



# THE WORK ISSUE

**INSIDE:** Behind the scenes at the Institute of Erotic Arts and Sciences, Similarities of comedians to Daoist monks, The torture of man-boobs, "Meffy" vs "Mee-Fai", How Neil Armstrong got that sweet job and a chat with the newest moderator





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## RHAPSODIE ON THE COVER PHOTO

"In an attempt to push myself out of my comfort zone, I started a project to photograph 100 strangers with their permission. I found it easiest to approach strangers while I was walking around downtown on my lunch break. Roy was a contractor working on the new museum upgrades also on his lunch break when I approached him for a portrait. We chatted about the new museum, about my camera, and about my hesitancy to approach strangers. He has no trouble speaking to strangers, he said, but then he has his fence."



## EDITOR'S NOTE

This month's theme, "work," was one that we fell upon by accident.

Two of the pieces, Brandon Blatcher's article on the long path that Neil Armstrong took to being the first man on the moon (pg. 24), and Msalt's piece on Dao and the art of comedy maintenance (pg. 8), were submitted for earlier issues and then reworked for this one. Both were good, and we knew we wanted to share them.

We'd also been trying to get iamkimiam's piece on the M-Set (pg. 18) in for a while too, and while we had high hopes for a sprawling typographical and linguistic opus, the interview Brandon got instead is still smart, interesting and relevant. We hope that we can feature more MeFi related research in the future.

With those three set, what connected them was the sense of endeavor or, well, work. I found an odd Craigslist ad and wrote about it (pg. 4), Brina interviewed the newest mod (pg. 22), and I stumbled across a pretty great comment from Lutoslawski that he'd already written up for his blog. It was about getting cosmetic surgery, specifically breast reduction (pg. 14). The link from boob job to "work" may be tenuous, but let's not let slavish adherence to themes get in the way of good stories.

Anyway, with this work nearly done, we look forward to your submissions for August! The theme is "cool," and whether that means temperature or temperament, we encourage you to submit.

[+]

Klangklangston (Josh Steichmann)

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No Mefites were permanently banned in the production of this magazine. Several were tickled, but we're not saying who.

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Dr. Susan Block in her office.

# ASSUME THE POSITION:

Live in Copy Editor Wanted for the Doctor Susan Block  
Institute of Erotic Arts and Sciences by klangklangston (Josh Steichmann)



Lounge with grand piano and stool.

The listing is unusual, even for the Los Angeles Craigslist. “Live-In Copy Editor/Photo Editor/Proofreader/Receptionist wanted for internationally renowned media sexologist.” There’s no pay, but the ad promises gourmet meals, maid service, internet access, an erotic art gallery and “awesome eclectic ambiance,” in exchange for writing website and advertising copy, doing general copy editing for the Doctor Susan Block Institute of Erotic Arts and Sciences, and working at least one shift per week as a receptionist for the institute.

The institute, founded in 1991, provides a broad array of sex therapy services including dealing with traditional dysfunctions like premature ejaculation and difficulty

orgasming. It also provides phone sex. Indeed, the therapists listed on the institute’s web page mimic the traditional come-ons of late-night advertising. Starla promises that she’s “sexy, sweet and sensual, and ALWAYS available to take your calls,” while Tina writes, “Who knows what could happen ... You have my full attention.” Block herself is identified as “Dr. Suzy, the world’s preeminent telephone sex therapist, sexologist, television/radio personality and erotic hypnotist.” The therapy runs around \$180 an hour, or \$3 per minute.

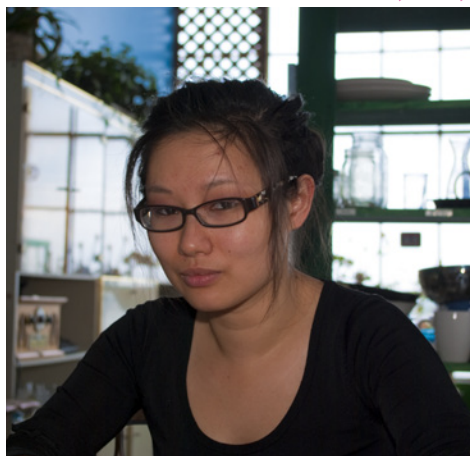
In person, Block is coquettish and charismatic at 55, with long blond hair and a penchant for sweeping hats. There’s a French documentary crew filming her today, so she’s dressed in lingerie and a lab coat with her name embroidered on it. It peeks open, and when we take pictures, she frets about sucking in her stomach and striking poses. She has a slight cross-eye and is self-conscious about it, making candid shots impossible, and her concern over how she presents underlines her sense of command. Both Block and her staff return several times to the metaphor of a ship to describe life at the institute; Block is undoubtedly the captain, helming the therapy sessions as well as her weekly subscription radio show, where she holds court on everything from the ongoing wars abroad (she is against them) and the sexual politics of primates (she favors the bonobo), interviews Penthouse Pets and features live sex shows of myriad kinds and kinks.

The institute is a sprawling warehouse space on Los Angeles’s southeast side, a few blocks down from the American Apparel factory and upstairs from one of the oldest strip clubs in Los Angeles. From the outside, it’s a beige block of concrete, and access is primarily through

a cargo cage elevator. Inside, it’s almost 15,000 square feet, housing between eight and 14 employees and guests, with a radio studio, video production bays, an extensive archive of Block’s shows, huge windows and a well-stocked bar. When giving me the tour, Max Lobkowicz, Block’s husband and first mate, can’t help beaming as he rattles off the amenities and points out the Yale memorabilia (Block attended Yale as an undergrad). A grand piano rests three feet from an Adirondack sex chair that combines homey with kinky.

“The mission,” says Lobkowicz, “is to help people explore and unlock the secret of sexuality, to meet needs and desires.” Lobkowicz has been with Block since the

“There was live sex in front of me, and plenty of pizza in the kitchen.”



Newest employee Helen Zhang

mid ‘80s, when she ran a radio dating show. He’d been on the edges of publishing in Los Angeles for decades, with stints at the Los Angeles Free Press, L.A. Star and Brentwood Bla Bla, having just sold off the latter for multiple millions (it ignobly collapsed soon after) and was emotionally and mentally spent. He met Block, became friends with her, and when both of their previous relationships had ended, they started dating. They married in 1992, around the same time Block started filming her radio show for cable.

Lobkowicz describes the living situation as internally socialist, externally capitalist, with a strong emphasis on caring for one another within the institute. The money that Block’s therapy and shows bring in covers living expenses, but everyone is vague in citing specific pay (there’s a sense this position might not fit seamlessly within employment law). With the drywall partitions, talk of socialism, and bold, primary color walls, it reminds me of college co-ops around Ann Arbor (where I grew up),

right down to the same posters in the kitchen. That many of the co-ops and communes have incorporated a utopic view of sexual freedom seems to tie the institute to that history, but Block is quick to shut those thoughts down.

“Some people have a very fantastic view of this place — Some people think this will save your life. But it’s a real place with real people with real sex lives,” she says. While she’s idealistic on the air, when discussing the institute, she’s pragmatic and experienced, and more interested in the pursuit of contemporary pleasure than theosophy or the Hellfire Club.

Helen Zhang is the newest employee, having answered an earlier similar Craigslist ad, and she moved into the institute six months ago. She helps with cleaning, cooking





**Block's radio studio, with bed.**

and the radio show, as well as everything else. As the institute is running on fewer staff than usual, job roles are less defined. She used to be a food writer, and makes a large spread of food for the visiting documentary crew. As they're French, everyone is playfully apologetic for the quality of the food.

Zhang is young, forthright and casual. She was born in China, but grew up in California, and did well in school, but was bouncing around and looking for something different when she stumbled onto the Block ad. She didn't know what to expect, but the amenities sounded good and, as she says, "I think I have a high tolerance for perversion."

She started on a Saturday, when Block's show airs. On her first day, "There was live sex in front of me, and plenty of pizza in the kitchen."

Since then, she's acclimated quickly. She's treating every aspect of the job as a learning experience, and is getting more comfortable with the constant sexual content. She has less problem making sweeping statements than Block does.

"It's not just a job, it's a lifestyle. It's a philosophy," says Zhang. While she doesn't treat clients, she sees how happy they are about their therapy, and how shrugging off internalized repression is one of their biggest problems, to the extent that sensationalist media seems silly, if not harmful. Scandals and peccadilloes just don't grab her anymore.

"When I watch TV, when I watch the news, with the attempts to shock with sex, it bounces off. We're at ground zero."

Zhang's social circles have had different reactions to her job. Her parents, traditional Chinese, are disapproving but respect her decision as an adult. Her male friends thought it was the coolest thing ever — "Because there were boobs everywhere!" she says — but her female friends were concerned until they realized the institute was a safe space for women, something Block actively works toward.

"Bonobos are matriarchal," says Block.

Leslie Greene, a video production intern at the institute, chimes in. He told his male friends, but hasn't told his family yet, and his friends were enthusiastic. "What's it like, was it real?" they asked.

"It's really real," says Greene, but emphasizes that he got it out of his system in about five minutes. He's a professional, he says, and after all, nothing's sexy when you have to edit it.

That Greene has only told some of his friends, and not his family, emphasizes the weird boundaries that a sex-focused live-in position requires. While everyone has their own private spaces they can retreat to, clients can call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and producing the radio show can be an all-night affair. Zhang calls it a delicate balance, noting that you're not just living with your friends,





but also your coworkers and your boss. She hasn't really dated since she moved in.

"If something rocks the boat too hard, it can turn over," she says, while Greene repeatedly emphasizes that the most important attribute for a new coworker is that they're not selfish and know how to share. Share what?

"Everything. They've got to share."

Both Lobkowicz and Block acknowledge that the copy editor position is off the traditional career path. With entry-level copy editors in California averaging around \$32,000 per year, and Block estimating the rent, food and amenities at roughly \$2,200 per month, that's still over \$5,000 less than a comparable position without even accounting for vacation and health care. Block says that they're either looking for someone on their way up, or on their way down; Lobkowicz describes the institute as, "Sort of a halfway house between people who are trying to get into

corporate America and people who are trying to get out."

Both complain about the poor quality of applicants generally, and declining writing skills. The ad itself reads, "Please No Members of the New Illiterati!" which Block describes as the general unedited masses, blogging error-laden screeds and thinking they're published authors.

"Everybody's a writer now. If you've got typos on your resume, how can I hire you?" she asks.

The position, she says, is best for someone who already has their own thing going, a freelancer who writes or edits but doesn't want to sweat having to come up with rent or groceries every month. And in this economy, that describes more people than ever.

Or, as the ad puts it, "This is an unusual position that's not for everybody, but for the right person there is tremendous room for grown and an opportunity to 'live the dream.'" MFH



# COMEDIANS AS DAOIST MISSIONARIES

By (MSALT) MARK SALTVEIT

**MY OBSERVATIONS ARE** contradictory, I think because the subject itself is. Standup comedy runs on anti-logic, the subversion of received wisdom and rules, including (especially) its own. Once a style of humor is expected, comedians must play against that expectation or become dull. Unfunny.

