A virtual death and a real dilemma: Identity, trust, and community in cyberspace

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John W. Jordan

This essay examines the rhetorical discourse of an online blogging community attempting to make sense of a member's act of betrayal and its aftermath. The community members debated fundamental online issues such as the nature of virtual identity, the relationship between trust and authority online, and the prospects for virtual community in the wake of their experience. An examination of these community members' own statements provides insight into how Internet users conceive of virtual community, the importance rhetorical communication plays in shaping users' relationships with each other and the medium itself, and persistent obstacles to community building in online environments.

The strange events surrounding the life and death of Kaycee Nicole Swenson captivated a multitude of Internet users for over 2½ years. Using a Web log, or "blog,"[1] Kaycee chronicled her tragic struggle with leukemia in postings that drew many supporters who added their own statements of encouragement for this all-American, teenage girl. During her illness, Kaycee's circle of online friends drew bigger and closer to her, shared their concerns, and offered her and each other sympathetic support in a virtually perfect model of virtual community. But the most compelling turn in Kaycee's story was not her battle with leukemia nor even the day she eventually succumbed to her illness and died, all of which were observed dutifully by her online cohort. The real revelation about Kaycee Nicole Swenson was that she had never been alive. She was a digital dream, a carefully constructed and maintained fictional persona affected by her "mother," Debbie Swenson, a very real person living in a small Kansas town.[2] Debbie never informed anyone or even hinted that Kaycee was fictional until after she had posted news of Kaycee's "death" to her blog, a bombshell announcement that precipitated a major crisis within their virtual community. Debbie insisted that she meant no harm, but her actions left many hurt feelings and questions about the relationships between computers, community, and communication.

Given the ever-increasing use of fear appeals in Internet rhetoric (J. W. Jordan, 2000), it is hard to say that we have not been warned about online hoaxes or that we should be particularly shocked when the Internet plays host to deception. As one Web designer avers, "The Internet did not create grifters. . . . If anything, the Net has just changed the dynamics of the game" (Powazek, 2002, pp. 147-148). Avoiding online deception is now considered a priority for Internet users, and consumer-oriented cyber-fraud books insist that the medium's vulnerability to ill purposes requires users to adopt a healthy skepticism when online (Thomes, 2000, p. xiv). But warnings such as these

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tell only half the story of online deception. What emerges far less clearly is a sense of how Internet users respond to and deal with the aftermath of crises in their virtual communities. The Kaycee Nicole Swenson story provides an example of how one group of Internet users addressed such a crisis and the impact it had on them as individuals and as members of a virtual community. Those persons who participated in the Kaycee blog and its related Web pages, either by posting material or following Kaycee's reports on her progress, constituted a virtual community in that they were bound together by their common interest and desire to communicate with one another. The aftermath of this online community's betrayal can be used to observe the rhetorics of community and citizenship as articulated by the community members themselves during a time when their values and beliefs in virtual citizenship were rocked to their core. The Internet is not a shy medium, and Kaycee's virtual death prompted many of her blog participants to post messages about their understanding of and regard for the prospects of virtual community, identity, and trust. Theirs was a rhetorical struggle among participants who shared neither similar definitions nor visions of community, and this divergence is a large part of what makes their rhetoric compelling testimony with respect to contemporary attitudes toward trust, technology, community, and computers.

This essay critiques the Kaycee community's online debates over their attitudes toward virtual identity and online citizenship in the wake of Debbie's hoax. A critical rhetorical analysis of the ways in which community members articulated these issues engages with fundamental questions about identity, authority, and anonymity in computer mediated communication. I begin by discussing the need for critical analyses of virtual communities that examine the rhetorical work community members do in the service of online citizenship, particularly when confronted with a divisive crisis. I then review theories of online identity, rhetoric, and authority that inform a critical reading of online deception and the stakes for participants deciding how and to what extent their virtual communities should be governed. Next, I analyze the Kaycee community members' responses to these issues, presented in public Web documents ranging from posted e-mails, statements in journalistic accounts, and blogs for their rhetorical conceptualizations of the nature and function of virtual community. I conclude by discussing how this case demonstrates the importance of rhetorical communication to online community members' interactions and their ability to contend with crisis.

OBSERVING THE AFTERMATH OF ONLINE DECEPTION

The lens through which I examine the Kaycee Nicole Swenson hoax is that of critical rhetorical inquiry, which provides an analytical framework for assembling the various discursive artifacts of the hoax into a "text" that can be analyzed in terms of how competing rhetorical forces engage with one another (McKerrow, 1989, p. 101). Toward this end, I employ several critical tools united by their common interest in explaining how rhetorical communication is used in generating notions of community, trust, and identity. My primary textual pool for this analysis is comprised of the numerous statements generated by Web users in response to the Kaycee hoax. These statements are scattered across the Web in various blogs, personal Web pages, and mainstream news articles about the hoax, but they are united figuratively by their common interest in Kaycee and literally through shared hypertext links. These statements reveal not only the varied attitudes the community participants had toward the future of online community, but also how they articulated and made meaningful their attitudes through rhetorical language.

My purpose in analyzing the community members' statements is not to offer definitive pronouncements about what virtual identity is or is not. Rather, I seek to demonstrate how these participants engaged in debates over identity and what it meant in the context of their articulations of virtual community. As is common in rhetorical defini-

tions of key concepts (Schiappa, 2003, p. 4), debates amongst the Kaycee community members argued both for particular definitions of virtual community and against the validity of others. The public statements generated from these debates constituted a rhetorical space on the Internet where "social issues collide, where political issues are struggled over and subject positions . . . are constituted" (Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 2). The role of community was clearly important to these people, making their disharmony over these definitions compelling statements deserving critical investigation in order to understand better how virtual communities use rhetorical communication in their relational activities.

In online and offline contexts alike, the true test of a community is not how well it manages during times of harmony, but how it confronts crisis. A critical rhetorical inquiry into the discourse generated in the aftermath of the Kaycee hoax evinces the importance of rhetoric to the work Internet users do in maintaining their communities. This aspect of community is often overlooked in popular and journalistic accounts of web hoaxes.[3] These reports are informative and offer important counterstatements to the often effusive praise virtual communities receive in other venues (e.g., Connery, 1997; Rheingold, 1993), and usefully describe how "the Internet has breathed new life into the phenomenon" of hoaxing while providing tips to readers on how to avoid online scams (F. Jordan, 2001, p. B1). At the same time, the overall message generated by many of these reports too often drifts into moralistic cautioning about the "dark side" of the Internet that treats hoaxes as singular, self-contained incidents rather than as moments in a virtual community's continuum. The effect of such messages implicitly endorses anti-community biases by emphasizing the acts of deceptive individuals irrespective of community reactions. The Internet's ability to serve as a communal space where users discuss and debate their responses to hoaxes is diminished as are the possibilities for community enactment online.

