Madeirabynight.com: Regulating behavior in a small online community

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ABSTRACT
In this paper I analyze madeirabynight.com (MBN) community and their knowledge, understanding and compliance of the forum rules and registration agreement. Madeirabynight.com is a small website about night events and urban music in Madeira Island – Portugal. The present paper talks about the forum (message board), which is where community members interact with each other. In order to participate in this forum, users have to register and agree with a registration agreement, but many times this agreement is not complied and user's behavior becomes turbulent. In order to address this issue I persuaded the forum administrator to introduce some norms/etiquette rules in addition to give more visibility to the registration agreement. This action effects on community behavior are described in this paper.

Author Keywords
Social Web, madeirabynight.com, online community, regulate behavior, rules.

INTRODUCTION
Madeirabynight.com is a small web community that orbits around urban entertainment, party, music, and all kind of night stuff… With all this party environment, regulate behavior and controlling extremism is a hard task because party has a "chaos connotation" and members tend to bring that kind of environment to the forum.

Sometimes it's about politics, sometimes it's music gender and because it's a small community, after all Madeira it's a small island and everyone knows everyone, many times people argue about personal issues with some members taking advantage of anonymity. Just because madeirabynight.com it's a small community it doesn't mean that rules, and other important matters that keep the forum running, can be somehow left to chance. All communities start up by being small and if not convenient regulated chances of getting bigger stay at risk. First because without regulation old and expert members that contribute to the community tend to leave and second because new members who want to add value to the community feel harassed and also quit the community. Both these phenomena are originated due to the shift of the community core: more peripheral themes and issues get on the spotlight and this takes valuable members to back off and stop making contributions that will lead the community to stagnation.

And we all know that happens, in the www, to communities that stop growing: They close and members move to a novel community!

RELATED WORK
Norms in online communities pose a special design challenge for three reasons. The first reason is that the ease of access to online communities leaves norms vulnerable to disruption. Although the ease of access is a boon to people finding a compatible community, and to their exchanging messages of support and advice once they have joined, it also represents an irresistible opportunity to some would-be harm doers. At one university, a disturbed student easily created an alias and typed an aggressive message that he copied to 58 fellow students in a student bulletin board, whom he targeted because their names looked Asian. Spoofers post cryptic messages about eating cats and pit bull fighting in easily-located pet hobby groups. Extremists post messages that condone or advocate violence on community websites. Because of the reach of the Internet and the ease of crossposting and moving around, a tiny minority of thrill seekers can do quite a lot of damage by violating community norms in outrageous ways.

Another reason that norms in online communities pose a special design challenge is that the comparative physical anonymity and geographic distance from others in Internet groups leads norm violators to feel they are safe from censure if they act badly. Norm violators can feel they are at low risk of retaliation online, especially in communities with no mechanisms for holding members accountable. Online text communications reduce social context information, especially visual information about the source of a communication. Photographs and movies can be altered or misidentified. People can conceal or misrepresent some aspects of themselves that we usually learn through visual observation, especially their age, ethnicity, physical attributes, health, and perhaps their social standing as well. Remailers, aliases, and encryption increase the difficulty of identifying someone and punishing misbehavior. Online communities benefit from physical anonymity in that it affords a sense of privacy to members who wish to talk safely and openly with others. The same feature, however, also aids those who wish to deceive and exploit others, and use norms against the group. For instance, in their search for relationships with children in sexually oriented communities, pedophiles pose as young boys or girls,

although this practice often results in pedophiles just meeting one another. In a study of online and real world romances, almost 23% of online partners misrepresented their age versus just 5% of real world partners who did so; 28% of online partners admitted they had misrepresented their physical appearance, versus 13% of real world partners who did so. On the other hand, just 15% of the online partners had misrepresented their interests, fewer than the 20% who did so in real world relationships. The authors argue, "exaggerations of age can be made readily in cyberspace, and misrepresentations of physical attributes are difficult to disconfirm on a computer screen. False claims regarding interests, occupation, education, or other background characteristics may be more difficult to sustain as these become the topics for conversation, questioning, and further explanation."

