The Ethics of Message Board Engagement: The Deflategate Case

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It was the perfectly polarizing sports controversy. The New England Patriots were discovered to have used deflated footballs in their convincing 45-7 victory over the Indianapolis Colts in the 2015 American Football Championship. As an investigation was launched by the National Football League, a proxy war between Patriots fans and haters gathered steam in the comments section under stories written on Internet news sites. The debate was not exactly high-minded. But could it be?

Within the court of public opinion, a trial with thousands of football fans as jurors took place in that two-week interval before the Super Bowl. As media coverage of Deflategate accelerated, individual citizens weighed in, utilizing the commenting function on media outlet websites. Under stories that marked every twist and turn in the investigation, individuals would offer opinions, sometimes intemperate, about the scandal, the investigation, the Patriots, and other football-related topics. More than 4,000 comments were offered under a single story on ESPN.com (“Belichick: Pats,” 2015). These user-generated comments provide a useful window into the thoughts of sports fans awaiting a big competition, and a unique forum to conduct an analysis of message board commenting through the lens of digital ethics.

Digital ethics examines the actions of individuals and media organizations in a virtual environment (DeVos & Porter, 2006; Langett, 2013; Singer, 2010). Also known as information ethics or “netiquette,” digital ethics focuses on how information is created, organized, disseminated and used online, and the ethical standards and moral codes governing conduct around this informational economy (Ess, 2014). Digital ethics asks a series of questions related to online communication: (a) What language and tone are appropriate for a given situation?; (b) What guidelines govern particular online communities?; (c) How do users portray themselves online?; and (d) How do users treat the increasingly blurred line between public speech and private communication? (Ess, 2014). Because of the multidirectional, interconnected online interaction opportunities afforded by social media and media message board, these ethical questions and issues will continue to evolve.

The purpose of this project is to examine the Deflategate story and its accompanying message board squabbling as a case study, to ascertain whether it is possible to create informal codes of conduct for message board hosts and participants, grounded in the principles of digital ethics.

By providing a content analysis of more than 12,000 comments under six ESPN.com stories connected to Deflategate, the study identifies which facets of what Suler (2004) terms the Online Disinhibition Effect are present in the comments, and suggests ways for site hosts to mediate against bad online behavior of this nature.

Presently, most advice governing online conduct is very informal, such as “Wheaton’s Law,” coined by actor and online personality Wil Wheaton. It amounts to a four-word maxim: “Don’t be a dick” (Wheaton, 2013). It is frequently ignored. The role of this case study is to see if, even for an emotionally charged story such as Deflategate, it is possible for site hosts to put rules in place that will still encourage comment and debate, but yield more insightful, less confrontational user-generated dialogue.

The comments under five stories on ESPN.com published between the AFC Championship and the Super Bowl, along with an August ESPN.com story announcing victory for the Patriots in their appeal of the league punishment, were analyzed for this case study. Each story generated an average of more than 2,000 comments from readers. A textual analysis of the publicly available comments was conducted on the more than 12,000 message board posts, utilizing open coding to gather a sense of the data and identify dominant themes. Axial coding was then utilized to identify broad categories and patterns within the data, and how they relate to the theoretical frameworks of the Online Disinhibition Effect and digital ethics (Hays & Singh, 2012).
Five broad categories of message board posts were identified: (a) condemnation of the Patriots and noting of recurring patterns of behavior; (b) pugnacious defense of the Patriots; (c) criticism of the NFL and ESPN; (d) amateur scientists explaining deflated footballs; and (e) comedians making fun of the entire episode. The nature of the controversy, and the architecture of ESPN.com’s commenting function — which places popular comments at the top of the message board thread — helped amplify the negative aspects of the conversation.

Given the open-sourced nature of online communications, a codified book of ethics for news comment sections is probably impossible, and would curtail free speech if it was possible. However, utilizing the spirit of digital ethics, this paper suggests it is possible to put rules of engagement in place to govern the online interactions that will still result in a lively marketplace of ideas, but one where informal edits such as Wheaton's Law are not so cavalierly ignored.