

LIVEJOURNAL LOYALTY AND MELODRAMA: STAKEHOLDER RELATIONS
IN WEB 2.0

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ABSTRACT

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By Christine Moellenberndt

As the popularity of Web 2.0 grows, the relationship between the users generating the content of the site and the groups and companies that own these sites is coming into focus. While in previous years, users often were passive users of websites, now they are actively involved in the sites, providing the content that is consumed. This creates a relationship that can be fraught with conflict as all involved have differing ideas of how these sites should function.

By analyzing three incidents in the history of LiveJournal, an online blogging and social communication site, this thesis will explore how these communities of users and the organizations that own these sites interact. The information for this analysis was gathered through online participant observation, survey, and systematic archival mining, covering the time period from the founding of the site in 1999 until early 2012. I will also analyze how the term “community” is operationalized by these stakeholders, how these communities form and function, and how ideas of ownership impact these interactions and relationships. By understanding these issues, companies and communities can find ways to build partnerships to sustain and improve their sites rather than being locked in ongoing conflict.

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LIVEJOURNAL TIMELINE

April 1999: Brad Fitzpatrick founds LiveJournal

September 2000: Introduction of paid account level

September 2001: Introduction of invite codes

December 2003: Invite codes discontinued

January 2005: SixApart (6A) purchases LiveJournal

April 2006: Official introduction of the Sponsored+ (or Plus) account level, ads introduced to the site

September 2006: Introduction of Sponsored Communities

October 2006: 6A partners with SUP to create new features for and manage Cyrillic language accounts

May 2007: 500 accounts removed on charges of pedophilia, kicking off The Great Strikethrough

August 2007: Introduction of Sponsored V-Gifts. "Boldthrough" event occurred, two more accounts suspended. Fitzpatrick leaves 6A for Google.

December 2007: 6A sells LiveJournal to SUP. SUP announces the 100 Day Plan, formation of Advisory Board, and LiveJournal, Inc.

March 2008: Basic accounts removed at completion of the 100 Day Plan

May 2008: First Advisory Board election

August 2008: Basic account returned, with addition of some advertisements. A la carte userpics promised.

January 2009: Layoffs occur at LJ's San Francisco office

June 2009: Second Advisory Board election

April 2010: LJ purchases Oh No They Didn't, a popular celebrity gossip Community. A la carte userpics released.

June 2010: Advisory Board disbanded.

August 2010: LJ announces the ability to crosspost between LJ and Facebook/Twitter, causing privacy concerns.

February 2012: LJ Media announced, Community content becomes the focus of LJ growth.

Chapter 1

Introductions and Roadmaps

“But we’re talking about a place that doesn’t exist, except as code in the files of a service provider’s computer. Bits and bytes. It’s nothing tangible.”
(from *Spirits in the Wires*, by Charles de Lint)

In the realm of Web 2.0 and user generated content, the relationship between the users generating the content of the site and the groups and companies that own these sites is fraught with conflict. Throughout the years, there have been many user insurrections on these sites. These conflicts not only reveal the assumptions made by the diverse stakeholders, they fuel online conversations that create a sense of community identity among users.

This thesis will explore how particular communities form and function online, and how they and the organizations that own these sites interact with each other. It will also question how the term “community” is operationalized by these stakeholders, and how ideas of ownership influence these interactions and relationships. I will do so by exploring these relations through LiveJournal, an online blogging (short for “web logging,” and sometimes called “online journaling”) and social communication site. Started in 1999 by Brad Fitzpatrick, LiveJournal (or LJ) is a unique site; its main focus is blogging, giving users a space of their own to write about whatever topics they see fit. However, LiveJournal also incorporates some social networking features by allowing users to “Friend” other users who can then follow their posts, and join “Communities” (similar to Facebook Interests, message boards, and Usenet newsgroups)

around their own interests.¹ All posts, whether from individual Friends or Community activity, are reported back on the user's "Friends Page," a somewhat early version of an RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feed.

LiveJournal and its community of users have had a turbulent relationship. As new owners replaced old, many LJ users have felt they are repeating history; they see clashes they thought were resolved reopened by new company representatives who were not steeped in prior history, as new owners try to implement changes, they receive complaints from their userbase. Each new misstep brings up stories and cautions based on similar actions from previous events in LJ's history. Older users used the incidents to indoctrinate new users into bashing the current ownership, using the missteps of prior owners. This pattern is aided by the ability to read the entire history of the site in a few centralized places.

The constant struggle between users and owners, as seen on LiveJournal, is played out across many Web 2.0 sites on a regular basis, as changes occur and users disapprove of those actions. Instead of fully acknowledging the role each has in the success of the site and forming partnerships to ensure further success, owners and communities often squabble over details, policies, and features, which makes for an unpleasant atmosphere, causing users to leave, and makes attracting new users more difficult.

Moving the Web to 2.0

When the Internet became prominent in the mid-1990s, for most users it was another form of media consumption, much like television and radio. Consumers went online to specific websites to read content from their favorite brands, and sometimes their newspapers, if those papers had made the jump to online editions. There were some gathering places for people to talk together, mainly Internet Relay Chat (or IRC), Usenet newsgroups, and a few message boards. However, these tools were not always “user friendly”; they often required a certain familiarity with computers and computer languages to connect, as well as downloads of special software. Adding web content was another large hurdle, requiring technical knowledge of web servers and domain registrations, programming languages such as Hyper-Text Markup Language (HTML), and knowledge of how to promote a website through search engine optimization (SEO). Much of this was beyond the average computer user in 1996, and while some tried and did succeed in creating sites that became destinations, most Internet users satisfied themselves with consuming content instead of producing it on their own.

The move into Web 2.0 negated much of this labor-intensive work, and made content creation available to people without large amounts of computer knowledge. Whereas “Web 1.0” was mostly filled with content created by corporations and other institutions for consumption by the public, Web 2.0 was geared towards content created by the public for their own consumption.

Blogging platforms, which allow users to create their own blogs or online journals, were among the first to gain prominence. Users on these sites create an account, select from a variety of preformed templates, and then start creating content and posting it using a web-based form, all for free. Later, new sites began to appear; social networking sites (SNS) Facebook and MySpace among others, micro-blogging site Twitter, photo sharing site Flickr, and video uploading sites such as YouTube. None of these sites provide any first-party content of their own to be consumed. Instead, they provide a repository where users can store their content in order for it to be consumed by others, along with advertisements inserted by these sites to garner revenue.

As users flocked to these new sites, they not only wanted to share content with the Internet at large, but also with each other; content geared toward old friends, new friends, family, coworkers, and others who shared similar interests. Users formed communities in and around these sites, and as time passed a sense of loyalty began to develop a sense of loyalty began to form around the sites on which they gathered. With this loyalty came a trust in these sites, who (with the institutions that owned them) were being entrusted with what was often deeply personal information and memories. Users continued to invest more and more time, and often money, on these sites creating and improving content, asking for new features, which often were provided, and giving feedback on site performance, especially on newer sites that needed proof that their concept worked. A sense of ownership would often begin to grow as well; even as users

were the owners of their content (for the most part), they had the knowledge that without their content, these sites would not exist. They could create their content with or without these media; the media only helped them share it. If the content were to disappear, the sites that housed that content would soon follow.

In Web 2.0, the power dynamic between these web companies and media consumers is changing. Instead of only consuming content, as media consumers had in the past, these users participate in that production, which makes them part of the event, part of the machine of media production (Shirky 2010:21). Combined with the loyalty and deep trust these users give to these sites, it gives them agency which they have not always had in typical commerce; a sense of ownership of the overall product, and therefore an expectation of an accompanying voice in the running of the site.

This agency, combined with the connective power of the Internet, also leads these users to be more apt to speak their minds when unhappy with the direction their chosen gathering places are taking. Before the Internet, gathering people together outside of specific geographic locations, was difficult. Passing along information outside of traditional means such as television, newspapers, books, and magazines was expensive and time consuming. Successful letter writing campaigns to affect changes in a company's actions were few and far between. With the Internet changing how people communicate, and Web 2.0 making it easier (and expected) for people to share and exchange information, users and consumers were given more avenues and power to affect change and

voice displeasure (Shirky 2010, Trippi 2008). In Web 2.0, uprisings are loud and swift moving. News spreads like wildfire through these sites, passing from one site to the next, easily inflaming large percentages of a site's community and therefore attracting news coverage, with headlines such as "Tumbler Screws Hipster Underclass to Appease Hipster Overlords at *Pitchfork*" (O'Connor 2011) and "Digg users revolt after redesign," (Halliday 2010).

In spite of the Web 2.0 roots of many of these companies, they are often seemingly caught off-guard when such uprisings occur. Even as their sites empower their users, they seem to expect their users to assume the same passive posture as consumers, instead of the active posture of the prosumer. As the outcry grows, the sites and companies running the sites find themselves having to backpedal on changes in direction, rethink, and re-present to their communities. Web 2.0 sites such as Digg (Haliday 2010), Instagram (McCullagh and Tam 2012), and LiveJournal itself (McCullagh 2007, samzenpus 2007, Wilson 2008a) have been among those sites who have found themselves in the middle of an uproar when planned changes are objected to by their userbase. In the case of Digg, a site redesign drove members to a competing service, Reddit. For Instagram, proposed changes to their Terms of Service (or ToS) sparked an Internet-wide outcry, causing Instagram to pull back on those changes. LiveJournal's many clashes with its userbase are the focus of this thesis. Often after such backlash occurs, the companies go quiet; in Instagram's case it was 24 hours before a statement was made. LiveJournal has taken days to respond

to its community and even mainstream media outlets during periods of unrest, which gives the appearance of a company taken aback by the disapproval of their userbase.

The ownership of content is a central contested issue. Most Web 2.0 sites have Terms of Service that state content posted to the site is owned by the person who created it. However, such an approach does not address the question of ownership of the entire site. It also does not address the question “Is the site more than the content?” Companies usually own the trademarks and logos for the site, as well as the servers that house the content. The individual community members, however, own the content that drives readers to the site. In the case of Instagram’s proposed ToS changes, which had broad language that seemed to state that photographs posted to the service would and could be licensed to be used in advertising, questions of content ownership quickly came to the forefront of the conversation. Some users began to question what ownership of content means (Hensher 2012). In the case of LiveJournal, and across other communities such as Wikipedia, I have documented a community concern that users will be misused. They provide what appears to be free labor, giving a site content, but the users have few mechanisms to direct how that content is utilized, licensed, or viewed. Statements such as “We built this site,” or variations on that theme dominate such discussions, as users attempt to claim a place at the table for discussing changes to the site they have spent so much time helping to build.

As well as grappling with new power dynamics, Internet companies (whether involved in Web 2.0 or not) have the compounded problem of how to maintain profitability. Much as traditional “brick-and-mortar” businesses have high overhead costs, Internet companies cost a great deal to manage. Bandwidth, the pipeline bringing customers to a site, has never been an inexpensive commodity, costing most sites several million dollars every year. Other expenses include computer equipment which must be constantly upgraded and expanded, and staff to manage this equipment and create new features to keep users coming back to the site. The “magic formula” of how to create a site that is dynamic enough to bring in a constant stream of users as well as a constant stream of revenue has been elusive to these companies who began flocking to the Internet in the mid-1990s. Companies often have difficulty solving the problem of profitability, and their users often have little understanding of how much it actually costs maintain a website. There is an understanding by users of these sites that monetization must occur somehow, otherwise the site will cease to function (during arguments and discussions, community members will often state as much point blank), but the line between “enough” profit and “too much” is very fine and constantly shifting. Members of these communities are fearful of the companies making money “off of [their] backs,” that is, creating profit off of the hard work the community put into creating content. Critics of the Wikimedia Foundation often denounce employees of being in the movement “only for the money,” without care or concern for the community who created the content

(usually when Foundation employees and the community are in strong disagreement). The methods of acceptable profit gathering are also contested, and are most often are what cause conflict. All three case studies in this thesis have money at their core in the form of advertising on the site; how much is too much, and how much advertising can constrain a site and its governance. As a site grows, and monetary needs shift to accommodate that growth, the dilemma of profitability is one of constant management, and not a one-time start-up issue.

Consumer/prosumer empowerment and the demand that the company acknowledge and reckon with that empowerment, as well as how to balance these demands with profitability, are notions which are still being negotiated, both by the consumers/prosumers themselves and the management of these companies. The Internet's reach is constantly expanding to cover new groups who use the Internet to express themselves and provide their opinions. This negotiation of power is one that is ripe for anthropological analysis and study.

LiveJournal as Fieldsite

By analyzing one website/company and its interactions with its community, we can see these dynamics at work. Utilizing a socially-based website, where almost all communications are publicly posted, provides a great deal of data for analysis by providing details on events as they happened, allowing us to analyze problems as they occurred. This analysis can provide insight into how companies and communities communicate, how that communication is positive

or negative in effect, and help to identify tactics that will lead to more positive interactions between companies and their communities.

As of August 2012, there were over 38 million accounts (both individual and Communities) on LiveJournal, with 1.7 million “active in some way.” (LiveJournal n.d.). It has gone through several owners, and has been owned by a Russian online media company, SUP, since January 2008. LJ operations remain in the United States with offices in San Francisco and servers housed in a secure data center in Montana.

LiveJournal is an optimal site to use for this research due to its longevity in the ever-changing online community landscape, and the public access to the majority of its history. Through official Communities we can track new features and the reaction to those features, as well as watch revolts unfold as they happen. As events and decisions rocked the LJ userbase, they took to the virtual streets to be heard; posting in official Communities, in their own journals, and creating new Communities to gather and strategize as well as to share news and create lists of resources. LJ users used LiveJournal against itself, a method that has been utilized in other user uprisings since. This provides a rich archive of data to analyze, mostly fully preserved.²

Confessions of a Native Ethnographer

Autoethnographically, I have been a user of LiveJournal since 2002, a paid account holder since 2003, and commented on some of these incidents as they unfolded in my capacity as a LiveJournal member. This gives me an type of

insider perspective into the LiveJournal community; even though my activity has waned in recent years (my last content posting was in early 2009, although I still read the site daily), I have spent the better part of ten years as a member of this community, and therefore this work can be seen as the work of a native anthropologist. LiveJournal has been a chronicle of my life, and indeed much of my academic life, as my most active years on the site were during my undergraduate years and the beginning of my graduate study. It is on LiveJournal that my research focus sharpened from online communities in general to the problem of relationships between site owners and their communities after experiencing several rocky patches, including the three related to this work. As any other LiveJournal member, I have my own opinions on how and why I joined LiveJournal, why I started paying them for my account, and how changes to the service threatened what I have held and continue to hold as special about the service.

Being a native anthropologist can make the researcher feel as if one has a split personality. On one hand, you are the community member, the native, with opinions and feelings on your community and decisions made about or for it. On the other hand, you are the researcher and are expected to keep an open mind on these same issues. No researcher can ever be totally bias free. By stating my place as a LiveJournal member, it would be safe to assume that my bias is towards the community, privileging the community's point of view over that of a large company. Instead, my goal is to analyze missteps, and better steps, of

both the community and of LiveJournal and its owners, in an attempt to discover a way that all parties can work together to foster a community that is both healthy and profitable for the company and owners.

Overcoming bias is difficult, but I have attempted to keep my biases in check while progressing through the research and writing process of this work. Along with my background as a LiveJournal community member, I have a background in online community management. I first worked with a small online comic strip, one with a rabid following, called User Friendly in the early 2000s. More recently I worked with the much larger community that has built Wikipedia in my time at the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization that supports Wikipedia, working with the community there to address problems, solve problems, and bring the voice of the community deeper into the organization. These experiences have given me the “behind the scenes” knowledge to see how decisions can be made from a corporate standpoint, and the work that can (or sometimes doesn’t) go into how to explain these moves to a community. All community managers know that there will never be a point where the entire userbase is pleased with their moves, but also know that their job is to try and make these moves happen with as little uproar as possible. Having weathered several storms as a community manager, and as a community member, I have a unique perspective that can help to balance biases arising from one side or the other.

Also helping to balance my views on these incidents, interestingly enough, is my role as researcher into these events. Living the events as they unfolded, even the most connected community member can and will miss items in the discourse. Many of these events carried over several days, weeks, and months. Comments on posts were fast and furious, and as a user attempting to follow what was happening as it happened, as well as live an offline life, it was easy to miss posts and other comments. Having the position of the researcher several years after the events happened has given me the time to analyze the events in a way that I didn't always have as a community member in the thick of the uproar. In the middle of some events, it was not unusual to hit the "Leave a comment" link on page five or six of comments to a post, only to have the comment appear on page eight or nine by the time you had composed your thoughts and hit the "Post" button. In those comments posted since the last refresh, new information could be and often was posted, which could change your entire outlook. However, these were sometimes overlooked in the zeal to get one's own thoughts in, or due to the need to leave LiveJournal and do other things. Having the time as a researcher to read through all comments and responses to posts, as well as further explore the other areas LJ members used to discuss these events has given me a much more complete understanding of events. There is a great deal to be said about the distance time gives us to events as well; with many of these events several years old, emotions have cooled which allows for more distance.

index.html

This work will be broken up into chapters, each tracing histories and themes relevant to the questions at hand. Chapter 2 gives an overview of the literature that informed this thesis, as well as the theories used to analyze the data, methodology, a brief history of LiveJournal, and a discussion of the term “community” and its importance to this work.






Chapters 3, 4, and 5 serve as the case studies from which conclusions will be drawn. Each chapter discusses an incident in the history of LiveJournal that served as a turning point in the history of LiveJournal, when users and company clashed. Chapter 3 discusses the furor that arose when LiveJournal began to allow advertisements on the site, and introduces the idea of social capital and credibility and their importance in working with such communities of users. Chapter 4 analyzes the event known as the Great Strikethrough, where approximately 500 accounts (of both Communities and individual users) were deleted without warning based on accusations that they harbored child pornography, and analyzes what happens when a company attempts to manage a community as a group of consumers with no agency. Chapter 5 considers the decision to remove the basic account option for new users of the site, the role of new owner SUP, and the culture clash between a somewhat Westernized userbase and a Russian company. Finally, Chapter 6 provides an opportunity to look back on what can be learned from these various events. How can





management work with a userbase as partners instead of consumers? Where is LJ going as it moves into its next decade?



Chapter 2



A Brief History of LiveJournal Dramz, Community, and Literature

“And it all started so well...”  axonfuel¹



LiveJournal was founded in 1999 by then-college student Brad Fitzpatrick, who was looking for a way to keep in touch with his high school friends as they moved away to attend college (LiveJournal n.d.a). Joining the site was free at the outset, however the site quickly became popular with others online, and within a year Fitzpatrick was musing in the news Community that he would need some assistance, both technical and financial, to keep up with the site’s growth (bradfitz, news, entry posted August 26, 2000).² By September of 2000, a pay system was set up, giving users extra features in exchange for a nominal fee to support the site (bradfitz, news, entry posted September 13, 2000).

By 2001, the site was growing at such an exponential rate that something had to be done in order to curb growth. The servers were barely coping with the strain of new accounts, there wasn’t enough money coming in to afford full-time employees to manage servers and server load (insomnia, news, entry posted August 15, 2001), and the newfound popularity of the service was attracting users who either were abusing the system or didn’t understand the “moral obligation” to help the site out either monetarily or with technical skill (avva, lj_biz, entry posted September 3, 2001). Invite codes, were introduced in September of 2001 as a temporary measure to slightly slow down site growth



while infrastructure was put into place to handle the influx of new users ( bradfitz,  news, entry posted September 2, 2001). These codes could be used to create a new, free account on the site. LJ users were given a finite number of invite codes to hand out to friends, paid users were given more than free users, and more could be purchased for a small fee by anyone. New paid accounts could be created without a code by purchasing a paid account, but the only way to create an account for free was by knowing someone already on the site. This was seen as an alternative to opening the site up to advertising, as many other free service sites had done at the time, and many sites do today. Later, users were offered the opportunity to purchase a permanent paid account. Costing around \$100 (and later increased to \$150), these sales were rare, running a few times a year for a limited time or limited quantities. Users who jumped on this opportunity were given all of the benefits of a paid account, including all new features added to the site as they were developed, without having to pay annually. This resulted in three different levels of membership: basic (or free) account holders, paid accounts, and permanent accounts.³



As well as setting up ways for users to support the site financially, Fitzpatrick also empowered users to support each other. After becoming buried in support requests for the new site, Fitzpatrick developed a support system in which users could submit queries that would be answered by other LJ users ( bradfitz,  news, posted August 15, 2000). For every question a user answered, the user would get points based on the amount of time the question sat in the

queue. The more points a user had, the higher up in the queue their own support requests would be placed. Other users stepped up to help with coding new features and took over other areas of the site.


During this period, relations between those managing the site (mainly Fitzpatrick, a few of his friends, and volunteers) and the users of the site were fairly smooth. Some clashes did arise; an early one concerned a new login system that was implemented without warning, and in the middle of the day ( bradfitz,  news, posted August 8, 2002). When errors began cropping up, the system had to be updated and reloaded, causing users to be logged out several times in a short period of time, frustrating users for the bulk of an afternoon. Even after Fitzpatrick reported that the system had stabilized, community members reported many more login (and other) issues on the post for hours and then months afterwards. Fitzpatrick was a coder first and foremost, not a customer service specialist, and perhaps wasn't used to having a site being used by a large group of users, most of whom were unknown to him. Many of these users were now also paying customers, and were expecting a different level of service than what was being provided. Regardless, the site continued to grow, with the one-millionth account being created April 2003, and invite codes were discontinued at the end of that year. Users could now create free accounts without needing an invitation from another user.

Fitzpatrick shocked the LiveJournal community at the beginning of 2005 by announcing he was selling the site to SixApart (or 6A), the company

responsible for TypePad and Moveable Type, two other large names in the blogging world. Fitzpatrick stated that this was because he “hate[d] running a business,” and would rather focus on “the fun stuff” (bradfitz, news, posted January 5, 2005). He reassured the community that he had “thoroughly screened [6A] to make sure they weren’t evil,” and that nothing would be changing for LiveJournal users. 6A had the designers and marketing professionals that LJ lacked, and the hope was that LiveJournal would become a “prettier” site, and better positioned in the market. He closed the message by saying, “If you think my baby (LiveJournal) will be destroyed, you better think again... I’m there to make sure they keep doing the right thing, but I’m already pretty sure that’s all they will do.”