A third reason that norms pose a special challenge in online communities is that most relationships in online communities are weak, in the sense that most community members meet as strangers, and remain so. The social network is also dynamic, with members continuously entering and leaving the community. Members in weak-tie online communities may have quite positive feelings for members of the community, and may willingly exchange useful information and help. Nonetheless, the vast majority of these relationships will be narrowly focused on one mutual interest, and they will lack an enduring personal commitment to the relationship itself. Weak ties characterize many single-issue online communities with a revolving membership. In such groups, social distance is comparatively high, with a large majority of the members lacking either personal bonds to particular members or strong commitment to the group as a whole. Social distance among people increases the chance that individuals or factions in the group will ignore or violate norms, and will fail to contribute to norm development. Potential norm violators may not feel constrained by their sensitivity to the approbation of the group or by their feelings for the welfare of their victims [1].

Ease of access, anonymity, and weak tie community structures are what social scientists call "moderating" factors or conditions. That is, these attributes of online communities do not cause social breakdown, but they reduce internal and external pressures on conformity, and increase the likelihood that potential norm violators will act on more egregious plans or impulses and this sometimes takes place in MBN forum [1].

Several authors state that visibility of norms/rules, monitoring compliance, enforcement and bad behavior sanction should be present in any community that wants to succeed. If one of these 4 design principles is missing, regulation does not exist or at least is not effective [2, 3].

Any successful community has a set of rules (whether they are implicit or explicit) that govern how common resources should be used and who is responsible for producing and maintaining collective goods, in madeirabynight.com case these collective goods are information and other valuable content. However, it is important that the rules are tailored to the specific needs and circumstances of the group like size, age and core of the community. Ostrom identifies this as a design principle that is a feature of cooperative communities: there is a good match between the goals and local conditions of a group and the rules that govern the actions of the group's members. Her research indicates that there is often great variation from community to community in the details of the rules for managing collective goods. One lesson is that it is dangerous to take the specific rules of a successful group and apply them blindly to other groups [2].

One of the most common and accepted tenets in the literature on cooperation is that the larger the group, the less it will further its common interests. Researchers have identified a number of reasons why cooperation and regulating behavior may be more difficult as group size increases. First, as the group becomes larger, the costs of an individual's decision to free-ride are spread over a greater number of people. If an individual's action does not appreciably affect others, the temptation to free-ride increases. More generally, the larger the group, the more difficult it may be to affect others' outcomes by one's own actions. Thus, an individual may be discouraged from cooperating if his or her actions do not affect others in a noticeable way [2]. This is the same that saying that in small communities, like madeirabynight.com, members actions have more side effects on other members and that will contribute to encourage that kind of behavior even if it is against the establish rules. That is the king of phenomena that behavior regulation is intend to handle: bad behavior spirals. Second, it is often the case that as group size increases, anonymity becomes increasingly possible and an individual can free-ride without others noticing his or her actions. Third, the costs of organizing are likely to increase, because it becomes more difficult to communicate with others and coordinate the activities of members in order to provide collective goods and discourage free-riding [2].

Monitoring and sanctioning is also important not simply as a way of punishing rule-breakers, but also as a way of assuring members that others are doing their part in using common resources wisely. Ostrom and other authors have argued that many individuals are willing to comply with a set of rules governing collective goods if they believe the rules are efficacious and if they believe most others are complying with the rules. That is, many people are contingent cooperators, willing to cooperate as long as most others do. Thus, monitoring and sanctioning serves the important function of providing information about other persons' actions. In every successful community studied by Ostrom, the monitoring and sanctioning of people's behavior was undertaken by the community member's themselves rather than by external authorities. Another common pattern was that cooperative communities employed a graduated system of sanctions. While sanctions could be as severe as banishment from the group, the initial sanction for breaking a rule was often very low.

Community members realized that even a well-intentioned person might break the rules when facing an unusual situation or extreme hardship. Severely punishing such a person might alienate him or her from the community, causing greater problems [2].

The design principle at stake in MBN forum was rule visibility. Rules were only showed when members were in their registration process. So I persuaded the forum administrator to give more visibility to this registration agreement and also add a couple of specific norms/etiquette rules regarding some common violations.