News reports of the Kaycee hoax serve as a case in point. Stories documenting the hoax typically begin by describing how, "by the thousands, the virtual community embraced Kaycee Nicole Swenson. Reached out to her, protected her, comforted her, prayed for her. Loved her" (Roeper, 2001, p. 11). Then they reveal the hoax with melodramatic phrases like "Kaycee Nicole hadn't died. She never existed" (Dunne, 2001) or "the sad fact wasn't that a 19-year-old girl had died. The real tragedy was that she'd never existed at all" (Lynch, 2001). These juxtapositions become springboards for broader discussions on online privacy ("World Wide," 2001), commentaries about Debbie Swenson's mental state and/or ethics ("Girl's Illness," 2001), and ruminations over the difficulties fluid Internet identities present for safety (Carroll, 2001; Senft, 2001). This dramatic reporting style effectively gathers readers' attention but necessarily narrows the scope of the story to focus on an individual's act of deceit. A few articles provide comments from members of the Kaycee community (e.g., Hafner, 2001), mostly as evidence of the emotional devastation wrought by Debbie Swenson, but none offer sustained commentary on how the community confronted the hoax and its aftermath. A critical rhetorical analysis of the community members' own statements picks up where these accounts leave off and offers insight into what may be an even more important issue for online citizenship: how the idea of "virtual community" is reconceived and enacted by community members in the wake a disastrous event.

A RECIPE FOR DECEPTION?: IDENTITY, COMMUNITY, AND RHETORIC IN CYBERSPACE

Hoaxes may have a history as old as communication, but some hoaxes are better suited to particular media than others. How a technology provides opportunities for ambiguity in communication significantly impacts how identity is performed via that medium and, by extension, how identity deception can be carried out. Orson Welles' famous "War of the

Worlds" broadcast, for example, likely would not have had the same shocking impact had it been aired as a television program because the most convincing element of the story, radio listeners' vivid imaginations, would have been dampened by television's over-determined visual cues. Although the Internet increasingly is becoming a visual medium, many online activities still require users' imaginations to fill in gaps and gloss over inconsistencies in their interactions, particularly the communicative exchanges made between ambiguously represented cyber-identities. With respect to the present analysis, in order to understand the impact the Kaycee Nicole hoax had on its blogging community, it is important first to consider the nature and function of both identity and community in cyberspace.

Identity and Authority Online

One of the most touted beliefs about Internet communication is that the medium strips away users' offline identities and leaves them free to reconstruct a tetherless online persona. This quality of performative ambiguity is the source for much of the optimism and skepticism surrounding the idea of virtual community. One's online persona frequently is discussed in terms of a potentially liberating performance within an Internet where "you can be yourself, against a duplicitous world in which you have to conform to the expectation of others" (Coyne, 1999, p. 4). Fluid identity is often cited as a mainstay of life on the Net, "hardwired within the very form of multiple-simultaneous on-line chat communication" (Waskul & Douglass, 1997, p. 394; see also McRae, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995; Warschauer, 2000). In a similar vein, the Internet has been characterized as an "identity laboratory" (Wallace, 1999, p. 48), a metaphor echoed in claims that "almost the sole purpose of chatrooms and MUDs is the construction of and experimentation with the user's identity" (Bolter, 2000, p. 23). Despite the commonality of this perspective, the meaning and function of identity experimentation are not agreed upon. The potential discordance between online and offline identity raises concerns regarding the "drawbacks of malleable persona" that ask users to consider that "if we couldn't see who we were talking to, how could we trust them?" (Dean, 2000, p. 10). While some maintain that the Internet allows them to escape into a more liberating world, others worry that the escape is into a world with even more duplicity and danger than the offline world.

Much of the tension concerning trust rests on an audience's ability to distinguish between "assessment signals" and "conventional signals" in online communication contexts (J. S. Donath, 1999, p. 32). Assessment signals are difficult to fake and are therefore taken to be trustworthy signifiers of a person's "true" identity. If a woman claiming to be a bodybuilder has bulging muscles, her body serves as an assessment signal authenticating her claim. A conventional signal is much easier to forge and therefore carries lower authority. If a woman claims to be a bodybuilder but her only proof is a bumper sticker that reads, "Bodybuilder Extraordinaire," people likely will not be convinced by that signal alone because it lacks authority. The difficulty presented by computer-based community forums like blogs is that they blur the boundary between assessment and convention signals and are limited in the types and amounts of signals that they make available to users. Proving or disproving the authenticity of an online signal becomes difficult. Just because someone has "Bodybuilder" as his or her screen name does not mean that he or she is or is not a bodybuilder, and this ambiguity creates dilemmas for assessing trust and credibility in online activities.

The Web, with its graphical interface, significantly increases the richness of online expression (Kollock & Smith, 1999) but also makes deception easier by allowing a deceiver to "authenticate" his or her message with links, pictures, and other Web-friendly signals that point an audience's mind in the desired direction (J. S. Donath, 1999, p. 50). A conventional signal can be given the appearance of an assessment signal by faking the appropriate signifiers, and the malleability of signifiers in a digital envi-

ronment like the Web makes it difficult to establish one signifier as more authentic
than another. Debbie Swenson was able to convince others that Kaycee was authentic by
forging signifiers of her identity, such as posting pictures of a teenage girl and writing
her blog posts in a teenager's voice. On the few occasions when Kaycee was required to
speak on the phone, Debbie delivered a performance effective enough to fool even the
New York Times.[4] These types of evidence count in Web communication because the
medium does not readily allow for the use of more authoritative assessment signals.
None of these signals may have been entirely convincing in and of themselves, but
taken together they achieved the desired effect and convinced numerous people that
Kaycee was really a very ill, rural Kansas teen who loved basketball and computers and
needed some online friends. When it comes to making decisions about authenticity
online, the standard seems to be more about consistency than absolute certainty. An
online persona is deemed authentic if enough of its pieces seem to fit together.

It is important to highlight the aspect of audience assessment, for virtual identity is
not the strict province of an offline individual carrying out the performance. Audiences
are an important and active part in any online persona's development, even an inau-
thentic one. Blogging veterans consider audience interaction essential to a blogger's
persona, noting that "The advice 'Write for yourself,' while appropriate for a self-help
course, applies poorly to the Web. . . . You skip the step of requiring an editor and pub-
lisher, but no one is willing to skip the step of requiring an audience" (Clark, 2002, p.
63). The self "emerges in the process of interaction" (Waskul & Douglass, 1997, p. 382),
a product of social interaction in that there is one who performs but there must also
always be someone for whom the performance is given. Even anonymous identities are
social constructs in that "anonymity requires an audience of at least one person" (Marx,
1999, p. 100). From these perspectives, online identity appears as a dialogic construct in
that "Internet discourse constitutes the subject as the subject fashions him or herself,
[and] individuals construct their identities in relation to ongoing dialogues, not as acts
of pure consciousness" (Poster, 1997, p. 211). While this dialog may be skewed in favor
of the performer, identity performance is viable only if it is convincing to another par-
ticipant, "presented and negotiated in an ongoing process of communication" (Waskul
& Douglass, p. 387). Audiences authenticate an identity by assessing its performance
within the context of the community, making identity an issue of rhetorical expression,
debate, and evaluation. It is important to recognize, however, that these processes relate
more to the acceptance of an identity than to its authenticity, for it is this gap between
acceptance and authenticity that enabled Debbie to bring Kaycee into existence.

