argument would be some of them. Through more research on similar online and physical transgression spaces, these reasons could come to be refined, which could enrich the analysis of transgression spaces in society.

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