

Chapter 22

“I hate your politics but I love your diamonds”

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**“I hate your politics but I love your diamonds”:
Citizenship and the Off-Topic Message Board Subforum**

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I'm glad you didn't take offense to my post and glad you enjoy the interchange of opposing ideas. I do as well. By the way, I was looking at your solitaire thread a while back and it made me change my mind yet again about my ring! . . . The beauty and simplicity of your set reminded me of what I truly love. Okay, back to politics! – A PriceScope user, November, 2008.

Discussion of solitaire ring design and heated political debate might seem like an unlikely juxtaposition, but for a time both could be found on the jewelry-lovers' message board PriceScope. It would not have been uncommon for two posters to argue about tax policy or abortion in one subforum while collaborating to help a

third user find the perfect setting for a repoussé engagement ring setting or pink diamond accent stone in another.

On PriceScope, this culture of collaboration produces the capacity for a politics of self-determination that John Hartley describes as “DIY citizenship.”¹ This in turn created the basis for more traditional forms of civic engagement, like overtly political talk and even voting. In the lead-up to the 2008 US presidential elections, the “off-topic” subforum to discuss current events became one of the most active subforums on the site. During this period, it would not have been uncommon for a shared interest in jewelry to ameliorate tension during a discussion of a divisive political issue. However, in the aftermath of the 2008 election, talk of politics seemed to eclipse talk of jewelry, undermining the basis upon which the PriceScope community had been formed.

In this chapter, we look at the everyday gender and economic politics of PriceScope’s jewelry geeks. Next, we describe the rise and fall of its off-topic area as an active site of explicitly political activity. Finally, as a conclusion, we call for further study of message boards in general, which we see as an important component of a decentralized social web.

PriceScope as DIY Citizenship

PriceScope, a “consumer education” website devoted to diamonds, colored gems, and jewelry, was founded in May 2000 by a coalition of independent jewelers united in competition against chain stores. Originally, it centered on a database of diamonds available for sale. By listing their available diamonds in the database, jewelers were able to increase their geographic reach and likelihood of sale. PriceScope was not an e-commerce site in that it did not sell anything. Instead, consumers had to contact jewelers directly about diamonds found in the database.

This business model relied on a special kind of consumer: one who disdainfully dismissed overpriced, low-quality “maul” (a play on “mall”) diamonds; who preferred custom-designed and hand-carved settings to mass-produced branded designs; who enjoyed a hunt for the perfect diamond more than a luxurious retail experience. It needed, as some PriceScopers have described themselves, “jewelry geeks.”

Shortly after the site launched, PriceScope added a message board, and by 2002, it had displaced the diamond database as the focus of the site. The message board attracted existing jewelry geeks whose willingness to share their knowledge, in turn, created new ones. It was a place to “geek out,” to “navigate

esoteric domains of knowledge and practice and participate in communities that traffic in these forms of expertise.”² In collaborative project threads, the “collective intelligence” of the community is called on to assist a single member in the design and procurement of a new piece of jewelry.³ By 2005, some of the most active members began hitting the 10,000 post mark. By 2007, the message board had over one million posts and by 2011, there were three million.

On PriceScope, the mutual respect, shared knowledge, and time investment required for the successful realization of a jewelry project formed the context for what John Hartley describes as “DIY citizenship.”⁴ For Hartley, DIY citizenship “is no longer simply a matter of a social contract between state and subject, no longer even a matter of acculturation to the heritage of a given community; DIY citizenship is a choice people can make for themselves.”⁵ According to Hartley, DIY citizens produce their own identities through the critical selection and redeployment of material and semiotic resources plucked from the surrounding media environment.

Although DIY citizenship is realized through consumption practices, it is not as simple as selecting from the prepackaged, off-the-shelf forms of citizenship characteristic of “commodity activism.”⁶ For example, from a DIY citizenship perspective, a woman who bought a diamond “right hand ring” for herself as a

symbol of “empowerment” should not automatically be seen as a dupe of a DeBeers-funded advertising campaign. Instead, her decision—and its personal and political dimensions—would have to be considered as part of a bespoke assemblage of values, norms, practices, and relationships.

