AVEN

Asexual Visibility and Education Network

A Look at Online Collective Identity Formation

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The Computer in the Closet – Online Collective Identity Formation

       To speak up we need words. In the language of new social movement theory the words, theories and principles around which any group comes together are referred to as collective identity. The concept refers to "the shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity,"[1] and the process of its derivation determines how a group interacts both internally and with the outside world. In order to form a group individuals must find a way to communicate their interests and establish which are common, they must find a shared way to articulate their experiences, and they must forge an understanding as to the nature of their solidarity. Collective identity is just another word for collective understanding, and its formation and reformation are ongoing. But how does collective identity form in the first place? According to Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier collective understanding is generally reached through "preexisting group ties,"[2] churches, clubs, and factory floors where individuals with common experiences can process and unify around those experiences. Once they share a common forum individuals must be willing to talk about an experience to find how and with whom it is shared. Experiences that are considered shameful or awkward to discuss are often 'closeted' until individuals are comfortable and articulate enough to include them in public discourse. Can collective identities form in environments without these preexisting criteria, where individuals hold no pre-existing social ties and their common experience is one that is awkward or shameful to discuss? How do individuals build a collective identity out of experiences that they do not have any cultural or social context to understand?

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[1] Taylor, Verta and Whittier, Nancy E. "Collective Identity in Social Movement Communities: Lesbian Feminist Mobilization." Freeman, Jo and Johnson, Victoria, <u>Waves of Protest: Social Movements Since the Sixties.</u> Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.: New York, 1999. p. 170.
[2] Ibid, 169.

Identities and experiences that cannot be articulated are closeted. In order to "come out of the closet", to talk about experiences that they were previously too uncomfortable to discuss, individuals must find a way to explore and better articulate those experiences: exactly the sort of discussion that closeting forbids in the first place. Since individuals cannot discuss their experiences in the immediate environment where they are most comfortable they must find a venue for discussion that is at the same time safer than what they know and entirely outside of it. Not an easy order to fill. In the 1950s and 60s the Mattachine Society was just such a venue, publishing information on homosexual experience which could be distributed secretly, allowing lesbians and gay men to formulate their identities without being prematurely 'outed,' and fueling the formation of a widespread social movement based on collective identity[3]. Today the same process takes place with queers across the world, but things have changed. In an article on modern queer teens Steve Silberman notes that, "just 10 years ago, most queer teens hid behind a self-imposed don't-ask-don't-tell-policy until they shipped out to Oberlin [or Wesleyan] or San Francisco, but the Net has given even closeted kids a place to conspire."[4] The internet expands the resources available for people to safely explore their closeted experiences and identities to an unprecedented level. Experiences which previously could not be formulated into cohesive identities are for the first time able to seek out their likeness, building collective identities on a global scale. These online resources allow a new type of social movement: one directed not externally at society or the state but internally at understanding and articulating its own collective identity; a global network of closets, connected by computers, slowly working themselves open. To examine these issues of online identity formation I will examine the recent emergence of

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[3] D'Emilio, John, Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1983.
[4] Silberman, Steve. "We're Teen, We're Queer and We've Got E-mail." Trend, David, Reading Digital Culture. Blackwell Publishers:Malden, 2001. p. 222.

asexual communities on the internet, with a focus on the Asexual Visibility and Education Network.

Proto-Identity – Asexual Experience

Since the early days of Usenet there have been murmurs from people who report not experiencing sexual attraction. They used a variety of words to attempt to describe their experience- celibacy, nonsexuality, antisexuality, and asexuality to name a few. These posts took place on boards mostly unrelated to asexuality and strongly affirmed the notion of asexual identity:

> **I am also trying to bring this out in the open. Asexual people do exist. Someone who**
>
> **is asexual is someone who has no real interest in either sex. Someone who has never**
>
> **been turned on by human genatalia. Asexual people may have other turnons *like**
>
> **bondage* but not much else gets it for them. I have been struggling over this issue for**
>
> **over a year now. I am very confused about my issues as well. Anyhow, I just wanted**
>
> **to try to start a little thread on asexuality. Please, respond to the group, unless you are**
>
> **that one person... Then respond to me directly too. Thank you very much.[5]**

The author's statement of experience raises a foundational question for asexual collective identity: asexuality is, by definition, a *lack* of experience. In order to build a collective identity asexuals must collectively understand and identify around some common experience (not merely a lack of one), so what is that experience and why is it so difficult to openly discuss? The author implies actively experiencing asexuality in several ways: through the disbelief or

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[5] "Re:Asexuality," <u>alt.sex.bondage</u>. Posted March 15, 1995.

misunderstanding of others (implied through the assertive statement of existence and definition), through a set of desires which fall outside of the general (genital) realm of sexuality and through a subsequent confusion about how to articulate those desires, and through an implied need to find people with similar experiences.