Rhetoric and Virtual Community

Scholarship on the relationship between rhetoric and community is too extensive to
be reviewed comprehensively. What I discuss here are the ways in which this scholarship
can assist in developing critical rhetorical readings of virtual community discourse.
Technological advancements ushered in during the last century have made it clear that
the idea of community in general increasingly is "conceptualized not in terms of physi-
cal proximity but in terms of social networks" (Kollock & Smith, 1999, p. 17), and that
"computer networking, for better and for worse, has become part of this process of pro-
ducing social spaces" (Saco, 2002, p. 199). This view should not imply, however, that vir-
tual communities are thought of simply as "community + computers." Virtual
community members perceive cyberspace "not as merely a series of interconnected
computers but as a tangible place—a medium and environment that cannot be
explained or reduced to its technological components alone" (Waskul & Douglass,
1997, p. 378). Participants in communities see cyber*space* more in terms of cyber*places*
where they "have strong interpersonal feelings of belonging, being wanted, obtaining
important resources, and having a shared identity" (Wellman, 2001, p. 40). This sense

of place is particularly relevant for critical rhetorical inquiries, where the dispersed and transient nature of online interaction puts a unique focus on rhetoric's use in virtual community maintenance (Stone, 1994; Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

The strength of any community, whether online and offline, is founded on effective rhetorical communication. As Hogan (1998) explains, "Communities are living creatures, nurtured and nourished by rhetorical discourse . . . [and] unite around common life experiences or shared visions of the future—commonalities manifested in their rhetorical discourse" (p. 292). Rhetoric, through its capacity for "adjusting ideas to people and people to ideas" (Bryant, 1953, p. 413), gives meaning to communities and the identities that inform them. As is true of both the ancient Agora and the modern online community, rhetoric "takes as its practice daily participation in civic and political life" (Ono & Sloop, 2002, p. 7). Rhetoric is used in everyday settings to "giv[e] form to the vague and disordered flow of human experience. Rhetoric gives shape to social reality and, in so doing, makes sense of it" (Herman, 1999, p. 6). Through rhetoric, communities develop and adjust to changing conditions and memberships, enabling a random group of individuals to become a relatively coherent social and political body. As they join together, participants also come to understand that "the problem of community is, in significant measure, a rhetorical problem" (Hogan, 1998, p. 295). Virtual communities use rhetoric to carve out a place for themselves and to develop their own codes of ethics, articulations of shared interests, and visions of purposeful action (Sloop & Herman, 1998).

The rhetorical and social processes that inform all communities similarly relate to online interactions, and it is here that community intersects with identity on the Internet. Virtual communities are made, not populated. Users must work together, albeit not always peacefully, to negotiate between individual desires and communal needs. In order for a virtual community to develop, participants must "engag[e] in a constant effort to structure experience together and to establish order in conventions of discourse so that shared meanings are possible" (Wynn & Katz, 1997, p. 302). Communities develop over time in response to the emerging issues generated by the articulation of shared interests, even if the aim and pursuit of those interests are contested. In this way, Internet communities are "underdetermined," meaning that they are "open to practice; they do not direct agents into clear paths; they solicit instead social construction and cultural creation" (Poster, 2001, p. 17). The collaborative ethos necessary for community growth also helps to explain why, despite calls for heightened paranoia regarding Internet frauds and predators, researchers find that many Internet users seem willing to give their fellow users the benefit of the doubt on matters of trust, even in ambiguous situations (J. S. Donath, 1999, p. 31).

Dialogic tensions between self/other and persona/community drive online community interactions and establish the trust that binds members together. They also reveal the extent of the dilemma faced by community members when they suspect one of their own of being a hoaxer. If their suspicions are confirmed, they face the potential loss of not just an individual community member, but of the foundation of the community itself. If identity is dialogic, then a hoax implicates *all* community members, even if only marginally, as it was their mutual acceptance of the fraudulent persona that allowed the hoax to succeed. This consequence may help to explain why users who take a "serious" attitude toward online identity may not appreciate those users who see it as mere "play." As Waskul and Douglass (1997) explain, "Ultimately, it makes no difference whether a person intends a genuine or nongenuine self-enactment, whether interactions are playful or serious—in the final analysis, the meaning of the enterprise is established in the expressive-impressive dimensions of communication" (p. 391). Only if everyone agrees that online interactions are just "play" can the consequences of hoaxes and pranks be considered harmless fun. If others take these interactions seriously, however, and invest their real emotions in the community, then a hoax can have devastating effects, even in those situations where the perpetrator claims his or her

actions were mere jest. As the Kaycee example demonstrates, even in online environments that privilege the authority of a single entity, such as the blog author, persons who become involved in that blogging community may develop attachments that they take seriously and will seek to maintain, rationalize, and, if necessary, defend.

A TANGLED WEB OF BLAME: MARGINALIZATION, SUSPICION, AND TRUST

Debbie Swenson's admission that Kaycee was a fictional persona had a devastating, embarrassing, and immediate effect on her blogging community.[5] Randall van der Woning (2001), the Web developer who voluntarily hosted and maintained Kaycee's Web site, immediately removed the blog from the Web upon receiving Debbie's confession, saying that he "refused to support a lie for even one second longer." Though it caused much turbulence, the removal of her blog did not immediately destroy the community that had built up around Kaycee, nor did it resolve their crisis. Conversations among community members arose in a variety of other forums spread across the Internet, where Kaycee's authenticity was debated along with issues of online citizenship, trust, and identity. One participant seemed to recognize the significance of the event in commenting, "Blogging community, welcome to your first real scandal" (tweebiscuit, MetaFilter). That the Kaycee blog participants were willing, if not perhaps eager, to debate these community issues in public forums necessitated that they engage with other community members, curious eavesdroppers, and even a few party crashers who came to witness the aftermath, the culmination of which gave their discussions a broader scope and relevance to the Internet community as a whole.

As the community members engaged with each another and outside interjectors, a wide range of emotional reactions transformed into purposeful rhetorical stances. Those members who felt betrayed by Debbie developed logics for blaming her and insisted that the Internet be regarded as a place of distrust and skepticism. Those members who believed, in the brief period between Kaycee's "death" and Debbie's confession, that Kaycee had been real took the opposing perspective and attempted to rebut the arguments put forth by the skeptics. After Debbie's confession, they reworked their optimistic rhetoric into a generalized call to preserve an attitude of trust within online communities. Others professed an ambivalent attitude toward Kaycee's (non)existence and stated that whether or not she was real was immaterial, what mattered was that Kaycee's blog had brought virtual strangers together and fostered a sense of community spirit amongst the participants. They expressed their hopes that others online would keep this in mind before placing every claim made by every member of their community under a microscope. From a critical rhetorical perspective, these stances are compelling because the participants engaged in issues of communal status and marginality in which their ethical precepts were articulated and defended. Throughout this section, I discuss how community members allocated blame to Debbie Swenson for her role in the hoax, the skepticism that emerged as a response to her actions, and some community members' attempts to reclaim "trust" as a virtue of "good" citizenship in the wake of Debbie's hoax.