DIY citizenship is usually not an isolated pursuit; it happens in communities. Traditionally, publics are thought to form around class, ethnic, cultural, and geographic interests. In Hartley’s DIY—or “DIWO” (do-it-with-others)⁷—mode, citizenship may be enacted through affinity among strangers. This is the case for PriceScope’s jewelry geeks, who enact a form of DIY citizenship in overlapping arenas of activity: the production of collaboratively self-determined ethical positions in relation to social institutions like marriage and within markets.

The DIY citizens of PriceScope produce a nuanced critique of marriage negotiated through a material symbol of the institution: the engagement ring. As one poster put it: “WE decide if and when we marry, who we marry, and how we marry. And if we want to choose the bling, we will. The ring in this century represents an understanding and commitment between two people. Not a promise from the male to the female that she’ll never have to worry her pretty little head about the big bad world now that Mr. Proposal has chosen her for his very own.”

Some of these women are already jewelry geeks and have worked out a “dream engagement ring” even if they are not planning to get married anytime soon. For others, the engagement ring project is an initiation into PriceScope. Through it, they become jewelry geeks and continue posting, eager to share their new knowledge with others. They also approach the jewelry market with a set of normative expectations: that technical expertise should be shared among producers and consumers; that the boundary between amateur and professional should be ambiguous; and that consumers should reject mass-produced brands in favor of artisans. Producers who meet these norms are rewarded by PriceScope consumers who view their consumption as a translocal form of the “shop independent” movement.

PriceScopers closely follow international attempts to regulate “conflict diamonds.” They are more aware than casual consumers of the flaws of the current process and avoid most diamonds dubiously marketed as “ethical.” Although many are concerned with the political economy of their purchases, most seem to find the ecological and human rights implications of diamonds no more objectionable than many other industrially produced goods. One member suggested that those who criticize her “blood diamonds” should be “more concerned about their own blood iPods.” Although this stance might be seen as

somewhat passive or even incoherent, it is a collectively produced alternative to preset platforms of “ethical consumption,” which are often nothing more than “greenwashed” attempts by corporate actors to rebrand rather than reform existing industrial practices.⁸

PriceScope and Discursive Participation

In Hartley’s model, DIY citizenship is enacted outside the traditional structures, rituals, and relations of state power.⁹ Unlike previous models, DIY citizenship is “post-political,”¹⁰ in part because it claims rights not through formal politics but in “social-network markets” and in the “gift economy.”¹¹

To critics, this “post-political” citizenship might seem like the triumph of the market over democracy—or perhaps not even citizenship at all. For Nicholas Garnham, the DIY citizenship position is “pollyannaish,” exaggerating the agency of individuals as well as the role of consumption in the formation of personal identities.¹² It offers few constructive possibilities for political action. However, for Hartley, it is this “democratization without politicization”¹³ within DIY citizenship that opens up possibilities for new democratic formations. DIY citizenship, then, is the “citizenship of the future; decentralized, post-adversarial,

based on self-determination not state coercion.”¹⁴ Indeed, as Elizabeth Jacka puts it, “For Hartley, it appears, democracy and politics are antagonistic concepts; perhaps he would even see politics as the enemy of democracy.”¹⁵

Although PriceScope offers an illustration of Hartley’s DIY citizenship, the theory of citizenship that seems to be in operation among users of the site is fully aligned with neither Hartley’s optimism for radically reimagined formations nor his critics’ fears of disengagement. Indeed, although PriceScope users use the site as a vector through which to meaningfully produce their own “DIY” identities and agencies, they also—at least for many years—used it to engage extensively in what Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini call “discursive participation,” that is, talking about electoral politics.¹⁶ By tracing the persistence of both forms of citizenship on PriceScope, we can better understand their interrelation. In this case, DIY citizenship does not displace engagement in state politics. Instead, it creates the basis for a community through which more traditional, explicitly political behavior can also emerge.