However, change came quickly to the site after it changed hands. Shortly after celebrating their first year under SixApart’s wing, Fitzpatrick announced that along with paid access and free access, there would be a new level of access, “Sponsored+,” later changed to just “Plus,” which would give users access to some paid level features in exchange for seeing advertisements on the site (bradfitz, lj_biz, posted March 8, 2006). Considering the rabid “no ad” stance Fitzpatrick took early on in the site’s history, shared by a large percentage of the userbase (who were quick to point out in any conversation about banner advertisements that they did not provide a high enough level of revenue to make them worthwhile), and promises made years earlier that ads would never appear on the site, the outcry from the community that followed this announcement was

no surprise. This controversy kicked off a series of events falling into what LJ users call “LJ Drama,” often pluralized to “dramz;” events occurring on LiveJournal which cause angst and frustration in the community, leading them to post in many personal journals and Communities, whipping up a frenzy of outrage. Along with ads came Sponsored Communities and virtual gifts, a plan to outsource support for Russian accounts to a Russian company called SUP which would prove to be a foreshadowing of things to come, the censoring of user icons (or “userpics,” small 100 by 100 pixel pictures used to identify individual users on the site) depicting breast feeding, the deletion of over 500 accounts on child pornography charges later termed “The Great Strikethrough,” and a major data center outage lasting several days followed in quick succession over the next year. With each outburst of controversy and LJ Drama, the userbase grew uneasy about the new owners and began to vocally call for the return of Fitzpatrick to the main stage, as he had faded to the background, leaving new LiveJournal/SixApart staff members taking over the community-facing role he had held for many years.

What the users were unaware of was Fitzpatrick, while still working for SixApart, had transitioned away from working on LiveJournal by the spring of 2007 (brad, entry posted May 31, 2007). By August of 2007 he had left SixApart completely (Thomas 2007), with no announcement to the LiveJournal userbase by SixApart. Although Fitzpatrick announced the move on his own LiveJournal account, the news did not permeate much past those who had

Friended Fitzpatrick; therefore, most LiveJournal users did not know Fitzpatrick had left until several months later, when it was announced he was rejoining LiveJournal as part of the newly appointed LiveJournal Advisory Board.

The community was rattled again when SixApart announced in December 2007 that LiveJournal had been sold completely to SUP, the Russian company that had partnered with 6A a year earlier to manage accounts held by Russian users ([the1jstaff](#), [news](#), entry posted December 2, 2007).⁴ The original partnership had caused concern among Russian users, citing the location of LiveJournal and its servers in the United States as a large reason they had chosen LiveJournal for their blogging site, as it gave these users a sense of security knowing their data was unreachable by their governments. There were also concerns over censorship of content, as well as corruption, either in truth or perceived, that often pervades business in Russia (Norton 2006). Russian users were allowed to opt-out of SUP account management, however with the sale of the complete site to SUP, Russian users felt their concerns return, and non-Russian users wondered what would become of their site. Opinions of SixApart plummeted, and users waited to see what SUP would do.

SUP immediately formed a subsidiary company, LiveJournal, Inc., to maintain the site, and promised that all servers would stay in the United States. They announced plans to form the LiveJournal Advisory Board made up of Fitzpatrick; several scholars involved in Internet, if not online community, research; and two user representatives who would be elected by the community.

They also threw a large party in San Francisco to celebrate the deal, inviting LiveJournal users to join them, and released the “100 Day Plan,” stating a list of goals and achievements to have completed within the first three months of SUP’s ownership.

The first three months passed without controversy, with the new LiveJournal, Inc. creating new features and releasing them to the userbase, as well as holding to the 100 Day Plan. The new Advisory Board was announced in this time, along with the information on the user-elected representatives. One would come from the Cyrillic language accounts, and one would be elected from the remaining userbase. Concerns arose over one representative coming from 20% of the userbase (as estimated by a LiveJournal employee), and one representing the remaining 80%. However, these concerns were quickly overtaken by a larger issue.

A few days after the Advisory Board announcement, the basic account level (originally the free account level) was quietly abolished, the only announcement being a short paragraph in a post touting the success of the first 100 days, stating that the sign-up process for new users had been “streamlined and simplified” ([@theljstaff](#), [news](#), entry posted March 12, 2008). This elimination meant that all new non-paid accounts would be subjected to advertisements, which violated a promise made to the community when ads were first introduced. Two members of the newly appointed Advisory Board, Fitzpatrick and scholar danah boyd,⁵ both active LiveJournal users, confirmed

they had not been consulted about this change, despite such changes being listed as part of the Board's purview. The new LiveJournal, Inc. took an unapologetic tone, stating that the change was a purely business decision, and did not give any mention of the Advisory Board's new role in decisions surrounding the site.

The continued tenure of SUP since 2008 has been a bit rocky, but nowhere near the intensity seen during the SixApart years. Promised features, such as permanent account sales and the ability to purchase extra userpic space were delayed several times, leaving the userbase wondering if the sales would ever occur. Layoffs in the San Francisco office occurred in January 2009, consolidating some positions to Moscow, which heightened the concerns over a seemingly growing divide between LJ Russia and the rest of LJ. The Advisory Board, whose first elections were plagued with allegations of ballot stuffing, was mostly quiet throughout 2008 and 2009, before being quietly retired in 2010, seeming to seal its fate in the minds of community members as a showpiece and nothing more. Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks, which have generally been targeting Russian accounts, have crippled the site off and on since 2011, causing downtime and frustration, and contributing to a slowly growing rift between Russian/Cyrillic accounts and non-Russian/Cyrillic accounts, with the latter becoming increasingly frustrated by the influence the former has over the site as a whole. This frustration may begin to typify relations in the LiveJournal community to come: the seemingly growing separation between the

Cyrillic users, best understood by parent company SUP, and the non-Cyrillic users, best understood by subsidiary LiveJournal, Inc. whose market share may be sliding.⁶

A Brief History of Relevant Literature

LiveJournal has shown the influence that a community can have on its site's governance and on the companies responsible for that governance, as well as showcasing a relationship ripe for ethnographic research. For all of that, very little has been written about these groups and relationships. Therefore, literature relevant to this thesis tends to fall into roughly three categories: research on the Internet as a broader whole, research on virtual worlds and online communities, and research on LiveJournal itself.

Research on the broader Internet tends to turn to what are fast becoming "classics" in this field. Technology changes quickly and therefore time seems to run quicker on the Internet; anything older than a few years of age can be considered ancient. However, the questions approached in this research and the conclusions drawn are still relevant to today's Internet and Web 2.0.

Among these works are Miller and Slater (2000), who are credited with conducting one of the first serious studies of the Internet and Internet culture, specifically in regards to Internet cafes in Trinidad. Hine (2000) also analyzes the early Internet, mainly focusing on websites devoted to the Louise Woodward au pair case, and how communications flowed. Markham (1998) reflexively discusses early online communication through Multi-User Dungeons (or MUDs)

and Internet Relay Chat (or IRC). This early Internet research shows that the issues of interest today in Internet studies are the same as those in the early days; knowledge production and sharing, the rise of the “active” consumer of knowledge (as opposed to the “passive” television view as consumer of knowledge), and the integration of new users into the arena. It also shows how far we have come, as in these early days most communities were founded around consumer-owned IRC servers, personal websites, and free-standing newsgroups instead of sites and servers owned by for-profit companies.

Coming directly from this field of Internet research are those researchers who focus on virtual worlds and other online communities. There is a growing corpus of such research, not only in anthropology but across the social sciences, especially as online games such as World of Warcraft continue to be popular.

Inside studies of World of Warcraft, Nardi (2010) and Bainbridge (2010) give emic accounts of the WoW world, Nardi providing an ethnographic approach and Bainbridge delving into more sociological aspects of online civilizations. While these are graphical online worlds, not textually based as LiveJournal is, the engagement between users of these games comes very close to the types of engagement between users that is seen on LiveJournal.

Similar, and perhaps more germane to the study of LiveJournal, are studies done around Second Life, which, while a graphic virtual world like WoW, lacks the gameplay mechanics that are central to most online games. Instead, Second Life encourages citizens to lead a true “second life;” visiting friends,

attending parties, going shopping, and engaging in other activities they may experience in their “first lives.” Boellestorff (2008) discusses production and consumption in this virtual world, and addresses questions of ownership as well. Malaby (2009), conversely, studies Linden Lab itself, the company responsible for Second Life. This work focuses on the struggles of a company attempting to maintain a hold on their property, while allowing its users to continually utilize and repurpose that property in ways never envisioned by its creators. Ideas of production, consumption, and ownership play heavily in LiveJournal, where users create content posted on a site belonging to another entity, and where clashes occur over decisions and directions that affect that content. Questions of site ownership, and connected to that, of who created the community and who belongs to that community, are pain points in relations between communities and their corporate overseers, as can be witnessed in clashes between the two as sites mature. Additionally, the idea of creationist capitalism used by Boellestorff (2008:206), where consumers produce what they consume, highlights the transition of passive media consumer to active media producer/consumer (sometimes called a “prosumer”), as well as ownership of site and content, and of community membership.

Out of the realm of virtual worlds are “regular” online communities, made up of people who are not conversing online to conduct quests or live another life, but are instead utilizing it as a new communication medium or a way to interact on projects that interest them. Kelty (2008) gives an example of what can be

seen as this “old school” style online community, where communication takes place over mailing lists, news groups, and IRC channels. Kelty’s community is centered around the Open Source movement, and his focus is on their ways of restructuring power relations as they pertain to knowledge creation. The idea in this work of the “recursive public,” a group involved in and organized around the modification and creation of the infrastructure that created and continues to support it (3) is of significance when discussing online communities in general, and LiveJournal in particular. While Kelty focuses on Open Source software communities whose members are much more intrinsically involved in its infrastructure, LiveJournal members are more recursive than they might appear on the surface. Instead of manipulating the infrastructure in a hands-on manner, LiveJournal members force change through the brute application of force and will. Indeed, policies and features have been substantially altered due to outcry from the LiveJournal community, such as during the Great Strikethrough where community protest lead to hundreds of accounts being reinstated, or when the basic account level was removed, but then reinstated after userbase protests, showing the userbase has a recursive power that is not always realized.

On the non-academic end of the spectrum, Trippi (2004) shows a moment in time when online communities began to truly show their power, during the 2004 presidential campaign of Howard Dean. Much as Boellstorff and Nardi give first hand accounts of their time involved in their respective online worlds, Trippi gives a description of a community growing from the ground up, and how the

organization responsible for that growth copes with a suddenly created community that has a somewhat limited lifespan, that of a presidential campaign. Unlike other organizations, Trippi recognizes the power his community held, and gives them a great deal of credit for their role in the early success of the Dean campaign. The Dean campaign mirrors some of the aspects of the LiveJournal community; both are passionate communities not afraid to speak their minds. The example of the Dean campaign also shows what can happen, good and bad, when that voice is heeded.

The edited volume by Adams and Smith (2008) gives a window into many online communities and social networks such as MySpace, and Craftster among others, including a brief discussion of LiveJournal. Their focus is on the “tribal” nature of these groupings, and while the focus here is not to debate the appropriateness of the term, they do focus on the bonding that occurs in these groups, leading to the formation of community. A second edited volume by Smith and Kollock (1999), discusses similar topics as they were identified in the early days of the Internet.

Finally, there are those works that are focused even more intensely on LiveJournal itself. This literature is somewhat split, as no one seems to be totally sure what kind of website LiveJournal is. Some approach it as a social networking site, while others approach it as a blogging site, even though LiveJournal actually shares elements of both.

Research that focuses on LiveJournal as a social networking site tends to focus on relationships between users and their networks. Pearson (2007) discusses maintaining community bonds through the giving and receiving of v-gifts. Golbeck (2007) analyzes the dynamics of various social networking sites (including LiveJournal) through a quantitative analysis of user linkage. Taking a more technical approach, Paolillo et al (2005) discusses how LiveJournal itself organizes user data and user linkages. These works do not look at the individual activity, and instead focus on relationships and dynamics inside the networks of users.

Research that portrays LiveJournal as a blogging site tends to focus on individual journal content and ignores the Community spaces. Cherny (2005) most notably takes this approach, describing LiveJournal as somewhat “ego-centric;” that is, a network centered around one person, as Cherny describes it, a “salon hostess.” Cherny acknowledges the Community spaces, but dismisses them from analysis. Raynes-Goldie (2004) analyzes knowledge production on LiveJournal both in individual accounts as well as community accounts, but does not focus as much on linkages between users, again focusing on the sharing of information from one user out to many others, and not on the connections between those users. Kendall (2007) also focuses on individual users, analyzing performance, identity, and privacy issues. While privacy does have some dealings with other users, Kendall’s sample is small and does not look at the overall connections in that sample.

The one piece of literature that seems to attempt an embrace of both sides of LiveJournal is Marwick (2008), which is a study commissioned by SUP/LiveJournal, Inc. Marwick's focus is "What makes LiveJournal users unique?" and identifies several areas where LJ users differ from other sites online, namely the depth of their engagement, the ways LJ users see and operationalize the term "Friend" or "Friending," the ways a Friends list crosses over from the "Real World" to LJ and vice versa, the many ways that LJ users use the site, and the way that LJ users use the built in filters similar to how they filter information through groups in their offline interactions. Marwick found that, in the end, the most potent factor that sets LJ users apart from other sites is their passion for the site. She closes by stating that passionate users "can be a pain," however they are "absolutely crucial to the long-term success of LiveJournal" (13).

Methodology

With over ten years of history, a website such as LJ yields a great deal of information to attempt to digest. Therefore, this thesis will focus on three events that resulted in conflict between users and company which will serve as case studies: the introduction of ads to the previously anti-advertisement site, the so-called Great Strikethrough, and the removal of the basic account level. In order to analyze the relationship between the LJ community and the owners of LJ, several methods are employed in this work to work through the different case studies.

Because the bulk of LJ history is archived online in its official Community accounts, as well as in individual journals and unofficial Communities, this archive is the most obvious place to look for information. Only posts and comments posted publicly, that is, not “Locked” down to viewing only by those designated as Friends, have been considered for this analysis. Most of the information included in this archival analysis is from official LJ Communities such as 📰news and 🧑🏻‍💼lj_biz, both Communities designated for news coming out of LJ about features and other items affecting service and users. However, official posts only tell half the story, and therefore the comments left by the userbase will be included in the analysis, as well as comments and posts in user run Communities, again only those posts open for public review and comment. Some LJ users also discussed their opinions on events affecting the LJ community in their own journals. These posts (where public) are analyzed to find the sentiments of the user community during events. Because these posts are not Locked, commenters and posters are aware that this content is available to the Internet at large, as proved when users would forward links to the conversations to various blogs and media outlets as they attempted to get more attention focused on their concerns, and is therefore public content. For this reason, usernames and Community names related to this archival research are maintained in this work. Prior case study work has not anonymized their subjects, and prior Internet archival research (such as Kelty) have also preserved the Internet locations and names of their archived sources.

In addition, conversations with other LJ users were held to gauge community members' sentiment, especially as I analyzed my own autoethnographic experiences, to ensure that my recollections were more on target with the broader community's recollections and feelings of the time. Because these conversations are presented in the aggregate, they are therefore anonymous. Mainstream media reports about LiveJournal are also included in the analysis. Some in the media were LJ users themselves, or tipped off to events by other LJ users, and present a different view of events rocking the LJ community.


On a final note, defining the LJ community, especially when it comes to the various events that make up the focus of this thesis, can be a difficult task. In the broader sense, the LJ community is made up of all users of the LiveJournal platform. During The Great Strikethrough, divisions inside the larger LJ community were illustrated as the various viewpoints of the community were vehemently announced and defended. In this event, as with others, there was also large group of users who don't have an opinion on the event, or do not wish to voice that opinion. The voices that made the most dramatic impact in these events may have been a vocal minority, but they can be influential, as evidenced by a discourse analysis before, during, and after key events.

With these foundations in history, methodology, and literature laid, we can now turn our attention to the three incidents that will inform our study of





LiveJournal and shed light on the inner workings of one of Web 2.0's oldest online communities.

Chapter 3

The Very Definition of Ad Fury

“This used to be such a nice neighborhood.”  *inexchris*

If online communities are equivalent to physical neighborhoods, banner advertisements on the websites they congregate around are equivalent to garish billboards and urban blight. Starting in the late 1990s and early 2000s, online advertisements exploded all over the World Wide Web, some of them incorporating flashing graphics and interactive invitations to, for example, “punch the monkey,” where users were encouraged to attempt to “punch” a moving monkey on a banner ad by clicking on the ad for an opportunity to win prizes. These types of ads, especially the monkey punching ads, were very quickly seen as nuisances, and workarounds were created to hide them from view, many of which were quickly incorporated into popular web browsers.

By the time LiveJournal began gaining popularity, ads on websites were commonplace and expected. However, since very early in the history of LiveJournal, ads were all but forbidden on the site, with Fitzpatrick declaring in September of 2000 that banner ads were “lame” and that they “piss off users.” ( *bradfitz*,  *news*, entry posted September 13, 2000). Access to the site was free, with donations encouraged and appreciated. Later, the creation of a paid account level, where users would get access to more features in return for a monthly fee gave the site a steadier stream of income ( *bradfitz*,  *news*, entry posted September 15, 2000). Ads were attempted briefly early on in the site’s



history, but not in a serious way, instead allowing users to opt in to showing the ads. The experiment seemed to not bring the revenue that paid accounts did, and was discontinued quickly with no other mentions of the experiment occurring (👤dakus, comment posted September 16, 2000, 📰news post dated September 16, 2000).




The users were supportive of the no-ad stance; mentions of ads in discussions of how to fund the site were often countered with the argument that ads historically brought in very little ad revenue, especially in relation to the annoyance they cause. This was embodied in the 2003 creation of the LiveJournal Social Contract, where “stay advertisement free” was the first item listed in the draft (👤jproulx, 🗳️lj_biz, entry posted February 10, 2003). No copies of the original contract exist, but a copy archived on the Internet Wayback Machine dated April 2004 states that LiveJournal “promise[s] to never offer advertising space in our service or on our pages” (LiveJournal n.d.b).

Having such a stance written into the makeup of the site made it an identifying characteristic. During the early 2000s, many other sites were appearing on the Internet landscape that allowed users to create a blog of their own, including Blogger, GreatestJournal, and DeadJournal, the latter two using LiveJournal’s own Open Source code. However, a great many of these sites (including the three listed here) had advertisements displayed in the journals they hosted. LJ’s stance on advertising, both in not allowing ads on the site and making that promise in writing, became a point of pride for their community



members. It was one of the things that inspired loyalty to the site, which became evident as the site grew older.

The End of Ad-Free

The dynamic was changed slightly in January 2005, when Fitzpatrick announced the sale of LiveJournal to SixApart. Going seemingly unnoticed by the userbase at large (there may have been some comments to individual journals, but these are almost impossible to find), the Social Contract was changed to state that the site would “avoid putting banner advertisements on the site,” and renamed to “Livejournal.com Guiding Principles” (LiveJournal n.d.c). The April Fool’s joke that year played along with this theme, releasing a heavily market-speak “statement” from Fitzpatrick alluding to the addition of banner ads to the site (bradfitz, news, entry posted April 1, 2005). The vast majority of the community saw this for the joke it was, and no real controversy erupted; in fact, the vast majority of discussion in the post centered around the “hotness” of Fitzpatrick’s photo included in the post.

Finally, in March 2006, the “no ads” stance was fully reversed in a post by Fitzpatrick to the lj_biz Community¹ entitled “Punching the Monkey;” a reference to the aforementioned “Punch the Monkey” banner ad (bradfitz, lj_biz, entry posted March 8, 2006). In the post, Fitzpatrick attempted to head off dissension in the userbase by discussing how the current revenue model for the site “kinda sucks,” praising 6A and trying to deflect blame from them, laying out a “pre-emptive” FAQ to answer anticipated questions, and finally explaining how




the ads would work through the introduction of a new account level, “Sponsored+” (later changed to simply “Plus”). Users could opt into this level and in exchange for seeing ads, they would have access to more features than free users, but fewer than paid users. He assured the community that LJ was “working hard to do this in a way that won't suck.”

The announcement was made official in a post to  news a month later ( ljkrissey, entry posted April 18, 2006). The change was portrayed as a net positive, focusing on the new features being available to a new group of users, and less on the addition of ads to the site. There were reassurances that the site would not become swamped with ads, specifically those of “questionable taste,” and that users could specify the types of ads they would like to see. Users would be allowed to switch back and forth between free and Sponsored+ to get a feel for what the new level would bring. Paid and permanent account holders were promised they would never see ads, with the post stating “[w]e're not going to double-dip on you.”

The LJ userbase was not enthused with this new plan, with many stating they felt betrayed by this reversal of a long-held, defining promise. However, they were somewhat mollified by this new promise of limited, defined ad viewing, and that free account holders would only see ads when visiting a Sponsored+ journal. While this new promise did help keep the outcry to a minimum, a new outcry began shortly thereafter, and while it was not about advertising as a

whole, it centered around the definition of “advertisement,” showing that the company and the users had different definitions of the term.


Sponsorship vs. Advertisement


Graphical ads had been in place roughly six months on LiveJournal, when a new idea was pushed to the LJ community. Touting the fact that “some great companies” were “really excited about LiveJournal,” rahaeli announced upcoming features to LiveJournal in a post to lj_biz, including “sponsored Communities” and “sponsored features” (entry posted September 29, 2006). The sponsored Communities would be identical to the Communities already on the site, however these would be run by sponsors, giving an area for them to interact with LJ users and offer special promotions and content, among other things. Sponsored features would be features that LJ had wanted to offer, but had not been financially able to make happen. The first feature set for roll-out was SMS integration which would allow paid users to post to LJ via text message, sponsored by Amp’d Mobile, a mobile phone company. Towards the end of the post, rahaeli conceded that users might not approve of the move, stating “We don't consider it to be advertising (though I'm sure some of you might disagree!). Our sponsored features are partnerships with companies who can make it possible for us to offer cool and nifty things we wouldn't be able to do otherwise, and we think that giving them credit is the right thing to do. It's what makes these partnerships attractive, and lets us be able to give you guys more stuff.” She did not elaborate, however, how these sponsorships were different than advertising.

The reaction of the users was, as predicted, highly negative. After being promised that ads would not be seen on certain accounts, to be told that sponsorship would continue to be seen on those accounts was seen as breaking the new promise 6A/LJ made to its members, cynically summed up in a comment by [@dorwrath](#), “I wondered how long it would be before they broke the promise that paid users wouldn't see ads” (posted September 30, 2006). Some users resorted to sarcasm, such as [@jacinthson](#), who stated, “Right. So, are you going to give us advance notice on which promise you plan on breaking next? Or can it be a fun, fun guessing game?” (comment posted September 20, 2006)


Some users went beyond feelings of simple promises being broken, and into feelings of full-on betrayal. [@claireylouisa](#) wondered at 6A/LJ's motives, commenting, “Ok so at the moment we don't have to see the ads if we don't use the features. 6 months ago there were no ads, period. In 6 months time how can we trust that there won't be more ads everywhere?” (posted September 30, 2006) [@tammylc](#) took a bit of a more emotional tactic, “I'm joining the chorus of NO! This isn't what I use LJ for, and I'm really offended by how stupid you must think we all are to forget all the promises you've made about paid users never seeing ads and always getting all the features” (comment posted September 30, 2006).