Marginalizing Debbie

The "Kaycee Nicole (Swenson) FAQ" admonishes its readers to "Remember: The Web isn't evil, evil people are evil" (Geitgey, 2001). But Debbie Swenson did not immediately come to symbolize the embodiment of evil within the community. In the brief period between the announcement of Kaycee's death and Debbie's confession, many community members defended Debbie against the charges of trickery made by members who posted their doubts about Kaycee's story. But once Debbie's confession and subsequent claim that "I am the only person who is to blame" (Swenson, 2001) made the rounds of the various Kaycee-related Websites, Debbie inevitably became the focal

point for much of the community's rage, and people ceased defending her. Debbie's vilification, in fact, was the sole point of agreement shared by all community members, who quickly abandoned a dialogic view of identity and agreed that all fault did indeed rest with Debbie alone. There was not as much agreement, however, about what these events meant for the future of their community or for virtual communities in general. Some pointed to Debbie as the very reason why no one could be trusted online, others attempted to portray her as an exception to the general rule of trust, and still others sought to exorcise her completely from the discussion by focusing on the communal goodwill rather than Debbie's personal motives or actions.

If the community members disagreed over what Debbie's actions meant for the future of virtual communities, those members who expressed an opinion on the matter seemed certain that Debbie's actions were entirely of her own accord and motivation. None of the posters had met Debbie in person, but many had strong opinions about what kind of person she was: "It's pretty obvious that this person is extremely troubled, needs professional help and is likely to be mentally unstable right now" (y2kira, Powazek's Forum). The presumption of Debbie's mental instability practically was pre-requisite for any commentary: "For whatever reason this woman said she did it for, she must have problems" (animoler, MetaFilter). Some used their negative assessment of Debbie to highlight their detective skills by pointing out that "when you photoshop photos to fit into the delusion you've perpetrated for almost 2 years, you fall into the decidedly not sane category" (zebra_monkey, MetaFilter). Others gave their marginaliz-ing comments a considerably nastier edge. One poster vilified Debbie by writing, "This woman is a chronic liar, nothing she says is true. . . . What a horrible person, to hurt so many just to play her little game. Those who are willing to forgive her are to be com-mended, but she doesn't deserve their compassion" (Stephanie Dragon, Powazek's Forum). Another poster arrived at a far less sympathetic conclusion: "If this is a hoax, the perpetrator should die alone and unloved" (sjc, MetaFilter).

A few bloggers made efforts at offsetting their negative regard for Debbie with pro-community sentiments. In outlining his reasons for removing the Kaycee blog, van der Woning (2001) stated, "I do not see the value in promoting *anything* that was published when I know the mind behind it manipulated and used people for her [Debbie's] own agenda." His parental concern for the Kaycee community was echoed by another poster who explicitly made the distinction between "good" and "bad" community members via Debbie's marginalization: "Shame on 'Debbie' and who ever else was involved, but as for the rest of you, I still love you all!" (Mike Thomas, Powazek's Forum). These posts expressed an optimistic attitude toward their fellow community members, but they also made it clear that any and all blame began and ended with Debbie and excused the other bloggers from having any role in the affair other than unwitting victim. No one questioned that Debbie should be marginalized; the debate was over what her margin-alization signaled for the future of their community.

Debbie's marginalization revealed some important rhetorical tensions between vir-tual community and identity. Specifically, the attention given to Debbie and her pre-sumed motives was not entirely consistent with the aforementioned theories that posited a dialogic view of virtual identity. When it came to Debbie's subjectivity, community members rhetorically negated the dialogic view of identity as a strategy for preserving their community and their own innocence. Debbie's actions needed to be seen as inten-tional and selfish in order for them to be seen as cruel. In order for this scapegoating to work, Debbie needed to be seen as the sole entity responsible for Kaycee, which meant that the community as a whole could no longer see itself as having participated dialogi-cally in Kaycee's creation. Furthermore, in contrast to previous statements about virtual communities as individual-centered "experiments," the members of this community clearly indicated that they take the idea of virtual identity very seriously and that commu-nal participation is more than just one person's "play," even if no harm was meant. This

perspective resulted in community members rewriting Kaycee's interactions as Debbie's intentional manipulation of their emotions, an action that drew a clear and distinct line between Debbie/Kaycee and her interlocutors. Community members could not simultaneously be partners in Kaycee's construction *and* victims of Debbie's hoax, and so they chose the latter position as a means of preserving their own status within the community.

Debbie's marginalization rhetorically reasserted the concept of identity as "one per person," and any breach of this concept became an abomination and a betrayal. In this revised perspective, online identity is dialogic as long as one's intentions are true; false intentions excuse the community from being implicated as collaborators. Ironically, this claim actually reaffirmed the dialogic properties of identity for the remaining community members, for Debbie's marginalization required as much community participation as any other aspect of her blog. Debbie's marginalized subjectivity as cruel hoaxer became the vessel through which the other bloggers articulated their responses, and this new role for her was created through the community's participation in her vilification. One observer was attuned to this apparent contradiction, writing that s/he was fascinated by "a wad of cyber-entities debating the existence of another cyber-entity. A gathering of ephemeral avatars, most of whom remain unattributable to an avatar-master, trying to decide whether a deceased avatar's master followed it into the netherworld. . . . I'm watching a bunch of made-up people trying to decide if another made-up person's maker-upper is dead" (Opus Dark, MetaFilter). Interestingly, no one responded directly to this thread, preferring to continue the discussion in terms of Kaycee's (in)authenticity.

Even the normal conventions of Internet communication, such as the use of ambiguous screen names, were brought into service for Debbie's marginalization. Although all posters used screen names, some of which made it impossible to speculate as to the "true" identity of the poster, their discussion of Debbie made it clear that they considered their identities authentic online personae whereas Debbie's use of "Kaycee" was inauthentic. The community's view was that identity could be playful as long as it was also honest, and the Internet could be an "identity laboratory" as long as everyone was informed and gave consent. In order for their community to function optimally, identity needed to be dialogic *and* communal, meaning it must conform to what community members saw as the "rules" for interaction. By the Kaycee community's standards, their use of screen names was permissible because the intent was in keeping with communal rules, but Debbie's use of a fictional persona violated the community ethos because it used a disingenuous performance to snare their real sympathies.

The community concluded that although Kaycee was not real, Debbie's deception was. Marginalizing Debbie did more than find someone at whom fingers could be pointed; it served as catharsis and warrant for further discussions regarding identity and trust in online communities. Debbie's marginalization became an important, but not final, chapter in the history of their online community. Attributing deceptive motives to Debbie's actions allowed the community to negate her "experiment" while keeping the idea of their community intact long enough for participants to debate their disagreeing viewpoints.[6] Those members who urged extreme skepticism used Debbie as proof that blind trust is foolish when online, while the more optimistic posters used Debbie as an example of how a virtual community could cast out a bad apple before it spoils the barrel.