Like many interest-driven message boards, PriceScope was designed with an off-topic subforum—here, titled “Around the World” or “ATW”—intended for discussion of current events or politics. The off-topic section, of which ATW is a component, is called “The PriceScope Cafe,” echoing Habermas’s

“coffeehouse,” if only incidentally.¹⁷ Although ATW was not always one of the most active subforums, there were usually a handful of posters, mostly passionate partisans, sparring with each other. Surprisingly, debate tended to be as civil as it was animated. The collaborative practices that enabled collective intelligence activities to flourish in the on-topic project threads became deliberative norms for off-topic political talk elsewhere on the site. “I hate your politics, but I love your diamonds,” one poster wrote to another, evoking the history of collaboration they shared.

Contrary to the findings of Sunstein and others who study political talk online, PriceScope was by no means an “echo chamber” of ideological homogeneity.¹⁸ Although the vast majority of members were upper-middle-class white women, PriceScope members’ political party identifications were more clearly heterogeneous. According to a poll thread created by a member in August 2008, 52 percent of the 459 members who responded were planning to vote for Barack Obama. Some 45 percent reported planning to vote for John McCain, and 3 percent reported “neither,” mirroring the country’s political identification: in 2008, Obama and McCain received 52.9 percent and 45.7 percent of the popular vote, respectively.¹⁹ As Hartley notes, one of the functions of cultural citizenship

is “[gathering] populations which may otherwise display few connections and . . . promoting among them a sense of common identity.”²⁰

Leading up to the 2008 presidential election, there was a surge of activity on ATW. As the election approached, it became one of the most active subforums on PriceScope. The political conversation became more heated, but it also became more sophisticated. There were “Debate the Debate” threads in which PriceScope users watched the debates virtually together live. In another thread, they challenged each other to prove that they could “argue the other side.” One undecided member started a thread in which she asked PriceScope members to persuade her to vote and who to vote for. One user later remarked, “I don’t think I would have voted if it had not been for this place and the people in it.”

The experience of sustained collaboration fostered a feeling of mutual respect that mitigated the hostility that might have otherwise arisen amid a tense political debate. As one user wrote, “Whenever I think ATW is getting a bit too contentious for me, all I have to do is go over to [Show Me The Ring] or [Bride World Wide] or basically any other forum in PS and I will read message after message that are kind, supportive and helpful.”

DIY citizenship, according to Hartley, creates a feeling of “cultural neighborliness”²¹ that “ameliorates our manners.”²² These dynamics, developed in

the PriceScope community through DIY citizenship practice, were put into service of civil discussion of formal, state politics. This is not to suggest that electoral politics should be privileged over DIY citizenship, or that the latter is simply a platform for the former. Indeed, for PriceScopers, the two had to be kept in careful balance.

The 2008 Election: Challenges and Crises

As the election grew closer, members joked that ATW had taken over PriceScope. There were complaints about some new members posting too much about politics in the off-topic areas and not “pulling their weight” in the on-topic areas. Political discourse began to grow more heated and more personal. For too many involved in the political threads, the political debate was no longer consistently paired with collaboration around a shared interest in jewelry. Without engagement in this common passion, PriceScope members were not “a truly sovereign community” of DIY citizens, “among whom relationships, decisions and ideas are negotiated and arbitrated.”²³ They were simply a group of atomized individuals arguing about politics on a message board.

A particularly tense topic was California's Proposition 8 to ban same-sex marriage, which appeared on the same ballots as the presidential election. PriceScope's terms of service had long prohibited discussions of religious beliefs, and some conservative members felt that they were unable to defend their position without being "ganged up on" for breaking the rules. But Proposition 8 was also an important issue for PriceScopers who were planning their own same-sex marriages. Near the end of a particularly divisive thread on ATW, one wrote:

I argued head to head with Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church when I was 15! And look at me now, 21 and crying over words on the internet. ;) It was different when I didn't think I would get married and didn't even want to. I've been an activist for marriage equality since I was 12, but it wasn't until a few years ago that I thought I might want to actually get married, and not until now that I am planning to get married. Something about planning to get married and having my legal rights threatened simultaneously collided in this thread. Planning my wedding in one section of the site and having to defend my right to have it in another.

