

Flaming (Internet)

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Flaming, also known as bashing, is hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users. Flaming usually occurs in the social context of an Internet forum, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Usenet, by e-mail, game servers such as Xbox Live or Playstation Network, and on video-sharing websites. It is frequently the result of the discussion of heated real-world issues such as politics, sports, religion, and philosophy, or of issues that polarise subpopulations, but can also be provoked by seemingly trivial differences.

Deliberate flaming, as opposed to flaming as a result of emotional discussions, is carried out by individuals known as flammers, who are specifically motivated to incite flaming. These users specialize in flaming and target specific aspects of a controversial conversation, and are usually more subtle than their counterparts. Their counterparts are known as trolls who are less "professional" and write obvious and blunt remarks to incite a flame war, as opposed to the more subtle, yet precise flammers. Some websites even cater for flammers and trolls, by allowing them a free environment, such as Flame-Wars forum.

Theory

Many social researchers have investigated flaming, coming up with several different theories about the phenomenon. These include deindividuation and reduced awareness of other people's feelings, conformance to perceived norms and miscommunication caused by the lack of social cues available in face-to-face communication.

Jacob Borders, in discussing participants' internal modeling of a discussion, says:

Mental models are fuzzy, incomplete, and imprecisely stated. Furthermore, within a single individual, mental models change with time, even during the flow of a single conversation. The human mind assembles a few relationships to fit the context of a discussion. As debate shifts, so do the mental models. Even when only a single topic is being discussed, each participant in a conversation employs a different mental model to interpret the subject. Fundamental assumptions differ but are never brought into the open. Goals are different but left unstated. It is little wonder that compromise takes so long. And even when consensus is reached, the underlying assumptions may be fallacies that lead to laws and programs that fail. The human mind is not adapted to understanding correctly the consequences implied by a mental model. A mental model may be correct in structure and assumptions but, even so, the human mind-either individually or as a group consensus-is apt to draw the wrong implications for the future.

Thus, online conversations often involve a variety of assumptions and motives unique to each individual user. Without social context, users are often helpless to know the intentions of their counterparts. In addition to the problems of conflicting mental models presented often present in online discussions, the inherent lack of face-to-face communication online can encourage flaming.

Professor Norman Johnson, commenting on the propensity of Internet posters to flame one another, states:

The literature suggests that, compared to face-to-face, the increased incidence of flaming when using computer-mediated communication is due to reductions in the transfer of social cues, which decrease individuals' concern for social evaluation and fear of social sanctions or reprisals. When social identity and ingroup status are salient, computer mediation can decrease flaming because individuals focus their attention on the social context (and associated norms) rather than themselves.

Generally, then, a lack of social context creates an element of anonymity, which allows users to feel insulated from the forms of punishment they might receive in a more conventional setting. Johnson identifies several precursors to flaming between users, whom he refers to as "negotiation partners," since Internet communication typically involves back-and-forth interactions similar to a negotiation. Flaming incidents usually arise in response to a perception of one or more negotiation partners being unfair. Perceived unfairness can include a lack of consideration for an individual's vested interests, unfavorable treatment (especially when the flamer has been considerate of other users), and misunderstandings aggravated by the inability to convey subtle indicators like non-verbal cues and facial expressions.

History

While flaming refers exclusively to insulting online discussions, debates resulting in back-and-forth personal insults have been common to society for ages. Arguments over the ratification of the United States Constitution were often personally heated, with many striking at one another through local newspapers. Also, such interactions have always been part of literary criticism. For example, Ralph Waldo Emerson's contempt for Jane Austen's works often extended to the author herself, with Emerson describing her as "without genius, wit, or knowledge of the world." In turn, Emerson himself was called a "hoary-headed toothless baboon" by Thomas Carlyle.

In the modern era, flaming was used at East Coast engineering schools as a present participle in a crude expression to describe an irascible individual and by extension to such individuals on the earliest Internet chat rooms and message boards. Internet flaming was mostly observed in the Usenet hierarchies although it was known to occur in the WWIVnet and FidoNet computer networks as well. It was subsequently used in other parts of speech with much the same meaning.