A mere statement of asexuality is not enough, the statement must be linked to the way in which that lack of sexuality is experienced. Another key element of asexual experience was articulated with the shift from Usenet groups to the World Wide Web. One of the first websites dealing directly with the topic of asexuality is dedicated to 'leather spinsters:' women who are "independent of a mate, celibate, and career-oriented without societal reprisals or guilt."[6] The site, which contains a section dealing with asexuality, hints at the ways in which asexuals come in conflict with traditional expectations, especially for women, of fulfillment through sexually-grounded romantic (and eventually familial) relationships. As asexuals began to use the internet to articulate their individual experiences a complicated set of issues emerged: an inability to articulate nonsexual desires, annoyance with socially ubiquitous notions of fulfillment through sexuality and frustration at the lack of information publicly available about asexuality.

The frustration led to increased visibility. Around the turn of the millennium a wave of personal websites on the topic of asexuality began appearing. Increasingly efficient search engines such as Google allowed these sites to be found amid a sea of reports on asexual bacteria and plant life. The sudden emergence of an asexual presence on the internet is documented well on one of the first asexual message boards, the "Haven for the Human Amoeba"[7] (the common experience of wading through search lists full of biological data led many asexuals to jokingly

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[6] "Spinsterhood" St. Mary's Publishing Company of Houston. Viewed May 12 2003.
[http://leatherspinsters.com/spinsterhood.html]
[7] "The Haven For the Human Amoeba," Yahoo Groups.
    [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/havenforthehumanamoeba/]

refer to themselves as 'amoebas.') The posting log of the group illustrates the sudden emergence

of asexuality on the internet:
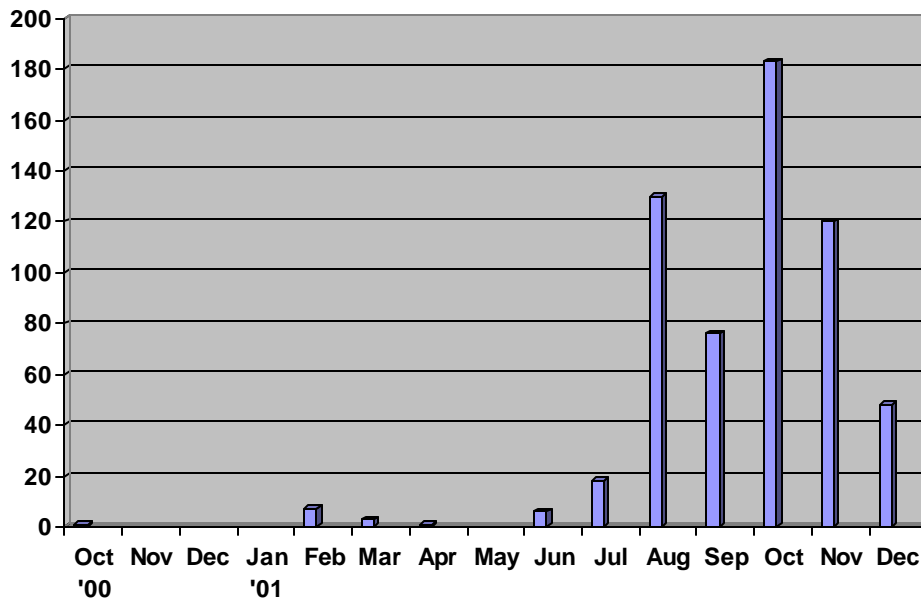
The amount of information available on asexuality steadily increased until it reached a critical

mass, different asexual websites were able to find and link to each other, and people looking for

information on asexuality could find it relatively easily. New users arrived at the online

communities and discussion took off, prompting the formation of even more websites and more

technologically advanced message boards. One of these was the Asexual Visibility and

Education Network (AVEN) located at http://www.asexuality.org.