The research and theory suggests that we can make norms stronger and more powerful within online communities by making them more noticeable and also by making good behavior noticeable and salient to others. Some authors have argued that group communication online, rather than attracting misbehavior, can actually promote normatively positive behavior among group members, especially over time. They say salient group norms can be enhanced online because the group image is uncontaminated by the physical presence of individuals who deviate in harmful ways from the group and because visual anonymity and physical isolation encourage self-disclosure and liking based on mutual interests [1]. Cialdini's work suggests that an occasional norm violator can make norms more salient and force the community to confront the behavior it will consider appropriate and inappropriate. This suggests that communities not seek to bar inappropriate behavior altogether but to hinder it enough to make the norm obvious. Community discussions of norms and rules, and how to turn rules into norms, also can make norms salient and help enforce them [1].

Social news aggregation sites such as Reddit (www.reddit.com) face a special challenge in making norms salient since the entire content of these sites revolve around voting and commenting on web links. Although Reddit has an area where 16 certain explicit norms are instantiated, this area has low salience for most users. The Reddit community's solution is to post dummy "articles" in the main news area whose titles describe the norms. Those article/norms that have widespread support and relevance in the community are voted up, often reaching the front page and thus becoming highly salient. An example of this is a post advocating the norm of using comments for conducting polls instead of articles: From reddiquette: "Please don't conduct polls using posts. If you feel you must use Reddit to conduct a poll do it using a comment. Create a self referencing post and then add a comment for readers to mod up or down based on their answer to your poll question. Also, be sure to indicate in the title of your post that the poll is being conducted using comments. Including something like "use comments to vote" in the title would probably be sufficient". This injunctive norm was developed in response to a slew of polls taking over the front page of Reddit, as each poll "vote" had the side effect of increasing the poll's popularity and visibility. The new norm "article" garnered widespread support and high salience (it was up voted more than one thousand times), at one point reaching the #1 article spot [1].

The website "Cops Writing Cops" (www.copswritingcops.com) is an example of a site that makes norms salient through online sanctioning for an offline community. The site includes personal stories of law enforcement officers who have received traffic tickets from other officers and includes the names and descriptions of the ticketing officers. By making violators of the norm "cops don't give other cops tickets" more salient through a persistent online sanctioning system, the community aims to make the norm stronger. This is also an interesting example of how norms for communities can clash with those of the wider population. When this site was popularized on social news aggregators, a number of people (not from the law enforcement field) harshly criticized it for promoting a norm that is in violation of the law – especially troubling to them since it is a norm for those whose job is to uphold the law [1].

So, it is clear that authors in this area believe that even in small communities, like madeirabynight.com, rules and other important matters that keep communities running, can't be somehow left to chance [1, 2, 3]. Depending on the type of community, the size or the age [2], rules should be design to address different issues like ease of access, anonymity, and weakness of ties [1], but one thing is for sure: visibility is always a key aspect in regulating behavior and rule compliance [1].

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

I was trying to find out how to decrease the violation rate of norms/etiquette rules in the MBN forum. How? Using ethnographic methodology to collect both qualitative and quantitative data:

Step 1. I started by collecting some data about the number and type of rule violation during a month – (849 messages from);

Step 2. Then 1 of 4 design principles was enforced, regarding this specific field: rule/norm visibility;

Step 3. The same kind of collection performed in 1. was done during a month after visibility principle enforcement – (810 messages from November 16 to December 16);

Step 4. Finally, a survey about how rule compliance evolved was responded by 46 members.

In the first step I notice that some norms/rules are not complied. These norms/rules are related with issues like flaming, off-topic, flood and bump:

- Flaming is a hostile and insulting interaction between Internet users. Flaming usually occurs in the social context of a discussion board, Internet Relay Chat (IRC), by e-mail or on Video-sharing websites [5].
- A contribution is on-topic if it is within the bounds of the current discussion and off-topic if not [4].
- To bump a thread on a forum is to post a reply to it purely in order to raise the thread's profile. This

will typically return it to the top of the list of active threads [6].

- Flooding a thread happens when a user posts several messages in a short period of time, instead of just editing the previous message.

So flamed topics, bump, flood and off-topic messages where counted between October 4 and November 4. In this period members posted 849 messages.