I've worked as a paid standup comedian on the West Coast for 12 years. It's fascinating, rewarding, and usually compelling — but it's still work. Comedians joke around a lot and are usually fun people, but the job itself is not especially amusing. I've heard that dancing in strip clubs isn't that sexy, either.

That makes it difficult or impossible to sum up the nature of comedy in a few concise words. Most good comedians will disavow any comic formula. Deep down, we sense that there is a true north of comedy, but you have to develop an intuitive sense of where it is. It's easier to say what it isn't.

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For me, there's a strong connection between standup (as practiced in the United States, anyway) and the ancient Chinese philosophy of Daoism (or Taoism), of which I'm very fond. This article is not a "Tao of Comedy" — that's been done, very well, by Jay Sankey in a book called *Zen and the Art of Standup Comedy*.

My perspective is the opposite of Sankey's. To me, standup is a form of applied Daoism. Or perhaps both are applied forms of some great unnamable way that I'm pursuing: my own mix of Daoism, a little Jung, some existentialism, residual Catholicism and my own biases. These things are very hard to spell out and pin down; that's part of the fascination.

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"Daoism" can mean a lot of different things. There are two mysterious books of pithy, paradoxical wisdom underpinning them all: the "Daodejing" (or "Tao Te Ching" in the old Wade-Giles spelling system), attributed to Laozi (Lao Tzu, or Master Lao), and the "Zhuangzi," attributed to Zhuangzi (Chuang Tzu, or Master Zhuang). Both books are probably collections or anthologies composed primarily in the 4th and 3rd centuries BCE and modified many times over the centuries. Laozi himself is almost certainly a mythical figure, and we're not too sure about Zhuangzi either.

There are religious sects in China and Taiwan today carrying on a centuries-old lineage tradition of Daoism that resembles traditional Buddhism with monasteries, celibate monks in robes, rituals, ceremonies and applied techniques for extending life, cultivating health, etc.

Another manifestation is a loose collection of personal practices considered by some to be applied forms of Daoism, including Qi Gong, Taijichuan (Tai Chi), traditional Chinese medicine, and the I Ching. (Others would say these are simply elements of traditional Chinese culture.) These practices are popular both in China and among New Agey Americans, especially on the West Coast.

Daoism can also mean the philosophy encapsulated in the Daodejing and Zhuangzi (and developed in hundreds of later books), and this is the sense in which I — and many Westerners — use it. A more precise term for this kind of Daoism, used by some scholars of Chinese philosophy, is "Lao-Zhuang thought."

I read those books often, but don't ascribe to any traditional practices. I prefer to look for examples of this wisdom in my own, modern American life.

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There is an attitude underlying comedy that shares a lot with Lao-Zhuang thought: mischievous, suspicious of authority and pomposity, fond of humble citizens and workers, very aware of the limits of knowledge and problems of communication, self-challenging, and drawn to non-logical truth — the kinds of thought not taught in school.

Daoism also celebrates a manner of action perfect for comedy; spontaneous, intuitive, humble, perfected through repetition and awareness. Every person and thing has its own intrinsic nature (tzu-jan). It is not a fixed thing, but a process that develops and unfolds in concert with all the other unfolding natures.

Not coincidentally, Daoism (and its descendant, Zen) are the only philosophies or religions that are frequently humorous.

★ ★ ★

The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.

The name that can be named is not the eternal name.

– Daodejing, opening lines (Gia-Feng/English translation)

Comedy mocks government, institutions and social rituals when they grow absurd, when they diverge from... what? There's no positive norm you can name, and if you try to construct one, it's easy to find flaws that prove it's not the real norm. At best, an intelligently targeted mockery can imply that good thing, point you in the right direction, or at least guide you to better choices along the way.

★ ★ ★

My act includes this joke:

I've actually become a Daoist missionary. Which means I stay home and mind my own goddamned business.

Of course I don't stay home. I usually travel hundreds of miles to deliver pronouncements like this to the audience. Humor has its own built-in, unspoken philosophy which, I think, overlaps Daoism in many important ways. By practicing comedy, all comics are in effect working as unwitting Daoist missionaries.

★ ★ ★



# “The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten. Where can I find the words?”

For the vast majority of performers, comedy pays little or nothing and involves many hours of driving and waiting around – not to mention the risk of failure. When people ask why I do it, I usually respond “Because I get paid to drink beer and tell people what I think.” A better (though trite) answer might be, “Because I can.” On a good night, comedy is a blast. It’s like being the life of the party, an accomplished writer, the smartest student, and the coolest naughty kid in school, all rolled together.

But the rejection is very personal, hence very painful. Whether your act is about you or not, it’s always by you. I’ve often wondered whether I would have become a comic had I not gotten laughs at my first open mic. Probably not.

The flip side of that coin is the thrill seeker’s rush of disaster narrowly averted, of living by your wits, and the camaraderie with others who have been through it. There are a lot of clean and sober comedians — perhaps replacing one wild thrill with another.

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I was drinking beer with my friend Tristian Spillman, a comedian and graphic novelist in Portland, Oregon. And he said, “Everyone thinks the Universe started as all nothing, and then the big bang exploded, filling the Universe with stuff. But I think it started as an infinite block of solid STUFF, and nothingness exploded into it.”

(It was really good beer.)

And I said, “I think the Universe was all one Unity, which consciousness ripped apart into somethings and nothings. Heads AND tails — it’s all one coin. That’s the deepest kind of simplicity.”

And he said, “Man, you really need a girlfriend.”

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“Know the masculine, but keep to the feminine.”

– Daodejing, Ch. 28 (Wu translation)

You can often hear by the pitch of the laughter that a given joke is more popular with women or with men. (The best, of course, make everyone laugh). In my experience, jokes that women especially like improve the general success of my show, while jokes that mostly men like bring the mood down. I have no theories why this seems to be true. But I try to tape and listen to every set, and pay attention to the timbre of responses.

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“When perception and understanding cease, the spirit moves freely.”

– Zhuangzi, Ch. 3 (Hinton translation)

Each audience is an organism with its own unique, collective nature, like a school of fish or a flock of birds reacting as one. The show is another organism with its own nature, an interaction between the crowd, the performer, the zeitgeist, the physical setting and whatever happens during the show.

The best comedians intuitively grasp the natures of the crowd and show and respond, deftly. You can’t do this logically or intellectually, any more than a professional athlete can analyze their moves during a game. “The zone” that athletes get in is the Daoist ideal, Daoism in action.

It’s hard to describe this feeling, being “in the pocket,” but you know it when you have it and even more so when you no longer do. It’s like being in love, those early magical times that prove so elusive in a lifetime. Often, we know it best by the sensation of having lost it.

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“Way gives you shape and heaven gives you form, so why mangle yourself with good and bad? Make an exile of your mind and wear your spirit away.”

– Zhuangzi, chapter 5, Hinton translation

You can plan your set in advance, structuring it, working on your writing or accents or movements, and strategizing about the likely crowd. The performance itself, though, moves far too quickly to analyze in real time. You have to be in the moment.

The adjustments a comic makes might include changing the subject, talking to audience members instead of telling prepared jokes, or riffing on something that just happened. Usually though, they are more subtle, instinctual, and



caught, the snare is forgotten. The purpose of words is to convey ideas.  
a man who has forgotten words? He is the one I would like to talk to.”

hopefully invisible to the audience — speaking a bit more loudly or quietly, slowing down, expanding your persona to fill the room or pulling in more intimately, forcing the crowd to come to you. Often, you don’t notice you’re adjusting.

Even afterwards, there are limits to understanding it through analysis. Lao-Zhuang thought encourages what I call “mystical empiricism” — in other words, direct apprehension of phenomena, not mediated through words, logic and theory. You learn by doing, by experiencing things directly with the right awareness.

Those mediating thoughts are great tools, but they can only take you to a certain point. Real artistry, the deep skill of a master craftsman, involves subtleties that require carefully honed intuition developed through long experience.

Any comedian will tell you that the best way to improve, perhaps the only way, is stage time. More time spent on stage performing. Yet you don’t want to be in your head onstage. I try to record each of my sets and listen to it afterwards. I treat it like a dream — I don’t analyze it so much as try to experience it again, and pay attention to anything that pops into my head.

★ ★ ★

There’s only one way to know if a joke or bit is funny — perform it on stage. Then, how can you not know? The audience is right in front of you. The silence of even 60 people is very loud; that of 200 is deafening.

To me, any performance is communication, and stand up gives you more immediate and vocal feedback than any other kind of entertainment — even sex work. If the audience doesn’t laugh at a joke, you were not funny at that moment, no matter how brilliant you might think that bit is (or how well it did last night).

The process is somewhat mystical to me. Sure, there are rules that generally work. For example, use sets of three examples in a joke: the first two set a pattern, the third — your punch line — breaks the pattern. But I think of new jokes the way a scientist looks at promising new cancer drugs. Some look good on paper but just aren’t effective; others are created by accident and work miracles.

★ ★ ★

“The purpose of a rabbit snare is to catch rabbits. When the rabbits are caught, the snare is forgotten.

The purpose of words is to convey ideas. When the ideas are grasped, the words are forgotten.

Where can I find a man who has forgotten words? He is the one I would like to talk to.”

– Zhuangzi, chapter 26 (Thomas Merton’s version)

Brevity is essential to good comedy writing. It’s as if every bit has a certain amount of humor, and the resulting laughter is that amount divided by the number of words used to convey it. Punch lines are relatively easy; it’s the setup that’s tricky. We all know people who are funny in social situations. The difference between them and a comedian is that your friends already share a common experience, a story you all know, or a situation you are currently in. A comic must create a shared experience like that for complete strangers in one or two sentences.

Reacting to something that happens in the club, whether a heckle or a dropped dish, eliminates the need for words altogether, since the audience has shared that experience. That’s why “improv” is so potent.

★ ★ ★

Before he was famous, I took a film class from the director Gus Van Sant. He said that most improvisation in film goes badly, because the director just hasn’t finished the script and hopes to pull it out at the last minute. But the pressure of the moment blocks the spontaneity and inspiration you need to improvise.

He said that to improvise well, you need to have a complete, polished script and storyboards for every shot in the film; only then can you relax enough to trust the moment, throw away that script and do something different.

That’s how standup is for me. Only when I have a solid plan, and tight jokes and bits prepared, can I trust the moment enough to wander successfully.

★ ★ ★

How to fight against a much stronger opponent:

A drunk walks out of a bar, and a fly lands on his nose. He tries to smash it and bloodies his own face.

One trick is flying away just before you get crushed.

The other is knowing when your opponent is drunk.



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In smaller towns, audience members frequently send a drink (almost always a shot of tequila) to the comic, about a fourth of the way through the show. This is partly a favor, a reward, a toast, but there's a darker element as well. It feels like a test, an offer of communion that can't (or shouldn't) be refused. Comics in recovery learn to arrange with the bartender in advance to substitute apple juice. Refusing the drink is always a mistake.