Am I Asexual? – Answering Questions with Identity

Unlike the Haven for the Human Amoeba which is essentially a list serve, AVEN allows

for posting on multiple "threads," or topics of conversation. This division, into sub-forums and

further into specific topics of conversation, allows it a structure unavailable to most other online

asexual communities. This structure is built around the process of identity formation. Above the forums there are a set of links with information on asexuality and the text: " Asexual: A person who does not experience sexual attraction."[8] The links lead to 'static content,' detailed compilations of the ways in which AVEN members generally understand and articulate their asexuality. This static content provides a model for an asexual collective identity, a way for new arrivals at the site to understand what asexuality means and to see if it fits with their experience. These resources, analogous to the publications sent out by the Mattachine society, provide the community with a cohesive set of understandings on which to build its collective identity. They serve the dual function of providing general information on asexuality to those who are merely curious and providing a model by which asexuals can understand and articulate their experience.

The forum provides a space to question and further develop the collective identity laid out in the static content, as well as allowing that collective identity to become the basis of a functioning social network. The first sub-forum, the "Welcome Area,"[9] is built around the sharing of collective asexual experience: when new users arrive at the site they post their "story," articulating the experience that they perceive themselves as sharing with the group. New members are ushered in with a statement of shared experience, allowing for the formation of a cohesive collective identity around that experience.

Initial posts often indicate that finding an asexual community is an emotionally powerful experience:

I am SO AMAZED(sic) to find other people like me, people who actually will type the sentence "I'm not attracted to either sex." ... my mind hasn't fully comprehended it yet. I

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[8] "Index," Asexual Visibility and Education Network. Viewed May 13, 2003. [http://www.asexuality.org]
[9] Ibid.

love it. It's great. You make me feel so at home and smile so much. Thank you all for being

here![10]

The comfort at finding validation through "other people like me," demonstrates the author's need

for a collective identity with which to understand and validate xe's own asexual experience. The

welcome area provides a way for new users to "try on" such a collective identity, using it as a

lens with which to view their personal experience in an environment removed enough to allow

safe experimentation. Users, upon arriving at AVEN, go through a set process of determining

whether an asexual identity fits their experience, allowing them to decide whether or not they

wish to wish to join the community.

For some new users the static content does not provide sufficient information on asexual

identity to determine whether it fits their experience. A series of posts in the Welcome Area

present experience and then requests an expert opinion on whether that experience 'makes them

asexual.' This request for a diagnosis is an interesting phenomenon of collective identity

formation: on the one hand it is a request for acceptance into the group, asking if the presented

experience fits some imagined criteria for group membership. On the other hand the question is

profoundly introspective: not quite certain how to view their experience through an asexual lens,

uncertain new users ask for help.

Getting to AVEN- Community Structure

The community which in which new users find themselves is one laid out by a

complicated set of criteria. AVEN's access statistics show that most users arrive at the site either

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[10] Post by user VivreEstEsperer, "New here….My story." Posted Dec 23, 2001. <u>Asexual Visibility and Education</u>
<u>Network</u>. Viewed May 13, 2003. [http://www.asexuality.org/discussion/viewtopic.php?t=226]

by typing the word 'asexuality' into a search engine or by typing directly the address:

http://www.asexuality.org. In order to reach AVEN one requires access to a computer with an

internet connection and the technical expertise to use the internet. One must then feel compelled

to type either "asexual" or "asexuality" into a search engine, and after doing so one must have a

sufficient understanding of the English language to comprehend the site's content (though this

content has recently been translated into Japanese.) These criteria place severe limitations on the

number of people to whom AVEN is accessible and play a large role in shaping the makeup of

the site's community. Almost all community members hail from primarily English speaking

countries with relatively high rates of internet access: the United States, the United Kingdom,

Canada and Australia. Those who do not mostly come from Scandinavian countries where

multiple languages - including English- are common. Overall usage statistics show more of a

dispersion across Europe and to wealthy nations such as Saudi Arabia and Japan (see Appendix

A.) Discrepancies between the two could be mere statistical anomaly, though they could also

suggest the limitations of a community grounded in western notions of (a)sexuality.

In terms of collective identity formation the most interesting criteria by far is that of the

internet search. In order to find an asexual collective identity to help understand xe's experiences

an individual must first name those experiences as asexual. This is no small step: there is little in

popular culture to suggest that it is possible to experience such a thing as nonsexuality, let alone

that those experiences could be coalesced into an identity called asexuality. To even arrive at

AVEN asexuals must have reached a relatively high level of self-awareness about their

(non)sexuality and possess the foundations of an asexual identity. This filtering process

contributes to community cohesion but greatly impacts its size and diversity; people who do not

for some reason spontaneously label their experience as "asexual" are not granted access.