Everyone is Suspect

Soon after suspicions were raised about Kaycee's authenticity, several community members joined in a kind of online scavenger hunt for "evidence" that could settle the question. Photographs of Kaycee were scrutinized, her blog was searched for inconsistencies and errors, and skeptics began posting their suspicions to the community. But before Debbie's confession validated their efforts, these members' actions were protested

against by those within the community who still believed in Kaycee's authenticity. Some were "aghast at the nature of this thread—and [I] am very depressed at the amount of venom flying about. What would it take to convince you people?" (crankyrobot, MetaFilter). Another asked incredulously, "Debbie just buried her daughter, and is expected to provide proof to a bunch of insensitive buffoons?" (EricBrooksDotCom, MetaFilter). As "proof" of Kaycee's existence, several community members described their e-mail and phone conversations with her, although each admitted that they never had physical or face-of-face contact with her (e.g., bwg, MetaFilter; Chazio, MetaFilter; halcyon, MetaFilter; IndianaSweetie, MetaFilter; kaya, MetaFilter). The basic disagreement with the skeptics' position was that their "fact finding" cheapened Kaycee's memory and threatened the community's foundation by calling into question its dearly departed centerpiece. A concerned poster summarized this sentiment by writing, "I think this thread really underlines the paranoia and distrust of people on the Internet" (bargle, Metafiler). The sole fact revealed through this inquisition, the offended grievers argued, was not Kaycee's non/existence but the insensitivity of the skeptics who questioned her existence.

Despite these protests, many within the community still favored an investigation into Kaycee's authenticity and lauded the skeptics' willingness to pose such questions. The supporters' arguments reconfigured the investigation from a specific inquiry about an individual into a political position on virtual community involvement. One member wrote, "I feel more comfortable knowing that our online peers are assertive enough to debate this openly. It's a better alternative to blindly believing or anonymously spreading rumours behind others' backs" (kv, MetaFilter). Other posters concurred: "I fail to sympathize with people who say this thread is awful, or that we are awful for simply talking about the situation. This is an open forum talking about someone that put themselves in the public eye. It doesn't hurt anyone, and it shouldn't have any affect on anyone who is 'grieving'" (justgary, MetaFilter). Somewhat ironically, the supporters of the skeptical inquiry argued that by banding together to disprove Kaycee's existence, they in fact were enacting the ideals of community cooperation. Such was the opinion shared by those members who viewed the situation as an "intense and impressive community investigation" in which "a lot of people worked hard to uncover the truth" (Geitgey, 2001). Several posters added their support to those "brave enough to voice their doubts" (mechaieh, Powazek's Forum). Another wrote, "I'm amazed to see how much the online community has come together over this, and just how much investigating and reporting some people have done. It's incredible! It makes me happy" (~y2kira, Powazek's Forum). A few posters noted that they had little interest in Kaycee per se, but found the overall discussion illuminating: "What we have here is basically a perfectly legitimate public discussion of a purposely public life, touching on issues of trust, privacy, and community" (kindall, MetaFilter). Although their efforts struck at the center of their community, the skeptics and their supporters rhetorically reinvented their efforts as signs of community strength.

Following Debbie's confession, the skepticism mutated from debates over specific pieces of evidence to a general discussion of the relationship between trust, computers, and community. Many of the investigators were emboldened by Debbie's admission, which they took as validation of their efforts. Some rearticulated their vaunted technical knowledge as a kind of transcendent Web savvy and boasted that they had known all along that Kaycee was a hoax, that the clues were completely obvious, and everyone else was a dupe for not having been more suspicious. "I knew after a couple of paragraphs it was a joke," bragged one commentator (Molly Campbell, Netslave), and another mocked the "stupid people [who] are taken in by a pretty picture" (S. Jensen, Netslave). Others applied their savvy more philosophically and advised that "the community of the 'web' is nothing but a collection of personalities be they fake or real" (10931, Netslave). Some articulated their skepticism with an aura of weary detachment: "I treat everything on the net as possible fiction, and I don't allow myself to get emotionally involved in

anything I know soley [*sic*] by the net" (justgary, MetaFilter). Others warned, "Don't believe ANYTHING you READ on the Internet" (A_fool_and_their_money, Netslave), and quipped, "The Internet: Connecting stupidity with technology" (Anonymous, Netslave). Disenchanted participants claimed that the episode "illustrated a clear danger of the Internet for many by saying that someone 'met' Kaycee on a Web site. You can't 'meet' anyone on the Internet. The Kaycee tale may be instructive for people who think they know someone through cyberspace communication alone" (Imhoff, 2001, p. G6). These comments clearly sought to establish a hierarchy of Internet intelligence: If other netizens were more like the skeptics, then they would not have been fooled by Debbie. By extension, they implied that in order for a community to work everyone must adopt the cool skepticism of these "Internet elite."

These statements illustrate how the Kaycee hoax became a means for many bloggers to distinguish themselves within the Internet community either by demonstrating their detective skills, boasting about their own intellectual superiority, or relating anecdotes about other Internet cons to show that they had "been around." For these skeptics, "trust" was a sign of naïveté and demonstrated lack of Internet know-how. Their rhetoric turned the tables on the members who previously had chastised them for daring to doubt Kaycee's authenticity. Now it was the optimistic "believers" who were bad community members for trying to halt the investigation and for being blind to the realities of Internet life. One skeptic chided the "believers" by saying, "The fact that people are willing to blithely ignore 'truth' because they were emotionally involved in the story is really sick" (zebra_monkey, MetaFilter). Debbie's confession not only validated the skeptics' efforts, but served as confirmation that the best protection for bloggers was to be highly suspicious of others and what they say. One commentator summed up this attitude by writing, "Let Kaycee Nicole serve a lesson to us all: on the Net, a little paranoia goes a long way" (Stamper, 2001).

Questioning Kaycee developed rhetorically into a generalized policy of distrust and self-policing. One poster commented, "I think a self-policing community is important. It means that people feel comfortable asking hard questions about emotional issues. People are willing to fact-check. People are willing to hold others accountable to what they say" (Roe, Powazek's Forum). This attitude was supported by those who asserted that "the fact that it's self-policing makes it that much more trustworthy" (Register, Powazek's Forum). It is interesting to note, however, that self-policing in this context was not discussed as an individually internalized disciplining, but as the communal "self" that would suspect, investigate, and then reject or validate the statements made by individual community members. For advocates of this approach, pervasive suspicion was simply a means for preserving what were considered to be the higher-order principles of open debate and inquiry, even if the target was someone within their own community. On her own blog site, one community member evinced this position by lambasting the "mob" of anti-investigation supporters who sent her threatening e-mail after she questioned Kaycee's authenticity. She wrote, "It wasn't enough that Kaycee supporters believed in her—they had to quash anyone who suggested, in any way, that her story might not be true. . . . Were you one of the bullies? Did you help create an atmosphere of intolerance? Do you preach about the wonder of personal expression on the web, and at the same time try to silence anyone who says something you don't agree with?" (Thomas, 2001).

The skeptical faction of Kaycee bloggers promoted suspicion as a positive, democratic aspect of virtual community in that everyone had the right to be suspicious of everyone else. Although the ideology informing this definition of a democratic community was itself highly suspect, several members of the blogging community voiced their support for a self-policing policy, both as it related to the Kaycee forum and as a general ethos for virtual community. From a rhetorical standpoint, the skeptics' approach to online community may have been persuasive because it took a complex and troubling issue and divided members into two distinct camps, provided a venue for the two sides

to engage one another, and, perhaps most importantly, gave one side a chance to claim superiority over the other. At the very least, a community ethos based on skepticism provided some members with a reason to continue to participate in the Kaycee community, even if the resulting course of action amounted to little more than the pandemic scrutinizing of each others' statements. Although clearly not an utopian model of community, we cannot ignore the fact that this perspective received support within the community by participants who seemed satisfied by the debates it generated and optimistic about the outcome it promised.