Other users took aim at the tone of the posting itself, which took a marketing style tone, full of excitement and hype, describing the new plan as “great,” allowing 6A/LJ to offer “cool and nifty things,” describing their excitement

at being able to offer these features, and attempting to draw the conversation in a specific direction, asking “So now it's your turn! What types of companies, features, information, and special deals would you be interested in seeing?” The resounding answer was “nothing,” as fraught summed up early on in the discussion, “None whatsoever, thanks. The last thing I need to see on the internet [sic] are more ads, and if I want information about a product/movie/album, I know where to find it myself” (comment posted September 29, 2006).



One thing becomes apparent after spending a great deal of time in these groups: online communities, from LiveJournal to Wikipedia to Digg and others, are especially sensitive to being tricked, especially with language. This shouldn't be a surprise, considering they exist in a medium of performance, where identities are constructed by carefully selected words. Marketing language is seen as a form of lying, and many online communities boast of strong “bullshit” detectors. solitary_summer was one of many LJ community members who was sensitive to the language usage, commenting, “You're trying too hard here, and too obviously. I think the artificially over-[excited] language of this post already says enough about how even *you* (general you, the livejournal team) are aware of the of the potential problems inherent in this change, or at least the fact that it'll be hard to sell to your users” (posted September 29, 2006). In this same vein, other commenters noted the placement of the announcement, in a Community not frequented by most LJ members, and the timing of the



announcement, late on a Friday night, as proof that 6A/LJ was attempting to hide a hard sell from its users.

Another concern community members expressed was that LiveJournal was undergoing “MySpaceification.” LiveJournal users, for the most part, were not great fans of MySpace, which during this time was the predominant social network and gaining in popularity. MySpace was also becoming largely commodified, with the front page being heavily laden with advertisements. Many LJ users were fearful of this same fate for their site, stating, “If I wanted a MySpace account, I’d have one already.” In the same vein, theurv commented, “If I wanted to be a superficial consumer only interested in more products to enhance my life- I would be a myspace [sic] whore,” implying that LJ users had more depth than the typical MySpace user, and therefore should be treated as such (posted September 29, 2006).

Within a few hours of the post going up, rahaeli made an edit to the post hoping to clarify some issues. She mainly focused on the idea that these new additions were “optional” and paid users did not need to see or use them if they wished. However, this did not fully address any of the concerns being voiced by the community. Paid users continued to assert that they had been promised they would see no advertisements at all, period, anywhere on the site, as well as access to new features without them being tainted by advertisements, and that these “partnerships” were just another way of foisting advertising on a population segment that did not want it. As comments on the post continued, it seemed that

this edit did little to assuage the userbase's concerns, as the majority of comments left were after the addendum was made.

By the next afternoon, Fitzpatrick had made a follow-up post in the same Community saying to "ignore" most of the previous post, that sponsored anything were indeed ads, paid users would not be seeing any ads at all, and tried to reassure the community that there were not "as many evil people here as you might think" (bradfitz, lj_biz, entry posted September 30, 2006). He laid the blame for the confusion on "poor communication." While the users expressed some relief, the overwhelming response was still one of great concern, with the main themes of comments being concern over the amount of control sponsors would have over overall content of the site, and a continuation of the sense of betrayal and broken trust.

Starting the following Monday, seven more posts would appear in lj_biz over a two day period as follow-up to the controversy. All but one were posted by burr86, who was a community member before becoming an LJ intern and later staffer, explaining to the community that their voices were heard, and attempting once again to clear up any confusion over the announcement. These posts did not release much new information, aside from an icon change for sponsored Communities. What they did, however, was explain in more detail the guidelines the sponsored Communities would be held to, and how they would actually work without using any marketing language. While the userbase as a whole seemed still skeptical and concerned, the volume of comments declined,



and many more people were commenting to thank [burr86](#) for the update and the clarifications, and some even stated that their fears had been assuaged.

While it is close to impossible to search only for sponsored Communities on LJ, counts tabulated by various LJ Communities tracking advertising show there were roughly a dozen and a half sponsored (or “partner” Communities, similar Communities which appeared in 2008) Communities on LiveJournal, with the last confirmed one popping up in 2009. All of them are currently idle, and a good portion of them have been locked to prevent further content from being added. Very few of them showed large amounts of activity, and at least one was never even activated outside of setting up the initial account information, with no content posted. Whether or not this level of activity has directly to do with overall community outrage, indifference to the companies/products involved, or a failure of the companies to fully utilize the site and misunderstanding site dynamics is difficult to say, although all most likely play parts in the assumed demise of this particular revenue stream; other companies attempting to involve themselves in similar endeavors in other online communities and virtual worlds have had similar difficulties (Boellstorff 2008:219-220). In the end, however, only [bradfitz](#) attempted to tackle head-on the question of “What is advertising?” and no other discussion of this topic occurred, at least publicly, during or after this incident.

The Gift of Product Placement

August 2007 saw LJ introduce a new set of “virtual gifts” or “v-gifts.” V-gifts, introduced in early 2006, are small graphics LJ users purchase for friends,

costing around \$0.99. These graphics are displayed on the friend's profile page, sometimes showing a message and/or the name of the person making the gift. V-gifts are often tailored to the season; hearts and flowers are offered for Valentine's Day, black cats and candy corn for Halloween, as well as charity v-gifts released to raise money for charity, such as a heart encompassing the island of Haiti released after the Haitian earthquake in 2010. There are also more generic ones such as teddy bears and balloons for everyday gifting.²

This new set of v-gifts were photographs of a new Pepsi product, Diet Pepsi MAX.³ Each user could send 10 of these v-gifts to Friends (or Communities) for free each week during the month of the promotion. The v-gifts came with a pre-programmed advertising message that would not be viewable by paid or permanent account holders, however this message could be overwritten by the gifting user with a more personalized one. These v-gifts were announced in news, along with Diet Pepsi MAX sponsored journal themes (special layouts users can choose to personalize their journals and Friends pages) and mood icons (icons at the bottom of posts showing the mood of the journal author for that post) for use in personal journals. The post mentions the new features created "specially" for LJ users by Pepsi, "in the hopes that you'll want to try their new drink that has zero calories, ginseng and extra caffeine." (ljkrissy , entry posted August 17, 2007)

Coming hard on the heels of the Great Strikethrough (covered in the next chapter), and almost year after the sponsored Community debate had died down,






the userbase was quick to share its ire at what they saw as yet another backdoor attempt to insert advertisements to paid and permanent account holders. Many took to the traditional avenues to share their displeasure, racking up almost 3,000 comments on the post.

Others decided to take a different approach, and gifted 473 Diet Pepsi MAX products to the 🗳️ news Community, along with a dozen other gifts (including Bad Report Cards and Detention Slips) to register displeasure. Six Apart CEO Barak Berkowitz, who had created a LJ account to address the Great Strikethrough happening only a few months prior, received 527 v-gifts, the vast majority of which were Diet Pepsi MAX products, and are still visible on his account's profile page ([@barakb25](#)).

Once again, the central issue for debate was the definition of “advertisement.” While paid users were not seeing banner advertisements, it appeared to them that LJ/6A was circumventing their promise, and, some argued, the contract entered into with paying members, that paid and permanent users would not see advertisements by allowing other users to push ads to them in the form of v-gifts and mood icons.

Not all posters were as eloquent, however. Several comments of “What is this shit?” “FUCK YOU LJ! Seriously, FUCK YOU!” and similar expletives littered the comments to the post announcing the new v-gifts, much as they littered the discourse around ads appearing in the first place on LJ. Generally, these types of comments were devoid of any other commentary, making them comments of

much style but little substance. These comments did not move the discussion forward, and it could be argued harm the overall community position as a group to be taken seriously in such debates. While these comments register displeasure, they do little to pinpoint specific areas of concern, or create an environment where community and company can work together to come to an agreement of what action to take.

Serial outbursts aside, the users did score a victory. In the next update to news, it was announced that further “sponsored content” would be appearing, however LJ was working to ensure that paid users would not see the content if they did not wish to, tipping to community opinion that any type of sponsored content was advertising (ljkrissey, entry posted August 28, 2007). The Pepsi sponsored mood icons and journal themes were quietly discontinued around this same time (uniquewonders, no_lj_ads, entry posted August 22, 2007), as well as the offending v-gifts themselves shortly thereafter. Also mentioned in the same post by ljkrissey, all users were given the option to opt out of receiving v-gifts completely, and paid and permanent members were given the option to opt out of just sponsored ones as well. As of January 2012, no further sponsored v-gifts have been released, or at least not in a public, widescale manner.

Breaking Trust, Building Capital

While this debate in all its forms was, on the outside, about the placement of advertisements on a site that had been vehemently anti-advertising, at the core it is actually about the trust placed in a site by its community. Trust is an



important issue for many online communities, and especially for LiveJournal users; each time the users become upset with a move made by LiveJournal, trust is brought up. As important of an issue as this is, academic studies of these groups have not analyzed it. However, articles written for marketing journals and websites do talk about trust and its importance to online communities (Porter and Donthu 2008, Grimes-Viort 2010, Reed 2009). Even then, these articles tend to look at trust as a commodity, something to polish to attract people, rather than the proper way of doing business, which seems to be what communities expect as they mention trust so often.





Communities are generally tolerant of money making activities; they understand it takes money to keep the sites up and running. Even though the Wikipedia community has a great dislike of banner advertisements, they allow such banners to be run on the site to publicize the annual fundraiser that provides the monetary capital needed to run the site year after year. LiveJournal users as well have always been aware that the site needed money to continue. Early in the history of LiveJournal, the addition of a paid access level in late 2000, T-shirt sales and later the permanent account level were all recognized as ways to bring money to the site to keep it going. As long as the money was going towards supporting LiveJournal and keeping it online, the users understood that these things were necessary. The success of the sale of these products is evidence of the support the community gave to Fitzpatrick and his business plan. Comments to the posts announcing the new plan for paid accounts were very





positive, as the new fees were in line with the community's values; free access without ads (although at this stage, many users were more tolerant of ads, mostly because the site's "No Ads" stance was not fully honed), more features with paid access.

With the site's sale to SixApart, the community's reaction was rather different. The majority of commenters were excited for Fitzpatrick and the site as a whole, however there were many comment threads of concern and worry over what would happen to the site, advice solicited and given for ways to backup one's journal, and sporadic concerns over if ads would be appearing on LiveJournal. The concern was mainly over SixApart's motives for buying LiveJournal. Was 6A truly looking out for LJ's best interests, or did 6A simply see LJ as a good investment, a way to add to their coffers?

With Fitzpatrick as the public face of LJ, and one who spoke frankly with his community, users saw Fitzpatrick as a leader, and therefore a face of where their money was going. Fitzpatrick was "one of us;" a regular user of the service, one who was committed to the community, and therefore was able to be trusted. The years Fitzpatrick spent building LiveJournal and talking with users about ideas for the service had built this position. Announcements of new features by Fitzpatrick were greeted with thanks and calls of "We love you Brad!!" by community members. Even the sale of LJ to SixApart garnered congratulations posts to Fitzpatrick, much as users would congratulate each other on new jobs, finishing school, or other life milestones. However, having a large company, one

fairly well known in the blogging world but still fairly faceless, take that place was concerning for users. lelah articulated this, commenting, “[...] I like to know where my money is going. I don't like it going into someone else's coffers. I smell blood and an era of prominent bullshit” (comment posted January 5, 2005,  news post dated January 5, 2005).

6A had a corporate identity, which made users reluctant to immediately trust them. The second post to  news by a new 6A/LJ staffer, ljkrissy, was very marketing and promotional in nature, attempting to capitalize on back-to-school by giving a list of suggestions of how to promote LJ at school ( news, entry posted September 22, 2005), which added to the mistrust felt by community members. While comments were mainly supportive of some of the new features announced, the volume was lighter than usual for  news posts, and the tone of the post was not normal for that venue.

Adding to the distrust felt by community members was the changing place of the community in company moves and decision-making. In the early days of LJ, community input was sought fairly often. Fitzpatrick posted requests for assistance and volunteers early on, and the lj_biz Community was created to be a forum for LJ users to discuss with the company new business decisions and ideas to move the business forward (insomnia, lj_biz, entry posted November 20, 2000). Even as the userbase grew larger, this sense of having input into the direction of the service continued. Fitzpatrick continued making updates to  news and responding to comments left there. Even though the

community was not consulted for feedback regarding the sale to 6A, Fitzpatrick's status as de facto Head of the Community gave him credibility, and community trust that he would do the right thing for his "baby."

The leeway given to Fitzpatrick was not passed along to 6A and its representatives as they attempted to take over community communications. As newcomers, they had not taken the time to build the social capital with the community they needed to be viewed as true insiders. Online communities are very cognizant of the fact that websites change hands quite often. Companies that hold many properties, as 6A did at that time, can be seen as distracted and not always fully aware of what is going on inside their communities at any given time. This means that, somewhat ironically, site owners are not often seen as community insiders. In fact, new owners in particular can often be viewed as outside interlopers.

Since ownership of servers and trademarks does not automatically confer insider status, new site owners therefore need to build capital, which can then be converted to trust, in order to show their community that they are valued and respected. The same actions that build capital, listening to a community, building new features for them, and showing an understanding of their values, are the same type of actions that help a community build trust in a new owner. If a community feels valued by the company owning their site, the company will be able to gain more value from the community (Porter and Donthu 2008), both monetary value and in good will, which translates into good word of mouth

advertising, bringing more members to the site. This is what occurred in the early days of LiveJournal, as users and the LJ staff worked together to build the site, and users brought their friends to the site.

Bourdieu (1986) identifies three types of capital: market capital, social capital, and cultural capital. Of the three, market capital is of least importance to communities such as the one on LiveJournal. Market capital, comprised of commodities to be bought, sold, and traded, is a difficult type of capital to exchange in a textual medium, and a difficult capital for site owners to exchange with users. It could be argued that the purchase of paid and permanent accounts, as well as the purchase of v-gifts, is an exchange of market capital, but from the user point of view, this sort of capital does not raise the standing of the company. Users will pay these fees when they trust a company and wish to further use their services, thus trust is a prerequisite for gaining this type of capital. Instead, social capital is the type of capital that carries more value to online communities.

Social capital, a measure of resources at one's disposal inside a social network, can be measured here as the level of goodwill between the two parties, in this case SixApart and the LiveJournal community. In this venue, reciprocity becomes key to gathering social capital (Malaby 2009:34), especially as one entity is attempting to garner capital from another. While it is true that SixApart owned the servers and marks that comprised the physical capital of LiveJournal, the community held (and continues to hold) the key market capital component,

that of the content of the site; it was their content that brought traffic to the site, and caused revenue to generate, either in the form of paying for accounts, or in ad views. Therefore, as 6A gives to the community in the form of new features, the community reciprocates with site content and positive word of mouth. For instance, just before Christmas 2005, LJ users of all access levels were given presents from 6A/LJ, ranging from additional userpics to additional storage space for photos and voice posts.⁴ The community's reaction was overwhelmingly positive, and 6A gained a good deal of social capital in that instance. Social capital can be difficult to quantify, however in the period after the holidays, several changes were made to LiveJournal to improve security, including requirements for passwords as well as basic changes in the URL of each journal. These changes would briefly disrupt the habits of users, but the outcry was small and not the large, somewhat overwhelming outcries that followed other, larger controversies. However, gaining social capital does not have to be done by giving something tangible. Fitzpatrick's level of social capital came not just from his creation of the site, but from his willingness to listen and consider opinion from his users, and his ability to take hard knocks from them when something went wrong.

Social capital is a finite resource; it, like market capital, can be depleted and must be earned back. 6A spent a great deal of Fitzpatrick's social capital in announcing the addition of advertisements, but did little to earn any back to pay for the further commodification of the site through sponsored Communities and v-

gifts.⁵ Thus, the introduction of these features caused 6A to lose social capital, completely wiping out any capital they had gained, as well as any trust they had earned as well, which made those features harder sells and further losses of goodwill and social capital.

Once the takeover of LJ was complete, posts to 🏠lj_biz, which had been a hive of activity for many years, plummeted to barely one post per month, and often posts were not from 6A/LJ staff. Eventually, the Community was locked down so that only the Community owner and maintainers (6A/LJ staff all) could post to it. By closing community members out from their accustomed place, 6A closed out an arena of social capital gathering, which was not replaced with anything other than the occasional resource upgrade, or compensation for site downtime.

By closing off this arena, 6A demonstrated its lack of understanding of its community, and of how to earn social capital as well as credibility. Fitzpatrick's credibility was earned by creating, living, and working inside the LJ community, working with the userbase to craft its values which were then delineated in the Social Contract, and participating in the community by posting entries to his own journal and other Communities, being a visible and active member of the community. SixApart, on the other hand, did not pay their dues in this manner, with new employees seemingly coming out of nowhere, at least to the eyes of the userbase; new usernames appearing in 📰news with little introduction or information of who the person was in relation to LJ/6A, and no prior history on the

site. Also, in closing down 🍷lj_biz, one of the few areas where LJ staff and community could co-mingle as equals, 6A sent a message that the opinions and concerns of the community were not of interest to them, harming their credibility with the community. Through these actions, 6A acted as though along with the physical capital they had purchased when they purchased LiveJournal, they also bought all of the social capital and credibility Fitzpatrick and other employees that came with him had amassed, and therefore could use it as their own. While Fitzpatrick could, and did, use his social capital on behalf of 6A in announcing the addition of ads to the site, 6A and its newer employees built very little capital on their own and did little to earn credibility, which made further announcements harder for the userbase to accept.

The stakes here are high; a lack of credibility can inhibit any further attempts to gain social capital as well. Online communities have long memories, and missteps are not only remembered (and documented) but re-referenced over and over again each time a new misstep is made. Each time SixApart angered the userbase, the ad controversy would be brought up again, pointing to a pattern of behavior proving that 6A did not understand the community, and was not to be trusted.

In the case of the addition of advertisements to LiveJournal, Fitzpatrick showed his understanding of community values and the Social Contract by framing his announcement in terms familiar to LJ users: the reference to “punch the monkey” ads, the acknowledgement of the former stance, the explanation of

why the change was occurring, as well as the venue of the announcement in the 🇺🇸lj_biz Community. The post to 📧news by staffer 👤ljkkrissy attempted to show similar understandings, with the assurances of paid and permanent account holders “never” seeing ads, the commitment to the free account level without ads, the attempt to draw the community into some of the planning by designing ads (which few examples of were posted to the comments as requested), and the link back to Fitzpatrick’s post on the matter, which could be viewed as attempting to cash in on Fitzpatrick’s credibility.

However, this show was quickly eroded as the announcements of sponsored Communities, features, and v-gifts were released. While the earlier announcements showed an understanding of the community’s aversion to advertising, it did not show an understanding of their understanding of the *term* “advertisement;” the assumption was that advertising was equivalent only to banner ads, when instead that aversion was to all forms of corporate promotion. In addition, the timing of some of these announcements, late at night just before a weekend, put the announcements, and the justifications behind them, on shaky ground. Correlated to this, the attempt to build social capital by inviting users to give feedback on what companies they’d like to see partnerships with also backfired. Showing a lack of one type of capital was in many ways directly related to the failure to build further capital and an erosion of credibility.

Social capital in online communities helps to form a trust level between the community and the site owner. However, for this to be successful the trust

should flow both ways; the community needs to trust the site owner, and the site owner should trust the community enough to take their opinions under advisement. The inclusion of the community into business matters (originally through the 🏠lj_biz Community) fosters the feeling of the community being part of the business of the site, a process referred to as “embedding” by Bhattacharaya and Sen (Porter and Donthu 2008:115). This process is considered essential to fostering trust in an online community, although these authors refer to it as members “perceiv[ing]” themselves as insiders. If the community is not taken seriously as a partner, and is allowed to foster an idea of being insiders when they truly are not, the reality can bite back later.


This is what occurred as 6A moved forward to implement the insertion of advertisements onto LJ. Community members, used to having at least an outlet to express their opinions and have them heard, found themselves not welcome as stakeholders for the purposes of the future of the site. Many follow-up posts to the LJ community from 6A representatives across many Communities asserted, “We are listening!” However, it was apparent on reading the posts that very little was changing in regards to plans as they were announced, showing clearly their lack of understanding of their community; a double blow considering the posts were coming from staffers hired out of the community. The largest areas of user concern, the role of advertisers in site content, the amount of site real estate the ads would take up, and the idea of “choosing” to see ads versus having them “forced” on users were mainly left unanswered, aside from posting

of guidelines sponsors would be expected to follow. However, to the minds of many users, 6A had already proven that these written guidelines and rules were flimsy protections, considering the demise of the Social Contract and a constantly evolving Terms of Service document. 6A was asking a wary userbase to trust them to know what was best for the site and community, something they did not quite have the capital for.


The inability of SixApart to understand the values of the userbase it acquired caused great harm to the relations between themselves and the community. While initially wary of the buy-out, many users were still open to the possibilities 6A brought to the table, and warming to them as the company began to attempt to build levels of social capital. However, the violation of one of the highest community precepts, that of an ad-free site, harmed the relationship between 6A and users, and the further pushing of sponsorships and advertisements continued to cause what was quickly becoming irreparable harm, inflicting blight on a small neighborhood.

Chapter 4


The Great Strikethrough of 2007




“Hoist those colors high, y’all!”  *ninepointfivemm*

If there is one event that has defined the SixApart period of LiveJournal ownership, it would be what the community termed The Great Strikethrough. Coming seemingly out of nowhere, this controversy quickly took on a life of its own, even though it was not sparked by a “public” action of LiveJournal itself.

Since the ad controversy, relations between SixApart and the LJ community had been slowly improving. Comments on  news posts contained less animosity, and the userbase reacted positively for the most part to changes and new features. Bumps in the road still occurred, for example the licensing of the LiveJournal name to a Russian company called SUP who would begin administering and creating features for Cyrillic language accounts which caused some controversy in that quarter. Also receiving attention was a fight over userpics depicting breastfeeding which received some attention outside LiveJournal, however for the most part the relationship looked to be smoothing out.

Things changed on May 29, 2007, when 500 accounts were removed. After the removal, attempts to access the accounts returned a page stating the accounts had been deleted, later changed to suspended. The accounts appeared with a line through their names when listed in Friends lists and comments that had been left under that account, which gave the incident its name; in HTML, the

language used to create web pages, to line-out text it is surrounded by the `<strike>` tag. At that time, there were around 13 million accounts on LiveJournal, making the 500 affected a seemingly small percentage. However, the majority of the affected accounts were Community accounts, watched and contributed to by large numbers of people. One of them, pornish_pixies, was the largest Community on LiveJournal, and one of the largest gathering places on the Internet, for Harry Potter fanfiction. Fanfiction (or fanfic), stories written by fans of an original work (such as book series, television shows, or movie series) often expanding story lines and using new characters, would prove to be a driving force of the controversy as well as one of the main targets.