After this, 1 of 4 rule design principles was enforce: rule/norm visibility. I negotiated with madeirabynight.com administrator how could these changes be made. The next paragraphs describe how this negotiation toke place:

After the completing step 1 and presenting the mid-term report in the Social Web class on project progress, I finish writing the rules to implement in the forum:

- Do not insult, slander or defame other members of the forum!
- Do not use obscene language!
- Do not bump! By bump we mean posts with no relevant content that would normally have the intent to move the thread to the top of the page.
- Do not flood! By flooding we mean publication of several consecutive messages in a thread by the same member. Instead, edit your first message!
- Do not make abusive and continued off-topic! For off-topic we mean publishing messages which content has nothing to do with the matter that led to the opening of its thread.
- Breaking these rules will bring consequences!

I sent this list to the administrator so he could publish it, but he advice me for the forum terms that were showed when members register in the forum:

"Registration Agreement in the MBN forum: By using this forum, you agree not to post any material which is false, defamatory, inaccurate, abusive, vulgar, hateful, harassing, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, threatening, invasive of another's privacy or otherwise violative of any event, the Portuguese and international laws. Unauthorized advertising, repetition of the same text, advertisements, extension of words and pyramid schemes are also forbidden on this forum. We not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information presented. The posted messages express the views of author and not necessarily the views of this forum, its moderators or administrators. Anyone who feels that a message posted is objectionable is encouraged to notify immediately administrator or moderator of this forum. Where there is necessary to remove objectionable content, moderators and Forum administrators reserve the right to make this removal, soon as this content is detected. This is a manual process, so please realize that they may not be able to remove or edit particular messages immediately. This policy is also applicable to the information included in the profile of members. You are fully responsible for the content of your messages. Apart moreover, you agree to indemnify and hold harmless the team this forum, as well as affiliate sites. By registering you have the possibility to choose your username. It advised use the name appropriate. By registering this user account for your protection, you agree to never give your password out to another person except an administrator. You also agree to NEVER use another person's account, for any reason. We also HIGHLY recommend you use a unique password and complex for your account, to prevent account theft. After you register and login to this forum, you can complete your profile. It is your responsibility to present clean and accurate information. Any information to be inaccurate or vulgar in nature by the forum administrator will be removed, with or without notice. Penalties would be appropriate. Remember that each time you make a post, your IP address is recorded, in the event of having to be banned from this forum or to contact the your ISP. This will only happen in the event of a breach of this agreement. It is important to note that the software places a cookie, a text file containing bits of information (such as your username and password) in your browser's cache. This is ONLY used to keep you logged in / out. The software does not collect or send any other form of information to your computer. Warning: It is allowed only one registration per user. Any abuse of this rule could result in a penalty action to your IP address, that prevent him from fully access the forum and the future all new site MBN."

As I said, this is only showed when new members register themselves, and let's be honest, no one reads those agreements because people want to register themselves fast and get on reading and posting in the forum. Also, members are always logged in the forum, because of the cookies installed in users computers, so there is no way to access this info.

I think that giving more visibility to the agreement an improve it with some of my rules (more objective and specific rules) that are not covered by that same agreement is a good way to persuade members to behave according to those rules.

After some discussion with the administrator we agree on this final version that was published on November 16:

"Reminder: Forum rules

Taking advantage of this moment of calm in relation to compliance with the MBN forum rules, and in the wake of what happened in recent months when the 'electoral marathon' take place, I recall the forum registration agreement as well as some other rules that must be followed:

Registration Agreement in the forum MBN: By using this forum, you agree not to post any material which is false, defamatory, inaccurate, abusive, vulgar, hateful, harassing, obscene, profane, sexually oriented, threatening, invasive of another's privacy or otherwise violative of any event, the Portuguese and international laws. Unauthorized advertising, repetition of the same text, advertisements, extension of words and pyramid schemes are also forbidden on this forum. We not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information presented. The posted messages express the views of author and not necessarily the views of this forum, its moderators