Olga Sanchez, a director of live theater (and my wife), describes the stage as an altar on which the actors are sacrificed for the redemption of the audience. Comedy is a bit different because the comic is writer, director, performer and master of ceremonies. He is the priest and the sacrifice, the self-deprecating fool who commands the room.

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“Although the tiger is entirely different from the human, it treats you gently if you obey its nature. But if you ignore its nature, it can kill you.” – Zhuangzi, chapter 4 (Hinton translation)

Early on, a wise older comic told me to ignore hecklers unless most of the crowd can hear them. Let's say you savage someone who is drunkenly responding to everything you say. If they are near the stage and the crowd didn't hear them, it looks like you suddenly attacked a random person in the crowd, making you an asshole and the rest of the crowd defensive.

Also, the attention encourages sparring and more heckling, even if you “win.” You are playing their game, as Ken Kesey might have said. Even if you “win” you are yielding power and control of the agenda. I would rather tell my stories than duel with drunks.

Still, sometimes you need to handle it. The thing to understand is that the heckler has stepped forward, as you have, out of the audience. The one who rejoins the audience first wins; you need to embody the crowd's response to this outlier. A couple of polite requests to shut up so we can all enjoy the show, followed by a fast vicious crushing as needed, work well. A clever slam can actually be too good, because the spontaneity and drama of the moment is hard to top.

One time, early in my set, a drunken stripper started yelling “We love dick!” after any remotely suggestive statement (she had done this to the previous comic, too). No one in the crowd could have missed her hollering, so finally I said,



bwg (Randall van der Woning)

“Yeah, but ironically you’re only woman in this club who no man wants to fuck.” The place exploded and she shut up, but the rest of my bits paled next to that moment, and the set suffered.

★ ★ ★

There’s a cliché that comedians say out loud the things that people think but are afraid to say. I think it goes a bit deeper, an ability to express (not necessarily in words) untapped emotions and energy that audience members may not even be aware of, as well as conscious frustrations, yearnings and bafflement. These are the raw fuel of laughter, which the comic shapes with their (hopefully) unique perspective.

In a great comedy set, the comic does this while being fully present in the unique gestalt of the show, intuitively unleashing and embodying that energy, reflecting it back to everyone sharing it with you. You’re a conduit, effortlessly and spontaneously uttering the most hilarious things off the top of your head, thinking quickly but speaking clearly. It’s like the audience is telling you, telepathically, the perfect thing to say and you’re just following instructions. If it was a Hollywood movie, there would be golden beams of light from every audience pouring into you and lifting you in the air, transcendent, glorious. Nirvana.

★ ★ ★

Most comedians think of themselves as either “city comics” (aka “alternative comics”) or “road comics” (aka “road dogs”).

City comics live in New York or Los Angeles or San Francisco or Boston, maybe Seattle or Austin. They have day jobs and perform short sets at showcase clubs that don’t pay but offer exposure, as they’re angling for TV appearances. Their acts have distinctive styles (which road dogs might call gimmicks); think of Steven Wright with his sad sack demeanor and verbal paradoxes, or Mitch Hedberg’s rock star look and cerebral stoner one-liners. Lesser city comics resort to in-jokes that only friends laugh at, and often despise the audience.

Road dogs often work in comedy full time, most piecing together a very low salary from 3 to 5 day “weeks” at smaller clubs and strings of “one-nighters” at bars in small towns, which can be hundreds of miles apart. They are not given lodging on their off nights and usually drive around the country, not rarely sleeping in their cars between gigs. The most successful headline major clubs, wrangle higher paid private gigs for colleges and corporations, or move on to squeaky clean and lucrative cruise ship work; this can push their salaries into the six figures. Lesser road comics steal jokes and premises, pander to popular prejudice, or get lazy and rehash their older material for decades at a time. One wag said that road comics aren’t really entertainers so much as truckers who deliver jokes to small towns.

City comics look down on road dogs as mindless hacks, repeating ancient stereotypes about men being dogs and women being cats. Road dogs look down on city comics as unfunny, self-important wimps who couldn’t last five minutes at a “real” gig. Comics of either camp who’ve actually worked together often share a deep, battle-worn camaraderie that transcends this pettiness.

★ ★ ★

“When an archer is shooting for nothing, he has all his skill.  
If he shoots for a brass buckle, he is already nervous.  
If he shoots for a prize of gold, he is out of his mind! ...  
His skill has not changed, but the prize divides him.”  
– Zhuangzi, Ch. 19 (Merton’s version)

My home town (Portland, Oregon) is in the midst of a comedy boom that is making “city comedy” almost possible, but until very recently, all professional comics here have been road dogs. I love the new shows in town where dumb dirty humor is discouraged and a comedian can try any crazy idea and at least get an attentive listen. I also love driving for hours by myself and soaking up the vast beauty of the inland west, connecting with people I would never otherwise meet in places like Winnemucca, Nevada.

Unlike most comics who hit their first open mic in their early 20s, I didn’t start until I was 38 and married, with children and a mortgage. I’m probably the only comic in America who wishes he could be driving around the country and sleeping in the back of his station wagon, because I know how much that stage time would improve my act.

Television (or movie) fame is the one surefire route to success as a comic. But I have no intention of moving to Los Angeles or New York, given my family. I fully realize that this means I am unlikely to become a success, financially. I don’t love that fact, but it frees me to enjoy my shows for what they are now, not as a stepping stone. MFM





By Lutoslawski  
(Erik Jorgenson)

**I WAS LYING** in bed feeling myself up. Why I was feeling myself up, I'm not entirely sure, but if this were the strangest thing a sixth grader were to do without cause, that would be quite an enigma indeed. I was chubby and so I had little man-boobs, or moobs, I guess is the colloquial portmanteau. And in the course of gently going to second with myself on this particular night, I discovered hard, quarter-sized disk things behind my nipples.

Understandably concerned, I got out of bed and crossed the hall into the bathroom. I turned on the light and I looked at my shirtless body in the mirror. What a chub-toad, I thought. I leaned toward the mirror and I squished my man-boobs, gently fondling the little disk things, and I noticed that now that I was attending closely, my nipples were a tad puffy and sort of, dear God, popping out just a little bit because, as became all too clear, the disk things were taking up not-insignificant space in there.

What were these hard, quarter-sized disk things? was the obvious immediate question. Certainly this wasn't normal. I remembered discovering my testicles when I was four. I squeezed one hard. I told my father this, and he said in no uncertain terms not to squeeze them hard, and that they were very important for later. This was not like that. This was perhaps idiopathic. No. Cancer. Of course it was cancer! Lumps mean cancer. Oh! And to die so young! Would it be quick? Or would I lose my hair and become pale and skinny and wear a robe and a wristband and get to make a wish to meet a celebrity, the obligatory flowers and balloons, as if you give two fucks about some balloons at that point.

I imagined myself sucking in the helium of the balloons, to the protests of onlookers. "You're weak!" they

would say. "It isn't good for your health!"

"Why should I" — and here I would take a big inhale of helium — "give two fucks about my health? I'm dying of cancer. And it's hilarious to talk about cancer in this voice. Cancer cancer cancer la la la." It's always tough to think of clever things to say when you're speaking on helium. So much pressure.

I realized that I must tell my parents that it was likely I had cancer. But how? It wasn't the cancer and death bit that bothered me so much as the talking about my breasts. My family, close as we were in our own dysfunctional ways, did not discuss anything remotely having to do with the physical body, especially any part classified as a primary, secondary or tertiary sex organ.

But alas, the gravity of my self-diagnosis necessitated that I breach this forbidden territory. And so the next evening I approached my parents, sitting in the living room, Dad engrossed in Zig Ziglar and Mom engrossed mostly in Dad.

"Mom and Dad?"

"Yes, buddy boo?" Mom asked.

"I have cancer."

"What! You don't have cancer." Dad put Zig Ziglar down. "What makes you think you have cancer?" he asked.

"Well, I have these, uh, er, little like lumps in my chest, behind my nipples, little hard disk things," I told the floor, sort of sotto voce.

"That isn't cancer. You don't have cancer," Mom said, with a certainty and lack of concern she did not normally exhibit when it came to health concerns.

"Well ... then ... what is it?" I asked, obviously.

"It's nothing. It will go away. Go to bed."

And with that, I went to bed, not to speak of the disk things again to my parents for six miserable years, years I spent in anxious anticipation of their withdrawal. But lo, they were steadfast.

Sixth and seventh grade passed with little event with regard to the moobs themselves. My chubbiness actually served me well in the way of a camouflage for my breasts. Of course I was mocked extensively for my plump stature, but as horrible as it sometimes was, I preferred it to the persecution I surely would have suffered had the sadism to which teenagers are so wont been focused entirely on this one unnamable flaw.

Of course, it's really a Hobson's choice, now, isn't it?

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And then I began to grow taller.

Had my physique not transformed into that of a slender, slightly awkward 14-year-old girl with newly blossoming breasts, this growth spurt would have been quite a boon. But having been stretched thin by this strange custom of puberty, the full majesty of my breasts was revealed. Perky, with nipples suspended in a swollen state by the hard disk things behind them, my breasts could have comfortably filled an A cup and given even a self-respecting 14-year-old boy a raging erection.

And so as I entered high school, hiding my nymph-like breasts became my biggest concern. For the most part, I was quite successful. Swimming week in gym class was the one time I was powerless in protecting my secret, and I dreaded it in the deep way you might dread death or having to go somewhere where there's loud and terrible music. For the 51 weeks a year I wasn't required to go shirtless in front of my peer review panel, I wore at least two shirts all the time: usually one thick, plain white cotton T-shirt and a stiff button-down shirt a size or so too big. On occasions when I couldn't choose my wardrobe — band concerts and the like — I taped my boobs down with duct tape. I'd put on a small, tight-fitting undershirt and then wrap my chest many times over with duct tape as tight as I could manage while still being able to draw breaths enough to fill my horn.

I walked hunched over, so that my shirts fell slightly forward, concealing completely the topography of my chest and making it seem like I just had bad posture. There is comfort and safety in the slouch.

I often fantasized about cutting my tits off with a sharp kitchen knife, just slicing them right off like you might the butt of a ham or the heel of the bread.

On a few occasions I tried to enjoy them, standing on a short stool in my bathroom so that I could see my body in the mirror but not my face. I would then caress my boobs like I thought one might caress Maggie M.'s recently blossomed bosoms, trying to pretend that no, these weren't my breasts, these were the breasts of a nubile goddess. But it takes more than hiding your face to convince yourself that the breasts you're feeling aren't yours, just like you

can't really switch hands and pretend you're getting a tug job.

"Why do you change like a girl?" I'd get asked in the locker room or the band bus or the theater dressing room, as I would carefully do that thing at which girls are so adept where they change shirts without ever taking one completely off. "Hey fag, why do you change like a girl?"

Increasingly my breasts became the chief recipients of my cognitive and even haptic attention. I thought perhaps I could will them or even squeeze them into remission. Lying in bed at night or sitting in class leaning forward covertly I squeezed the little lumps, those cursed nascent mammary glands, squeezed just until it hurt, like if I couldn't obliterate them with sheer force, I would torture them until they relented and retreated back to the dark corners of puberty whence they came.