(Re)Building Communities of Trust in the Shadow of Suspicion

Debbie's marginalization served as the basis for a second rhetorical articulation of virtual community that expressed almost exactly the opposite attitude toward "trust" than the one advanced by the skeptics. Debbie's actions were still vilified by these participants, but they maintained an optimistic appreciation for what they viewed as an open and inviting sense of online community. For them, the revelation of Kaycee's nonexistence came to mean that even though Debbie was a "bad" community member, her actions did not invalidate the "real" concern and emotions that had been invested in the community, nor did they need to abandon their belief in the concept of "trust." They argued that the dynamics of online community are such that the worth of the community never rests on the actions of a single member but on the overall, shared effect generated by the members as a whole. Their community remained valid as long as people came to it with good intentions. Rhetorically, Debbie remained guilty within this perspective but her marginalization led to the exoneration of all other community members, reaffirmed their commitment to "trust" as a foundational principle, and allowed them to reach out to others in their virtual community.

One way in which "community" was rearticulated according to this logic was by drawing a distinction between the "real" emotions of the community members and the fraudulent emotions of the hoaxer. Debbie's marginalized subjectivity was used to signify "evil" in order to illuminate a positive juxtaposition between the "good" and "bad" intentions that validated their trusting attitudes. "In the end," explained one blogger, "the only thing I *know* was real is the love that people gave to someone who, it turns out, was manipulating them. And that's a shame. But the great thing about love is, there's always more to give" (dmp, Powazek's Forum). Another poster also praised fellow community members by denuding Debbie's falsehoods: "This has brought the blogging community together. It has torn us apart. It has allowed us to trust, and it has torn the trust down. . . . We were betrayed, but at least we came together" (GeekMeltdown, Powazek's Forum). These posts rhetorically transformed deception into affirmations of communal trust and kinship. After summarizing the hoax, one commentator concluded that "It's important not to lose faith in everyone as the result of a few disturbed souls. I believe that the vast majority of people I meet online are being truthful with me" (Powazek, 2002, p. 148). These statements clarified the divide between the skeptics and the optimists. Where the skeptics understood Debbie as typical of the untrustworthiness inherent to Internet communication, the optimists used Debbie as the exceptional case that proved the general rule. Trust, as defined through the optimists' rhetoric, was an overall capacity functioning within virtual communities and could weather the deceit of a single malcontent.

As part of their rhetorical reappropriation of trust as a civic virtue online, optimists embraced the hoax and acknowledged that they had been deceived. This approach left these bloggers vulnerable to charges of naïveté, but also enabled them to claim that they were now wiser and that their belief in trust was stronger because they had endured this trial by fire. Posters insisted that the hoax "actually renews my faith in humanity, because a whole bunch of strangers were moved to care" (Sharon, Powazek's

Forum). This sentiment surfaced as a theme in several posts: "I'm glad people were touched by Kaycee's story. They should be. You can call it rank sentimentality if you like, but it shows that people have a capacity to sympathize and to care. That should be a vital part of our lives" (tranquileye, Metafilter). These posts further defined trust as an essential, if occasionally abused, quality that enabled communities to grow stronger and more assured. This stance was effective rhetorically because it offered bloggers a way to acknowledge their deception without having to change their behavior or admit that their optimism was naïve, which allowed them to reaffirm their ideology within the community. As one long-time Kaycee blogger proclaimed, "I followed my heart. Sometimes that requires an optomism [sic] tax. It stings to pay it, but in the long run, it's a bargain. . . . I'd rather be duped 100 times than shut off my compassion" (Halcyon, Powazek's Forum). Such optimism created a rhetorical means for the admission of gullibility to become a badge of honor identifying the blogger as a compassionate individual committed to the transcendent ideals of virtual community.

Not surprisingly, these statements drew fire from the skeptics. In response to the bloggers who belittled their optimism, pro-trust community members challenged the assumption that wholesale suspicion was the only way to guarantee a safe community environment and sought to reward optimism by arguing that its benefits were worth the risks: "I want, I *need*, to still have faith in humanity. And I think I'm still willing to keep that faith, despite the risks" (Noah, Powazek's Forum). Another wrote, "I, too feel used . . . [but] I do not regret having faith in [Kaycee]. It is always better to have faith than to be cynical. That's how I feel" (Redgie, Powazek's Forum). Some optimists challenged the skeptics' ideology on the grounds that, although flaws had been revealed in Kaycee's story, there could be no doubt of the community members' intentions: "The important thing to remember is that the emotions that Kaycee's blog evoked in people are real. And you can't take that compassion and that generosity away from the people who gave it; it's still there" (kristina, Powazek's Forum).

As with the skeptics, specific concerns about the role technology played in the hoax surfaced in the optimists' rhetoric. Some addressed the impact of the scandal within the context of blogging technology itself. Their comments recognized the influence of technology on identity formation and the omnipresent possibility for misuse, but posited communal interests and emotional connection as transcendent qualities that exist apart from any particular medium: "This saga isn't going to make me stop trusting what I read on the web, the relationships I form here, because what enables trust, compassion and love is the message, not the medium. . . . I found out a friend died recently, because her daughter called up and told me. I do not hate the phone. I hate the fact that she died" (Meg, Powazek's Forum). Sentiments such as this tend to oversimplify the distinctions between communication technologies and how people use them to communicate, but they fit the general tenor of the pro-trust claims in that they refocused attention on the relationships between community members rather than the medium through which those relationships were formed. Other posters were even more buoyant and argued that the emotional support demonstrated by sympathetic members of the Kaycee community proved that the Internet was a caring place. "Everyone allowed themselves to feel," proclaimed one supporter. "They connected not just with 'Kaycee' but with each other. For those brief moments the idea of cold, plastic space was diminished. That was real. That existed" (Peter, Powazek's Forum). Others concurred that good people made for a good medium: "The memories I'll take from this? Friends pulling together to honor a spirit that showed great courage, great compassion, and a great hope for the future. Good, real people who are trying, hard, to make a new 'medium' work" (Dominik, 2001).

Perhaps the most confrontational rebuttal advanced by the optimists was that the skeptics' investigation had missed the point of virtual community altogether: "Sure it might not be real. Does it really matter? If nothing else, the story of Kaycee's death was a

moving experience for some people" (moz, MetaFilter). Another asserted, "Whether you believe Kaycee is real or not . . ., absolutely *no one* can deny that she brought a great amount of hope and inspiration to many, *many* people" (Noah, MetaFilter). One poster critiqued the skeptics by making a value comparison of the "truths" revealed through the skeptics' investigation and the "truths" that emerged through the optimists' defense: "I feel like picking apart related websites, scrutinizing post times and examining meta tags is somehow beside the point. . . . Reflecting on how this has made a huge 'community' pull together and applying that energy to other causes, even on an individual basis, could make the 'truth' beside the point" (jennaratrix, MetaFilter). Advocates of the communal trust perspective attempted to reverse the skeptics' notion of healthy suspicion by deriding its supposed benefit to the community. Those members who spent their time "picking apart" Websites in order to disprove some claim did so for selfish motives, whereas a "good" community member used trust to advance the goals of the entire community.