For the poster, it was disconcerting to have been met with knowledge sharing and support in the PriceScope jewelry and wedding planning forums only

to discover that members of the same community were arguing against the legality of her marriage in another. Instead of diffusing conflict, the proximity of on-topic ring shopping and wedding planning to off-topic talk about Proposition 8 heightened it. After Proposition 8 passed, she posted pictures of her wedding ceremony in one forum and, not long after, in another, an open letter to the community stating that she was leaving PriceScope completely. She had been supported by PriceScope when she had used it to develop the elements of “semiotic self-determination”²⁴ as a DIY citizen picking out an engagement ring for another woman, but she had faced an intolerable disconnect from that support in PriceScope’s discussion of formal politics.

Aftermath: Clashes and Breakdowns

In the aftermath of 2008 elections, the community and collaboration enabled by the DIY citizenship of PriceScope had become fully dis-integrated from the discursive participation it had previously supported. It seemed clear that ATW had taken on a character of its own, isolated from the collaborative norms of the other PriceScope forums. The reactions to the fractious Proposition 8 threads provided the community with an opportunity to assess itself. One poster wrote: “People can

argue all they want about gay marriage, but in that situation this girl was just married and then just days after, SS marriage was banned, and right now she doesn't know what will happen to her marriage. I understand that ATW is a place to debate politics, [but] what could be gained from letting this girl know that you voted against her rights (or would have if you lived in CA)?"

ATW was "a place to debate politics," but what purpose did it serve if it undermined the basis of the community that supported that very discursive participation? Political talk had become a liability to the collective intelligence activities upon which PriceScope's DIY citizenship was formed. Instead of a flow of collaborative norms from the project threads to the political threads, the destructive effects of the "bashing" that had become common on political threads began to be felt in forums beyond ATW. Moderators initially posted warnings about civility and established ground rules for political discussions—efforts that had previously been unnecessary—but they ultimately decided to prohibit political talk altogether when the situation did not improve. The regulation of political talk was justified by site moderators through a rearticulation of PriceScope as a site for sharing knowledge and expertise about jewelry and gems. A warning note posted by a moderator stated, "First and foremost, it should be duly noted that Diamond education is our first priority and always will be." ATW

was described as an “extra ‘recreational’ area” that was a “minor part of the entire foundation of PriceScope.”

Although many were disappointed, PriceScope users seemed to generally agree with the ban on political talk. Throughout the metadiscussion about whether or not PriceScope should “keep its politics,” posters reminded each other of their community’s shared interests, practices, and histories. One wrote, “With the founders of pricescope in mind I am somewhat ashamed that we all continue to act so poorly with this issue. . . . After all we have all come here for the love of diamonds and many of us have formed wonderful relationships.”

To remind PriceScope of its former spirit, moderators encouraged members to “remember their roots” by sharing the story of what brought them to PriceScope in the first place and contributing to the new “PriceScope Community Project,” which asked them to nominate diamond photography to be compiled into a book to be sold to raise money for charity. The charity project, a depoliticized form of civic engagement, was intended to repair and restructure the community upon which the both DIY citizenship and discursive participation depended.

Three years later, with the 2012 elections approaching, PriceScope had not lifted its ban on political discussion. Longtime members sometimes reminisced

about ATW as the “Wild West” or, alternatively, the “good old days.” One wrote, “It’s a shame admin shut down such a popular forum . . . not to mention that we’d have a lot to talk about these days!” Nevertheless, discursive participation does occur subrosa, usually on subforums not as overtly coded as ATW. As long as these threads—on topics such as anti-Semitism, the BP oil leak, and the Occupy movement—do not require excessive moderation, they tend to persist. There are also threads about the everyday politics of members’ personal lives—the harsh realities of having cancer in America even with insurance, salary cuts for state employees, and, yes, same-sex marriage. In most cases, because the community was able to restabilize itself after the 2008 crisis, it is able avoid destructive confrontations by appealing to shared passions and social bonds, even if it is not yet ready to call these conversations “political.”

Coda: Message Boards and the Decentralized Web

Taken individually, PriceScope may appear to be a curious outlier, but its collaborative practices and deliberative norms are not unique. PriceScope’s principal organizing structures—the forum, the thread, and the post—are iterations of a fundamental form of asynchronous computer-mediated

communication that has been in continuous development since the late 1970s.²⁵

Indeed, the online message board system has served as an infrastructure for countless communities of interest—from flashlight enthusiasts to unhappy Starbucks employees, from peafowl breeders to armchair detectives, from homeowners trying to avoid foreclosure to fans of Houston hip-hop.