My voice began to change. My pubic hair came in, the first of which I discovered while sitting on the toilet one morning and, thinking it was simply a hair that had fallen from my head onto my crotch, I proceeded to tug at quite forcefully before I realized, "Oh shit, that hair is actually, like, attached." I had my first wet dream. I continued to grow taller. And still my breasts remained, determined to make my gender-confused hormones known to the world.

It was at this point that I started to pray with fervor, every morning and every night and sometimes silently or just under my breath during the day. "Dear God," I would beg, "please, please take my breasts away, God, please." At night I would beg God to do me this one favor until I cried. I made the typical promises: "Do this one thing for me, God, and I will dedicate my life to your service, I will never think of another girl naked again, I will be kind and obedient to my parents always."


"What do you want from me?" I would ask, feeling at this point quite like Job. "Why are you doing this to me? What have I done to deserve this?" And while other kids went swimming in the public pool during the summer or made out with girls and took their shirts off or played on the skins team during weekend youth-group basketball tournaments, I hid. I hid from everyone, wearing my stiff layered shirts and occasional duct tape, waiting for God to answer my prayers, waiting and hiding and cursing my moobs.

The years passed and my breasts remained. By my junior year, I was thin, had armpits and a crotch full of fluffy, curly hairs, was singing bass in the choir and was feeling increasing urges to let girls touch my penis. And yet my breasts remained. Perky, soft, with large, pink and puffy nipples, and still harboring those hard, quarter-sized disk things behind them. And I continued to beg God daily, "Please, please, God, take these away. I just want to be normal. I just don't want these tits."

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The breaking point came when Eric H., a real dickwad who used to call me lardass in gym class when I couldn't climb the stupid rope, gave me a titty twister





one day. He had to really reach down and around as I was walking at this time with such a Quasimodo-esque slouch as to make my breasts undetectable and unreachable. He grabbed my right tit and twisted — hard. And then: “Nice breasts,” he said. “Nice breasts.”

It was all I could do to not run to the band room that moment and cry and curse God and tear my hair out and rub my head in ashes. Not knowing where else to turn, I had that night the first conversation about my breasts with my parents since I had first told them I had cancer six years earlier. I sat down and began to try and say what I needed to say, but tears were all that came. My mother put her arms around me. “What’s wrong, buddy boo?” Here I was, a 17-year-old man, weeping in his mother’s arms because of his emasculating man tits. “Mom, Dad,” I said between pathetic sobs and attempts at catching my breath, “I still have tits. I still have those hard disk things beneath my nipples. I’m half-woman. I get it. I get it now. But I can’t take it anymore. I can’t. I really, really can’t. And I don’t know what to do.”

So well had I hidden my secret tits for so many years, even my parents didn’t know about my suffering. Not knowing exactly where to start the next day, we booked an appointment with our family doctor, a Dr. D, a very good-natured guy who made a lot of dry jokes about teens behaving and winked after each one. I sat on the examination table, both of my parents in the room, and sheepishly pulled off my shirt. Dr. D fondled me as if he were giving me a breast exam.

“Gynecomastia,” he said.

“Gyne-what?”

“Gynecomastia,” he said. “It usually occurs in boys just starting puberty. It’s extremely common, actually. Something like

60 percent of boys, I think. And almost all of the time it goes away in six months or so. How long have you had it?”

“Over six years,” I said.

“Oh, well” — and he sort of took a breath looking at the floor, and then looked up at me — “In rare cases, it just doesn’t go away.”

“So that’s it? I’m just a man with breasts?”

“Well, there are options.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you can wait longer,” he said. “At this point, they’re probably not going to go away. It’s possible, but not likely. You could wait until your chest hair grows in a bit more, which will cover your puffy nipples a bit. Maybe do some butterfly lifts at the gym to sort of hide them. Build muscle around them. Or we can take them out. That is an option.”

“I want them out,” I said. “I want them out right now.”

“Well, hold on. It involves surgery.”

“I don’t care. I want them out.”

“And your insurance probably won’t cover the cost, since it’s technically cosmetic, and the surgery is not inexpensive.”

“Cosmetic? I’m deformed. I’m a mutant,” I said. “What do you mean it’s cosmetic? I’m not asking for a nose job. I’m a dude who grew tits and I want them cut out of me — cut right the fuck out!”

“Erik, watch your language around your mother,” my father said.

“Would you have called surgery on the Elephant Man cosmetic?”

“OK, OK,” my parents said. “Let’s think about it and talk to the insurance company, and we’ll see.”

And so we did the insurance-company dance. There was no way we could have afforded the surgery if our insurance company didn’t cover it. They said yes, then a couple days later they took it back and said no.

“We didn’t realize it was cosmetic,” they said.

“It isn’t,” I said.

There was a lot of praying, though I was by that point beyond having any sort of real hope in prayer. The church used to say that God answers prayers in one of three ways: yes, no, or wait. Well, then what is the fucking point? We prayed. We waited. We pleaded with the insurance company.

Finally, they said, “Fine, since we first approved it, we’ll go ahead and cover it.”

“See,” Mom said, “God answers prayers. God is good.”

“Right,” I said.

I went in for surgery.

“Where would you like the incisions?” Dr. D asked me. “We can cut two long incisions perpendicular across your chest or we can cut around the nipples. Either way, you’ll have scars. In the first case, your scars will be bigger and more noticeable. If we cut around your nipples, you’ll probably lose a good deal of the feeling in them, perhaps all of it.”



“Cut my nipples,” I said. “Cut my nipples open and rip those hard quarter-sized disk things right out.” Looking back, I’m not sure why I made the choice to have the incisions in my nipples. Perhaps I saw some symbolic catharsis about cutting them that made the choice so easy at the time.

The tissue and glands Dr. D removed left caverns in my chest that filled with pus and blood and other liquids. For several weeks, I had to go back to the doctor’s office regularly to have my breasts drained. I would lie down while they stabbed the side of each breast several times with an oversized syringe and sucked out the bloody liquid that had filled my chest and made my tits even bigger than before and given them a sort of nice, heavy, warm quality, like the developed breasts of a woman in her twenties. A nurse would carefully empty the syringe into a bedpan, stabbing each tit again and again until they were dry inside, and I would go home and wait another week for them to fill up. And eventually they stopped filling up. Eventually they stopped growing. Eventually all of my bandages came off. I looked in the mirror at my newly flattened chest and for the first time in six years, I felt OK with myself. I put on a single soft T-shirt and stood up

straight. I watched the way the T-shirt fell across my flat front. I smoothed my T-shirt over my chest. I smiled.

I still have scars, though they’ve lightened over the years. My nipples are still sort of wonky-looking, slightly inverted and maybe more oblong than is normal. Some feeling has returned to them – not the pleasant feeling I imagine one might get from having one’s nipples explored in a sexual context, but if you bite those fuckers hard enough, I can feel it. They aren’t perfect, but I go swimming in the summer, I stand up straightish, I wear T-shirts and get naked with girls.

We are like some subatomic particles, the ones you know are there until you look and then they’re gone. We try to find ourselves by changing ourselves. How does that work? When I see a woman with fake breasts now, I catch myself thinking, “Why? Why did you do that to yourself? I’m sure you were so beautiful. I know you were. You didn’t have to do that.” But then I think of my own “cosmetic” surgery. And the truth is that I just don’t know. We hide so much. Shame is the fabric of our shrouds of solipsism. And it hurts like a pain, sometimes much more than being cut with knives. MFM



# WORKING WITH THE M SET

Brandon Blatcher interviews  
[iamkimiam](#) on the intersection  
of language and meaning  
in web communities

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I FIRST BECAME aware of MetaFilter member [iamkimiam](#) when she posted a linguistics survey to MetaTalk about the pronunciation of MeFi and MeFite. Later I heard she got a master's degree studying language on MetaFilter. Then she mentioned she was basing her Ph.D. research on language and the MetaFilter community. This all sounded very mysterious and strange, so questions were in order. I caught up with her one Saturday afternoon in June via Skype.

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**Brandon: So, your research?  
What the hell are you doing?**

**Kim:** Haha. I have several different ways to explain "what the hell I'm doing." Basically, I'm studying how people pronounce different words from the internet. But I'm more crucially looking at how people assign meanings – how people negotiate social meanings – of words. Because we know that words, and especially names, come to be associated with groups and people. The different ways you say things will tell people where you're from or what you're about. Or maybe what different facets of your identity you wish to share.

**Brandon: Ok, could you give me  
a couple of examples of that, not  
MeFi-related?**

**Kim:** Sure. So we have things like 'shore' vs. 'beach' ... Oh, there's a recent study by Lauren Hall-Lew and her colleagues that looked at different pronunciations of '[Iraq](#)', showing how the variants were associated with different socio-political persuasions. So people tended to recognize one pronunciation as being associated with Republicans and Republican ideology, while the other was recognized as having more Democrat or liberal associations.

**Brandon: Ok, so it's kind of related back  
to how different regions or classes are  
using language? What that says and how  
that identifies them as a group?**

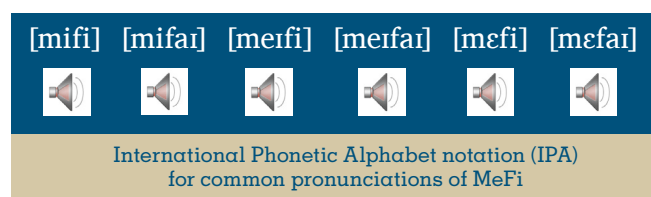
**Kim:** Right, exactly. And we can't help it; we're always telling people who we are with our speech. We have an accent, we have interests and hobbies we like to talk about, we may be unhealthy or if we smoke, you can sometimes hear that in the voice. Often we can't or don't want to hide those things. But we're doing a fair

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amount of identity construction work with our speech. So we want to tell people things ... either directly with the words we choose or the types of things we're talking about, or the way we say them.

**Brandon: Ok, so how did you arrive at this particular topic? Specifically, why 'MeFi' and 'MeFites' for MetaFilter.**

**Kim:** Yeah (laughs). It started out so small and then it turned into such a big project! I've always been fascinated by the pronunciation debate on MetaFilter. And I stumbled upon a post by [heatherann](#), who is also a linguist, about it on MetaTalk. MetaFilter people are so self-aware of what's going on within the community and want to talk about it. She posted a thread asking how you pronounce [MeFi](#).



**Kim:** And that just got me thinking. I needed a topic for my master's thesis. I had a bunch of different topics, but I ended up running with this one because it had a lot of ... well, it had legs. And it ran. And it ran really, really far. To England.

So, yeah. So I finished my M.A. and I was applying to Ph.D. programs and I just kept realizing that there was actually more to this after I did the survey and reading a lot of the comments. There were so many more things that studying

**Brandon: The actual terms that you decided to focus your study on ... MeFi and MeFite ... how did you arrive at those particular ones?**

**Kim:** MetaFilter provides just the perfect testing ground for looking at this. The pronunciation of MeFi and MeFite – I call them the M-Set, which allows me to talk about both of them without...