The story of how the 500 accounts were removed can be pieced together over many personal journals, Community posts, and in conversations and links shared through postings to the news Community. While there was not originally a post announcing what had occurred, users instead took over the May 24, 2007 news post, which was unrelated to the incident, to ask for answers and share information. The story quickly spread through LiveJournal (or “went viral,” at a time when social media was still in its infancy) and to outside media, generally by LiveJournal members posting about what happened to their personal journals as well as other LJ Communities, linking to the comments in the news post, encouraging others to speak up, and contacting outside news organizations.

As pieced together by users, with the majority of pieces confirmed by LJ itself, LiveJournal/Six Apart was approached by a group called Warriors for Innocence, a right wing Christian-based group of volunteers claiming they were working to remove pedophilia and child pornography from the Internet. They informed LJ/6A that there were several accounts on the service promoting child pornography and pedophilia and demanded that the accounts be terminated. When that contact occurred, and how exactly the decision was made is unclear (as well as what role advertising played in the decision), but this led to the May 29 removal of the accounts. The account owners were not informed of this action, as most affected users who reported in 🗨️ news comments stated that they did not know what had occurred until they tried to log into their accounts. They were greeted with a similar message to that of visitors, stating that the account had been deleted, later changed to suspended, as LJ stated no account had been actually deleted.

What came out later was that all of the affected accounts had similarities in their “Interest” lists.¹ Like many other sites online, LiveJournal allows for (and encourages) users to create a list of their interests, in order to find other people to Friend, new Communities to join. Along the way, this also gives the sites an idea of their users’ interests, allowing the sites to market to their users more effectively. LJ users, however, also used them as a way to broadcast what type of content may be in the journal; this was especially prevalent among Communities.




This became a problem in regards to the fanfic Communities that were affected by The Great Strikethrough. Inside the fanfic genre, there is a subgenre known as “slash,” which consists of romantic, and usually sexual, pairings of characters generally not paired in the original work. Slash fanfic deals with sexual themes, and often deals with more violent sexual themes such as incest and rape, as well as homosexual pairings. These terms were often listed in the Interests of these Communities, as well as other terms such as “pedophilia” and “violent sex.”

However, it became clear to the userbase that the content of the journals was not being taken into account in deciding whether or not to suspend the journal; it was based on what Interests were listed. Many of the suspended accounts were fanfiction related, especially Harry Potter themed fanfiction due to its wild popularity and due to its universe being populated with both students and teacher characters. These relationships were fraught with dramatic tension that these writers turned into sexual tension. While the entries posted in the affected accounts contained these themes, the stories were fiction, and not meant to be a description of an actual act, nor to be a goad to someone’s pedophilic desires; the focus in these stories is on the characters, not on the acts themselves. What cinched these suspicions for the community was the suspension of the 🇪🇸lolita07 Community, which hosts a Spanish language discussion of the novel *Lolita*, as well as a few personal journals which were used to allow the account holders to work through molestation and rape incidents in their own lives. As the content in

these journals would have quickly cleared up any question of illegal content, the fact they were deleted proved to the users that none of the accounts had undergone a content review at all, which LiveJournal later admitted.

In the end, the majority of accounts that were suspended were reinstated. However, unease remained among the userbase, especially those involved in the fanfiction community, in regards to SixApart. This was due to how SixApart handled the controversy, both in addressing it to begin with, and then in managing the fall out. Meanwhile the broader LJ userbase learned quickly how to use LiveJournal against itself and protest effectively.

Fighting LJ with LJ

As word began to filter through Friends lists that some accounts and Communities had been deleted, many LJ users became concerned over silence from 6A/LJ over the incident. Affected account holders attempted to contact LiveJournal to find out what had happened, sending emails to LiveJournal's Abuse Team. However, all reported these contacts were unsuccessful.  ataniell93 (since renamed to  tiferet) reported having two accounts she used for a LiveJournal based role playing game (or RPG) suspended, with the Abuse team refusing to release the accounts "in case they commit crimes later" (comment posted May 30, 2007,  news post dated May 24, 2007). She commented later in the thread that the RPG was "a wartime game" and therefore violent sexual acts would occur, but the rules of the game forbid descriptions of such acts, only allusions to it happening "offstage."

At first, the reports of the incident were through individual posts to journals and related Communities. As time went by and no official announcement was released by LiveJournal, LJ users took to the one place they were fairly certain LJ staffers would see their inquiries, the 📱news Community. 🧑niicolu was the first to post a comment to the most recent post in the Community, which was dated May 24. The comment, posted May 30 at 12:49am Pacific Time (the same timezone LiveJournal's office was and still is located in), asked "So. Any official statement on the recent deletions any time soon? Or ever?" This comment quickly opened the floodgates, and all further comments to the post were directed at information gathering, and information demanding, by the userbase.



The choice of the 📱news Community for the airing of grievances was not a random choice on the part of the users. 📱news was where most communication between userbase and 6A/LJ occurred, so it was a logical step to turn to 📱news to demand answers, even if Community members could not create new posts to it. When comments are made on a post, generally those same comments are sent via email to the person who made the original post, in this case a member of the LiveJournal staff. The hope was that a large influx of emailed comments would catch the attention of 6A/LJ and cause them to answer, however it is unknown if any of the comments were emailed to 🧑ljkriissy who made the post.







At the time of the Great Strikethrough, posts on LiveJournal were limited to 5,000 comments (this was expanded in 2011 to 10,000 comments). The May

24 post which had 6 pages of comments (approximately 375 comments) at the outset of the protest, quickly ballooned to 98 pages of comments and hit the 5,000 comment maximum within the first day.² When that post was filled, users turned to posts in other official Communities such as 🇺🇸lj_ads (created to discuss advertisements with the userbase), but mainly stuck to 📠news, moving to the next post back in the Community, dated May 17. Even though 6A/LJ did release a statement after commenting began on this post, users still pushed it up to the 5,000 comment mark to register their displeasure.³

The main focus of the userbase in these comments was to demand answers from SixApart and LiveJournal as to what had occurred and why. Some were direct in their questions, much like 🇺🇸niicolu who started off the comment bursts. Many, however took the opportunity to express their opinion on what had occurred, share information, and keep the pressure up on 6A/LJ.

Users also used comments in 📠news to rally each other and lend support. 🇺🇸parle (and several others) posted a link to the SixApart website and encouraged others to call SixApart to voice their concern (comment posted May 30, 2007). Several users reported back that they had contacted 6A; some calling and talking directly to public relations representatives, others going directly to voicemail boxes. Still others found email addresses to send messages to, and some found the fax number for the office and faxed letters expressing their disappointment and concern, as well as demands to address the LiveJournal community. Others shared information as they found it, both links to outside


sites that reported on the incident, and links inside LiveJournal to users such as liz_marcs and stewardess, two LJ users who wrote long posts in their own journals about the controversy, talked with representatives from LJ and WFI, and speculated on what happened and what was to come. Still others worked to influence LJ with their pocketbooks. A reoccurring theme was for users to state that they had been paid users for any number of years, but would no longer be paying for accounts until there was some answer to what had happened. Others turned off the setting allowing for their accounts to be automatically renewed when their paid time ran out, and posted the confirmation message to the comments. Others threatened to not take part in a previously announced sale of permanent accounts, although they had been awaiting the sale and had saved money towards the \$150 price.


Other LiveJournal users found different ways to use the tools LJ had created for them to work in protest against LJ. Some created new Communities to share information such as whydoesljsensor, fandompays, and ljspeaks, among many others. vichan created a different sort of Community called fandom_counts. It was publicized it through news, and then began to circulate through other fanfiction Communities as well as other fan related Communities. “Fandom” is made up of the broader community of fan groups, not limited to but generally centered around the Internet in general. Users were encouraged to join the Community if they considered themselves a “member of fandom.” Unlike other LiveJournal Communities, which allowed users to communicate and share

ideas via posts and comments to the Community, 🗳️fandom_counts would have no posts. Instead, it was simply intended to be a head count, as each Community contains a list of members, and a number of how many members it has. 🗳️fandom_counts grew rapidly in the first two days of the Great Strikethrough controversy; in its first 11 hours it counted over 22,000 members and as of early 2012 it still stands at over 33,000 members.

The membership count was updated regularly in 🗳️news posts, and others began using those numbers to calculate potential lost revenue to LJ, assuming each one was a paid user, or considering a permanent account. These numbers were not accurate, as the 🗳️fandom_counts numbers did not differentiate between paid, Plus, permanent, and basic account holders, nor could it predict who would have the funds to participate in future permanent account sales. It also was not an accurate headcount of *users*, instead it was a count of *accounts*. Some LiveJournal users have multiple accounts; some claim upwards of 10 accounts, in a mixture of paid and non-paying levels. Some users stated they would be joining the Community with “all” of their accounts, which does explain much of the number skew. In addition, this was a voluntary action, and those who joined were mainly representative of those members of fandom upset by the controversy, and who took the time to click through to the community and click on the “join” button. This type of sample is not wholly representative of the entire population, though it did give a large number to throw around in the same way LiveJournal often threw around the 13 million figure of accounts on the site, even

though the number of active accounts was much, much lower and pegged to be around 1 million accounts by some users.

Others made their opinions known by creating custom userpics, the small 100x100 pixel icons used to graphically represent themselves on the site. Unlike most social websites, LiveJournal has always allowed for users to have multiple userpics, and some users pay extra to have hundreds available. Each time a user makes a post or a comment on the site, they can select which userpic they have uploaded they want to use on the posting, so it can be possible for each post and comment to use a different userpic. Some users who were upset by the controversy created userpics related to the Great Strikethrough and shared them with other users. This allowed users of these userpics to let their opinions be known outside the news Community and spread it throughout the rest of LiveJournal as they posted to their own journals, left comments in friends' journals, and posted and commented in other Communities.⁴ This was especially important, as many LiveJournal users who were not affiliated with the fandom Communities did not know what had happened.

Fandom also used what it knew best to rally each other: popular culture. The movie *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End*, the third movie in Disney's *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, had opened a few days before the accounts were deleted, and the plot dealing with a band of pirates fighting the large East India Company resonated with the LJ fandom community. Many comments posted to the two news posts targeted contained lyrics to the song "Hoist the

Colours,” a song utilized early in the film, sung by those who had been convicted of piracy and who were awaiting their death by hanging, as a show of defiance. The chorus, “*Yo, ho, haul together/hoist the colors high/Heave ho, thieves and beggars/never shall we die*” was posted most often, including showing up on several userpics and banners to head journals with, as well as characters popping up in image macros and icons.⁵ Other fandoms contributed as well, creating image macros, pictures with superimposed text, from their chosen fandoms.⁶

All of this activity took a toll both on the userbase, and on the servers that hosted the site. Several users commented that they were skipping meals and were not going to sleep that night, instead obsessively refreshing the pages looking for new comments from other users, or a statement from 6A/LJ. Many of those comments were heavy in graphical content, or in content that was more server-intensive to load, with colored text and animated text. This load, combined with the sheer number of comments and posts coming through to the site and server requests from frequent page refreshes caused users across the site to report that the site was becoming slow and unresponsive by early morning on May 31, which was around the time 6A/LJ broke their silence to the community.

Silences, Speaking Out, and Outsiders


In the end, it wasn't the deletion of accounts that enraged the userbase most. While the deletions sparked stronger feelings of betrayal and mistrust than

the advertisement controversy of the prior year, it was the silence from SixApart and LiveJournal from the deletions on May 29 until their apology post on May 31 that created a great deal of actual anger and fueled the controversy further. By the time the community commenting had moved to the May 17 🗨️ news post, the topic of conversation had moved from an outpouring of opinion into calls for some type of communication from 6A/LJ, and an end to their silence.



A two-day silence may not seem very long when dealing with a corporate infrastructure. However, LiveJournal users were used to quick turn arounds from community leaders and owners. During the days when Fitzpatrick's Danga Interactive owned the site, Fitzpatrick would very quickly respond to user questions and concerns, sometimes even arguing with users. Even through the ad controversy, SixApart was responsive for the most part to community inquiry, and had been since with site outages and other issues that affected the users.


For SixApart to remain uncommunicative caused users great concern, even those who were not directly affected by the deletions, and caused them to ramp up their calls for some type of communication. "Even a placeholder 'hey everyone we are putting together a response' post would ease tension," 🧑‍🦰 crimsonclad commented (posted May 30, 2007). Many other users echoed this statement, saying that a short "we're working on it" statement would be better than the ongoing silence from SixApart.

Several other users reported contacting SixApart via phone, and were told statements would be forthcoming. 🧑‍🦰 ravenwleonhart stated they had spoken to


SixApart public relations, who said they were working on a statement for immediate posting at around 3:45pm Pacific Time on May 30. An hour later,  sciencegeek listed the phone number for “Jane in PR” at SixApart, whom they had spoken to a half hour prior, and had promised a statement in the next two hours.

While a statement did not appear on LiveJournal in this timeframe, a statement was published online, in an article appeared on the news site C|Net about the Great Strikethrough, with comments from Barak Berkowitz, SixApart’s CEO (McCullagh 2007). As news of this article filtered through the community, and began appearing elsewhere online (Jardin 2007, samzenpus 2007), there was anger first that Berkowitz had spoken to an outside entity before releasing any kind of statement directly to the users on LJ. Compounding that anger was a quote from Berkowitz that was pulled out as a highlight quote in the article, “Our decision here was not based on pure legal issues. It was based on what community we want to build and what we think is appropriate within that community and what’s not.”

This quote was posted over and over again across various Communities, in comments to  news, and continually repeated as the controversy continued into the following months. The users immediately bristled at the idea of SixApart “creating” the community.  notpoetry responded in a comment to one of the repostings (dated May 30, 2007) with, “Are you. Fucking. Kidding me. We built this community. We *are* the community. WE ARE YOUR USERBASE, LJ ... And

now you tell me that *you*, the corporate entity, is building that community? I don't fucking *think* so," a sentiment echoed by many others who commented on the same quote, including fragiletender who replied, "Dear Six Apart, you did not build this community – WE built this community, you just bought it." (comment posted May 30, 2007)


Also stirring users a few hours later was a post to the weblog MetaFilter about the Great Strikethrough, and comments left there by SixApart's Vice President Anil Dash (MetaFilter). Dash's comment was somewhat more along the lines of what the userbase was looking for than the comments from Berkowitz in the C|Net article. While Berkowitz took a stance that SixApart was in the right, and that a small number of accounts were affected, Dash instead released an admission of wrongdoing and an apology, as well as including personal contact information, encouraging readers to contact him with questions or concerns. However, this was again posted to an outside site, and LJ users would not hear from anyone from SixApart on their own site for another few hours. Some users, both on LiveJournal and on MetaFilter, called Dash out for what they considered a condescending attitude.

fragiletender's comment points to the major problem in this controversy, which is echoed from the advertisement controversy in the previous chapter. Even though SixApart had bought LiveJournal over two years prior, they were still considered outsiders by the LiveJournal community, and the comment about building communities proved that status to the userbase. The fact that SixApart



took to more traditional methods to explain what had occurred such as media outlets and other, larger blogs, before using their own platform also convinced the users that SixApart did not understand them. Many users pointed out to SixApart the mistake in their communications; [angelofsnov](#) commented, “LJ, I think you should make it part of your policy to address the community (on LJ) first whenever any major event happens. That could have saved so much miscommunication and wank.” [hoshitachi](#) also commented on the loss of trust, saying “If you would just have been telling us something anytime sooner, you would not have lost as much trust as you now have. My trust in you is severely [sic] shaken, I'm not sure if you will be able to regain it anytime soon” (comments posted May 31, 2007, [news](#) post dated May 31, 2007).

Also hearkening back to the advertisement controversy, users wondered if SixApart listened to outsiders more than the inside community itself when it came to reports of inappropriate content on LiveJournal. [roaring](#) stated that they had reported a comment to LJ Abuse by someone “expressing a desire to rape a girl that lived near them” (comment posted May 30, 2007). The response they received from LJ Abuse stated that “It is not illegal to discuss illegal actions” and that LJ could “only take action if the user is actively encouraging other users to commit such actions, or if they are soliciting or providing information on how to do so.” Soon, several other users reported that they had similar experiences with LJ abuse when reporting comments and journal entries, down to the same form letter. None of the accounts affected during The Great Strikethrough seemed to

be encouraging, soliciting, or informing readers on how to commit acts of child sexual violence, and so it appeared to users that a double standard had been put into place, where an outside group was given more credibility than the internal group who used the site every day. Compounded with an allegation on Metafilter of WFI contacting LJ advertisers to compel 6A/LJ to comply, this gave the userbase more reason to fret.⁷

The silence from Fitzpatrick, the site's founder who had been in the middle of the ad controversy, did not go unnoticed by community members. Many users called for a statement from Fitzpatrick, and wondered why he hadn't spoken up to this point. Fitzpatrick posted to his personal journal after SixApart made its statement to the userbase, saying he was on vacation, and didn't know any more about the situation than any community member (brad, entry posted May 31, 2007). He also stated a "little-known fact" that he was no longer working on LiveJournal, and hadn't for some time.

Moving Forward, Treading Water

Shortly before 1:00am on May 31, Berkowitz (under his username of barakb25) made a statement to the LiveJournal community, on LiveJournal itself (news). Titled "Well we really screwed this one up..." the post took a much more conciliatory tone than the C|Net article, admitting that the accounts were not reviewed before being deleted, that a full review would be taking place and accounts reinstated as appropriate, and stating a respect for fandom and its place in the LJ community. Several addendums were added as users continued

to comment, admitting to the mistake of speaking to C|Net before speaking to LJ's userbase. He addressed the fact that Fitzpatrick was on vacation, and commented, "I will need to beg his forgiveness too for doing such a bad job of filling in his absence." There was no mention of Fitzpatrick's movement to other projects inside SixApart, something users who had read Fitzpatrick's journal criticized Berkowitz for in the comments. This was the first that some users had heard of Fitzpatrick's change in role, however it escaped notice of most users as few users commented on the change, or mentioned it in the discussion. When a comment did mention the change of Fitzpatrick's status, it was met with exclamations of shock and surprise by others.



While comments to the post stated relief that there was finally a response addressed to them, there were still many unanswered questions users had for Berkowitz, as well as a great deal of anger. Berkowitz and Dash both responded to comments for several hours, however these interactions were very brief. Berkowitz would generally reply to one comment with a sentence or two, but not continue with the thread as more questions were posted in reply to his response. Dash did small amounts of follow-up, and as he had on MetaFilter provided his personal phone number and encouraged concerned users to call or send a text message, which at least one commenter stated they received a reply to. Neither, however, engaged with the userbase in an ongoing fashion outside of initial comment replies, and no other known 6A/LJ staff members stepped in to answer questions or concerns.

One of the largest questions that went unanswered in comments was the issue of Interests. Berkowitz stated in his apology post,

“Both in the instructions for profiles and in other places on the site we make it clear that interests listed should be evaluated within the context of “I like x”, “I’m in favor of x” or “I support x”. As many profiles are the only public part of a private journal and profiles serve partly as an advertisement for people of like interests, it is important that the content of a profile can be evaluated as if it stands alone. If your profile were to express interest in pedophilia with no other content that describes this interest as in helping survivors or protecting children from it we must read the profile as “I like or I support or I’m in favor of it.” For this reason we suspended profiles that meet this criteria.




Users had several problems with this statement. On the “Edit Profile” screen, where users input their Interests, the instructions read (at that time, and currently) “Short single-word phrases are best. Rule of thumb: You should be able to put the interest in the sentence “I am interested in _____,” and then goes on to give examples of how to phrase interests so they may be of use to the community. The Frequently Asked Questions (or FAQ) for Interests also lists no specific criteria for what an Interest should be, only describing it as “a way to describe what you like on your User Info page,” (LiveJournal n.d.d). This wording has stayed static through various incarnations of the page as confirmed through the Internet Archive website.

Therefore, it seemed Berkowitz’s understanding of “Interest” criteria was off-base, as nothing available to users clearly stated that interests must conform to a positive affirmation for the topic listed. Regardless, the large LJ community was utilizing these tools in a different way, defining “Interest” in a way more akin

to a research interest, and Community accounts often used Interests as a way to let others know what kind of content could be expected there. Many LJ users pointed this out, as well as drawing parallels between the use of “Interest” and the use of “Friend” on LiveJournal; “Why must ‘interest’ be read as “support in real life’ when listing someone as a ‘friend’ does not mean they are actually a friend?” asked imagines (comment posted May 31, 2007). kor27 commented that Berkowitz’s description of interests was “naïve, at best, and indicates a profound lack of understanding of how the communities you’ve bought operate” (comment posted May 31, 2006). Others pointed out the fallacy of Berkowitz’s definition of Interest towards users who had listed such things as infertility, diabetes, and other diseases in their Interests, saying that it would be odd for anyone to be in favor of any of these conditions. For the most part, Berkowitz and Dash stayed away from the topic of Interests, aside from Berkowitz commenting to another user who brought up these issues, “OK. Yes these are hard issues. That does not mean we can just ignore them.” The community interpreted this as Berkowitz, and by extension SixApart, failing to understand the community, as they were asking for further conversation and clarification, not to ignore the issue.

While many LJ users commented directly on the content of Berkowitz’s post, not all did. As this was the first public statement by 6A/LJ about the controversy, this was the first time the vast majority of the LJ community was hearing about what had occurred, and this post as well quickly hit the comment

limit of 5,000 comments. There were a great many more voices entering the conversation now, and with that a great deal of repeated postings and information. Many others took advantage of having the virtual ear of the CEO of their parent company to give their opinion of the situation, much as had happened in the prior days on other posts, however now the comments were longer, with more care taken to lay out a position. At the same time, other users who felt 6A/LJ were in the right commented to say so, and ended up in arguments with users on the other side.

Over the next 36 hours, Berkowitz would make two more posts in  news, both updating users on the progress of restoring the wrongly deleted accounts, promising that all “fandom, fiction” and those deleted who “had problems in their profile only” would be restored ( news, entry posted 5/31/07), and the owners of those accounts contacted to explain what happened and then work with those account holders to “avoid further difficulties” ( news, entry posted 6/1/07).

During this period, a more pointed shift in comments come from LJ users, and those who posted responses sorted mainly into three different themes. Members expressed wariness of SixApart and their intentions, but they were still watching and awaiting the final outcome. Another group was still incredibly angry, and took every opportunity to give voice to their anger. These messages included attacks and arguments on the third group, who were supportive of SixApart/LiveJournal’s efforts, including a subgroup who often stated what 6A/LJ did was “for the children.” This latter subgroup was the largest target of the angry

users, and also the group almost completely made up of non-fandom members. There was a great deal of animosity between these groups, and the in-fighting often threatened to overtake the discourse, which made it difficult to conduct a meaningful discussion.

