

COMMENT AND RESPONSE

PICKING UP WHERE GROVES LEFT OFF: RESPONSE TO EMILY GROVES

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Emily Groves' essay "The Emerging New Discourse of the Away Message System" in Volume 3 of *Young Scholars* examines the transformation of the AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) system from "being a discourse of conversation to a mode of self-expression" (5). Since the publication of Groves' essay, several new features have been added to the AIM and Away Message systems. These features further reinforce Groves' idea that AIM has strayed from the initial discourse it was created for, conversation. However, these features also contest Groves' assertion that AIM replicates Michel Foucault's panopticon by portraying the illusion that the user is away or invisible, while in actuality the user is logged onto the system and could be chatting to anyone.

One new feature directly affects the Away Message system of AIM by allowing users to remain "away" yet still be able to chat. Prior to this change, if a user wanted to chat with anyone, the user had to remove his or her away message, and then the user became available to converse with everyone. Now, however, a user can appear to be "away" but can still chat with targeted other users. The user does this via the addition of a check box on the Away Message screen that reads "Allow sending of messages," which enables the user to keep the same away message up and be able to chat with other users. A user must also keep the "Hide Windows" box unchecked so the Instant Message windows are able to be accessible. This change has again altered the way users communicate through AIM.

AIM was initially created "as a method for conversation, relying on visual rather than oral language" (Groves 5). The main purpose was to allow an online source for people to communicate with each other openly. This new feature, however, removes open communication. Typically, if a user IMs another person who does not have his or her Away Message up and this person does not respond, it is looked down upon and considered poor manners in the AIM system. Now, any user can give the false impression that he or she is away while this user may be chatting with someone else and be able to put off responding to certain IMs more freely than before. This creates a new kind of communication, one that gives participants the power to start communicating or participate in the system if and when they decide to do so. Additionally, this feature plays into the narcissistic side of AIM users that Groves discusses. By allowing the Away Message to remain visible while still conversing with other users, it plays into the quest for personal attention. The users can still publicly express themselves in their Away Messages that seek

responses and at the same time perhaps hold an IM conversation about it with another user.

Another new feature to the AIM system is the ability to set one's self "invisible" to other users while still continuing to be connected to the system. To activate the feature, there is a small eye ball image towards the top of the user's buddy list. When this eyeball is open, the user is visible to all. When the eyeball is closed, the user is "invisible." Groves made an observation that with the addition of the Away Message system, "the viewer has become more common than the conversationalist within the AIM discourse" (6). This "invisible" feature helps strengthen her opinion that AIM users are also voyeurs. While a user can converse while being "invisible," most people choose that feature to avoid communicating with others. However, it does not prevent them from viewing everyone else's Away Messages or Infos, which are areas for users to further express themselves and more importantly, "allow . . . each user to check another's Away Message without actually IMing the user" (Groves 5). Therefore, users can be strictly viewers and not even participate in the conversation portion of AIM.

Groves uses Foucault's theory of the panopticon to explain power relationships within the AIM system. She states, "The panopticon, often referred to as the 'seeing machine,' is really a system of observation in which anyone within the system can exercise the power of surveillance" (6). The invisible feature goes against this idea. While the user who is invisible can observe other users within the system, the surveillance is not mutual. Other users are not able to view an invisible user because they can not even see that the invisible user is connected to the system. This creates an unbalanced situation in AIM where some users are less equal than others. While the feature is available to all users, those who choose not to activate it are left at a disadvantage in regards to the panopticon system because they can not equally participate in surveillance.

AIM was created to encourage a social network, but with the addition of the Away Message and other "enhancements," it has slid to the other side of the spectrum. The system is rebelling against itself. Groves says a rebellion against the system "involves being an unequal participant within the discourse which essentially means acting solely as a viewer" (10). The AIM system has enabled functions that create the possibility for "viewer-only" participation in the system. Aside from not signing in at all, being "invisible" is a direct rebellion against this social system. Thus, it can only be assumed that as the AIM system continues to reinvent itself, it gets further away from its initial goals.

Works Cited

Groves, Emily. "The Emerging New Discourse of the Away Message System." *Young Scholars in Writing: Undergraduate Research in Writing and Rhetoric* 3 (2005): 5-10.