Through these arguments, "trust" became a rhetorical vessel used to distinguish and evaluate the types of communal activity that emerged in response to Kaycee's death and Debbie's confession. The optimists valued their idea of trust because it allowed them to argue that positive intentions were more important than negative consequences. It is important to remember, however, that this articulation of trust was predicated on Debbie's permanent exile from the Kaycee community. In other words, in order for the optimists' definitions of trust and community to come to fruition, they needed to portray Debbie as the antithesis of all these values. This approach meant that even within the most pro-trust elements of the Kaycee community, a healthy amount of distrust and suspicion circulated, albeit localized to a particular individual. When Debbie insisted that her actions were "not done for any reason other than sharing the love for life they [cancer victims] gave to those they loved," and that she "regret[ed] any pain I caused but I do not regret putting their thoughts out to be read" (Swenson, 2001), the rhetorical foundation of the optimists' concept of virtual community necessitated that her words be read as an insincere plea for forgiveness rather than as a testament to emotional sharing, despite the striking similarity between Debbie's words and the optimists' own rhetoric. In order for trust to be vindicated, Debbie had to be absolutely and irreconcilably guilty and never allowed to claim that her misguided intentions were more important than the consequences of her deception. Her ascribed position as banished Other effectively trumped all other readings of her confession. Debbie's marginalization, despite the claims made by the skeptics and optimists, demonstrates that the distinction between the two community factions was more an issue of degree than strict separation. The skeptics advocated suspicion of all community members whereas the optimists implied that almost everyone could be trusted, but each agreed that at least one member, Debbie, had to remain "outside" in order for their community to overcome the crisis.

This apparent contradiction in the optimists' position may account for why not everyone was convinced that a presumption of trust could be salvaged simply by voicing support for it, and some in the optimists' camp took an even harder line against the skeptics and Debbie. These bloggers expressed their pleasure in seeing the community come together during the crisis, but warned about the consequences a "suspect everyone" attitude would have for the idea of virtual community and for blogs' ability to function as arenas for social support. Their argument was not only that a suspicious attitude "missed the point" of community but that a pervasive attitude of suspicion caused as much damage to the community as the hoaxer it sought to expose. Posters writing from this perspective saved their harshest words for the investigators and linked Debbie's deception with the "rabid fascination and investigation that followed" (Grohol, 2001). Debbie's actions were hurtful enough, they claimed, and scrutinizing her and others' posts only compounded the problem: "The truth is, had the online community not investigated the matter as thoroughly as they did, it is unlikely anyone would have been hurt by Kaycee's 'death.' . . . It is for the sheer sake of curiosity and uncovering

the 'truth' . . . that the community brought the hurt upon itself" (Grohol, 2001). Refuting the claim that the investigative efforts brought the community together, their argument distributed the blame for the crisis between Debbie and the skeptics and implied that the investigators' actions, regardless of their intent, ultimately were more damaging to the community than the facts they uncovered.

Bloggers who advocated this position were concerned not only with this particular case but also with the ramifications of distrust for the blogging community in general. They feared that the escalating scrutiny demonstrated by the skeptics would create a slippery slope of suspicion that would needlessly undermine authentic blogs' abilities to generate social support for their members. In their estimation, the real consequence of the Kaycee Nicole Swenson saga was that too many blog readers would adopt a skeptical attitude and assume that every claim of illness and every request for sympathy were inherently spurious, and that it was more important for community members to find flaws in such stories than to listen sympathetically. The broad adoption of this attitude would in effect silence the voices of people in real pain who use the Internet to reach out to others. One concerned poster commented, "The thing that bothers me about this kind of hoax is that, will others think that I'm a phoney, too, if I should publish a blog or journal or whatever? Or will people basically believe first and question later?" (splash, Forums@Grohol.com). Describing his spouse's blog detailing her battles with breast cancer, one observer sympathized with these worries by saying, "The story of the despicable Ms. Swenson deflates me a bit. I imagine how the wonderful people who wrote to me would have felt if our story had been a hoax" (M. Donath, 2001, p. G11).

These community members rhetorically linked the concept of trust not to suspicion but, rather, to a sympathetic understanding of the Internet as an arena for coping with illness and tragedy, even if some used the technology for selfish and deceptive purposes. As one member explained, "Those of us who do put our lives online build a trust with those who read our words. Every single time one of those hoaxes . . . come to light, those of us who are honest and sincere are hurt" (Sandy, MetaFilter). Although critical of the skeptics' investigative efforts and their underlying motives, these bloggers were sympathetic to those members who had been deceived. Their argument did not ask community members to abandon common sense but to remain open to the possibility that many, if not most, blogs were authentic. Ironically, this sentiment was expressed most eloquently by the investigative journalist credited with being the first to have raised doubts about Kaycee's authenticity, and who herself maintained a blog detailing her own battles with a chronic disease. Her concern was for

> People who have journals and blogs too, and people who are all getting hate mail, and skeptic mail doubting every single world [sic] they say, examining every inch of their journal or blog, and have lost their ability to be open and honest dealing with their disease online. . . . I can't say I'm thrilled that some poor kid is deleting his mail unread because no one believes him anymore. Then again, I can't blame people for being extremely suspicious right now. . . . I'm angry at Debbie Swenson, for stealing my tongue. (Mitchell, 2001)

Although careful to sympathize with the community members who were misled by Debbie, Mitchell's comments are most sympathetic to those whom she regards as truly deserving of sympathy and for whom the Internet may be the most accessible means for communicating with others. Shifting the grounds of debate to this notion of sympathy and communal goodwill transforms the issue under contention into a matter of silencing all authentic pleas for compassion instead of exposing a single fraud.

Advocates of communities founded on trust rather than suspicion argued that theirs was the better means for securing a space for authentic voices who wished to use the Internet to share their meaningful experiences and seek companionship and comfort from others. Their position was problematic, however, because it did not address directly

the concerns of members who did not want to be "duped" and were not content to file their betrayal under "live and learn." Although trust advocates convincingly enumerated the harms that unchecked skepticism could create in an online community, more practical approaches to the problems of anonymity and trust remained unaddressed. What was offered instead was akin to a Golden Rule of Virtual Community: "Trust in others as you would want to be trusted." Although noble, this approach was problematic because it hyperpersonalized community issues, such that any questioning of a participant's identity would be viewed as a personal attack against an individual. Bloggers adhering to this pro-trust approach would be placed in the difficult position of having to accept all personae as authentic or risk being labeled cold-hearted skeptics. But this all-or-none approach was undermined by the pro-trust members' own assertions that a successful community must stem from the authentic goodwill of its participants. Unfortunately, nothing beyond personal anecdotes were given by the optimists as a means for understanding how trust could be gauged in online community interactions. Bloggers who followed the optimists' community-through-trust arguments and personal examples were left with a better understanding of the relationship between virtual community and authenticity, but were just as likely to find themselves back at square one when the next Kaycee came along.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

When the Internet was little more than a few networked computer terminals shared by a handful of computer scientists, simply having access to the network at all told users a great deal about the likely identity of the person on the other end of the modem. Now that the Internet population has grown much larger and more diverse, these initial assumptions are no longer viable. We are left pondering how it is that we can invent something as marvelous as the Internet yet continually fail to arrive at a common definition of "community." This hubristic frustration has been discussed as a kind of "technoromanticism," where "the technologies that support virtual communities . . . imply a certain self exaltation or conceit on the part of humankind, a presumption that we can have total control or omnipotence" (Coyne, 1999, p. 4). Stories like Kaycee's serve as apt examples of technoromanticism's Frankenstein-like twist and admonish us to remember that the power to create does not translate directly into the power to control. Given the immensity and diversity of the Internet, it may be more practical to abandon the dream of control and focus more on the contingent circumstances that bring users and crises together online, and explore how people can, do, and must use rhetorical language to adapt and respond to the demands of their online communities.