Berkowitz's next post came a week later, on June 8, giving another update to users, reporting more accounts had been reinstated, a call to the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) had been made to discuss the situation. More discussions were promised to come, as well as ongoing reviews of policies and procedures by staff and the volunteer Abuse team. He shared some ideas that the 6A/LJ team were thinking about, encouraging users to continue to share their ideas as well. He ended the post with an announcement that further discussion of the Great Strikethrough (although he never used the term, nor did any LiveJournal staff) would occur in the 🗨️lj_biz Community, stating that it was "a more appropriate place to keep people informed of status and to discuss ideas" (🗨️news). To underscore this venue change, 15 minutes later a new post was made to 🗨️news by 👤ljkrissy, which attempted to move back into a "business as usual" format, acknowledging the upheaval, but then moving once again into updating the userbase with news of updated features and v-gifts. In a possible effort to direct the conversation away from the negativity of the previous few weeks, 👤ljkrissy asked users to "Tell us why you need a bear hug in the comments," and randomly selected commenters would receive the new animated "Bear Hug" v-gift. This direction seemed to help keep the negativity in that post

down, as the majority of comments to the post were in answer to the prompt (with some references to the Great Strikethrough) instead of to the events that had dominated 📰news for the last week.

Commenters coming from the fandom community immediately reacted negatively to the change of venue, mainly directing their anger towards Berkowitz, and not as much at 👤ljkrissey through her post. The fear was that the issue would be swept under the rug, due to 🎨lj_biz being a less trafficked Community than 📰news, not only in number of posts but in numbers of users watching the Community. 📰news was generally considered a “one stop shop” for information on news and happenings inside LiveJournal, and eventually all new users were automatically subscribed to it.⁸ 🎨lj_biz was considered more of a “specialty” Community, with less user involvement/interaction as LJ continued to grow. 📰news posts also often appeared on the front page of livejournal.com, whereas 🎨lj_biz posts did not.

The users’ fears seemed to be confirmed, as Berkowitz stated that in four days an announcement on compensation for affected journals, as well as ways to make amends to the community as a whole would be posted. Those four days came and went with no word from 6A/LJ, and no compensation was ever publically announced. Traffic also went down on posts as the discussion shifted to 🎨lj_biz. Posts in this Community in regards to The Great Strikethrough no longer saw large number of comments, instead seeing around 1,000 to 2,000 comments, instead of reaching the maximum of 5,000 regularly.


Berkowitz made one more post to the community in 🇺🇸lj_biz on June 20, to explain how and when the Abuse team would review content, and what was considered “content,” which included information on a user’s profile page. He responded to comments left in the first two pages of contents, but his engagement with the userbase seemed to end there. After that, 👤burr86, who had taken a front point during the ad controversy, made three posts to 🇺🇸lj_biz, one on the same day as Berkowitz, and the other two within hours of each other on July 19, attempting to clarify matters for the userbase. The first post did little to provoke users to action, although the tone of comments was a bit lighter, perhaps due to 👤burr86 being “one of us,” someone who came out of the community to work at LiveJournal. There wasn’t much new information contained in the post, as it was mainly a recap.

The second two postings caused a bit more conversation to take place, not only due to the content but due to the timing. These posts laid out what kind of content would be considered improper for LiveJournal, in three bullet points:

1. Material which violates United States Law ...
2. Material which encourages or advocates hate crimes, rape, or child abuse, or pedophilia ...
3. Material that asks for assistance in committing illegal activities that cause serious physical/emotional harm to others.
[<http://lj-biz.livejournal.com/241182.html>]



The comments quickly began picking apart the first two points, especially as 👤burr86 specified that the first point included “other material – including drawings or text – that explicitly depicts minors under the age of 18 (real or not)

in graphical sexual context.” This threw the slash fanfiction community into a great deal of doubt as to their welcome on LiveJournal.

The second post attempted to clarify further and calm the userbase, stating that LiveJournal was not looking to actively police journals, and that fanfiction that would run afoul of these rules would be rare. However, commenters were looking for concrete definitions, as many comments to both posts included “what if” scenarios, demanding to know what LiveJournal would do with specific information reported to the Abuse team. burr86 was reluctant to give answers, and instead attempted to answer the questions with general statements, which did not appease commenters. However, giving such concrete answers to “what if” scenarios could cause problems for 6A/LJ further down the road, which was perhaps not realized by the commenters. Nailing down specific “yes” or “no” answers to hypothetical situations gives LiveJournal very little room to maneuver when time came to apply the policy. In this case, users’ inability (or in some cases, refusal) to see the position LiveJournal was in caused more harmful feeling and resentment.



The community’s resentment was partially due to the timing of these two posts, which were the first time users had seen anything that resembled a policy clarification. These posts came two days before the release of the final novel in the Harry Potter book series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*. Many Harry Potter fans were taking themselves offline for several days before the official release date of July 21 until they finished reading the book, to keep from reading



“spoilers,” blog posts or comments elsewhere that would reveal plot points and action in the new work. Because Harry Potter fanfiction felt the brunt of The Great Strikethrough, some other fandom members claimed that 6A/LJ had planned the timing, so that the Potter fandom would be left out of the discussion. Although there is no way to ascertain the veracity of this statement, as no organization would want to admit to actively working to keep its customers in the dark, this lack of knowledge (which was inescapable in mainstream media) did not help LiveJournal’s case that it was trying to involve as many users as possible in its discussions on the subject.

This period also coincided with a previously announced permanent account sale, scheduled to begin within a few weeks. Permanent accounts are highly coveted by many LiveJournal users, as they confer all the rights of a paid account for the life of the account, without having to pay a monthly or yearly fee. The accounts go on sale rarely and for a limited period of time, usually one day. This permanent account sale was slightly different, in that it lasted for a week ( ljkrissy,  news, entry posted June 19, 2007). In addition, while the price was the same at \$150, those who purchased accounts within the first 36 hours would have \$25 of their payment donated to four organizations, two having to do with free speech and copyright on the Internet (the EFF and Creative Commons) and two dealing with sexual abuse and human rights (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (or RAINN) and Witness). The donation would either be split between the four, or the purchaser could opt to put the entire \$25 towards one

organization. Commenters questioned the sale timing, coming so soon after The Great Strikethrough, and in a period of time when the promised new policies had yet to be hammered out. Many LJ users were concerned about committing that large of a sum of money to an organization they were no longer sure they trusted. The 🍷lj_biz posts of July 19 were not seen as adequate explanations for many members of fandom to be comfortable purchasing a permanent account. LiveJournal does not release statistics on how many accounts are sold during these events, so it is unclear if the controversy impacted sales.

After this, very little new information came out of LiveJournal, even though users had not forgotten the strife and events continued. In early August, two more accounts were permanently suspended after posting drawings related to slash fanfiction. This incident was termed “Boldthrough,” as now suspended accounts were displayed in a bolded font instead of a line out as before. Users responded as they had before, filling the most recent posts in 🍷lj_biz with comments demanding answers. Instead of being addressed by one LiveJournal staff member, the community was addressed by 👤theljstaff, a new account created by 6A/LJ to make posts to 📱news and other LJ controlled Communities. This account addressed the Boldthrough in two posts on August 7 and on August 13, laying out stricter policies than 👤burr86 had less than a month earlier, stating that “any content which contains a graphical/visual depiction of a minor ... in sexually explicit conduct [is] a violation of our policy.” 👤theljstaff further clarified that it would review content that was placed under a “Friend lock,” which makes a

post visible only to those the poster lists as a Friend, but would not be reviewed unless there was a “reasonable expectation” that a “serious violation” would be present. As burr86 had earlier, theljstaff stated that it would be rare for a fanfiction Community to come afoul of these new policies, but users were not convinced.

The post to lj_biz on August 13, clarifying the policy further was the last to address the issue. News posts continued to allude to more coming policies around content reviews and Interests, and users continued to ask for it, but no clarifications were forthcoming. Around the time of the Boldthrough incident, Brad Fitzpatrick quietly left SixApart for Google, with no announcement to the LJ community (Thomas 2007). Berkowitz also left SixApart in September 2007, which was announced through a post to lj_biz, however the post was locked down and no comments were allowed on it (entry posted September 14, 2007). On December 2, 2007, SixApart announced it had sold LiveJournal to Russian media company SUP, who a year earlier was given control over Cyrillic based accounts, and a license to use the LiveJournal name in Russia. Users speculated that SixApart had grown weary of rebellions inside the community and wanted to rid itself of its “problem child.”

Community Belonging


Much as in the ad controversy detailed in Chapter 3, much of the misunderstanding during The Great Strikethrough had to do with a lack of cultural understanding on the part of SixApart of its broader userbase and the myriad of


groups inside that broader userbase. This is especially true for the fandom communities that called (and continue to call) LiveJournal home, as well as the type of content published on the site. Also compounding the issue was the inability of community members to understand why LiveJournal was unable to commit to concrete definitions for the application of the new content policies, a cultural misunderstanding by the community of corporate culture.


LiveJournal houses journals, and after spending time on LiveJournal, one realizes that very few users refer to what they do there as “blogging,” for all that LiveJournal falls under that banner. Most users use the term “journal” to describe their space on the site, which denotes a more personal form of communication than blogging. While some posts are indeed logs of a day’s goings on, others are deeper reflections on emotions and opinions on a very personal level. Entries are often long and detailed, something that is becoming a novelty in today’s world of short Twitter updates and Facebook status updates (Marwick 2008:4). Because of this, LiveJournal was not just considered a blog or a place to talk to others online, it became something akin to a home on the Internet frontier. In reading comments surrounding the Great Strikethrough, many users who discussed their feelings of hurt and betrayal by SixApart also described LJ as a home and somewhere where they felt safe, a place where they could express themselves without fear of retribution.


This is especially true for slash fanfiction communities, like the type targeted during the Great Strikethrough. Jenkins noticed that slash fanfiction

writers were “met with considerable resistance” from their broader fan groups, and from their “real life” communities for their hobby, and had difficulty finding places to call home (Abrams and Grün 2008:209-210). LiveJournal was found to be an ideal place for slash fans to congregate, as it was simple to use, easy to allow and deny access to various postings, and allowed for a great deal of customization (Abrams and Grün 2008:224). To have their community seemingly targeted by an outside group made them feel violated and unwanted in their new home. Similarly, users who utilized their journal as part of their healing process from abuse found themselves doubly victimized, and worse, described as the same as the people who victimized them. For these groups, their trust was shattered, and some disbursed to find new homes on the Internet, such as GreatestJournal and InsaneJournal, the latter of which was quoted by various LJ users as stating they would not delete any content without a legal notice.


While some left, others stayed behind to fight for their home. At one point, getaway_machine asks of the upset users, “[W]hy are you still here?” Almost 20 users answered, in responses that echoed through other comments asking similar, saying that they liked the site and wanted to see it make changes.

tavalya_ra: Because if we don't voice our disgust *how will things ever change?* I believe it can be changed or I wouldn't bother.



littlestclouds: The reason people don't just up and leave is because they like it here. They want improvements. There's nothing wrong with that.

skylion: So, I guess you feel the same way about yourself, correct? If something becomes hard or a bit too challenging, perhaps, you fold like an ironing board and go running somewhere else?

Somewhere else is the land of a thousands deaths (no threat too you intended by the way, merely illustrating where coward flee towards) If any of us that stand against this, rail against this are doomed to fail, at least we can say we fought for what we believe in.

 lamboyster: Because people fight for what they love, duh.
[<http://news.livejournal.com/99650.html?thread=50456898#t50456898>]



Fandom commenters rallied to defend their home not just from Warriors for Innocence who allegedly caused the upheaval in the first place, but from SixApart, the interlopers who bought the community, and whose CEO claimed that they had created LiveJournal as well, both in the C|Net article alluding to the “community we want to build,” and on his user Profile page, describing SixApart as the “makers of LiveJournal” (Berkowitz). Not only was Berkowitz appearing to take credit for the community’s work, at the same time the community could feel he was pushing them aside to make way for a new community built by SixApart, with a different look and feel than their LiveJournal home.

SixApart may have hoped that sending Berkowitz to address the userbase would calm them down, as having the CEO of a company come to discuss problems can make a group feel that they are being listened to. However, Berkowitz’s position as an outsider negated this advantage, and his outsider status showed just in his posting methods, not even fully having to do with the content of his posts. Many users noticed that while his account was created two years before, it had no entries, and no other activity until he began addressing users during The Great Strikethrough.  ccnuggie stated they couldn’t trust anyone with only one userpic (comment posted June 1, 2007, in  news post

dated June 1, 2007), causing [gameboyguy13](#) to reply, “One wonders if your trust level is proportionate to the number of icons” (comment posted June 4, 2007).


This comment focusing on amount of userpics also shows a bias of the userbase, showing in one sentence that SixApart was not seen as a member of the LJ community, and may not ever be seen as such. Many users only had one userpic, and their trustworthiness was not being questioned by anyone; using number of userpics to judge whether to trust a user would appear to be rather subjective. However, to some users something as basic as multiple userpics shows an understanding of how users communicate in ways other than words; while users can set mood icons for posts, many coordinate moods and subject matter with a userpic as well, providing their readers with a quick, at-a-glance preview of the post or comment. This is especially true for comments, which do not have an allowance for a mood icon setting, meaning that the only way to graphically demonstrate mood or feeling was via userpic, other than imbedding a graphic directly in the comment.

Berkowitz was also taken to task for posts that were short and often filled with typos and grammatical errors. A later post was grammatically correct, however appeared in a non-default font, suggesting it had been composed in an outside word processing program, then copy and pasted into an LJ entry. Both approaches caused scorn by users. The first posts were derided for giving an appearance that Berkowitz did not care about public perception by not utilizing

proper grammar and spelling. The latter, on the other hand, were derided for apparently using an outside program to check for such things, instead of the spell checker included in the LJ posting interface and basic human proofreading, the approach taken by many LJ users. This again seemed to show a lack of understanding of how the userbase used the site, and to the minds of community members, a hallmark of an outsider, or at least a hallmark of how SixApart felt about the LJ userbase. snowfox090 commented, “Also, if one can't be bothered to use basic correct grammar while addressing [sic] their customer base, what does that say about the amount of respect they hold--or rather, don't hold--for that same group?” (comment posted June 1, 2007, news post dated June 1, 2007) As community members seemed fixated on taking Berkowitz to task no matter how he posted messages begs the question if there was any way for SixApart to be seen as an equal, caring member of the LJ community at all.

Creating Power, Creating Content

For Web 2.0 sites to thrive, they not only need an organization to run the servers, write the software, and keep things working smoothly, they also need a group of users willing to provide the labor that creates content to draw visitors to the site. These types of sites thrive in what Toffler (Boellstorff 2008:208) calls “prosumption,” where consumers create the things they consume, “turning consumption into a form of production.” If there were no prosumers on LiveJournal to create content to be consumed, then no one would visit the site, pay fees for paid accounts, or view ads.

Prosumers hold a great deal of power on Web 2.0 sites, especially ones like LiveJournal, which allow for users to export their entire journal. This was generally meant for backup purposes, and many LJ users would backup their journals in times of upheaval on the site. However, this could lead to a removal of content as well as users backup all the content they have, delete their account, and then take their content to another site (in this arena, a site like GreatestJournal, InsaneJournal, or Blogger, among others), thus depriving LJ not only of a (possibly) paying customer and future content, but of all content that user had created to date. Then there is the fallout as the user who is leaving tells all their Friends they are leaving and why, and where to find them. Their friends, wanting to keep up with that user's content create an account on the new system. Those friends then may decide to follow suit, packing up their content and leaving. While it is difficult to determine how many LiveJournal users took such steps, some left comments in the different  news posts with links to their new accounts on InsaneJournal or GreatestJournal, mentioning that all of their content would also be posted there in the future. Others made "final" posts on their LJ accounts with links to the new journal sites, and some mentioned they would be crossposting content to LJ for some time. This abandonment leads to more empty space visible to other users who come to the site and look for specific kinds of content to consume.

Prosumers are more active than consumers, who often passively consume content, and therefore they have more agency toward the sites where

they produce and consume content. Joe Trippi, a political consultant, ran the 2004 presidential campaign for Howard Dean using social media, a novel idea at that time. What Trippi discovered was that the community that formed around this presidential bid was more powerful than he realized, and that they could accomplish what the campaign as a whole could not.


...The biggest myth of the 2004 election was that Joe Trippi was managing Howard Dean's presidential campaign. *They* were managing. It wasn't headquartered in Burlington, it was *out there*. Anything we could do *they* could do better. We'd put a new campaign flyer up on the web site for people to download, and in a few minutes, we'd get emails with new, improved versions of this same sign. We'd post those on the blog, and someone else would make improvements on the new flyers. [2004:116]

By utilizing the power of his movement, Trippi was able to propel Dean from an also-ran to the frontrunner candidate. Allowing that kind of control to pass to the community gave the campaign a great deal of success.

That being said, there are unfortunately consequences if organizations should turn over operations to their communities, Dean's losses once the primaries started can be seen as an example of this phenomenon. However, understanding that community members can be partners, and conversely that the organization is part of the community, can be a model for success and a connection to help the community and organization move forward. Wikipedia demonstrated this method in 2010, when the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization that supports the site, began a strategic planning process to direct the path for the site (and its sister sites) in the coming years. Instead of planning this by themselves, the WMF enlisted the help of their large contributor


base to give feedback and ideas. By working together over a long period of time, the WMF and community (over 1,000 participants from across the world volunteered for the project) were able to come up with a strategic plan that was agreeable to both parties, and created a shared vision for the future (Grams 2011).

As SixApart and the LJ community refused to act as partners in this situation, The Great Strikethrough stretched into a drama lasting several months, with distrust brewing among users, and most likely inside SixApart as well, considering the timing of the sale of LJ to SUP just a few months after the Boldthrough saga. Even if there was no distrust inside SixApart, the timing of the sale was suspicious to the userbase. The creation of policies by SixApart to deal with what 6A/LJ termed “Illegal and Harmful content,” did not involve the users that would be affected, and instead came across as a top-down imposition of values that did not fully line up with those of the users.



The sale of LiveJournal to a new company closed the door on the SixApart era of LJ ownership, which was fraught with technical difficulties and community upheaval. With Fitzpatrick gone (even though the majority of the userbase did not realize he was no longer with LiveJournal), and SUP being a Russian company, users were wary of what the coming year would bring. However, the majority opinion was best summed up by djcati, “Oh jeez. Gotta be better than SixApart, though” (comment posted December 2, 2007).

Chapter 5

Free to be... Sponsored

You just don't learn, do you? It's like watching someone drop a banana skin, slip on it, then pick the banana skin up, throw it a few yards ahead and walk right onto it again. And again. And again. --  manna

As 2007 wound to a close, LJ found itself in new hands, those of new owner SUP, and LJ users felt a great deal of uncertainty about what direction the site would take next. The last seven months under SixApart's management had been tumultuous, and many users adopted a wait-and-see attitude for what would come of what some were terming the “new Russian/Soviet overlords.”

For their part, SUP attempted to get off on the right foot with the LJ community. In the same post that announced the sale, assurances were made to the users that SUP was the correct company to “do right” by LJ ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted December 2, 2007). In that vein, SUP would be creating a new company, LiveJournal, Inc., which would be solely dedicated to LiveJournal. This move was in contrast to SixApart, which owned several different sites and software platforms, dividing its attention. In addition, it was announced that all SixApart employees that were full-time LiveJournal staff would become staff members of the new LJ, Inc, ensuring continuity.

Also in the same post, an announcement appeared for the LJ Advisory Board, which would “represent the users,” but would be separate from the management of the new LJ, Inc. This Board would have oversight into various issues including policies, privacy, security, and “community traditions.” The first

Board member announced was Brad Fitzpatrick, the LJ founder who had left SixApart during the Great Strikethrough just a few months earlier. Along with these appointed members, SUP promised to add two user-elected representatives, noting that they were inspired by the Wikimedia Foundation Board of Trustees, which is also made up of a mixture of appointed members and community-elected members (Wikimedia Foundation 2012). The Wikimedia sites (the largest and best known is Wikipedia) are also large community-based content collectives with a fairly successful Board model, therefore seeming to be a good fit for the new LJ, Inc. The largest difference, however, is that while LJ, Inc. is a for-profit company, the Wikimedia Foundation is a non-profit organization, a distinction that proved some foreshadowing of things to come, as boards have a different function in non-profits as opposed to for-profits.

Further, SUP made a commitment to work through the policy update promised by 6A during the Great Strikethrough and created a new Community to work through those issues, 🧑🏿🗣️lj_policy. Also created was 🧑🏿🗣️lj_2008, a Community to discuss the new changes SUP was bringing to LJ. Finally, users were again reminded, as 6A had stated so often before, that their comments were important and that SUP heard them. As a bonus for joining the new 🧑🏿🗣️lj_2008 Community, users would be able to see an invitation to an “exclusive” party in San Francisco the following night to celebrate the transfer of ownership, posted by Fitzpatrick.¹












The userbase's response to this series of moves was wary, but hopeful. The addition of two new Communities segregating discussions of interest to the entire userbase was concerning to some, causing them to question how many Communities they would be expected to follow to keep abreast of all new information concerning LiveJournal, as many were following 🇺🇸lj_biz, 🇺🇸lj_maintenance, and 📱news among several others. Users saw this as a continuation of policy under SixApart, relegating discussions to smaller venues. This would make such topics less visible to the broader community who would quickly forget about them. The return of Fitzpatrick was seen as a good thing, even if it was the first some of the userbase had heard of his departure. Even though Fitzpatrick had moved on to Google, LJ was still seen as his "baby," and users felt he would continue to look out for its best interest. The addition of user-elected representatives to the Board also garnered interest from users, with many asking for more details on how to run for one of these spots.

The party announcement, however, did not garner as much interest. Parties have a history on LJ; early on in the site's existence, Fitzpatrick and other early LJ staffers would throw parties open to any LJ users who could attend (👤bradfitz entry posted September 5, 2000, 👤evan entry posted October 26, 2000, 📱news), and often posted updates from those parties in various states of inebriation to 📱news. Users, even those who were too far away to attend, generally met posts about upcoming parties with amusement.



SUP's party announcement, however, was met differently. Some users felt it was not fair to announce a party with only one day's notice, which would not allow a majority of LJ users to make arrangements to attend, seeing as it was being held on a weekday night. Others felt that a party was not appropriate, considering the amount of strife still evident in the community regarding policy clarifications yet to be made, and wondered if it was a smart idea to invite possibly hostile community members to a party with the LJ staffers they had clashed with months earlier. A reminder post in 📱news set with a mood icon of "drunk" was met with scorn by some users, pointing out that the strife of previous months was meant to protect children from "harmful material," and (somewhat sarcastically) wondered if publically announcing a drunken state was appropriate for minors to see. As users poured on the criticism, it became apparent that even though the conflicts of the previous year had taken place on SixApart's watch, SUP would also be held accountable for these mistakes.