**Brandon: Saying them over and over again?**

**Kim:** Yeah, yeah. And biasing you with my pronunciation. It also allows me to talk about them as a [variable](#), without singling out a particular pronunciation.

The M-Set is really about sociophonetic variation – variation in how things are pronounced, having social significance. And when you're looking at sociophonetic variation you often want to look at words or sounds that are associated with meaningful things. You have something with MetaFilter where these terms – the M-Set – is actually the group identity of the community itself. It's the name of the community that they're arguing over. Also, the name of the people who belong to the community.

It's like any community, let's say a geographic community. As a local, you want people to pronounce the name in the way you do. I remember when hostilities broke out in Ossetia in 2008. The American media, getting their tips from Russia, went with their pronunciation of [Ossetia as ah-SET-ee-ə](#), rather than the pronunciations of [oh-SEE-shah](#) or [oh-SEET-ee-ə](#), which might be more aligned with how they would refer to themselves, in English. So now the more widely known pronunciation that's been propagated through the news sources might contain an unintended alignment or connotation. The point being, the way people refer to themselves and to others is important.

“THE M-SET IS REALLY ABOUT SOCIOPHONETIC VARIATION – VARIATION IN HOW THINGS ARE PRONOUNCED, HAVING SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE.”

this could actually tell us. It's not just people arguing on the internet about how to pronounce a word.

It's about people ... how people negotiate meaning. And we've never really had the chance to look at it in this way before. With the persistent transcript of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), where we can always refer back to what was said, to the prior discourse. And you have people arguing about pronunciation in text. Which is really weird.

**Brandon: And so when did you finish up your master's?**

**Kim:** Oh, wow, yeah that was a year ago, almost to the day. Yeah. I quickly wrapped that up, defended, packed and moved to England and started the Ph.D. at the [University of York](#).

**Brandon: Oh, it's kind of like the difference between Mumbai and Bombay?**

**Kim:** Yeah, or Peking versus Beijing. Or other things, like LIN-uicks versus LIE-nucks (for Linux).

**Brandon: Oh but wait a minute. Oh crap. You're telling me people say LIE-nucks?**

**Kim:** Oh yes they do! Or how about the way people say [.gif](#)?

**Brandon: Right. I'm a little bit aware of that from the design perspective.**

**Kim:** And one pronunciation tells you that the person might be a long-time internet user, referencing the creators of the



# Common Pronunciations of MeFi:

file format – that’s the “peanut butter” pronunciation. The “hard g” .gif-sayers might rely on other cues, such as the ‘g’ sound as in ‘graphics’ or not liking the Jif® brand peanut butter sound association.

The people who care about this though, who maybe have been around computers for a long time or are in the industry, might say “Oh, no. It’s gotta be said like this.”

So again, you’re indexing your membership within a certain group, or your long-time status.

**Brandon: So, it’s kind of like, speaking in graphic designer terms, if you get a file from a client that’s say, built in Publisher, you’re immediately making some assumptions about their technical ability and that sort of thing.**

**Kim:** Exactly. We always take shortcuts or pick up clues about people. What they do, who they are. So we know how to speak back to them and how to make sense with them. With your graphic design example, you will probably adjust your speech as far as how to explain a setup or request something from them. Maybe you won’t talk in the most technical terms with them.

**Brandon: Right, ok. So in terms of the M-Set – you already got me saying it now – a pronunciation can be a particular signifier of an individual? Like even subgroups within MetaFilter...**

**Kim:** Yes. And it’s interesting because you always have people arriving at the debate, often without any influence from others about pronunciation. So they’ve got their own grammatical rules in their head and they pick whatever makes sense to them.

**Brandon: And they’re usually not consciously thinking about it.**

**Kim:** Right. We usually don’t stop and weigh all the pros and cons of why we should say something new a particular way. But what we actually do say, where we end up, tells you something about what’s going on in our minds. There are lots of reasons people end up with their pronunciations and they may not even be aware of them.

**Brandon: If someone has a particular way of pronouncing, but maybe one of the moderators, those people in perceived ‘authority’ says it the same way ... it kind of gives their pronunciation more weight, as a more “true” one perhaps?**

**Kim:** Right. And this is where favorites come in. Especially in pronunciation threads. I mean, we all see the favorites. People might rail against favorites but, well, they’re so incredibly interesting! [The November Favorites Thread](#) ... It was like all of the sudden we had no social feedback.

**Brandon: Exactly! That’s exactly how I felt about it. Favorites were sort of like a voice of MetaFilter. So you kind of get feedback about what’s going on and how that entity is actually thinking or feeling.**

**Kim:** Right, right. You get kind of a ... I hate to use this word ... but kind of a zeitgeist going on?

(Both laugh.)

**Kim:** But seriously, how the community is feeling. Or what the community finds interesting or funny. In text-based communication we rely on these other mechanisms that tell us how to navigate, how to exist socially here.

“...YOU ALWAYS HAVE PEOPLE ARRIVING AT THE DEBATE, OFTEN WITHOUT ANY INFLUENCE FROM OTHERS ABOUT PRONUNCIATION. SO THEY’VE GOT THEIR OWN GRAMMATICAL RULES IN THEIR HEAD AND THEY PICK WHATEVER MAKES SENSE TO THEM.”

You can have *all* these different reasons for why you could pronounce something one way or another. So, you could say, “Oh, I say MeFi like the first syllables of ‘Meta’ and ‘Filter.’” Or, “I say MeFi because that’s how this moderator says it.” Or, “It’s MeFi because of this other word ...” All of these dimensions go into how people figure out how to pronounce words from (the) internet.

And we need that. Sometimes there are hundreds of people having a functioning conversation in text, all at once.

There are a couple of MeFites that are doing interesting work with favorites and other MeFi-related aspects. There’s going to be a MetaFilter panel at the [Association of Internet Researchers Conference](#) this October.

[DiscourseMarker](#) and her colleague will be presenting research on discourse strategies surrounding conflict in the November Favorites thread.

**Brandon: Oh cool!**

**Kim:** Yeah, it's going to be a fun thing. So we've got four presentations going on in that AoIR panel. In addition to DiscourseMarker's talk, moderator [cortex](#) will be data sharing with a behind-the-scenes look at MetaFilter, [lewistate](#) with [more research on ethos and identity](#), and I'll talk about negotiating social meaning online through the pronunciation of the M-Set.

**Brandon: Excellent. Now you said in your research somewhere that you've found about 10 pronunciations of the M-Set?**

**Kim:** Yes. (Laughs.) And that's for each variable, so, 10 for 'MeFi' and 10 for 'MeFite'. I didn't even realize this when I did the survey. I originally started with six main pronunciations. But with 'my-fye' – and there were enough people that I had to consider it – that made seven. The reason why I hadn't considered it was that from what I could find, there is no word in the English language that is represented with the letter 'e' in that position, pronounced like 'eye'. And there are a few other pronunciations, too.

**Brandon: (Laughs.) So, people are just ... making stuff up.**

**Kim:** It shows how abbreviations and internet words are influencing pronunciation and the language. And there are enough people that do it and they feel so strongly about it that it can't be ignored. In their comments, they say things like, "Well, I say 'MeFi' like 'WiFi' or 'HiFi'." Even though those are spelled with 'i'. And can be pronounced other ways.

**Brandon: It's funny because I'm listening to you and my mind is reeling, "No. How could they come up with that? And argue about it!"**

**Kim:** Right. And it's a playful argument. Which is great. Because we're not waging wars over this. You know, slaughtering MeFites over this. But it's meaningful. And it shows us how it's done.

**Brandon: But I'm like, "How did they come up with that pronunciation?"**

**Kim:** To me, it's almost like linguistic ideology. What is the belief system? How does the grammar in their heads work? That made them get there ... that made that

pronunciation make sense to them. Where yours is so different. And so this goes for all of the pronunciations.

**Brandon: So, I gotta ask this, I gotta ask. You may have to cut this out, but what's the most popular pronunciation?**

**Kim:** Oh, ha! Yeah. It's MeFi.

**Brandon: (Reaction.)**

**Kim:** So, what I *can* say is this. The order of the pronunciations favored is always the same. It's the amounts by which they're preferred that varies. And you can predict this order. You can look at common words in English. You can look at grammatical and phonological rules. And you could probably figure out what the order would be. But the amounts, the amounts by which they're preferred changes based on all sorts of sociolinguistic factors. And some of those amounts are statistically significant; some of them are not. But these things could depend on sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender, where you are, what dialect you speak, how much of a "core" member of the group you are, how much you participate on MetaFilter and in what ways ... all of these things may influence your pronunciation choices to some degree.

There are so many things that go into it. One thing I've been really into lately is word frequency. Even though this is all text-based, what about words that are sound-consistent – they don't have pronunciation ambiguity, like 'me', 'met', 'may', etc. – and sound like different pronunciations of MeFi? Certain higher-frequency words having consistent sound-mappings in English ... does that correlate with pronunciation somehow? I want to look at [how] the site as a whole groups MeFites with regard to [word frequency](#). MetaFilter is going to vary across subsite. So what if you hang around AskMe all the time and there's a different distribution of words that you're seeing. That might have an influence on pronunciation. And again, this is all happening in text, which is weird. Because you're not hearing it, you're seeing it.

**Brandon: Again, you got ahead of my questions.**

**Kim:** Ha. Sorry.

**Brandon: So do individual pronunciations extend to subsite pronunciations?**

**Kim:** I haven't even begun to look at that yet. I've got my hands full here. But that's so fascinating to me.

There was a comment that I just loved. I'll go find it...

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**Q: Congrats on your new gig as weekend mod on MetaFilter! Why would you want to spend your weekends herding around a bunch of louts like us?**

A: Because that's what I do. The funniest part about becoming a mod on MetaFilter is it hasn't really changed my daily habits at all. Before I was a mod I would load MetaFilter, go away for awhile, and then come back and reload. Now I just have more buttons to push, which is lots of fun. I've been in community management for years. I like the idea of really strong communities that feel safe. It's what I do, and this is a great place to do it.

**Q: What communities did you manage before MetaFilter?**

A: I was the Internet marketing manager for Patrice Pike's record label. That meant I moderated her forums, wrote content for her website, produced her newsletter and managed her street team. I also got really good at hucking amps up the rickety metal staircase outside her regular venue.

Then Jeremy went to work for NCsoft, a game publisher that specializes in MMOs.

I was in charge of making sure our customers knew what was going on with the game, and making sure the developers knew what our customers thought of it. This involved forum moderation to some extent, but we had outsourcers for the really low-level "he used a bad word" stuff — I was more involved with managing the conversations about the relative power level of the Dual Daggers of Bloodthirstiness and the Bastard Sword of Did You Just Call Me A Bastard, Punk? Did You?

I also wrote a bunch of website copy (playguides and whatnot), the ever-present newsletter, and — my claim to fame — three or four two-sentence character descriptions for Play magazine. (The "Girls of Gaming" issue. Yes, I own it.)