Labeling one's experiences as asexual requires both familiarity with and acceptance of the notion

of a sexual orientation, as well as a set of primary experiences that clearly suggest 'the opposite of sexuality.' Individuals in environments where, for instance, women are not expected to express or act on sexual desire or those in a culture that lacks a concept of sexual orientation may be hard pressed to articulate how they are different.

On the site itself there are further divisions between those who actively articulate their asexuality and those who do not. Only a small portion of users who visit the site register with the forum, implying that the majority of visitors to the site view the static content without feeling a need to participate in an asexual community. Even more interestingly, of the 337 users who have registered since the forum's founding in June 2002 142, nearly half, have never posted. Registering a username requires a complicated procedure of e-mail verification, and for that reason visitors to the site can view the forum and even post anonymously. The (apparently strong) propensity of visitors to register and never post perhaps indicates a desire to formally declare asexual identity even without any desire to actively discuss that identity. Several users on the forum have come forward as ex-'lurkers,' regular visitors who regularly read the forum but never post. There is no way to determine the size of this 'lurker' population, though usage statistics suggest it is growing with the total number of users, that users are not abandoning the forum at the rate that they are finding it. (See Appendix B.)

Dialogue – Refining Identity

Among those users who actively participate in discussion a common discourse has been built for talking about asexual experience. Asexually complicated issues such as monogamy and romantic relationships have steadily progressed in dialogue as concepts are grappled with, understood, and broken down by the group. As dialogue has taken place users have grown more

familiar with the societal factors dictating asexual experience and the ways in which that experience plays out in a wide variety of social contexts. The more fundamental experiences of familial expectation and social invalidation have been deconstructed, as members become more comfortable with the lens of asexual identity it is being used to inspect everything from gender performance to aging. This expansion has resulted in a greatly increased breadth of topics since the forum's founding, and an ever-increasing complexity of analysis. As asexual identity begins to further encompass and explain asexual experience the members of AVEN are increasingly comfortable taking that identity off of the site and into their immediate environments.

Collective Action – The Limits of Online Social Networks

The greatest asset of online identity formation - it's accessibility and distance - prove to be it's greatest obstacle in moving from collective identity to collective action. Though members are informed and supported by the online community when they turn away from their computers that community is gone. Thus almost any action which takes place as a result of collective asexual identity must take place through an individual, not a group.

As understanding of the social factors surrounding asexual identity has increased so too has the desire to change those factors. Many asexuals remember all too well the experience of having no context with which to understand their asexuality, and many are frustrated at the lack of understanding or disbelief that they receive when they try to discuss their asexuality outside of AVEN. Of the various social factors affecting asexual experience the most pervasive by far is a lack of generally available information, and several more active members of the asexual community make efforts, both online and off, to combat this lack of information by pushing for asexual visibility. Websites have been the first (and the most effective) means of doing so by

making archives of information readily accessible. Other visibility strategies work to advertise those archives by introducing the concept of asexuality into public discourse. Visibility efforts have included art projects, public lectures and efforts to integrate asexuality into the agenda of gay rights and queer groups. Almost all of these efforts have been carried out by individuals and who then reported back to the AVEN, there has only been one case of the community exerting a collective effort towards visibility.

The action was an effort to print and distribute t-shirts with information about asexuality. These t-shirts would be marketed chiefly to members of the group, who could then wear them as a visibility tactic. Though the purchasing and distribution of the shirts had to be handled entirely by one person the design of the shirts took place entirely on the forum. Suggestions for slogans, images and colors were given and then voted on, compiled and then voted on again. Because conversations took place in posts and not in real-time the process of generating, refining, compiling and voting on ideas took over a month. Democratic processes took place in the form of online polls, which would themselves take as much as a week to generate acceptable results. Online message boards allow for ongoing discussions. Users have time to review any given discussion going on and formulate a reply, making them ideal for tackling complicated issues of identity. However these forums make poor arenas for organizing, where ideas and logistics need to be worked out quickly and decisively. An inability to act collectively or effectively hold conversations in real time greatly hinders the asexual community on AVEN's ability to transform their collective identity into collective action. For this reason the community has focused almost exclusively on building and refining its notion of collective identity through strengthening it's social network.