or administrators. Anyone who feels that a message posted is objectionable is encouraged to notify immediately administrator or moderator of this forum. Where there is necessary to remove objectionable content, moderators and Forum administrators reserve the right to make this removal, soon as this content is detected. This is a manual process, so please realize that they may not be able to remove or edit particular messages immediately. This policy is also applicable to the information included in the profile of members. You are fully responsible for the content of your messages. Apart moreover, you agree to indemnify and hold harmless the team this forum, as well as affiliate sites. By registering you have the possibility to choose your username. It advised use the name appropriate. By registering this user account for your protection, you agree to never give your password out to another person except an administrator. You also agree to NEVER use another person's account, for any reason. We also HIGHLY recommend you use a unique password and complex for your account, to prevent account theft. After you register and login to this forum, you can complete your profile. It is your responsibility to present clean and accurate information. Any information to be inaccurate or vulgar in nature by the forum administrator will be removed, with or without notice. Penalties would be appropriate. Remember that each time you make a post, your IP address is recorded, in the event of having to be banned from this forum or to contact the your ISP. This will only happen in the event of a breach of this agreement. It is important to note that the software places a cookie, a text file containing bits of information (such as your username and password) in your browser's cache. This is ONLY used to keep you logged in / out. The software does not collect or send any other form of information to your computer. Warning: It is allowed only one registration per user. Any abuse of this rule could result in a penalty action to your IP address, that prevent him from fully access the forum and the future all new site MBN.

Other rules that must be followed:

- Do not bump! By bump we mean posts with no relevant content that would normally have the intent to move the thread to the top of the page.
- Do not flood! By flooding we mean publication of several consecutive messages in a thread by the same member. Instead, edit your first message!
- Do not make abusive and continued off-topic! For off-topic we mean publishing messages which content has nothing to do with the matter that led to the opening of its thread."

After publishing this message on November 16, I started to collect data for step 3. During the following month members posted a total of 810 messages.

Research methods are not restricted solely to quantitative techniques. Researchers have come to understand that ideally we should join both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to obtain more feasible results. In qualitative analysis we shift away completely from the mathematical grounds that drive quantitative analysis. No more are we interested in the significance of the results at a numerical value, but instead we try and understand what are the reasons that potentiate the phenomena at stake [7].
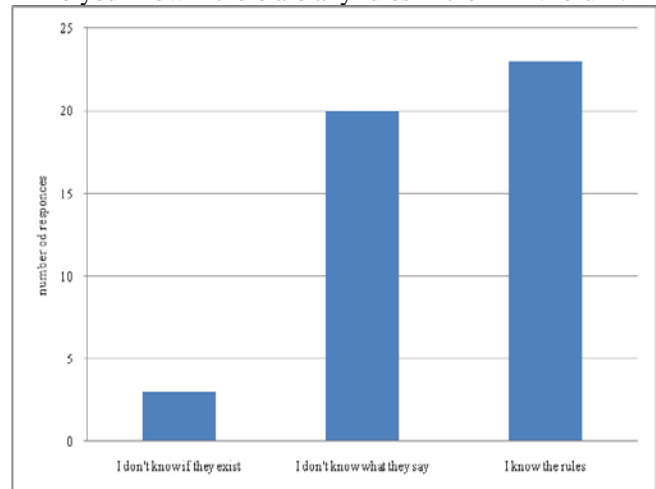
This drove me to come up with a small survey in order to give me some insights about users opinions. Some of the questions asked in the survey allow a graphic to be draw and a qualitative/quantitative numerical analysis can be done, but some were intend to be open answer questions and they were only used to help me in the ethnographic filed, and not so much in the purely qualitative/quantitative numerical analysis per say. This survey was published on December 7, still during the period of time of Nov 16 - Dec 16 where the data of step 3 was collected. Coming next is the survey introduction showed to the MBN members, and also all the questions asked with some of the results gathered:

"Online survey – Rules and behavior in the MBN forum
My name is Francisco Andrade and I'm a Madeira university student. I'm preparing a project for the social web course (http://hci.dme.uma.pt/courses/socialweb09F/) ministered under the Master of Computer Engineering. The focus of that project is studying the behavior of the MBN community and the rules knowledge/compliance of its members. The purpose of this survey is to help me to understand the knowledge, comprehension and compliance of the forum rules. Please participate. The survey is anonymous, has 9 questions and only takes about 5 minutes to respond. If you have any suggestion or if you are interested in the results, send me an email to a2051703[at]max.uma.pt. Thank you in advance!"
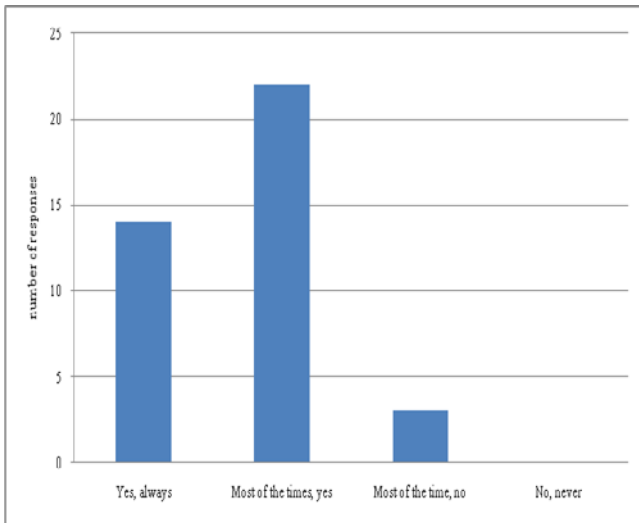
Survey questions and some results:
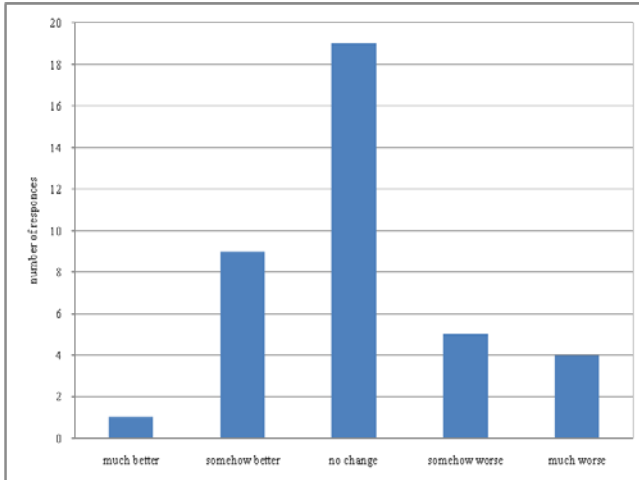1- Do you know if there are any rules in the MBN forum?

2- Is there anything in the forum rules that you don't understand? If yes, which? (open answer question)
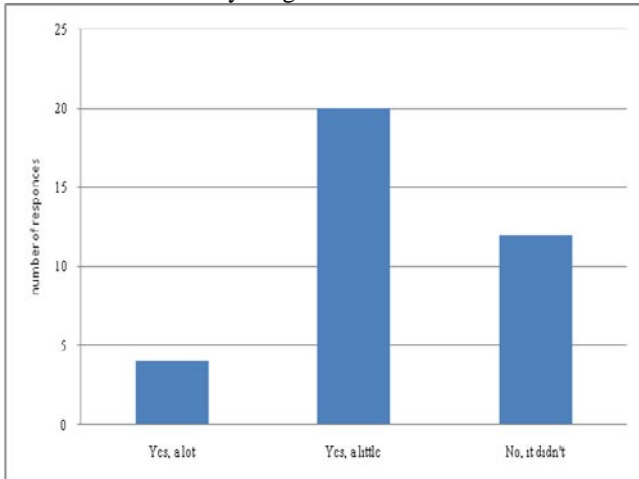3- Do you follow the forum rules?

4- What do you have to say about general evolution of the forum environment in the last 3 weeks?