**Q: You said in your intro note, "I'm Jeremy, yes I'm a girl, yes it's a long story." You know the**

**folks of MetaFilter adore long stories, so if you feel comfortable sharing yours, we'd love to hear it.**

A: My legal name is Emily, but nobody since I was a little kid has ever called me that. I was signing up for a mailing list for a band, and it asked for my first and last name. I didn't particularly want to give my real first and last name, so I put in "Jeremy Preacher" — and I pulled that straight out of my ass. What I didn't realize is that every message I sent to that message board would be signed with that name, and so when I moved to Austin, everyone I knew, I knew from that message board, and they all thought my name was Jeremy Preacher. It's the Internet handle that ate my life. (That was in 1998. Nowadays, Jeremy only uses the name "Emily" at the bank.)

**Q: What first drew you to MetaFilter?**

A: I started visiting MetaFilter pretty much when it first launched. My girlfriend at the time was in tech support at Dell, and the people in tech support at Dell had nothing better to do than sit on MetaFilter all day. Pretty soon I was in tech support at Dell too, and I had nothing better to do than sit on MetaFilter all day.

**Q: Has it been weird adjusting to modliness?**

A: It has been very weird. The weirdest thing about becoming a mod is that people are suddenly paying attention to me. Not the actual moderation stuff; they're paying attention to that, of course, but that's not weird at all. That's how the site works, and it's actually pretty awesome. (Honestly — I really do appreciate the feedback and find it super-helpful.) But just in general, I'm suddenly conscious of a lot more eyeballs on everything I say, particularly in MetaTalk — it's a little disconcerting.

**Q: What are some of the other interesting secrets of MetaFilter mod-dom?**

There is a lot of email. Every MetaTalk post gets emailed to us, every MetaFilter post gets emailed to us. The funny thing about the process of getting hired is there was no interview. I kind of chatted with everyone, but there was no interview. I realized they [already] know everything about me. It's very odd knowing all the users can find out anything they want just by looking my profile.

**Q: And finally, what's your golden rule for hanging out on the Internet?**

A: Never connect yourself to the Internet when you're over-tired or emotionally distraught. That's rule number one. MFH



cmyk (Julie Wright)





# The Path To **HISTORY**

## How Neil Armstrong became the first man on the moon

By Brandon Blatcher

**IN 1961, PRESIDENT** John F. Kennedy, speaking before Congress, set a goal of landing a man on the moon by the end of the decade. Eight years and a quarter of a million miles later, in 1969, Neil Armstrong fulfilled that goal and stepped into history. The road from speech to footstep, dream to reality, was curved and winding. This is the map.

It was a combination of luck and skill, talent and fate that placed Neil Armstrong in the spot to make history. It would be easy to say his luck began at birth. There were other, older, astronauts who were born just as lucky (or even more so), but his timing was right. Armstrong was born in 1930, and came of age when America was supremely powerful. World War II had ended. The German engineers who developed the first guided rocket had been brought to America and put to work in the US Army, building rockets. The Soviet Union had launched the first satellite in 1957, and put man into space in 1961. A great space race had begun. America needed brave and talented pilots.

Yet the path that led Armstrong to take those historical steps could be said to have started almost anywhere. Pick a point, draw a line that zigs and zags and curves and call it the path. Only by looking backwards can you see the winding path that brought Armstrong to that point.

Donald K. 'Deke' Slayton is as good a point to start with as any. Born six years before Armstrong in 1924, Deke came of age in time to serve as a pilot with the Air Force in World War II. After the war, he earned a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering, then became a test pilot. His job was to fly various aircraft, test their capabilities and discover their limits, hopefully without getting killed or destroying the ship. He was among the

best, a fact recognized in 1959 by the newly formed National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

Formed in 1958, NASA had one simple task: Win the space race. As the agency worked to launch unmanned satellites into space, it also began studying the feasibility of sending humans after them. After some consideration, test pilots were deemed the best equipped to handle this unknown environment. In 1959 NASA chose over a hundred military test pilots as possible candidates for

It was a combination of luck and skill, talent and fate, that placed Neil Armstrong in the perfect spot to make history.

Project Mercury, America's first manned space program.

Rigorous testing whittled down the hundred plus candidates to seven astronauts. Deke was among them. He was scheduled to make an orbital flight in 1962, but was pulled from flight duty due to a newly-discovered erratic heartbeat. Although he had flown for years as a combat and test pilot with no ill results, the doctors were uneasy about sending him into space. No one knew the effects of weightless on the human body, and no one was willing to risk flying someone who wasn't in optimal physical condition. Yet Deke was an experienced test pilot and had passed all but one of the physical exams to become an astronaut. What was NASA to do?

Faced with an unknown, the agency's doctors had a simple solution: As long as there were astronauts with non-erratic heartbeats, NASA would fly them instead of Deke. The agency revoked his flight status.

Meanwhile, NASA was growing by leaps and bounds. With President Kennedy's goal of landing on the moon by the end of the decade, more astronauts would be hired, creating the need for a manager. The other Mercury astronauts lobbied Deke to apply for the position, wanting one of their own in charge. Deke did apply and was accepted, becoming Director of Flight Crew Operations. One of his duties would be selecting who would fly on the missions for the upcoming Gemini and Apollo programs.

Though not an obvious factor in Armstrong's path to the moon, Deke's position and power of crew selection can not be overstated. He had a virtual free hand in choosing crews (rarely overruled in his choices) and it was the only hand. This enabled him to plan long term and mix and match personalities and skills. Deke developed strategies and philosophies for choosing not only individual astronauts for NASA but also crews for missions.

NASA administrators pressed for hand-picked crews, citing the need for specialization in an unknown environment. Deke successfully resisted. He saw that the planning of missions would be fluid, changing right up to the launch date. Specialized crews would be too limiting. Instead, Deke mandated that any crew needed to be able to fly any mission. That simple idea formed the guiding principle of crew selection.

Despite that philosophy, Deke felt a certain loyalty to the original seven Mercury astronauts. While he had an excellent selection of talented pilots, Deke insisted that seniority be a factor. Those who had been with the program the longest were given the best flights. It was no accident that the first Gemini and Apollo missions were commanded by Mercury astronauts.

While the Mercury program was getting up to speed, Neil Armstrong was busy testing jets in California. Flying had interested him at an early age, and he had gotten his pilot's license before a driver's license. After graduating from high school in 1947, he enrolled at Purdue University, paying for tuition by agreeing to spend at least three years with the U.S. Navy. Armstrong's service began in 1949, bringing him to the combat zone in Korea.

He flew 78 missions during the war before being released in 1952. Now 22, Armstrong returned to Purdue and graduated in 1955 with a bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering. From there he went on to become a test pilot, like Deke and most of the early astronauts.

He was known as a good pilot, but not the absolute best. His strength was in understanding aerodynamics and using that knowledge to understand and test aircraft. Earlier pilots didn't have degrees and flew more by touch and experience. Armstrong, with his schooling, had more thorough understanding of what a jet was capable of before

he took it into the air. Combined with his calm nature and steady head, Armstrong made a name for himself in test pilot circles.

On a personal level he was hard to know, prone to keeping people at a distance. He wasn't anti-social, just quiet and shy. After a while he would open up to people and could be found closing down bars and the like.

But he was never one to get too personal or discuss his life outside of being a test pilot.

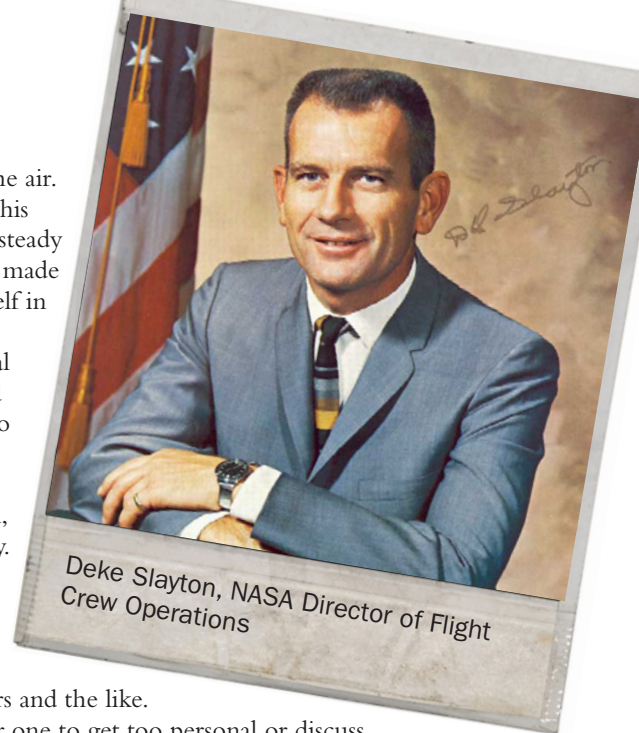
Armstrong showed a slight interest in the space program in the late 1950s, but was not selected for NASA's first group of Mercury candidates. With the announcement of the Apollo program and its goal of sending men to the moon, Armstrong became very interested in flying ships in a different environment. He sent in an application for NASA's second call for astronauts, which was open to volunteers. However, his application arrived late, nearly a week after the deadline of June 1st, 1962. Luckily, a friend from Armstrong's test pilot days worked in the office and noticed the application. He slipped the paperwork into the correct file.

On September 13th 1962, Deke called Armstrong and invited him to be part of the second group of NASA astronauts, known as the New Nine. He accepted and immediately moved to Houston to train and help out with the Mercury program, which was now launching humans into space.

Mercury ended in 1963, and the Gemini program began in 1965. Designed to carry two men into space, Gemini was scheduled for 10 missions to test and practice the techniques needed for sending men to the moon and returning them safely. Chief among the needed procedures were rendezvous, docking, space-walks and medical testing. Neil spent the years training and practicing to fly in space, along with the other 15 active astronauts.

The first manned flight of the Gemini program was to be commanded by Alan Shepard, who had been the first American in space as one of the original seven Mercury astronauts. But Shepard developed Ménière's disease, which threw off his balance. Shepard, like Deke, was grounded. Still attached to the idea of going to the moon, he stayed with NASA and became Deke's Deputy Director in the Astronaut Office.

Shepard was replaced with another Mercury astronaut, Gus Grissom, who had been the second American to fly in





space. With the question of the first crew settled, Gemini III roared into space in March of 1965. The mission was a success and the program continued forward.

As the missions progressed, the press and even the astronauts were clueless as to why or how a crew was chosen. Deke gave no indication or clue of his reasoning process, instead repeating the mantra “any crew could fly any mission.” But after a few flights, a rotation system became visible. First a crew would be assigned the backup role on a flight, training with the prime crew and able to take over the mission should something happen to one or both of the prime crew members. Then two flights later, that backup crew would (usually) be assigned to a prime crew.

Armstrong had been assigned as backup Commander of Gemini V which, if the rotation held, would place him as commander of Gemini VIII. It did, and the rookie astronaut found himself in command of an ambitious mission. He, and Pilot David Scott, were to perform the first docking in space, linking up with a specially designed unmanned rocket called the Agena Target Vehicle.

Rendezvous between two spacecraft — a precise match of the crafts’ orbits and speeds, allowing them to come within 120 feet of each other — had only recently been accomplished on the Gemini VI and VII missions. Now it was time for two ships to physically meet and attach themselves to each other, an act critical for sending men to the moon.