Also posted was the "100 Day Plan," a list of features and other improvements that would be focused on for the following three months (👤theLJstaff, 🇺🇸lj_2008, entry posted December 2, 2007). Some of the items, such as "optimize navigation" and "enhance the registration process" seemed vague, and many users criticized these points for what they saw as an overuse of "marketing speak." Other items, such as the promised policy update which been on the LJ community wishlist for months were well received. Also of note was a line in the posting that stated there would be an "increase [in] certain limits for


basic and Plus accounts” which also spurred user interest. These two account levels are on the lower end of features, including having the fewest userpic slots, a commodity highly prized by LJ users. This was never expounded upon, and some users speculated that the “increase” in those limits would be just that, more limits on the accounts instead of an increase in the numbers of userpics or amount of storage space.

Over the next weeks, updates came in a somewhat steady stream both to news and to lj_2008 with progress pertaining to the 100 Day Plan. New features such as the LJ Explore area (theljstaff, news, entry posted February 1, 2008), and a new icon to further distinguish posts “locked” to a user’s friends list and posts “locked” to a customized friends filter were announced (theljstaff, news, entry posted February 28, 2008). More details on the Advisory Board, including appointed members and the requirements for the user-elected representatives were also released (theljstaff, lj_2008, entries posted February 28 and March 12, 2008). Another announcement was for a new hire, Vice President of Product Development Jason Shellen who came to LJ from Google and who was cited as a creator of competing blogging service Blogger. Progress and activity also continued in lj_policy. LJ also solicited suggestions from the suggestions Community, running a poll asking users to rank their top three unimplemented suggestions for consideration by LJ engineers (entry posted by coffeechica, December 26, 2007). While the userbase did not fully warm to all of these announcements, there did not seem to be any further

mistrust of the new ownership or of LiveJournal. Improvement was still in the distance, but for the moment things were not any worse than they had been.

March 12 marked the 100th day of SUP's ownership of LiveJournal, and  theljstaff marked the occasion with a post to  news, rounding up all that had been accomplished. Much of this information had already been reported in other Communities, however there were still some new items to report, including infrastructure improvements, as well as some cosmetic changes. Towards the end of the post, changes to the new user registration process were mentioned. The process had been “streamlined and simplified” making it “faster and easier than ever” for new accounts to be created, however SUP released no details on those improvements.

One Step Forward, Three Steps Back

It did not take long for LJ users to find out what had changed. On the second page of comments,  redbird noted “That's all very well, but can we have the ‘create a free account’ easy option back? Not everyone wants either paid or ‘sponsored.’” (comment posted March 12, 2008) This opened the floodgate of LJ users discovering what had occurred, and who began adding comments registering their displeasure and concern over this new direction.

The removal of the free, or basic, account level reopened many of the wounds created when advertisements were introduced on the site by SixApart in 2006. Back then, Fitzpatrick promised that the free account, unsupported by ad revenue, would still be an option, stating “we’re not phasing [it] out.” The

userbase believed that the removal of the basic account level broke that promise, forcing new users to either see ads on their journals, or pay a fee to not see them.

Causing even more consternation was that this change was essentially buried in the text of the post and not openly announced to the userbase. The move was announced in an update to the FAQ entry for account levels occurring just before the post to 📧news, however this was not linked to in the 📧news post, nor did SUP/LJ, Inc. divulge the details of how the signup process had been streamlined to the userbase. The only way the userbase could find out exactly what had changed was for a user (in this case, 🐦redbird) to take it upon herself to go through the new account signup process looking for changes and alterations, and then reporting back.

Some users asked if the newly appointed Advisory Board had been consulted on this change, as this seemed to be well within their purview. At the time, four members had been appointed and announced, with two of them being active members of the LiveJournal community. Aside from Fitzpatrick, a known quantity to the userbase, the other was researcher danah boyd, at the time a PhD student at UC Berkeley studying teens and social media who has had an active account since the early days of LiveJournal. The other two members, businesswoman Esther Dyson and professor Lawrence Lessing made no statement, however boyd and Fitzpatrick took to their own LiveJournal accounts to speak to the LJ community about the change. True to the independent nature

of the Board, both Fitzpatrick and boyd were critical of the policy shift. Both confirming it had not been discussed in any substantive way with them. Fitzpatrick stated he had advised against such a move when he'd "heard a rumor" about the move (Brad's Life, entry posted March 12, 2008), while boyd stated LJ, Inc. representatives had floated the idea at a lunch she and Fitzpatrick attended, and both told the LJ representatives it was "the worst idea ever, although for different reasons" (danahboyd, entry posted March 13, 2008). boyd went on to say that, "I had thought it had been tabled until I learned of this. After it had been posted." Both Fitzpatrick and boyd stated separately that while they were upset that LJ, Inc. hadn't consulted before moving forward, they remained optimistic.



Both Fitzpatrick and boyd, as community insiders, saw the value of the basic account level, understanding those users as prosumers who created content that others (including those who showed ads on their journals, and those who paid for access) came to read. boyd also noted another important role for basic accounts, providing readers for paid members. She commented that she had a paid membership on her personal account for many years. Many of her friends who had accounts to read her journal had basic accounts and produced little, if any, content of their own. However, if she did not have those readers from those free accounts, she would not bother producing content, nor would she pay for the account she held. She also explained an understanding both of the


need for LJ, Inc. to make money, and the unique environment of LiveJournal which caused issues to those monetization strategies:

Systems like LJ are an ecology and individual-driven monetization approaches fail miserably. People have different levels of participation, engagement, and tolerance. What they want from the system differs as does the way that they relate to others. It's a networked system and pissing off users affects more than just the user-company relationship - it affects the whole network. I totally understand that it's not possible to provide a service (and engineers and support and ...) for free, as much as we would all like that to be the case. But... I'm not convinced this is the right move to balance the financial scales.

boyd ended her post with the hope that LJ would listen to the userbase and to the Advisory Board moving forward, and encouraged the community to continue to speak their minds ([danahboyd](#), entry posted March 13, 2008).

Also wading into the fray for the first time was Shellen, a few months into his appointment as VP of Product Development. In a response to [redbird](#), Shellen (under his official account of [jasonshellen](#)) responded that LJ, Inc.'s decision was an attempt to make the registration process easier for new users (comment posted March 12, 2008). He claimed that having two options, either to have an ad-supported account or one supported by a fee was a more "easy to understand work-flow." He stated that it had probably "been ages" since most commenters had signed up for a new account, and therefore were not aware of how "confusing" the process had become. He further clarified that the basic account was not disappearing entirely; new basic accounts would not be able to be created, but current basic accounts would still stand.

Many users were quick to take issue with Shellen's comments, mainly pointing out that he had not addressed the larger issue, namely that this change had not been clearly announced, instead being buried under market-speak, causing users to dig out what had happened for themselves. Now-former staffer rahaeli, who had her own run-ins with the community during the advertising controversy a few years prior, immediately stepped up adding "Also, you know, LJ users can see through spin like it wasn't even there. Dressing it up and saying it was to make things easier for new users is not going to fly: just come out and say that it was to increase ad impressions" (comment posted March 12, 2008). This comment resonated with commenters, with many stating they agreed and were glad to see a former LJ-staffer taking a stand. rahaeli replied, like boyd and others, that she understood the business decision, but could not stand behind the way the announcement was made, "What I object to is the stealth and the spin. *Own* your fucking decisions, man" (comment posted March 13, 2008).

Shellen commented again, further down in the thread, thanking everyone for "bringing up these additional points," and stated that the reason the change was not announced in news was because "it doesn't affect users other than new users and News updates are for existing users" (comment posted March 12, 2008). He further commented that most new accounts being created were at the Plus level "anyway," the level that displays ads in exchange for more access to features. LJ users immediately took issue, again, and commented that Shellen, and by extension SUP, obviously did not know their userbase. For starters, they



argued, the Plus level had been made the default level when creating a new account, and many users don't change defaults when registering anywhere for the first time.




The other statement users complained about was that new account creation was stated to be for "new users only." Many LJ users hold multiple accounts on the service; I personally have four accounts on LJ, one paid, one basic, and two Plus (both created after March 12, 2008). Other LJ users hold many more, and during the Great Strikethrough many users stated having numbers of accounts ranging into the double digits, and of various levels. There are a myriad of reasons why LJ users create multiple accounts. Some are playing role-playing games, and create new accounts for their characters either to flesh out their stories or to participate in LJ-based games. Others segregate certain types of posts (such as political posts, fandom posts, or other niche specific topics) into a separate account. Some additional users may want to make a clean break from the history associated with their current account and start over with a clean account, especially during the time before LJ allowed for accounts to be renamed. Even today, renaming an account requires the purchase of a rename "token," whereas a new account can be created from scratch for free.


Shellen made two more comments in the thread, pointing responders back to his previous comments, stating that he was reading and responding, and also commenting that "the personal attacks are a bit much," and later that "Wow... it's



getting brutal...” in relation to the userbase’s reaction to his comments (both comments posted March 12, 2008). Much as during the Great Strikethrough and the ad controversy before it, some users again resorted at times to language that did not further the discussion at times. However, ad hominmen attacks were not at the levels seen during these two prior incidents, at least not in the thread Shellen was most active in, and most personal attacks were directed at other users, not at Shellen himself. When it came to Shellen, the majority of users stated that he obviously didn’t know this userbase, which may have been true considering he had been on the job for just under three months at the time of this incident, and while he had involvement with Blogger, that userbase is different than LiveJournal’s, a community that continues to have a reputation around the Internet for being incredibly outspoken. Others wondered if he could “smell [his] own bullshit,” a reference to the marketing speak employed both in the post to 🗨️ news, and to the language Shellen employed in his comments, with other users repeating 🗨️rahaeli’s point that that LJ users see through that type of language, and, as 🗨️xb95 noted in a comment, seemingly trying to upsell the community as a whole to paid accounts in his first comment. Other users pointed out that while he was indeed responding to comments, he was not following up where others had noticed his mistakes, or offered any other type of statement that the user’s comments were indeed being listened to and taken into consideration.

Shellen participated in the discussion through several pages of comments and then dropped out of the discourse, and was the only known LJ staffer to


respond to comments in this post. marta, a LJ user who had joined the staff the year prior and worked as a type of go-between between LJ, Inc. and the community (and who was held in high regard by the community) did not participate in the discussion, and while some LJ support and abuse volunteers spoke up, it was to speak against LJ's actions. Fitzpatrick and boyd were also quiet in the comments to the post in news. Many users lamented that any progress that had been made in regards to LJ, Inc's transparency level to the community was basically shattered with this action.








The next day, theljstaff posted again to news to address the uproar (entry posted March 13, 2008). However, unlike the post following The Great Strikethrough, or even the tone taken during the ad controversy, this post was unapologetic. Stating that SUP had "made it very clear that LiveJournal was going to change," the move to remove the basic account level was "emphatically" a business decision. theljstaff's post admitted that the new team was "still working out how to strike just the right tone" in communications to their userbase, and reminded users that LJ was a business that had grown into a "pretty successful company" which now employed people around the world. Changes were coming, including new offices (announced in an earlier post) and personnel, as well as new policies and products, specifically the new account structure. The post closed by imploring the userbase to "embrace" new features, that they "may certainly criticize" features they did not like, and that these new features would require investment from SUP, but also "engagement, understanding, and ideas"



from the LJ community.  theljstaff 's comments did not include mention of an apology, their understanding of the community's position, or indications that SUP would consider altering their policy. However, the post did mention that the community had raised "legitimate concerns" over the announcement (or lack thereof) of the change, and that the message had been "received, loud and clear."

The userbase reacted immediately and harshly to the post, and while many expressed surprise that SUP addressed this controversy so quickly, unlike so many other conflicts between users and LJ staff that went several days without any kind of acknowledgement. However, a majority of commenters were upset at the lack of apology in the message, and quickly noticed SUP's new tone in handling disputes with the community.  leora commented that the tone of the post was "we're sorry you're mad," (comment posted March 13, 2008) which  wigglyfish followed up on saying that such statements were "a timeless hallmark of bad service" (comment posted March 13, 2008).

Reopening Old Wounds

Complicating matters was the discovery around the same time (by  stewardess, who had made a name for herself during The Great Strikethrough) that a software release had filtered certain Interests from a new feature that allowed users to see a listing of popular Interests. The list of filtered Interests included terms such as "fanfiction," "yaoi" (a term used to describe Japanese cartoons, either motion (*anime*) or static (*manga*) depicting sexual relationships

between young boys), “bisexuality,” “depression,” and “bondage,” among others (stewardess, comment posted March 16, 2008, changelog post dated March 6, 2008). As they had during The Great Strikethrough, LJ users took to the latest news post to express their displeasure, which was the post on the removal of the basic account level. While never addressed officially in news, marta replied that the filtration was a “mistake,” (comment posted March 17, 2008) and henrylyne, who had made the initial change, commented in the changelog post that the change would be “rolled back” (or removed) in a release occurring the same day.

The userbase worried that SUP had not learned from the mistakes of SixApart, having reopened wounds from two of the largest controversies of the last two years (The Great Strikethrough and the ad controversy) in less than a week’s time. Calls began in comments to the news post for a content strike across the site, and users arranged one for March 21, with notices being crossposted across various Communities and personal journals, as well as in the comments in news. The strike would commence at midnight GMT on March 21, and last until midnight GMT March 22. Strike participants would not post or comment on the site, including posts made to filters, under a Friends lock, or even private posts visible only to the account holder. Users were reminded to turn off RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds that would crosspost content from other sites to LJ, as well as apps that would crosspost Twitter posts to LJ. The hope was not to cripple LiveJournal the way a mass exodus would, but would

instead show the “power of community” by reminding the new LJ owners that it was the community who created the content that made the site a destination, making a dent in daily posting numbers sitewide.

Shortly after the strike was announced, an article appeared on Firefox News, with a comment from an unnamed SUP spokesperson, commenting on the interest filter. However, the removal of the basic accounts was not addressed (Wilson 2008a). LJ members quickly began comparing this article to the now infamous C|Net article quoting then-SixApart CEO Barak Berkowitz during The Great Strikethrough, as once again a content issue had been addressed on an outside website instead of first to the LJ community on their own site. Again, SUP had proved itself to be no different than 6A to LJ users, who continued demanding information from SUP, racking up 5,000 comments in the 📰 news post, and close to 3,000 in the prior post which had initially kicked off the ire.



Fuel to the Fire




A further complication arose in an interview released three days before the planned boycott by the Russian online newspaper Izbrannoe with SUP “Social Media Evangelist” Anton Nossik (Skorobogatko 2008). Printed in Russian, non-Russian speaking LJ users quickly utilized sites such as Alta Vista’s Babelfish to get a quick translation, and Russian-speaking users offered up their own translations of the entire article. Comparing a few of the various translations on LJ with a translation I received from a Russian contact unconnected to this

incident, there are a few differences in word choice, but the content and tone remains basically the same across all translations, especially in the areas that riled LJ users.

LJ users had several objections, the largest was Nossik's use of the word "idiots" to describe people who call the companies that advertise on LiveJournal, demanding they pull their ads. This word was included in every translation available. As some LJ users had done just that during The Great Strikethrough, and that the specter of such action by an outside group that many blamed for that incident in the first place, some users took the term personally. They then went on it to claim Nossik was calling all LJ users "idiots." Nossik repeated the same refrain as Shellen, that the majority of newly created accounts were on the Plus level, but added another rub, that "a significant portion" of newly created accounts were created by current users to post spam related posts and comments and cause disruptions on LJ.² This again hit some LJ users personally, remembering that a good number of LJ users hold multiple accounts not used for spam or any other nefarious purpose.


Users also hit Nossik for a misstatement about early days of LiveJournal. He claimed that until 2005, "users would be told in no uncertain terms: 'Even if you decide to upgrade to a paid account, you won't get anything extra for your money. Any payment to LJ is seen as a donation. Do you like our project? Then give us some cash.'" (Skorobogatko, 2008)

Users were quick to point out this wasn't true, as evidenced by the Early Adopter user status created to preserve features for early users that were taken away when the new paid account level was created in 2000 and the free features were curtailed;  pinkfinity linked to a post in her own journal where she used The Internet Wayback website³ to compare old versions of the FAQ entry on paid accounts to show the features paid users received that basic users did not, including access to faster servers, more userpics, and an @livejournal.com email address among others (entry and comment posted March 19, 2008). Later in the article, Nossik seemed to contradict  theljstaff, saying that "LJ wasn't a business" in the early days.


Nossik responded to these criticisms and more in his official journal ( anton_nossik), as well as responding to many comments left there with his personal account ( dolboeb). He stated the translations were contributing to the uproar, calling those done by "third parties" worse than ones done by "machine" (i.e. Babelfish). He also alluded to interference from the interviewer, saying the translations had "distort[ed] whatever little was left of my original words" (entry posted March 20, 2008).  telenl, a commenter purporting to be the editor of Izbrannoe, commented on the post asking if the reporter did distort his words (comment posted March 20, 2008), to which Nossik never responded.


Nossik stated in his LiveJournal post that he was giving his own opinions, and was not speaking on behalf of SUP. To attempt to clear up his position at SUP, he stated SUP had asked him to come on as an advisor in 2006, and his



official title was that of Social Media Evangelist. However he did not include any further discussion of his position or involvement with SUP, other than to give other credentials as to his longevity on LJ, and the fact that his personal account was a permanent account. He declined to give further information when asked by commenters to his post. This left LJ users unsure as to who they were talking to in the overall scheme of SUP hierarchy. This problem garnered many complaints from LJ users over the years, as LJ employees were apparently not required to identify themselves as such in their profiles or on their pages. This was confusing to many users, as hearing statements from a manager is different from hearing statements from someone further down in the hierarchy. It also works against the transparency that online communities expect, which was at the heart of the current controversy. Not being open about his role at SUP looked to be another instance of LJ leadership not dealing honestly with their userbase.

Nossik went on to attempt to explain the history of paid accounts, quoting the Paid Account FAQ as viewed from 2001 until 2005 (as accessed with the same Wayback Machine link used by  pinkfinity) stating that paying for an account was not required, but seen as a better way to support the service than placing banner ads on the site. He also stated that there were no extra benefits given to holders of paid (or permanent) accounts, which was spelled out in chart form on the page he had cited. This misstatement led users to attack him within the comments, giving voice to concerns that SUP did not know anything about the site they had purchased not only in community makeup, but in the history of

the site in general. This was particularly concerning for users, as they were part of that history.


Nossik also stated he did not call LJ users, or anyone, an “idiot,” but instead was commenting on the “idiocy” in following the lead of those “whose contribution to LJ is unclear, to say the least,” in their calls for action against LJ, such as contacting advertisers. He specifically mentioned antisponsoredlj, a Community created to protest the sponsored Communities introduced two years prior as a new advertising revenue stream. He continued to mention this Community throughout his comments to the post, even though other users pointed out that not everyone who had concerns about LJ were members of this small Community.


While Nossik conceded that the Community in question was indeed small in size, he appeared to imply that users on that particular Community, and others like it, were not “committed” to LiveJournal, due to their complaints and concerns. These were the users he was describing in his interview as those only out to “cause LJ and its creators harm.” chaeri pointed out that after having looked through the Community and reviewing profiles of the members, that “most [members] have at least one hundred journal entries, 70-80 friends, comments over a thousand, and appear to have had the journal for more than two years. so,[sic] apparently, there goes your theory that only sock puppets⁴ and people without an invested interest in LJ are angry” (comment posted March 20, 2008). While Nossik never outlined for what type of activity defined a user who was




“invested” in LJ,  chaeri spoke for the userbase, showing that members of  antisponsoredlj were committed to LJ in terms of years on the site, comments to posts by others, active Friends lists, and a healthy numbers of their own posts. This portrays members of that Community participating in all levels of LiveJournal, not just in activities seen as negative to LJ as a business.


Nossik attempted to explain his statements regarding the upcoming boycott, likening the action to “blackmail” and an action that would tie the hands of the company.




In a situation where people try to blackmail and intimidate us, threatening to destroy our business, there are solid reasons and business guidelines not to reward such behavior. That’s basic human psychology: we are far less willing to cooperate when we feel pressured and rudely treated. The thing is, never in the history of any given successful venture, has success been achieved by way of an aggressive and unfriendly disposition. No decision, no matter how right it is, should be made under duress.

While Nossik addressed concerns that basic accounts were now fully in jeopardy of returning due to the boycott, saying they were not, he did not address the biggest issue users had with this statement, namely the inference that those participating in the boycott were attempting to blackmail SUP/LJ, Inc. “How are any of our actions—or the actions of the people you are talking about, if not us—akin to blackmail or intimidation or sabotage?” asked  cacahuete in a comment, “What makes you think we want to harm LJ or that we are unfriendly to it after years of loyal use and, in many cases, significant payment?” (posted March 19, 2008)





Nossik (commenting under his personal account dolboeb) replied, “I believe that someone with years of loyal use, someone who chose LJ over other platforms, knows to value the service, wants it to remain the place of communication, not flames and fighting, and is rather interested in a productive and constructive dialog with the service, than just shutting it down to make a point.” He concluded his comment by saying, “I don’t remember a single case, when compromise were reached by a refusal to talk, and a shutdown” (comment posted March 19, 2008).


This prompted a flurry of commentary from other LJ users, many objecting to the idea that boycott was the only option they had tried. “The problem is, every time we attempt dialog, we're shut down,” commented shadesong, “Dialog is always our first recourse - look at all of the comments on news posts! We want to sit down and have a discussion, but when we attempt to do so, we're ignored, dismissed” (posted March 20, 2008). todiefor followed up, “If you could kindly point out where you see anybody refusing to talk, I would gladly swallow that statement as it is. Until then, all I SEE is dialogue about this issue. EVERYBODY wants to talk about it. It's your company that's unwilling to discuss this with us without trying to backpedal and poo-poo things like it's us who should've known what you ‘meant’ to say” (comment posted March 20, 2008).


Other users saw a culture clash and attempted to bridge it by explaining, in abbreviated form, the history of strikes and boycotts in the West. griffen suggested Nossik read up on boycotts, and cautioned that “Calling [such actions]

'blackmail' is a great way to get people in those countries to stop taking anything you say seriously" (comment posted March 20, 2008).  featherofeeling commented, "We've almost built protest into our models of interactions in the US and many other close countries, but other nations haven't. I'm worried that with new management being based in Russia, user reactions in  news could be seen as aggressive and provoke opposition and attitudes like *No decision -- even the most correct one -- should be taken under duress*" (posted March 20, 2008).  loganberrybunny followed up saying that, "the tradition of open protest is vitally important to most LJers (not just Americans!)" and likened boycotts to the "fiasco" of New Coke in the 1980's, when the Coca-Cola company introduced a new formula for its flagship product (comment posted March 20, 2008). When consumers revolted and stopped buying the product (in effect, boycotting it), the company changed back to the original formulation, thus proving the power of the consumer boycott.