The geographical barriers which prevent effective collective organizing are slowly dwindling. As more and more asexuals arrive on the forum the relative distance between users

decreases, and as social ties made over the forum grow stronger users are more willing to travel in order to meet up in real life. A section of the site devoted to these meetups, the "Meetup Mart"[11] was recently created out of a widespread desire to expand asexual community from virtual to actual reality.

Conclusion

For social movements the internet is a space for discussion and coordination but not organization. The ease with which it provides access to information greatly accelerates the process of movement formation, allowing disconnected groups or disconnected individuals to find strength in solidarity. It allows collective identity to leap geographical barriers with ease, letting globally-spanning movements form with the humblest of resources. At the same time the drastic barriers of internet access and language make the term 'global' questionable at best. Though the internet can be a powerful tool -or even the foundation- of a social movement in the end it can only be an extension of real-world organizing.

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[11] "Index," <u>Asexual Visibility and Education Network</u>

APPENDIX A

AVEN's April Usage by Country (Generated by Webalizer v. 2.01)


Usage by Country for April 2003

Network (43%)
US Commercial (16%)
Unresolved/Unknown (15%)
US Educational (7%)
Old style Arpanet (arpa) (4%)
Austria (3%)
Canada (3%)
United Kingdom (2%)
Netherlands (2%)
Finland (2%)
Other (3%)
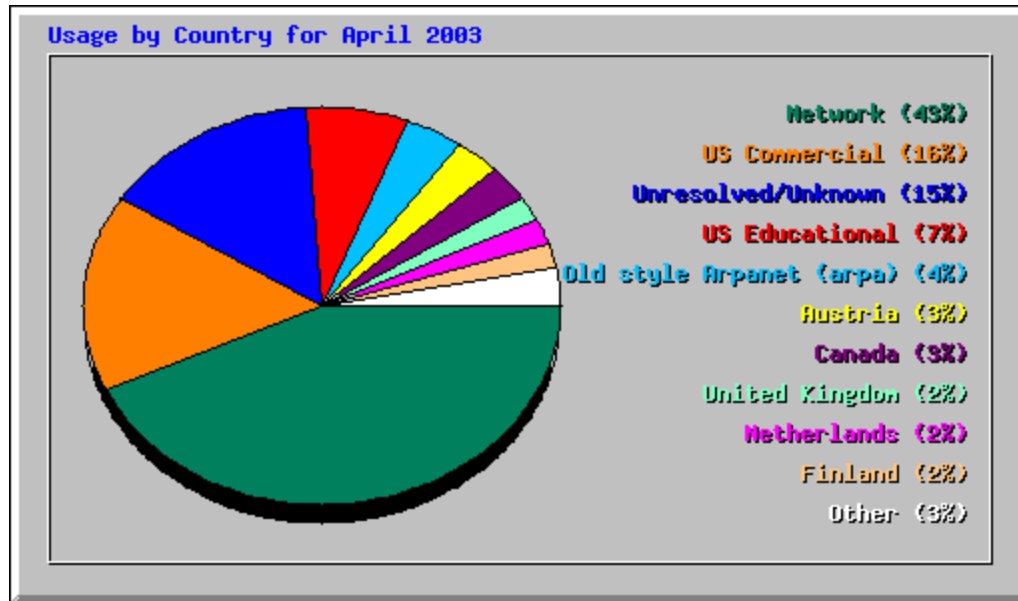
Top 30 of 53 Total Countries							
#	Hits		Files		KBytes		Country
1	97658	42.58%	63682	44.22%	269693	36.80%	Network
2	36597	15.96%	21725	15.09%	164517	22.45%	US Commercial
3	34732	15.14%	21268	14.77%	77589	10.59%	Unresolved/Unknown
4	15497	6.76%	8310	5.77%	59069	8.06%	US Educational
5	9117	3.97%	9101	6.32%	13024	1.78%	Old style Arpanet (arpa)
6	7282	3.17%	3250	2.26%	12943	1.77%	Austria
7	5978	2.61%	3057	2.12%	14478	1.98%	Canada
8	5255	2.29%	2921	2.03%	61214	8.35%	United Kingdom
9	4343	1.89%	1917	1.33%	17780	2.43%	Netherlands
10	3720	1.62%	1706	1.18%	5004	0.68%	Finland
11	3572	1.56%	2484	1.72%	21133	2.88%	Australia
12	1635	0.71%	1625	1.13%	3519	0.48%	Switzerland
13	726	0.32%	478	0.33%	1228	0.17%	Japan
14	399	0.17%	261	0.18%	742	0.10%	Sweden
15	382	0.17%	279	0.19%	1452	0.20%	United States
16	359	0.16%	312	0.22%	1085	0.15%	Saudi Arabia
17	270	0.12%	224	0.16%	916	0.12%	Non-Profit Organization
18	252	0.11%	204	0.14%	1453	0.20%	Singapore