Launch was smooth, the rocket lifting the two men to 160 miles above Earth. Once in orbit, they chased down the Agena rocket, and Armstrong carefully guided the Gemini capsule into history’s first space docking. The crew was congratulated by ground control, and with the first major goal of the mission accomplished, Armstrong and Scott were left alone while they drifted into a communications dead zone. For 20 minutes, as the two men floated high above the Indian Ocean, there was

no way to contact them. It turned out to be a terrifying time, as the crew members found themselves fighting for their lives.

A few minutes after entering the communications blackout, the now docked ships began to spin on their own, pitching head over heel. Thinking the problem was with the Agena, Armstrong and Scott undocked, but the problem only worsened. Their Gemini ship began spinning faster, causing the crew’s vision to blur and pushing them towards unconsciousness. Armstrong tried everything he knew to arrest the spin, but one after another, they failed. Running out of options, he fired special thrusters reserved for only

The space program and America would have been left with the image of two men lost in space, for reasons unknown.

reentry, which managed to stop the spinning. But firing those thrusters dictated a re-entry according to mission rules, sending the crew home much sooner than expected.

They splashed down in the Pacific Ocean after only 10 hours in space. Post-flight analysis revealed that a thruster had become stuck in the ON position, sending the ship spinning wildly. No fault was assigned to the crew. In fact, Armstrong was praised for having handled an unusual problem and bringing him and Scott home safely. Had he not been able to regain control of the spacecraft, they would have soon lost consciousness and died.

Since the mishap occurred when they were out of communication, NASA might have never been able to figure out what happened and why. The space program and America would have been left with the image of two men lost in space, for reasons unknown.

Armstrong’s fast thinking had avoided that terrible fate, a fact NASA administrators were keenly aware of. His performance was lauded throughout the agency, and the incident cemented the idea that Armstrong knew how to handle himself in a crisis situation.

A few weeks after Gemini VIII, President Johnson invited Armstrong to go on a 24-day tour of Latin America with other NASA astronauts and administrators. He prepared for the trip by taking classes in Spanish, enabling him to greet local crowds in their native language. He also spoke of Brazilian-born Alberto Santos-Dumont, the South American aviator whom the locals regarded as the true father of aviation.

The crowds loved Armstrong and responded well to his knowledge of their language and history. His companions could not help but notice how easily, yet humbly, Armstrong interacted with the crowds in a foreign land.



Neil Armstrong next to an X-15 in 1960

Traveling with him was Dr. George Low, the newly appointed head of the Apollo Applications project at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. Low was impressed with Armstrong's manner, as recounted in the latter's biography, "First Man: The Life of Neil A. Armstrong":

"Neil had a knack for making short little speeches in response to toasts and when getting medals, in response to questions of any kind. ... He never failed to choose the right words."

In his travel journal Low concluded,

"All I can say is that I am impressed. Neil also made a very significant effort in learning Spanish, and even learning Guarani for Paraguay, and this, of course, made him a tremendous hit with the people."

The time Low spent with Armstrong would have an major impact when it came to choose who would be the first man on the moon.

After the tour, Armstrong returned to Houston, serving as the backup commander on Gemini XI. The program ended with the next mission, Gemini XII, in December of 1966. Apollo, with its goal of landing a man on the moon, began immediately.

The first Apollo launch was scheduled for February of 1967, but tragedy struck on January 27th. As the Apollo 1 crew trained on the launch pad, a fire broke out in the ship known as the Command Module (CM), killing all three crew members — Gus Grissom, Ed White and Roger Chafee — in seconds. Grissom was a veteran of both Mercury and Gemini, respected as a pilot and engineer both by astronauts and administrators. He had already been selected unofficially to be the first man on the moon.

Deke remarked on this fact in his 1993 autobiography, "Deke!":

"One thing that probably would have been different if Gus had lived: the first guy to walk on the moon would have been Gus Grissom, not Neil Armstrong."

"Nothing against Neil. He did the job, but even on the day he was assigned as commander of Apollo 11, there was no guarantee that mission was going to be the first to land. At the time we still had to fly Apollo 9 and Apollo 10; if there had been problems, things would have been different. ...

"Bob Gilruth (Director of the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston) and headquarters and I agreed on one thing, prior to the Apollo fire: If

possible, one of the Mercury astronauts would have the first chance at being first on the moon. "And at that time Gus was the one guy from the original seven who had the experience to press on through to the landing."

The fire left caused an 18-month delay in the program. NASA spent the time investigating the accident and redesigning the Command Module to prevent similar accidents. In the meantime, several unmanned missions tested the Saturn V rocket and various redesigns of the CM. By the time these redesigns were finished, triple checked and verified, it was late in 1968. The first manned mission of the program, Apollo 7, was set to fly.

The commander would be Wally Schirra, a jovial yet meticulous pilot. He had been one of the Mercury astronauts and a veteran of Gemini. As a well-known and respected pilot and one of the Original Seven, Schirra was in perfect position to be the first man on the moon

But something odd occurred as Schirra prepared for the mission. Normally easy to work with, he turned into a demanding grouch. Being commander of Apollo 7 involved overseeing the numerous changes to the CM after the Apollo 1 fire. Schirra pushed engineers and technicians, demanding that they fix problems to his satisfaction and not caring who he angered in the process.

Then, two weeks before Apollo 7 was to launch, Schirra announced that he would be retiring after the flight. He had already been through the grueling training process several times and was unwilling to do it again.

In his autobiography, "Schirra's Space," he noted that "The space age is very hungry ... It devours people. I have been completely devoured by this business."

Schirra and his crew carried out the mission with flying colors in October of 1968. They spent 11 days in orbit, putting the command/service module (CSM) through its paces, testing all the changes made after the Apollo 1 fire. Their success paved the way for the program to meet President Kennedy's deadline of landing a

man on the moon by the end of the decade.

Meanwhile, Armstrong had been selected as backup commander for Apollo 9, a mission designed to test both the CSM and the lunar module in deep space conditions, 4,000 miles above the Earth.

But the Apollo program was still running into problems as it tried to do what had never been done before. One of the major issues was the lunar module — the smaller ship designed to separate from the main spacecraft, land on the moon, and return to dock with it again. Its manufacturer, the Grumman Corporation, was falling further and further behind in producing a flight-ready ship for the astronauts.





Apollo 8 was supposed to test both the LM and the CSM in low Earth orbit. The vehicles were to dock and perform other maneuvers that would be used for a moon landing, while remaining safely close to Earth. The CSM had proven itself capable on Apollo 7, but the LM needed similar verification before NASA was willing to take both crafts to the moon. Grumman said a craft would not be ready until February 1969, leaving a very tight schedule for making Kennedy's deadline.

So a new path was charted around the obstacle. Since the CSM had performed so well and no LM would be ready for a while, why not send a crew and CSM to orbit the moon on Apollo 8? That way, a crew could test its ability to get in and out of lunar orbit and the performance of communications, tracking and other systems. Less time would be lost while the Lunar Module was being finished, and the astronauts would gain valuable experience and information.

However, the crew of Apollo 8 was knee-deep in training for the LM, whenever it was ready. Sending them on a voyage where there was no Lunar Module would be a loss in knowledge and training.

Deke had a solution; Swap the crews of Apollo 8 and 9, so that the crew of 9 would go around the moon while the crew of 8 would be pushed back a mission until an LM was ready. Since the crew of Apollo 9 hadn't done much LM training, very little would be lost.

After discussions with senior NASA administrators and various contractors, the swap was approved for both the prime crews and their backups. Thus Armstrong and his men were reassigned to back up the circumlunar flight of Apollo 8. Under the normal rotation, a backup crew became the prime crew two missions later. So if everything went well, Armstrong would be commanding Apollo 11.

There was no guarantee that Apollo 11 would be the first moon landing mission. Everything would have to go well on Apollo 8, 9 and 10 for NASA to even attempt a moon landing on Apollo 11. Still, every astronaut was aware of Deke's crew rotation scheme. Lots of bets were being placed on Apollo 11 being the moon landing flight. Had the crews not switched, the original backup Commander of Apollo 8 — Pete Conrad — probably would have been first on the moon.

Apollo 8, launched on December 21st, 1968, was a huge success. For the first time ever, humans broke free of Earth's gravity and traveled to another world. The flight was virtually perfect, with the crew entering lunar orbit, surveying future landing sites, and testing communications methods and other techniques that future astronauts would need.

With their safe return, Deke contemplated doing something he had never done before: saving the prime crew of Apollo 8 for the first moon landing. Yes, it would break the rotation and cause an uproar among the astronauts. But it made sense to use a crew who had already been to the moon, and there was only one. Deke asked the commander of Apollo 8, Frank Borman, if he was interested in being the first man on the moon.

The answer was no. Borman, like Schirra, wanted out of the astronaut business. The long periods of training were tearing at his family, and he felt it wasn't worth it. Borman wanted to move on. Though his crew still wanted to fly, the offer didn't extend to them and Deke wound up moving them to later missions.

Apollo 9 finally took flight in March of 1969, for the long awaited test of the Lunar Module (LM). The mission was successful, with few hiccups. Again Deke asked Mission Commander Jim McDivitt whether he'd be interested in being first man on the moon. Again, the answer was no. McDivitt had already been into space twice and was keenly aware of the odds of something going wrong on another flight. He stepped down and became a manager at NASA.

After Apollo 9's successful test of the LM and CSM, the deep-space test of the ships was canceled. It was decided that Apollo 10 would be a dress rehearsal for a moon landing. Both ships were to be sent to the moon, where

the LM would separate from the CSM and drop to within 8 miles of the lunar surface, survey a landing site and then return to lunar orbit to re-dock with the CSM.

Some administrators in NASA argued for going ahead with the moon landing on Apollo 10. Why

spend all that money, take all that risk, come so close and not actually land on the moon? The crew was certainly game, but two things prevented an earlier moon landing.

One, NASA felt it needed to test communicating with two ships in lunar orbit, tracking their movements and coordinating the mission. The moon has a "lumpy" or inconsistent gravity field, causing flight irregularities. NASA wanted to be sure an LM and its crew could handle the gravity fluctuations, without adding the complexity of managing a landing.

Two, the LM was too simply heavy. The astronauts might be able to land, but they'd never be able to take off. Grumman was working on a lighter LM, but it wouldn't be ready for a few months. It was already mid 1969 and President Kennedy's deadline was looming. There was no time to wait, and NASA still needed to obtain some valuable information.

Apollo 10 took off on May 18, 1969 and reached the moon three days later. The crew took the LM

The space program and America would have been left with the image of two men lost in space, for reasons unknown.

down to within 50,000 feet of the lunar surface, tested communications and radar, and performed a dry run for a lunar landing. Again, everything went well. With NASA confident in the capabilities of man and machine, Apollo 11 was designated as the first attempted moon landing.

The month was also a good one for Alan Shepard, the first American in space, who had been grounded back in 1965. A new surgery corrected his inner ear problems, restoring him to flight status. Shepard, still working as Deke's deputy, pulled a lot of weight in NASA. He nationally known, a beloved hero with charisma to match.