Mea Culpas

Around the time of Nossik's comments and the run up to the boycott,  theljstaff posted to  lj_2008, reversing their original post to  news, admitting that the announcement of the removal of the basic account level from new account creation went against internal policy to post "proposals affecting overall user experience" for community comment, and apologizing for the lapse ( lj_2008, entry posted March 19, 2008). They announced that there were discussions taking place that might result in bringing back the creation of basic

accounts for current users. Also included in the post was a series of other changes to the service up for discussion. The timing of the post amused some commenters, coming two days before the planned boycott, and a day after Nossik's interview hit the Internet, while others were pleased to see an apology. However many expressed a desire to see this post crossposted to  news as well. True to LiveJournal style, commenters gave their opinions on the changes mentioned in the post, including LJ, Inc.'s idea to allow Community moderators to charge for access to their Communities. This suggestion was soundly rejected by commenters, and caused them to question how desperate the new LJ, Inc. was for revenue. The post did not mention Nossik's interview, or the interest filtering concerns.





The boycott occurred March 21 as scheduled. There were no official count of number of participants, nor does LiveJournal release daily activity numbers, so the scale of participation is unknown. Anecdotally, the majority of LJ users were not affected by the boycott. The next  news post on March 27 made no mention of the uprisings and complaints, aside from alluding to them with the saying that for LJ March came "in like a Lion... out like a Lamb." In the same post, they also mentioned that Shellen had decided to leave LJ, Inc., barely three months into his appointment. Speculation was rampant (both inside the LJ community and outside of it) that he left due to the unpleasantness inside the LJ community directed at him during the furor, however he maintained it was due to

the time difference between LJ's San Francisco office and SUP's home office of Moscow (Thomas 2008).


Moving forward, no further mention of the interest filtering was made. The basic account removal was finally addressed on July 17, in both news and lj_2008, with the news posting being mainly a pointer to the discussion at lj_2008. There, theljstaff explained the discussion process that had occurred over the intervening months, including two discussions with the Advisory Board (one before and one after the community election held in May). LJ committed to restoring the basic account level for all users, existing and new, by the end of August. Furthermore, the leadership laid out four proposals for how the basic accounts would look moving forward, which would include the addition of “limited advertising... viewed in certain circumstances.” The post stated that logged-in basic account holders would not see advertisements when reading their own journal and Friends pages, nor on any of the journals of their friends who were also basic account holders. However, basic users would now see ads affecting their account more than in the past, when no ads would appear on their journals, and they would only see ads only when viewing journals held by Plus account holders.

One new proposal suggested showing ads on the journals of basic accounts when non-logged in users viewed those pages. Another would show basic account holders ads on “application” pages such as the ones they used to update their journals or to edit their journals. The final proposal suggested









showing basic account holders ads when they viewed a journal of another basic account who was not Friendened, or Community (also at the basic level; Communities have the same types of account levels as individual journals) of which they were not a member. A corollary proposal stated that having a mutual Friend of the journal or Community would avoid advertising being shown. The post ended saying that LJ would be collecting feedback for two weeks on the proposals, encouraging users to comment on the post with their ideas, and then would make a decision on how to move forward.


Users left almost 1300 comments on the post, giving their “votes” on the various proposals, and suggesting some of their own. Many mentioned that this was ending basic accounts as they had been previously known, since the owners were making basic account holders display ads without getting any additional benefit. However, if basic accounts were allowed to exist under the current policy they would remain virtually ad-free.  marta backed this up somewhat, stating that any changes decided upon would affect all basic accounts, those currently existing and new ones moving forward (comment posted June 17, 2008). User  bubble_blunder took it up on herself to share this with the userbase, going back through prior pages of comments and replying with the new information where applicable. Some offered different ideas, such as  dbaxdevilsfan who suggested giving Basic users the option to choose one or two ads to display on their Profile page, allowing them to show support for the product being advertised (comment posted June 17, 2008).  miss_ineffable

suggested that LJ, Inc. basically implement all of the options and allow users to select which one they wished to use on each individual account they held (comment posted June 17, 2008). Others, however, saw the compromise, and most gave their backing to the first and second options, with few backing the third option in either form, showing that while they were upset with the further placement of ads on the site, they understood that the site needed to continue making a profit in order to survive.

Users were concerned with the first option, fearing that the ads would break journal themes and layouts, making them unattractive to those viewing the page with ads, with some noting that the ads would make the pages ugly enough. The third option caused concerns over “forced Friending;” LiveJournal users, moreso than any other social media users, are the most cautious about their Friends lists, and as  feemaudite wrote in a comment, “some users keeps their friendlists tidy [sic]” (posted June 17, 2008). Some LJ users engage in regular pruning of their Friends list, removing people whose journals they don’t find interesting, don’t know, or are no longer friends with, making posts in their own journals to this effect. In addition, there have been concerns for many years on LiveJournal over displaying one’s Friends list on their Profile, especially the list of people who have Friendened that user, which includes those users that have not been Friendened back, most likely due to the personal nature of the content posted on LiveJournal. This caused LJ to separate out this listing into one group

of “Mutual Friends,” and the other titled “Also Friend Of” which can be hidden from the profile.

Almost a month later, on August 14,  theljstaff announced their decision about basic accounts in both  news and  lj_2008, with the latter posting providing more details. LJ decided to go with the first option, displaying ads on basic account journals, but only to those viewers who were not logged in. While new accounts could not be created at the basic account level, any account (including Plus) could be downgraded to basic at any time. This new policy would be implemented two weeks later, on August 28. LJ also announced that paid accounts would be on sale for 20% off the usual price for the month of September, and a permanent account sale was planned for November, as well as the ability to purchase a la carte userpics, an option the userbase had asked for repeatedly. However, the permanent account sale ended up being pushed back a month to December, and the a la carte userpics pushed back several times, causing users to question whether it would ever happen. This fear was reinforced by staff cuts at LJ, Inc.’s San Francisco offices in January of 2009. Every  news post was peppered with comments from users asking when the option to purchase additional userpics would be available, and in the Year End Update for 2009, LJ admitted they had dropped the ball on the “neon purple elephant squatting on our heads” ( theljstaff ,  news entry posted January 7, 2010). A la carte userpics were finally made available in April 2010 ( theljstaff ,  news entry posted April 15, 2010).

The LJ Advisory Board was further plagued with difficulties, with the first election being rocked by allegations of ballot stuffing and death threats on the “English” side.⁵ The elected representative,  legomymalfoy soon withdrew from LJ life, with users reporting that any attempts to contact her were unsuccessful, her LJ had been locked down, email disabled, and any success in reaching her were reportedly met with scorn and an unwillingness to work with the community. Another round of elections in 2009 went much more smoothly, but when it came time for elections in 2010, it was announced that the Advisory Board was being disbanded, with all participants thanked for their service.

Repeating History

There are many issues inside this incident, but underlying all of them is the failure of SUP to understand and learn from what had occurred during the SixApart’s tenure. All of the issues the userbase objected to, from the elimination of the basic account to the filtration of interests, and even the delay in bringing promised features to the userbase echoed similar events that occurred while SixApart owned LiveJournal, and the userbase became very concerned that they would be forced to fight the same battles over again. Even Fitzpatrick’s era was invoked, as during Danga Interactive’s time as LJ’s owner, the userbase often clashed with Fitzpatrick in his inability to fully communicate with his userbase to explain changes, a charge also leveled at SUP in a much larger fashion.


The failure of LJ users to allow SUP to begin with a completely clean slate, as well as an overreaction to some of Nossik’s statements only

compounded existing problems. Early on in SUP's tenure, users continually brought up missteps and problems that plagued them while 6A was still in charge. While it is true that some employees of SixApart followed LiveJournal to SUP, not all did, and it could be assumed that SUP would have a different outlook and a different plan for LJ. This gave SUP a much larger task in attempting to win over the community, and with a larger task comes more opportunities to misstep and cause problems.


The strong desire to stay on their chosen sites even in the face of frustrating changes, and the strong defense these communities present when faced with those changes shows the strong loyalties these communities tend to have for their sites. This passion and loyalty can lead to members to quickly jump to conclusions in the furor to participate in an event. In this instance, reading Nossik's interview and coming across the term "idiot" set many community members on edge. While many automatically assumed Nossik was calling all LJ users idiots, context in various translations do not show this is what he was referring to.





These communities also have long memories, mainly because their entire history is archived and available to view by anyone. Also, due to the strong loyalty these sites tend to inspire, users tend to remain on them for long periods of time, and to inform newer users on the sins of the past. This education is not provided only with storytelling, but also by providing links to the pages where discussions took place, so that they can read for themselves what occurred,

albeit within the frame provided by the senior user. Two users coming down on the same side in one incident will most likely come down on the same side in other, similar incidents, and users can dig deeper into prior incidents to come to their own conclusions.

Perhaps the most interesting narration of history telling was Nossik's, where he attempted to explain LJ past to a userbase already well-steeped in its history. In the process he managed to ignore, or at least misstate, large pieces of it. It could appear that Nossik was attempting to rewrite LJ history when he stated that until 2005, paid accounts did not receive any additional benefits. This was questioned by LJ users in their own journals and comments, as well as in at least one commentary online (Wilson 2008b), and is also easily dismissed by going through  news and finding posts about incentives for paid account holders, going all the way back to the creation of the level in 2000. Nossik states his personal LiveJournal account was converted to a permanent account in 2001, with the profile page stating the account was created the same year, and posted the link to the Internet Wayback Machine showing how the FAQ page for paid accounts looked when he created his permanent account, and how it looked when Wilson created her account as well, claiming that it plainly shows there were no advanced features for paid account holders. By ignoring the latter half of the page, which clearly shows his mistake, Nossik (and by extension, SUP) seemed to rewrite history to benefit his point of view. When this was pointed out first by Wilson in her editorial and then by the userbase in the comments to his

own LiveJournal posting, Nossik did not respond to the users. He flatly denied Wilson's commentary, and seemed to insinuate that it was Wilson who was lying, saying that anyone could view the archive on the Internet Wayback Machine to determine "who's lying here, who's mistaken, and who was simply quoting the LJ official position about payments."

Nossik's refusal to definitively state his position in the SUP hierarchy was also problematic. In his post, Nossik points to his personal account, dolboeb, stating that anyone who visits that site can find links to his profiles on Facebook, LinkedIn, and his profile currently contains a link to a disclaimer on an outside site. However, as many commenters pointed out, much of this information is in Russian, and others mentioned that such a linkage should be referenced in all his profiles on LJ (both his official account and his personal account). This is a common practice elsewhere in the media; many news reports on channels such as NBC and CNN make reference to their corporate ties when reporting on stories involving corporate parents GE/Comcast and Time Warner. In my time with the Wikimedia Foundation, I held two accounts on Wikipedia, one my "volunteer" or personal account, and the other I used solely in conjunction with my work at the Foundation. Both accounts carried disclaimers stating my period of employment at the Foundation, my job title, and that only one account would be used in my work on behalf of the Foundation. Nossik did not appear willing to do similar, stating that there were other sites online meant for maintaining resumes online, and that LiveJournal was not one of them.

SUP/LJ, Inc. did not attempt to define Nossik's role, and at least when it came to non-Russian users, did not acknowledge the interview.  marta briefly answered queries stating he was not "manager or executive staff" and that his comments "don't reflect the opinions of SUP," but would not elaborate further (comment posted March 19, 2008). This frustrated LJ users even further, and they took the opportunity to remind LJ of incidents in the past when employees spoke out of turn and were not reprimanded in ways visible to the community, including one incident that occurred during the original ad controversy, where  burr86 made comments in a non-LJ related Community about the controversy that were not taken well by the userbase.  burr86 apologized, but LJ did not truly address the incident. While the community had a right to be upset,  burr86 has a right to his own opinion as well, and LJ does not need to take a stance on whether that opinion is correct or incorrect, at least in a public sphere. Employee personnel decisions are not something that can be aired publically, however LJ could have acknowledged the incident, thereby showing they were listening to the concerns of the community.

In addition to the uproar around who has the authority and knowledge to provide an accurate history of LJ, there was a deep and obvious culture clash between the new Russian owners, and the non-Russian portion of its customer base of LiveJournal. LiveJournal is incredibly popular in Russia, and in fact the term for LiveJournal, *zhezhe* (short for *Zhivoy Zhurnal*, Russian for Live Journal), is synonymous with blogging in general (Greenall 2012). SUP had taken over

management of Cyrillic language journals in 2006, after first offering to purchase the site from SixApart outright, to the consternation of that segment of the userbase (Norton 2006). SUP hired Nossik at that time due to his longevity on the site, and then administered the Russian side of LJ before finally acquiring the entirety of LiveJournal a year and a half later. While SUP may have felt they understood the culture and community of LiveJournal, they were more familiar with the Russian community of LJ, and not as much with the rest of the LJ community, much of whom resides in the West and have different ideas surrounding free speech, protest, and relations with corporations.

In Russia, some of the first users of LJ were Russian journalists and other professionals, who used the site to broaden their readership (Greenall 2012), whereas in the US and elsewhere, users of LJ and similar sites use the sites to keep in touch with family and friends, sharing publically but not necessarily for a public audience (Shirkey 2008:90), as well as participate in communities around hobbies and interests (activity which Greenall disputes). Russian users came first for the community aspects and later found the way to share their individual voices, where non-Russian users often came first for the individual blogging aspects and then joined the more community minded aspects (Greenall 2012, Marwick 2008:5). This creates two userbases with different needs, and differing reactions to changes in their service.

The other clash echoing in this conflict is between the way business is conducted in Russia as compared with other parts of the world, especially the US

where LJ was founded. While Russia has opened up more since the collapse of the Soviet Union, its brand of capitalism and business is different than that practiced in the United States, and those differences play into the clashes seen during this period.

The position taken by Nossik in his communications with the LJ community can be seen as rooted in Soviet history, as it continues to influence Russian capitalist practices. In the Soviet period, misinformation was standard in business dealings. Expectations of worker performance were often seen as unrealistic. Workers would then often lie or mislead superiors. Because upper management was also overworked, the misinformation was not traceable, and was allowed to slip through the system. These practices translated into a seemed tolerance for misdirection, and lead to a new group of administrators who were “highly egocentric... and aggressive bureaucrats” (Filatov 1994:14). Compounding this is the traditional Russian societal belief that lying to a business associate is not as severe as lying to a friend or family member (Puffer, et al. 1994:47).

Such cultural differences might explain perhaps why Nossik made an error by describing paid accounts as having no additional features or benefits from their inception, and did not attempt to correct himself. Because misdirection is expected on both ends of a business relationship, it could be that Nossik assumed the community was misdirecting him, even as he was attempting to mislead them, and was unprepared for a userbase that did check facts and was

not so overburdened by other commitments that misinformation could slide by unnoticed. Even if there was no conscious misdirection involved, the lack of trust inherent in Russian business dealings run counter to the more open and trusting environment expected by online communities, accounting for the frustration and anger at Nossik's behavior.

This could also account for the tone that came through in Nossik's communications with the userbase. The tone in his postings (something seized upon by non-Russian LJ commenters, and by some Russian ones as well) is much different than an American businessperson's in a similar context. Nossik thus came across as uncaring about the userbase and unapologetic about it. Nossik, and by extension SUP as evidenced in their March 13 post to 📰 news regarding basic accounts, did not have a personal relationship with at least the non-Russian contingent of users, and seemed uninterested in creating such a connection.

Puffer (1994:52) suggests that Western businesspeople attempting to work with Russian business people attempt to "forge personal relationships" with their Russian counterparts in order to counter what she calls the "dual ethics" that bind relationships with business contacts and close, personal contacts. At least part of the userbase was attempting to forge these connections in their comments to Nossik, and to the March 13 📰 news posting, calling for dialogue and discussion, as well as pointing out the differences in cultures that may have been causing the problems in communication, which may have led to the tone

shift in the apology post made to 🇺🇸lj_2008 the following week. Because both posts were made by the anonymous 🇺🇸theljstaff, it is difficult to know from where the posts truly originated; from the Russian SUP, or the still US staffed LiveJournal, Inc. The change in tone shows, however, that at a corporate level, it was determined that the former way of communication was not going to work for the userbase and change would be needed.

Even after the basic account hubbub had died down, when users received a compromise in their favor, there was still a wariness remaining around the new ownership. It was clear that change would continue to be part of the landscape, including large changes that would change the character of LiveJournal, even while SUP stated they wanted to work to preserve the culture and character of the community, that community was unsure that their opinions would be listened to actively, especially as the opinion of the Advisory Board's effectiveness continued to drop. As promises were not kept and the service began suffering setbacks in a variety of Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks aimed mostly at the Russian portion of the business, LJ users began to look elsewhere to find places to keep in touch with family and friends.


The rise of social media sites, especially the juggernaut of Facebook, began to chip away at LJ's audience, losing 8.2 million unique users in the first eight months of 2011 (Greenall 2012), and as LJ entered its second decade, the service seemed a bit threadbare. Through misunderstanding its userbase owner after owner, LiveJournal failed to capitalize on its biggest strength, instead

turning it into its largest weakness. The deeper misunderstandings of that userbase, and what we can learn from them will be the focus of the next chapter, as well as a look at where LiveJournal is going today.

Chapter 6

Getting Along Inside Web 2.0

“I don’t need kids, I have an online community.” – Anonymous Community Associate/Master’s Student

As seen during The Great Strikethrough, members of online communities as well as outsiders question why members of these communities stick around when the management of their sites are upsetting them, causing a ruckus and loudly complaining about what is changing. The answer is, as  lamboyster so eloquently put it, “Because people fight for what they love, duh.”

Members of these communities are often confused for the media consumers they have been in the past; a group of people passively consuming media products without the agency to create their own products for consumption (Shirky 2010:11, 204). They may have loyalty to one specific type of media (specific television shows, radio programs, magazines, etc.) over another, but, with a few exceptions, there is no connection, no deep-seated passion for that product; one does not generally defend their choice of television show to the general public. If the brand no longer meets the needs of the consumer (the subject matter changes, there is a degradation in the quality of the product, the parent company moves in a political direction distasteful to the consumer, etc.), the consumer can and often will stop watching that show, and move to a different one. They may write a strongly worded letter, or tell a few of their friends (or in this day and age, perhaps post about it to Twitter or Facebook), but the move, while perhaps inconvenient for a time and except for a few instances, isn’t

generally disruptive. The company will make changes, or go in search of a new demographic to serve, as it still has a product to market.

Online community members, however, are not simply consumers, nor do they have the same relationship with their sites as they do with the media they consume. Web 2.0 sites do not produce content for users to consume; they only provide the space and technology that enables users to share the content they create. This ability to assist in creating a site that becomes a destination for others to consume content on makes those users feel a certain ownership of the site, and the success of the site is seen as a validation for all the hours spent on the site both creating and consuming content. They become, as Shirky noted, “part of the event,” that is, part of the creation of this new site and community (2010:21).

LiveJournal as a company understood these feelings, at least in the early days. Inviting users to give their opinions on features, suggest new ones, and comment on new business plans, made the community invested in the company and its success, allowing users to say, “I helped create that.” When Fitzpatrick made the decision to create paid and basic/free accounts, moving some features over to the new pay model, he understood that those who were the first LJ users should be rewarded for their loyalty. He created the “Early Adopter” level which allowed them to keep the features they’d grown accustomed to that were moving to the paid level as a thank you for helping the site grow to this point. This gave these users a place of prominence in the community, having an official

designation of someone who helped prove the concept of LJ as something that would work. Some users at this level were even concerned about becoming paid users, as they would lose the status of Early Adopter, and what that meant about their involvement in the community.

However, it is not just investment or feelings of ownership that keep online communities intact, and keep the members of those communities continually coming back to the sites, mailing lists, or chat channels they participate in. Instead, it is a feeling of “home,” a place to call one’s own, somewhere to put down roots in the large frontier of the Internet that these communities provide which acts as the glue holding these groups together. Throughout my participation in the community around the online comic strip User Friendly, members of the community would communicate via mailing lists, in Internet Relay Chat, and in face to face meet-ups at trade shows, and talk about their relief in finding others who were “just like” them; geeks, IT professionals, and sharing interests. It is this glue that has held the User Friendly community together, even as the strip has gone into reruns and is no longer being updated. Similarly, members of LiveJournal over many of these conflicts described the site as their “home,” and a place where they felt “safe” and “welcomed.”

LiveJournal users in particular are very loyal to they community they worked to create, and, by extension, the site they helped create as well. This was evidenced during the Great Strikethrough, as many users discussed the betrayal they felt as a violation of their trust, and through the many users who

declared “I love LiveJournal.” Fandom, and the slash communities inside of it, took this betrayal extra hard, as many of the members of these groups face scorn for their hobbies, and LiveJournal had grown to have a reputation as a safe place for these groups to gather.

What brings about this connection? With LiveJournal in particular, much of it comes from the site itself, and the myriad of ways it is used by its users. The word “journal” is in the name itself, which connotes a more personal arena, moreso than a “blog/web log.” Even the phrase “personal blog” seems to point to a separation between reader and writer, something for the general public which has perhaps been sanitized down to keep out the full details or emotions of events. LiveJournal’s emphasis on journaling as opposed to “updates” or “statuses” on Facebook or Twitter is part of what keeps users coming back to the site, and is what helps bond users together. Marwick notes that the entries LJ users post, and the comments made to those posts, “mimic face-to-face conversational practice.” These long, in-depth conversations that LJ users have are what drive the deep relationships they have with each other, and drive their loyalty to the community and the site (2008:4).

LiveJournal’s own privacy settings also make this possible. The privacy filters LiveJournal employs continues the mimicry of real-life conversations, by allowing users to lock posts down to viewing by a select few. These filters, which many sites have attempted to duplicate but have yet to do so completely, give LiveJournal a reputation of being a place for private, intimate information

(Marwick 2008:11). These filters and sharing build trust among users which helps them form into a community around this platform (13).

The LiveJournal Communities also foster a sense of homecoming. No matter if one is into Doctor Who, anime, fanfiction (slash or otherwise), sexual fetishes, identifies as a conservative or liberal, or is a survivor of any type of abuse or disease, there is a LiveJournal Community catering to those who likewise identify. There, you can be assured of finding others who share your experience, giving more opportunities for bonding (Abrams and Grün 2008:211). Some of those people you may even add to your own Friends list (or may add you to theirs), giving them access to your personal posts, creating an even stronger bond.

Understanding the Community

As SixApart learned during its tenure as owners of LiveJournal, purchasing a site, and by extension its community, does not automatically make an organization an expert in how to work with that userbase. And, as Jason Shellen and SUP learned, knowing how one blogging userbase thinks does not mean you understand how others think and behave, even when one is dealing with the same site (though the argument can be made that Russian LJ is vastly different than the rest of LJ).