5- What do you think that contributed to that evolution? (open answer question)
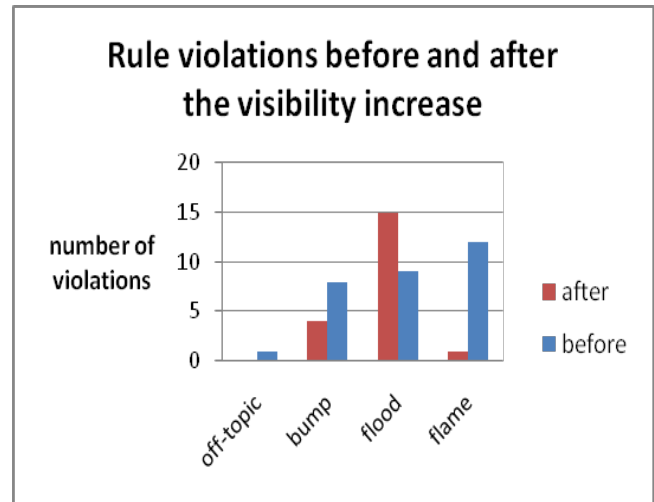
6- Do you think that the message posted by the forum administrator entitled "Reminder: Forum rules" in the November 16 had anything to do with that evolution?
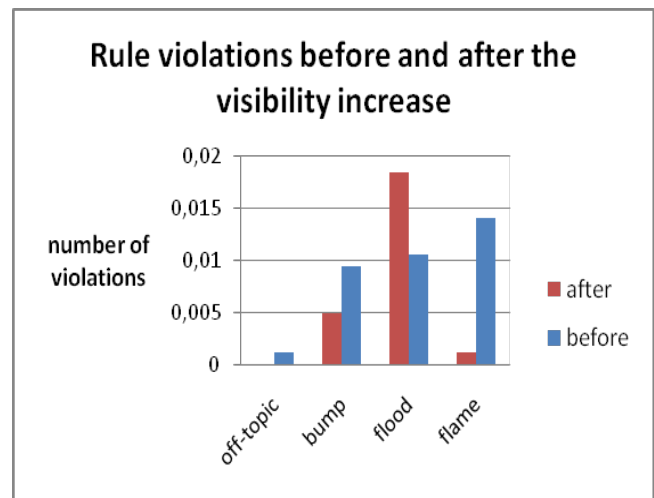

7- In your opinion, which rules are less complied? Why do you think that happens? (open answer question)

8- What do you suggest to implement in order to increase rule compliance? (open answer question)

After all this work I compared quantitative data collected in steps 1 and 3:

If we introduce the number of messages in each month as a new variable (number of violations/ number of messages) we get this new graphic:

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results suggest that some improvements were achieved, because people started talking about this issue and the violation rate decreased. Ethnography and some qualitative data show that the increase of norm/rule visibility had some influence in environment evolution in the last 3 weeks. Even so, members didn't note a great evolution. They also suggested several additional measures to address this problem, and surprise: those suggestions are all about the other 3 principles that help improve behavior (monitoring compliance, enforcement and bad behavior sanction). Members believe, and I agree, that sanctions should be stronger or at least have more visibility in order to set examples to all community. About this study itself I must

say that associating quantitative and qualitative methods was very helpful because using several methods always gives new perspectives.

Quantitative data suggests a good evolution: less episodes of rules violation in all categories except for food messages. I have counted more flood messages in the period after the administrator gave more visibility to norms/rules but my ethnographic experience allows me to say that this happened only because a new user started a very unusual topic and flooded it with several messages. It was an isolated case and as we can see in the graphics (last two) above all the other categories of norms/rules violation were less common. This is not clearly showed by qualitative data. This qualitative data mainly collected from the survey, and all the ethnographic know-how gave me some clues and insights about what happened before and after increasing norm/rule visibility:

- Politic topics are much more calm after visibility changes;
- Administrator was much more active after visibility changes on deleting and editing messages.

I think like many other members in the MBN forum and also like some cited authors: new members (young people) that add no value and only flamme topics around are dragging old members that add value, out. A solution also given by some members and pointed out by authors is to give more visibility to rule enforcement and sanctions in order to set up examples for all members. Give visibility to norms/rules may not be enough: at some point it will be necessary to give visibility to other variables (monitoring, enforcement and sanction).

The main conclusion that I draw from this project was that regulating small communities is not much different from regulating big communities. It's just a question of size and repercussion of peoples actions like cited authors suggested. If we have a big community a small action or change will not have much impact in the community as a whole, but if you have a small community a small gesture or sign may have a great impact in the whole community. This is valid for both free-riders, who violate norms/rules, and for administrators and moderators who try to keep the community running.

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