Recently, however, some observers have described the message board as technology in decline. Virginia Heffernan, writing for the *New York Times* online opinion page, gave message boards a “nostalgic embrace.”²⁶ For Heffernan, the message board has become an “endangered species” as “forum villagers flee for the Facebook megalopolis.”²⁷ She writes:

If urban history can be applied to virtual space and the evolution of the Web, the unruly and twisted message boards are Jane Jacobs. They were built for people, and without much regard to profit. . . . By contrast, the Web 2.0 juggernauts like Facebook and YouTube are driven by metrics and supported by ads and data mining. They’re networks, and super-fast—but not communities, which are inefficient, emotive and comfortable. Facebook—with its clean lines and social expressways—is Robert Moses par excellence.²⁸

But, the death of the message board—for these very reasons!—may yet be greatly exaggerated. Although PriceScope members report some slowing down, many find that Facebook and other mass-scale sites are incompatible with the salient functions of “geeking out.”²⁹ Non-niche social network sites are not designed for the development of collective intelligence and lack, for example, the ability to search an archive of past posts. Furthermore, few PriceScope users want their interest in jewelry—a “guilty pleasure” for many—to show up in their general-purpose, multi-audience feeds or even to be linked to nonpseudonymous accounts. This is especially true when seeking emotional support about the family issues that often arise through wedding planning. It might also be true for discussing politics. We expect, then, that the interest-driven message board will persist. The form will continue to evolve, even as it maintains its low profile, neither resembling nor aspiring to compete with general-purpose social network sites. People will find their way to message boards and make communities out of them.

Instead of Jane Jacobs’s New York, we see the message board as the strip mall of the Internet—uniform but unique, ubiquitous, and invisible. All message boards are alike—they are produced using a handful of very similar software packages—but each is deeply particular. The key design elements that enabled

PriceScope’s discursive community to flourish—persistent pseudonymity, searchable archives, and an off-topic forum—are common features found among thousands of interest-driven message boards. Rather than approach each board as a wholly new site, these common infrastructural characteristics invite us to see message boards as a single highly distributed sociotechnical phenomenon, an analytic move that enables a productive comparison with monolithic social network sites like Facebook.

In addition, the message board’s distributed architecture may also be essential for the sustainability of the kind of “DIY citizenship” and heterogeneous discursive political participation we describe here. Unlike messaging “platforms” provided by companies like Facebook, Twitter, or Disqus, message board software does not require the concentration of data or authority within a single institution in order to function. The highly centralized institutional architecture of the commercial services leaves them politically and economically vulnerable at a single point of failure. Should the parent company go out of business, temporarily suspend service, cancel a user’s account, or be censored by a government, users are left with little recourse.³⁰ In contrast, it is not possible, for example, to easily censor message boards in general because each web-based message board is its own institution running on its own host. PriceScope’s infrastructure will continue

to function without interruption even if every other message board on the web suddenly disappears.

As the Internet is increasingly segmented into incompatible “walled gardens,”³¹ scholars and activists should neither overlook communities built on decentralized infrastructures like the interest-driven message board nor surrender them to the sociotechnical scrap heap. As sites of sociality and diversity, as well as privacy, autonomy, and self-determination, they are fertile ground for citizenship formations of many kinds.

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Notes

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5. Ibid., 178.
6. See Roopali Mukherjee and Sarah Banet-Weiser, eds., *Commodity Activism: Cultural Resistance in Neoliberal Times* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).
7. John Hartley, "Silly Citizenship," *Critical Discourse Studies* 7, no. 4 (2010): 233–248.
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11. Hartley, "Silly Citizenship," 241–242.

12. Nicholas Garham, "A Response to Elizabeth Jacka's "Democracy as Defeat," *Television and New Media* 4, no. 2 (2003): 193–200.
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21. *Ibid.*, 172.
22. *Ibid.*, 180.
23. *Ibid.*, 161.
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25. See Ward Christensen and Randy Suess, “The Birth of the BBS,” 1989, <http://chinet.com/html/cbbs.html>, and *The BBS Documentary*, directed by Jason Scott (Bovine Ignition Systems, 2004).
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28. Ibid.

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