The largest mistake made by both SixApart and SUP when dealing with their userbase was not understanding the values of that userbase, why that userbase used the site, how they used the site, and what kept the users


anchored to that site. While it is true that communities have a strong sense of loyalty to their sites, taking that loyalty for granted can backfire tremendously. Assuming that changes can be made without the community noticing (for example, the removal of basic accounts), or that liberties can be taken with other hard-fought for concessions (such as when SixApart continued to push the envelope with advertisements) hint at an arrogance from these companies that online communities often feel when presented with these situations; a feeling of “no matter what we do, we know you’ll stick around because you love this site and have made it your home.”

There is also a great temptation to believe that this group of people exist only in Cyberspace and specifically on their own individual sites, and have no agency outside that small bubble. They are sometimes viewed in the mode of the typical television viewer who exists only as an individual who only consumes and does not create (Shirky 2010:42). The ability to create creates a higher level of buy-in to a medium, it becomes “something we use” instead of “something we consume” (52).

These groups have shown the fallacy of this prior way of thinking. Much as how the LJ community reacted to the Great Strikethrough by turning the site against itself, as well as reaching out via avenues outside of the site, other online communities have used similar tactics with some success. The community around the website Digg has had its share of revolts. One of the larger ones revolved around the posting of a key used to encrypt DVDs; knowledge of this

key could be used to unlock the discs and make them copyable. This key was posted to Digg, and Digg administrators responded by removing any post containing the key, citing legal reasons. This angered the community, which was comprised of many people who believed that there should be no restrictions on the copying of such data, and they responded by inundating Digg with the code, or instructions on how to find the code. The site's founder received a flood of email on the topic, which ultimately led to Digg reversing course and allowing the code to be posted to the site, with the founder stating that they would "deal with whatever consequences might be" (Shirky 2008:290-291).

This contention comes into play when these companies attempt to communicate with their communities. Online communities want communication with the organizations that run their sites, especially as changes occur, be that changes in features, changes in policies, or any other changes that will affect the userbase. Online communities tend to expect transparency, expecting companies to be brutally honest with them, as they often are to the companies, as their objections to marketing language and professions of "bullshit detectors" can attest. Many conflicts on LiveJournal find users begging for LiveJournal to be honest and straightforward with them; other communities, such as the Wikimedia communities, are built on transparency and demand it from the companies they work with. They are not shy about expressing themselves, and do not mince words, sometimes resorting to cursing and angry outbursts to get their opinions across.

Companies, on the other hand, are often not as straightforward or blunt as their userbases generally are. Whether it's coaching information in overly-positive language (as rahaeli did in her post announcing new sponsored features and communities), hiding information through obscuring language (as LJ did in the non-announcement of the removal of the basic account level), or not addressing community concerns perhaps in the hopes that said concerns would go away (as what seemingly happened during the Great Strikethrough), companies employ various ways of trying to show they are talking to their communities, without directly telling them what their users want to know, or "talking down" to them. Such actions sow discord into relations between companies and their communities, which then feeds into the vicious cycle as communities continue to distrust the companies that own their sites.

Profits and profitability are areas of communication that cause a great deal of distrust. Web 2.0 is still somewhat new, and companies must continue to experiment with making these sites profitable. Most Web 2.0 sites are privately held and thus do not release information on their financials, either how much revenue they have coming in, or how much money goes out in costs. This leaves their users in the dark as to how the site is faring financially, and then fosters the idea in the community that the site is doing fine financially at all times, since they see no impact in their daily usage of the site. This lack of information causes any move by the site to raise revenue to be seen as a money grab, riling the community and causing further discord. This is a difficult problem to solve.

On one hand, being more open with the users of a site can diminish the amount of outcry over changes. On the other hand, no company wants to admit it is in financial difficulty, as that can drive away new investors as well as new users.

Community member communication styles complicate these problems. While these groups are completely upfront and rarely hide their feelings, they are also blunt. Any uprising in almost any community is often filled with comments that amount to nothing more than profanity, a pronouncement that the change “sucks,” or sarcasm, which, while it may be amusing to the community, does nothing to further discourse. Their communications, like those from their companies, may be absent useful content. This can frustrate the representatives of the company the community is trying to convince is in the wrong, as they have little information to go on of how to change things, other than a full-course reversal with no room for compromise. It can lead to a siege-mentality; when one is being constantly yelled and cursed at by a group of people, this makes working with that group incredibly difficult, not to mention unpleasant.

Forging Partnerships

Instead of setting up this adversarial relationship, communities and companies can work together as partners. It can be a more difficult road, and decisions can take more time to be made, but in the end the community gets greater buy-in into the moves the company makes, and the company gets a happier community who will, with any luck, work closer with them and not have as many problems.

This is the tactic taken by the Wikimedia Foundation, the non-profit organization that supports Wikipedia and eight other “sister projects.” Perhaps because it is a non-profit, the Foundation takes a more “hands off” approach to community and project management; the international community of editors and contributors to the projects create the site guidelines as well as the content on the sites, as well as police themselves. The Foundation exists mainly to keep the servers up and running, continue development on MediaWiki, the software that runs Wikipedia and many other wiki-based sites, and as a legal contact. The Foundation also runs and maintains programs that support the mission of the sites, the dissemination of free knowledge, but these are often run with the assistance, and preferably the buy-in, of the community.

While the Foundation would be the first to admit they are not always as transparent as the community would like them to be, and the community would quickly concur with that assessment, the Foundation does attempt as often as possible to bring the community into the decision making process. This has occurred not only with the Strategic Planning Project in 2010, but in other situations including late 2011 when the Foundation needed to update their Terms of Use agreement, a document all sites on the Internet have which delineates the rules a user must follow in order to participate in the site. The Foundation’s legal department could have easily created this document on their own, and implemented it across all the Wikimedia sites without any input from the community. However, they knew that such a move would create a large

backlash from their community, who demand transparency even more than the LJ community does.

Instead, the Foundation's legal team drafted the document, and then posted it online for the community to view, comment on, suggest revisions, and ask questions. The Foundation's General Counsel, Geoff Brigham, engaged the community in this process, answering questions himself, commenting on the suggestions, as well as admitting that some of their suggestions were ideas he and his team had missed and would be incorporated in the next draft as well as having conversations with the community about the implications of various international laws on the document. Over the next four months, the community and Foundation worked together to draft and redraft the agreement, finally coming up with a document that met the needs of the community and the Foundation on December 31, 2011. Brigham noted that the discussion over the new document was as long as Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," which can be a testament to how seriously both the Foundation and community took the effort. (Brigham 2011)

Four months of back-and-forth is a great deal of effort to put into what some see as a basic document. However, the Foundation in the end saved a great deal of time and frustration by bringing the community into the process early on. Had they implemented a Terms of Use in a more "traditional" fashion, imposing it from the top down (as most other sites do), the community response would have been swift and mirrored the responses of the LJ community when

decisions were made without consideration for the users' opinions and beliefs. The Wikimedia community most likely would have been in full-scale revolt. While the Foundation is a non-profit organization and therefore does not have the concerns that for-profit companies do when it comes to financial capital gains and losses, the Foundation would have lost a great deal of social and political capital. Foundation staff members need this capital since they rely on the community to assist them with a great many tasks. To respond, the Foundation would have had to stand their ground on the new Terms of Use, losing further goodwill and capital. Alternately, they could have rescinded the changes, starting over from scratch taking into consideration the community's objections (and still losing capital), or perhaps belatedly invite a potentially hostile community into the drafting process. By inviting them in at the beginning, they had a community willing to work with them on the document. Then, by explaining why certain changes were or were not incorporated, the community stayed on the Foundation's side during the process as a true partner. The community would be more likely to respect and comply with the document, as they helped create it, and therefore are partial owners of it.

In contrast, LiveJournal generally posted new policy documents for the community to review, and the community would make comments on problems they saw, concerns they had, and areas that needed clarification. However, LiveJournal would not respond to these attempts to influence policy, as the policy would not change, and members of the LiveJournal staff rarely responded to

these comments. Especially in the period following the Great Strikethrough, when policies were under review, LiveJournal missed a key opportunity to bring its community into the decision making process and begin to heal the wounds left by the incident, as well as recapturing the atmosphere of the early days of LiveJournal, when users worked with LJ staff to delineate policy and direct the site.

While it is true that not every decision can be taken to a community for through discussion and feedback, Wikimedia's Terms of Use discussion shows that the benefits of doing so whenever possible far exceed any disadvantages. It is much easier on everyone, community and company, to engage with a community eager to assist, than to engage with a community eager to protest at what has been done in its name.

Working Together, Building Bridges

Building these partnerships must involve all the stakeholders. Both companies and communities should buy into the partnership and respect each other. After analyzing these three events in the history of LiveJournal, we can summarize best practices into three steps for companies to take in dealing with their online communities, and communities to take when dealing with the companies holding their sites.

1. *Assume Good Faith.* This is a basic tenant of the Wikipedia community, and it is an excellent tenant to remember for all communities. Assume Good Faith (or AGF) means to assume that everyone being dealt with is "out to help

[the project], not harm it” (Wikipedia n.d.). Practically, this tenant reminds members of the Wikipedia community to be patient with everyone working on the site. Users are urged not to immediately attack other members for mistakes or other transgressions, and to handle disputes calmly.

Communities need to AGF when companies make changes to the site, remembering that in the end, the site is a business that needs to earn money to survive, and, at times, this means change. Community members should keep open minds to these changes, not immediately become outraged when such changes occur. Conversely, companies should AGF towards their community members, realizing that these are the people who use their sites daily, and understand how to make the site work for them. Also, these community members want the site to continue to survive, as it gives them a place to gather and share their content. This shared mission can be a foundation to building a partnership.









2. Keep communication lines open and clear. For companies, this means being transparent in their communications to their communities, not using marketing language excessively when announcing new features, not covering up mistakes when they occur, and being fairly easy for community members to reach out to when problems do occur. For community members, this means being clear in communicating needs, giving reasons why they are upset, and not conveying anger solely through expletives or sardonic comments.

3. *Remember that you are both part of the same community.* The parent company of any site with an active community can find itself excluded from membership in that community. The community will demand that the company do things according to their advice and vision exclusively, as we can see in the reaction to the Great Strikethrough. Companies can also approach the community as if they were an outside group, as we have seen when LiveJournal made undisclosed changes. Both groups are working together to create the site, and to keep it successful, and therefore are part of the same community.

LJ in the Current Day

SUP remains the owner of LiveJournal, and January 2012 marked four years of ownership by the Russian company. However, the relationship with the community has continued to be fractious. In January 2009, just over a year after purchasing LJ, SUP laid off almost half the San Francisco office staff (Thomas 2009). Once again, the userbase learned of the move via blogs and other online media, and demanded explanation from LJ, who took two days to make a statement and release a press release, blaming the worldwide economic downturn for the move (👤theljstaff, 📰news, entry posted January 8, 2009). The userbase panicked, thinking the owner of their online home was about to go out of business, although SUP and LJ, Inc. stated that the site would “be around for years to come.”

LJ again stirred the userbase in the late summer of 2010, when they joined the ranks of many other sites with social content, announcing the ability to



crosspost content between Facebook and Twitter, something that many users had been doing on their own manually for some time ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted August 31, 2010). While not an issue for users of many other sites, LJ users are notoriously devoted to their privacy, and LJ as a site has many privacy controls, more so than most other social networking sites. For a month, LJ users and LJ, Inc. went back and forth over control of content. Users were concerned that even if they disallowed their individual content from being posted to Facebook, it would still end up there via friends who crosspost comments to others' entries to their own Facebook pages, which would include a linkback to the original post on LJ ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted September 10, 2010). Complicating matters was the discovery that the feature was being implemented differently for users of the Cyrillic services originally provided by SUP, namely that those who had opted into those services would be allowed to crosspost comments made to Locked posts to Facebook and Twitter. This appeared to many as a way to circumvent privacy settings set by the post owner ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted September 21, 2010). Some LJ users then called for the ability to ban anyone opted into Cyrillic services from commenting on their journal entries.¹ Crossposting between LJ and Facebook and Twitter stayed as an opt-in feature, however any Locked content, or comment to Locked content, was made to be un-shareable, no matter whether the user was opted into Cyrillic services or not ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted October 5, 2010).




The April 2010 purchase by LJ, Inc. of the popular celebrity gossip Community 🗣️ ohnotheydidnt (or ONTD) also caused concern (👤 theljstaff, 📰 news, entry posted April 8, 2010). While the purchase itself didn't stir a great deal of discussion at least among the broader userbase, what did irritate the users was the amount of promotion LiveJournal did for ONTD across the site: mentions in many 📰 news posts and the placement of a module on the front page cycling the latest headlines. The userbase was of the opinion that if they wanted content from ONTD, they would have joined that Community, and didn't appreciate the overhype the new acquisition was garnering. They felt that content was being forced upon them. ONTD had been the cause of some site instability in the year prior due to its enormous size,² so it was already on some shaky footing with users as it was; the addition of the extra hype made it worse.

This acquisition appears to have paved the way for the new business model being embraced by LJ, as announced in early 2012. While the service has been growing in Asia, visitors to the site in the US have tapered off. To drive more US-centric growth, LiveJournal has decided to focus on bringing more eyes to the various Communities on the site (Ungerleider 2012). Utilizing their new arm, LJ Media, LJ looks to continue the ONTD experiment with other Communities (👤 theljstaff, 📰 news, entry posted February 24, 2012). In exchange for spinning their Communities closer into LJ, Inc., maintainers of the Communities receive a makeover for their Community, detailed metrics (reported to be even more detailed than the metrics Facebook shares with its partners),

and other perks that are “seemingly designed to deemphasize blog content” (Ungerleider 2012). Many of the upgrades are geared towards commenters on posts, highlighting popular commenters and making the commenting process easier, but few improvements have been made for the content generation side. Considering that content is why visitors visit sites like LJ, it was unclear why improvements focused so heavily on discussion arenas on content, but not on content itself. When the commenting system was overhauled in early 2012, a move connected with the new Community push, users rebelled. The release has been plagued by bugs that, as of June 2012, had yet to be fully resolved. Some users have noticed that the new commenting system is unfriendly to very long threads of comments, that is, those comments that generate hundreds or thousands of replies. The comment system simply bogs down and will not fully expand threads of this size. Instead, it favors smaller threads that number perhaps in the double digits. Some users fear this will stifle the long, detailed discussions LJ users have grown accustomed to having in comment threads, and instead privilege the types of “discussions” seen on other mainstream media sites, where many people leave comments, but few read and respond to those comments. True discussion does not occur here, and coherent communities fail to form in this environment.

What LJ’s plans are for community cohesion are uncertain. Longtime LJ users are wary of the new direction, commenting in articles about the new move, as well as in 📰 news posts as new pieces of this direction are revealed to them.

Most users continue to express a sense of betrayal, feeling that their type of participation is no longer desired in this new direction, and perhaps that individual journals, seen as those journals that built LiveJournal, will fall by the wayside as the focus shifts to Communities and the commenters therein. These commenters will be the content generators and sources of revenue for LJ, Inc. as there are plans to remove all advertising from the site except for “select Communities,” most likely those who have joined LJ Media ( theljstaff,  news, entry posted February 1, 2012).

The overarching feeling is that SUP has not learned from history, either its own or that of previous owners SixApart, in how to work with their users and the larger community they have created. They are concerned that the service will continue to change in ways that will further alienate the existing community, and that new users attracted to the site won't get involved with the larger LiveJournal community. LiveJournal as an entity has not responded to these criticisms, and has begun to slowly back off from any engagement with the community. Posts to  news are now no more than announcements of new versions of the software that powers LiveJournal, and detailing the changes occurring, basically a log of changes, or a Changelog, for which there is already a Community in place ( changelog). The most recent post to the community was made in October 2012, and that post has commenting disabled on it, and serves merely as a pointer to a post in  lj_releases. There are many questions the community wants answers to, mainly about things that LJ itself has alluded to such as the removal of ads

and a rumored plan to remove paid accounts in favor of a more a la carte mode of option selecting. However, no information has been forthcoming since October on any of these fronts. There is no engagement here, no attempt to truly communicate with users, which again may be part of the new plan; users who come for commenting only and not for content generation are less likely to buy into a site and its governance, making them passive users again, and therefore easier to manage.

For its part, community members are still attempting to communicate, but less than in days past, and are often unwilling to view change as positive. Most commenters point out negatives to any new functionality, and refuse to find a way to meet LJ midway to find a solution that would work for all parties. Also, LiveJournal has seemingly dialed back on attempts to communicate with the community. Posts to 📰 news are now few and far between, coming several months apart, containing very little information except for links to other communities, and with comments on the posts disabled. With the main stakeholders, LJ users and the site owners, at constant loggerheads and not communicating, the future continues to be uncertain.

End of Line

Relationships between online communities and their corporate counterparts are often uncertain, and this influences the way these relationships form and function. Uncertainty breeds distrust, which can be a death knell for any community, online or offline. Companies that describe their users as

communities must understand what that term entails before engaging it, or they may find themselves with a user grouping that has a different view of the relationship than the company does. Users also must understand what being a community entails, and be able to use their commitment to further relations with the organization who owns their site, instead of using that power to damage any hope of cooperation.

Partnerships are key for successful relations, and while they take more work than a typical consumer relationship, they provide benefits well beyond their inconvenience. Allowing mistrust to breed affects relationships for years to come, and affects new users coming to the site as they learn history from those already there, as well as affecting the ways which the company attempts to interface with its users. Creating a partnership allows all stakeholders to have a level playing field, similar expectations, more automatic buy-in to proposals and new features, as well as the social capital and credibility on all sides to ask for concessions as the need arises.

NOTES

Chapter 1

1. In this work, Friend and Community are capitalized to denote certain LiveJournal specific usages. “Friend” is similar to a Facebook “Friend” or a Twitter “Follower,” that is, someone a user wishes to receive updates from. “Community” is used to denote a LiveJournal account type in order to differentiate it from the generic “community” which is a focus of this research.

2. In the summer of 2010, LJ announced they would begin deleting inactive accounts and Communities, and purging the contents, allowing for the user and Community names to be recycled for future users. This has had a nominal effect on this research, as the bulk of applicable material came from official LJ Communities unaffected by this purge.

Chapter 2

1. Titles and names of users and Communities each have their own symbol on LJ, which assists users in deciphering what type of journal they are reading. These icons are preserved in this work in order to appropriately denote Communities (👥), individual user accounts (👤), and the news Community (📰) which has its own unique identifier.

2. All Communities (and individual journals) can be found by visiting <http://communityname.livejournal.com>, where *communityname* is the name listed after the icon. For example, 📰news can be found at <http://news.livejournal.com>.

3. A fourth account level also existed (and still exists) called “Early Adopter.” These accounts were created before September 2000, and are given access to a few small features that basic users do not have access to, mainly new journal design styles.

4. In this instance, “Russian users” was broadly construed to include users who posted the majority of their posts in a Cyrillic language, listed their location in any country formerly part of the USSR, or used a Russian-language based web browser.

5. boyd does not utilize capitalization in her printed name. That convention is honored here, and throughout this work.

6. It is difficult to say with true clarity how much market share, if any, LiveJournal has lost over its 10-year history. Users do not always delete

accounts when they cease utilizing the service, and even accounts that look “abandoned” with no postings may still be actively used to continue access to Friends lists. Anecdotal evidence seems to show a slide in LiveJournal activity, and statistics done by LiveJournal show that there were around 2 million accounts “active in some way” as of April 2011, which has dropped to 1.7 million by August 2012, but this is difficult to further quantify or verify.

Chapter 3

1. This was a Community set up to address the reasonings behind various business decisions related to the site, and to solicit opinions from the community on upcoming business decisions.

2. To view examples of V-gifts, please see <http://kethryvis.ufies.org/thesis/Figure1.jpg>.

3. To view the Diet Pepsi MAX V-gifts, please see <http://kethryvis.ufies.org/thesis/Figure2.jpg>.

4. LJ offers a service called Scrapbook which serves as a repository for LJ users to store photographs to be used in their postings, instead of utilizing outside services such as Flickr and Photobucket. Paid and Plus users also are able to record posts using their mobile phones, with the recording being automatically uploaded to LJ’s servers, and posted as a new entry to their journals. There are limits on how many posts can be made per month, and each user has a set amount of storage space for these posts to reside on the LJ servers.

5. In fact, both 6A and Fitzpatrick did little to rejuvenate their respective stores of social capital. 6A did little on its own, and this incident marked the beginning of Fitzpatrick moving out of his role as de facto Head of the Community, and further into the background.

Chapter 4

1. Much like “Friend” and “Community,” “Interest” here has been capitalized in order to denote specific LiveJournal usage.

2. As of 2013, the post sits at 4,825 comments. However, many comments have been deleted in the ensuing months and years since the incident occurred. These were deleted either by the commenter themselves, or due to their accounts being deleted at a later time, which can later lead to comments being deleted as well.

3. As of 2013, this post now sits at 4,703 comments.
4. To view examples of userpics created by LJ users to protest the Great Strike Through, please see <http://kethryvis.ufies.org/thesis/Figure3.jpg>.
5. To view examples of Pirates of the Caribbean userpics and image macros made and posted by LJ users, please see <http://kethryvis.ufies.org/thesis/Figure4.jpg>.
6. To view examples image macros used by other fandoms, please see <http://kethryvis.ufies.org/thesis/Figure5.jpg>.
7. The comment on Metafilter quoted a post on WFI's blog. That post has since been removed, but was viewable up to 2010.
8. This occurred sometime prior to 2009, but it is not clear when this began.

Chapter 5

1. This post has since been removed from the Community.
2. Ironically, non-Cyrillic language LJ users have been complaining since 2009-2010 about the large numbers of Cyrillic language accounts created for just this purpose, which had not been seen on the service in large numbers before SUP's takeover of the service.
3. This is a website which regularly crawls the Internet, archiving snapshots of how the website appeared at that time. The site is helpful to those wishing to piece together histories of websites, as websites are often changed, with no references to the past, or ability to view previous versions of a site to look for changes.
4. Sock puppet is a term used to describe accounts created and controlled by another user for the purpose of deceiving others online. They are often used to sway debates, appearing to be a new voice to the conversation when instead it is just another facet of someone already involved in the conversation. While multiple accounts are common on LJ, using multiple accounts in debates is generally frowned upon, as it gives one user multiple voices to influence the discussion.
5. While this user represented more than English language users, it was generally referred to as the "English User Representative" and was elected by the 🇺🇸lj_election_en Community.

Chapter 6

1. Any user of LJ can opt into these services, not just those who post in a Cyrillic language. Many users quickly discovered that there were many features included in Cyrillic services that all LJ users would want to use, including the ability to utilize custom userheads, the small icons before a user's username to denote the type of account (User, Community, etc.).

2. ONTD actually brought LJ almost completely down, when it broke a previously unknown limit of total comments to a Community. Because of this, LJ commenting and site performance was seriously hampered for a week while the problem was fixed, and all posts received a new maximum comment number of 10,000. The Community was also shut down briefly by LJ, Inc. after the death of Michael Jackson in the summer of 2009 due to the sheer amount of traffic to the Community and the stress on LJ's servers.

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