The Kaycee Nicole Swenson saga exemplifies several challenges facing Internet communities today and the role rhetoric plays in their development. It also reveals some pitfalls and lingering problems which netizens and communication scholars alike should continue to explore. In contrast to many popular press reports, we find that virtual communities do not always end at the act of deception but instead struggle with their problems and attempt to make sense of crises while developing and debating future courses of action. The Kaycee community took the issues of identity and community quite seriously, demonstrated by their passionate debates over the usefulness of anonymity, the role of trust, the obligations individuals have to their virtual communities, and the consequences of their proposals for future communal relations. In acknowledging their use of rhetoric to work through their crisis, however, we should not be too quick to praise them simply for discussing these issues nor to scold them for not having reached a definite conclusion. These questions are too important and the issues too complex to expect a tidy ending. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize and seek to understand how the Kaycee community members argued toward their respective solutions.

The participants in the Kaycee community debates never resolved their arguments or formally concluded their discussions. The Kaycee community is now largely aban-

doned; most of the message forums are inactive and the bloggers have moved on to other sites, topics, and controversies. And yet, from a critical rhetorical standpoint, the decline of the community proves instructive. The picture that emerges from the rhetoric of the Kaycee story is one of concerned advocates in a virtual community creating and articulating a variety of complex arguments and experiencing great difficulty reaching a consensus about the meaning of an event that brought them together. The Kaycee community ultimately fell apart not because of irresolvable problems inherent to the technology or because Debbie Swenson spoiled the Internet for the other users, but because the community members were unable to make their rhetorical arguments purposeful and community oriented. Theirs were passionate rhetorics, but rhetorics without a common *telos*. Many arguments were made, but it was difficult to find the common purpose that could have led to a collaborative revisioning of their community. Agreements were short lived and generally unsympathetic to opposing views, giving only terse acknowledgment to others' feelings before quickly devolving into divisive harangues about compassion, trust, and sociotechnical savvy. The most contentious postings were those in which individual posters narcissistically held themselves out as champions of the community, either because of their advanced technological know-how or their ability to empathize with the "true" suffering of deserving bloggers. Such posturing made it difficult, if not impossible, to see the common ground that existed between the different members' stances. Polarizing rhetoric made community issues a matter of personal pride and ultimately closed off the discussion despite each side's stated desire to promote a more democratic vision of virtual community. I am not claiming that the goals the various factions pursued were meritless, but that the way in which they pursued these goals compounded their problems and hindered their progress. The community members may have had more success had they recognized that identification must be "logically prior to persuasion" (Charland, 1987, p. 133). If members of an online community in crisis are serious about reestablishing their common interests and repairing their communal foundation, they should seek to articulate better what they desire an online community to be *before* they engage in debates over why it should be that way. Particularly in the discursive realms of cyberspace, community pursuits can be supported only by the pillars of shared interests.

The Kaycee Nicole Swenson story—as told through the hoax, its aftermath, and the tensions that arose between the skeptics and optimists—illustrates that rhetoric is very much an active and important part of virtual communities facing crises. Those persons who would dismiss the prospects of online community negate the time, energy, and effort these members put into debating the issues confronting them and miss an opportunity to observe how community is enacted in the everyday activities of this still new and developing social environment. Though this particular community was unable to reach a mutually agreeable resolution, it is encouraging to recognize that the ways in which these bloggers debated trust, authority, and community demonstrated an awareness among Internet users of the seriousness of these issues with respect to both the technology involved and the idea of online citizenship. Internet culture, on the level of community interaction, is showing signs of maturing into a complex and dynamic communication space, "warts and all." Communication scholars would do well to continue to investigate how online participants negotiate this space, their identities, and their respective desires as they work to transform virtual communities from playful experiments into fully-realized social settings.

NOTES

[1]A "blog" is defined as "an easily updated Web site that works as an online daybook, consisting of links to interesting items on the Web, spur-of-the-moment observations and real-time reports on whatever captures the blogger's attention" (Levy, 2002, p. 52). Blogs are an amalgam of Web portals and personal opinions for public consumption (Mead, 2002). Their participatory nature and ease of use have made blogs a popular Web attraction, with an estimated 2.4 to 2.9 million active blogs as of June 2003 (Greenspan, 2003). In a typi-

cal blog, one user or group is responsible for providing the main content, but readers from anywhere on the Web may post their own comments in blog message boards and chat rooms, or continue a conversation across distinct blogs by linking to different threads and/or separate Web pages, thus creating a blogging community around common themes more than a common location. For thorough discussions of user interactivity as constitutive of online community, see Connery (1997) and Poster (1997; 2001, pp. 171-188).

²For comprehensive summaries of the Kaycee Nicole Swenson saga, see Geitgey (2001), Lynch (2001), and van der Wonig (2001).

³Two notable exceptions are Dibble's "A Rape in Cyberspace" (1994) and Stone's critique of "The Cross-Dressing Psychiatrist" (1995). Both accounts discuss community reactions to deception, but tend to focus more on the ramifications of deception for individuals rather than for communities as a whole.

⁴The *New York Times* interviewed Kaycee for an article on virtual communities. The *Times* published a correction to its story after the Kaycee hoax was revealed ("Editor's Note," 2001, p. A2).

⁵The community postings discussed in the following sections are culled from several blogs, Web sites, and message boards that shared a common interest in the Kaycee hoax. These postings were publicly accessible (i.e., there were no subscription charges or other membership barriers to reading and posting to these sites). For the sake of efficiency and cohesion, my citations for these postings consist of the screen name used by the poster and the forum from which it came. The URLs for these forums are:

Forums@Grohol.com: http://forums.psychcentral.com/showflat.php?Cat=&Number=5&page=0&view=collapsed&sb=5&o=&fpart=1
Netslave: http://www.netslaves.com/messages/pg-message_redirect.asp?id=9905649690&topic=990564969
Powazek's Forum: http://www.powazek.com/zoom/log/archive/00000058.shtml
MetaFilter: http://www.metafilter.com/comments.mefi/7819

⁶From the existing information, it appears that Debbie has not attempted to contact the groups directly (i.e., using her identifiable screen name) following her posted confession, although she may have made contact and/or posted using an alternate screen name. Even so, Debbie's participation (or lack thereof) is not requisite to her marginalization because the community has publicly stated that she is not welcome in any capacity.

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