19	202	0.09%	182	0.13%	1499	0.20%	Norway
20	186	0.08%	166	0.12%	637	0.09%	Germany
21	184	0.08%	101	0.07%	401	0.05%	Croatia (Hrvatska)
22	140	0.06%	132	0.09%	321	0.04%	Spain
23	98	0.04%	90	0.06%	98	0.01%	Italy
24	84	0.04%	50	0.03%	293	0.04%	Czech Republic
25	67	0.03%	58	0.04%	324	0.04%	Belgium
26	66	0.03%	62	0.04%	307	0.04%	Cuba
27	62	0.03%	57	0.04%	162	0.02%	Taiwan
28	55	0.02%	54	0.04%	149	0.02%	South Africa
29	51	0.02%	9	0.01%	143	0.02%	Turkey
30	47	0.02%	40	0.03%	84	0.01%	Greece

APPENDIX B

Overall Usage Statistics for AVEN(Generated by Webalizer v. 2.01)
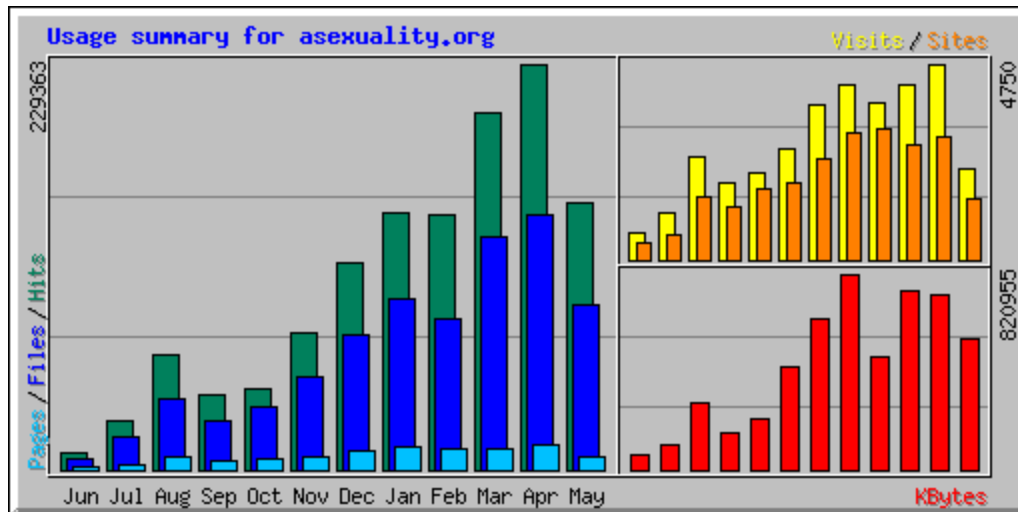
Month	Daily Avg				Monthly Totals					
	Hits	**Files**	**Pages**	**Visits**	**Sites**	**KBytes**	**Visits**	**Pages**	**Files**	**Hits**
May 2003	11622	7163	598	170	1463	545314	2217	7784	93124	151093
Apr 2003	7645	4800	486	158	2970	732957	4750	14607	144010	229363
Mar 2003	6490	4229	394	137	2777	746002	4259	12223	131100	201219
Feb 2003	5145	3043	407	136	3163	474347	3820	11409	85206	144084
Jan 2003	4693	3108	410	136	3059	820955	4217	12716	96375	145505
Dec 2002	3775	2459	335	121	2437	629196	3758	10405	76245	117039
Nov 2002	2571	1745	257	88	1870	430177	2666	7736	52378	77146
Oct 2002	1480	1134	190	67	1715	211108	2088	5895	35171	45892
Sep 2002	1414	928	171	61	1297	156489	1842	5140	27862	42425
Aug 2002	2092	1301	243	79	1504	278352	2474	7558	40331	64853
Jul 2002	890	604	102	36	614	107332	1143	3164	18744	27603
Jun 2002	438	298	84	30	436	60388	643	1782	6278	9207
Totals						5192617	33877	100419	806824	1255429

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     Lesbian Feminist Mobilization." Freeman, Jo and Johnson, Victoria. Waves of Protest:
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     1999.