The term "flaming" may originate from The Hacker's Dictionary, which in 1983 defined it as "to speak rabidly or incessantly on an uninteresting topic or with a patently ridiculous attitude". The meaning of the word has diverged from this definition since then.

Typical flaming

Flamebait

Flamebait is a message posted to a public Internet discussion group, such as a forum, newsgroup or mailing list, with the intent of provoking an angry response (a "flame") or argument over a topic the poster often has no real interest in. While flaming can occur as a result of legitimate debates or grievances, flamebait implies the intentional posting of inflammatory rhetoric or images.

As stated, flaming can stem from a variety of issues, including misunderstandings, frustration, and perceptions of unfairness. One motive (from trolls especially) is the desire for attention and for entertainment derived at the expense of others. Posted flamebait can provide the poster with a controlled trigger-and-response setting in which to anonymously engage in conflicts and indulge in aggressive behavior without facing the consequences that such behavior might bring in a face-to-face encounter. In other instances, flamebait may be used to reduce a forum's use by angering the forum users.

"Flame wars"

A flame war results when one or more users engages in provocative responses to the originally posted flamebait. Flame wars often draw in many users (including those trying to diffuse the flame war) and can overshadow regular forum discussion if left unchecked.

Resolving a flame war can be difficult, as it is often hard to determine who is really responsible for the degradation of a reasonable discussion into flame war. Someone who posts a contrary opinion in a strongly focused discussion forum may be easily labeled a "baiter", "flamer", or "troll". Therefore, it seems important to make the rules and focus of a discussion forum public to avoid misconceptions about its accepted use.

An approach to resolving a flame war or responding to flaming is to communicate openly with the offending users. Acknowledging mistakes, offering to help resolve the disagreement, making clear, reasoned arguments, and even self-deprecation have all been noted as worthwhile strategies to end such disputes. However, others prefer to simply ignore flaming, noting that, in many cases, if the flamebait receives no attention, it will quickly be forgotten as forum discussions carry on. Unfortunately, this can motivate trolls to intensify their activities, creating additional distractions.

Taking the bait or feeding the troll refers to someone who responds to the original message regardless of whether they are aware the original message was intended to provoke a response. Often when someone takes the bait, others will point out to them YHBT for "You have been trolled", or reply with "don't feed the trolls." Forum users will also frequently "rate" the troll as means of acknowledgment, with statements such as "0/10, obvious troll is obvious", or "10/10, I

raged."

Examples of flaming

Any subject of a polarizing nature can feasibly cause flaming. As one would expect in the medium of the Internet, technology is a common topic. The perennial debates between users of competing operating systems such as Windows, Mac OS, or the Linux operating system, users of Intel and AMD processors, and users of the Nintendo Wii, PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 video game systems, often escalate into seemingly unending "flamewars". As each successive technology is released, it develops its own outspoken fan base, allowing arguments to begin anew.

Popular culture continues to generate large amounts of flaming and countless flamewars across the Internet, such as the constant debates between fans of Star Trek and Star Wars. Ongoing discussion of current celebrities and television personalities within popular culture also frequently sparks debate.

In 2005, author Anne Rice became involved in a flamewar of sorts on the review boards of online retailer Amazon.com after several reviewers posted scathing comments about her latest novel. Rice responded to the comments with her own lengthy response, which was quickly met with more feedback from users.

The free FlightGear Flight Simulator has provoked a large number of flame wars in the past, as well. In 2010, a deletion sparked a real-life threat flame war on the Simulator's discussion forums.

Legal implications

Internet laws generally regard any message or post that threatens, harasses, or degrades another user as cyber harassment. While "flame wars" are not illegal, threats and insults said within them may break cyber laws. Laws vary from country to country, but in most cases, flaming can be considered cyber harassment, which can result in Internet Service Provider action to prevent access to the site being flamed.