He was quickly given his own command of a moon mission, Apollo 13 (later changed to 14), completely skipping Deke's rotation system and bumping other astronauts. If Shepard had been restored to flight status earlier, say in 1968, would Deke have put him on the first moon landing? There's no firm evidence either way. Considering Deke's loyalty to Mercury astronauts and Shepard's popularity with administrators and the public, it's a strong possibility.

As for Apollo 11, a critical question remained: Who would be first on the moon? Though three men would go to the satellite, only two would land on it. Command Module Pilot Michael Collins would stay in orbit, waiting for the others to return. Commander Neil Armstrong and Lunar Module Pilot Edwin "Buzz" Aldrin would descend to the moon, land and spend a few hours exploring the surface. But who would be first out?

Aldrin, like Armstrong, was an accomplished pilot who had flown in the Korean War. Unlike Armstrong, he had continued his education beyond a bachelor's degree, earning an Sc.D. degree in Astronautics from MIT. His graduate thesis was "Line-of-sight Guidance Techniques for Manned Orbital Rendezvous," which developed methods for astronauts to rendezvous without computers.

Despite his formidable intellect, Aldrin didn't fit with the test-pilot-dominated Astronaut Corps. He was nicknamed "Dr. Rendezvous" for his seemingly one-track mind about the subject. It was said that any conversation with Aldrin eventually turned to the subject, with him being able to talk about it for hours. He also had a tendency to ask a lot of questions, a trait some of the more authoritarian astronauts and NASA administrators found abrasive.

Aldrin had flown in space once before, as the pilot of Gemini XII, with Commander Jim Lovell. His performance was lauded, particularly on the 5 hours he spent testing space walking techniques. Problems were repeatedly occurring on space walks throughout the Gemini program, resulting in several dangerous situations for various crews. Aldrin's performance on the last space walk of the program proved that NASA had managed to conquer the difficulties of that activity.

After Gemini, Aldrin was assigned as backup command module pilot of Apollo 9 (later switched to 8), where he first served with Neil Armstrong. While many commanders found Aldrin's frequent questions annoying, Armstrong had no problem with him.

Almost from the moment Apollo 11 was officially announced in January of 1969, people began asking who would be the first man on the moon: Armstrong or Aldrin? Speculation was intense both in the press and the agency.

Some thought it would be Aldrin because of the procedures used during the Gemini program, where the commander flew the craft while the pilot did a space

The first man on the Moon would be a legend, an American hero beyond Lucky Lindergh, beyond any soldier or politician or inventor. It should be Neil Armstrong.

walk. Others predicted Armstrong, believing NASA wanted a civilian to be the first person on the moon. This line of thought and the lack of a definitive answer from NASA administrators angered Aldrin. He kept pushing for a reply from higher ups, while casting himself as the perfect choice. He also approached other astronauts, asking for their opinions. They all rebuffed him in one form or another, refusing to take sides.

NASA administrators actually hadn't given the matter a lot of thought, despite officially announcing the Apollo 11 crew in early January of 1969. At the time, Apollo 8 had just ended, so it was far from definite which mission would attempt the moon landing.

After the success of the Apollo 9 mission, it became clear that Apollo 11 would be a strong candidate for the first landing. In March of 1969, four NASA administrators held an informal meeting about the issue. They were Deke Slayton, Director of Flight Crew Operations; Bob Gilruth, Director of the Manned Spaceflight Center in Houston (aka Mission Control); Dr. George Low, the Apollo Program Manager (who had traveled with Armstrong through South America back in 1966); and Chris Kraft, the director of Flight Operations.

Kraft remembered this meeting and his thoughts on the subject in his 2001 autobiography, "Flight: My Life in Mission Control":

"In all the early flight plans and timelines, it was the lunar module pilot. Buzz Aldrin desperately wanted that honor and wasn't quiet in letting it be known. Neil Armstrong said nothing. It wasn't his nature to push himself into any spotlight. If the spotlight came, so be it. Otherwise, he was much like Bob Gilruth, content to do the job and then go home.



"I thought about it. The first man on the moon would be a legend, an American hero beyond Lucky Lindberg, beyond any soldier or politician or inventor. It should be Neil Armstrong. I brought my ideas to Deke, and then to George Low. They thought so, too. "So now we were in another Gilruth-Low-Kraft-Slayton meeting, talking it through from every angle. Not once did anyone criticize Buzz for his strongly held positions or for his ambition. The unspoken feeling was that we admired him and that we wanted people to speak their mind. But did we think Buzz was the man who would be our best representative to the world, the man who would be a legend? "We didn't. We had two men to choose from, and Neil Armstrong, reticent, soft-spoken, and heroic, was our only choice. It was unanimous."

Deke's thoughts on the Apollo 11 crew were summed up in his autobiography, "Deke! An Autobiography":

"With the success of Apollo 8, it was time to name the Apollo 11 crew. On the planning charts, this might very well turn out to be the

first manned lunar landing. But no one knew for sure. The lunar module was still a couple of months away from a test flight. There was the Apollo 10 lunar orbit mission too. Some people were thinking that if 9 went well, we should ... have the 10 crew make the landing.

"So it wasn't just a cut-and-dried decision as to who should make the first steps on the moon. If I had had to select on that basis, my first choice would have been Gus, which both Chris Kraft and Bob Gilruth seconded. With Gus dead, the most likely candidates were Frank Borman and Jim McDivitt. I had full confidence in Tom Stafford (Apollo 10), Neil Armstrong, and Pete Conrad (Apollo 12) too. The system had put them in the right place at the right time. Any one of them might very well make the first landing.

...

"Finally, there was no guarantee that 11 would turn out to be the landing. So I figured my best choice was to stick to the rotation and assign Neil Armstrong's crew.

...

"Later on, people would talk about this process



Armstrong suiting up for Apollo the 11 launch in 1969



as if it were some kind of science. Or as if politics had controlled it—the fact that Neil was civilian. All I can say is that a lot of factors, most of them beyond anybody's control, put these three guys in the right place at the right time. The first person to walk on the moon might just as easily have been Tom Stafford, an Air Force officer, or Pete Conrad from the Navy.”

As to the specific choice of who would be first, Deke wrote:

“I told Buzz I thought it should be Neil on seniority. I felt pretty strongly that ones who had been with the program the longest deserved first crack at the goodies. Had Gus been alive, as a Mercury astronaut he would have taken the step. Neil had come into the program in 1962, a year ahead of Buzz, so he had first choice.”

To soothe potentially-ruffled feathers and make the decisions appear as impersonal as possible, a different reason was publicly given for the decision. There was the matter of the hatch that astronauts would use to exit the LM. It was on the commander's side of the ship and it made sense for him to go out first, especially in the cramped quarters of the tiny LM. Experiments had been done on earth, to see if Aldrin could maneuver around Armstrong in a bulky space suit and life support backpack. It was possible, but the close quarters usually resulted in the astronauts damaging the interior somehow. The decision was sold to the public and press as a practical one.

So on July 20, 1969, Neil Armstrong was the first man to walk on the moon. None of the original Mercury astronauts were available to take the steps. His previous space flight had demonstrated how he remained cool under pressure. He had impressed many with his ability to comfortably inhabit the role of hero. And finally, several turns of fate, from Gus Grissom's death to the long delays developing the Lunar Module, placed Armstrong in the right spot to command the historic flight. The path from dream to reality had taken 8 years and numerous flights, but the destination was finally reached.

As Armstrong took those first steps, Deke was a quarter million miles away, still grounded back on Earth. He watched, along with over half a billion people, as the man he had indirectly selected walked into the history books. MFM



Apollo 11 lift off



# Common Pronunciations of MeFi:

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 21

I never realized until this thread that I say MEE FIE and Ask MEE, but also MEH TA. The ability to hold such disparate ideas! I contain multitudes.

posted by [REDACTED] at 1:10 PM on March 26, 2010 [1 favorite +] [!]

**Kim:** I think that was originally a quote from, oh, I can't remember. But it's hilarious. And it's true. When it comes to these two words, people are all over the place.

**Brandon: Right, right. So what sort of real-life research have you done on this? Like at a meetup or some such; have you brought it up?**

**Kim:** Well, initially, before this became a Ph.D. topic, I was just talking to people about it. It always comes up at meetups. It just got more and more interesting the more I heard people arguing about it; laughing about it. But saying things like, "How can you call yourself a MeFite when you say it all 'MeFi'?" That's the quote I heard once that has just stuck in my mind, because it just says so much. Like, how can you consider yourself a worthy member of this group when you don't say words like I say words?

So yeah, I haven't done anything official at meetups, but I am going through ethics clearance right now to be able to – with permission, with much advance notice, with only the willing, and in the right environment and on and on – I would like to audio-record some word task games with MeFites and some natural conversation. But I want to be super, super careful about that. I don't want anybody to feel uncomfortable about showing up to a meetup or feeling like they will get roped into doing something they don't want to do. I won't even think about recording if anybody at all is uncool with it in any way. Buuuut, if people are game ... I've got my consent forms and info leaflets handy!

**Brandon: In those unofficial conversations at meetups where people are talking about this, what was the negotiation process? Do people actually change their pronunciation once they heard one? Was there a trend there? Or would people just become more entrenched in their pronunciation?**

**Kim:** People go different ways. Some people really aren't that bothered by it all and just more or less want to be agreeable. So I wonder if people with certain personality traits, let's go with agreeableness, if that correlates with certain pronunciations or perhaps those people display more variation in their pronunciations.

To explain, you have two types of variation. There's inter-speaker variation; that's variation across MetaFilter ... the different members of MetaFilter are varying in their

pronunciations. So that's across a group. Then there's intra-speaker variation and that's when just one person might change their speech or their pronunciation based on the context. So maybe they're talking to a person that they know says MeFi a certain way, and they want to be agreeable and have their pronunciation go unnoticed. So maybe I'm more apt to use Josh's (cortex) pronunciation when I'm talking to him, but I use Jessamyn's when I'm talking to her.

But now I'm so self-conscious of it that I'm probably more apt to not use either anymore. Because it's so salient in my mind.

**Brandon: How did you originally say it?**

**Kim:** MeFi.

**Brandon: And were you bound to that? Did you feel strongly that that was the right way, in some form or fashion?**

**Kim:** Ok, well, as a linguist I can't really say that there is a "right" way.

(Both laugh.)

**Kim:** But I know what you mean. There was a point in my life, yes, where I did feel very strongly about my pronunciation.

I'm clearly hedging my answer. Oh, my prescriptivist ways. No.

But yeah, this shows you the influence of being focused on a topic and being exposed to all these different pronunciations. I think about this all the time, being here in England. Every day I learn about new word that's pronounced differently here. And I'm slowly becoming aware of my syllable stress and how that's changing. British English has slightly [different syllable stress rules](#) than American English. So sometimes I start travelling down the pronunciation of a word and I've already messed it up and I can't go on. So I have to start over. Because I've either screwed it up the American way or I've screwed it up the British way or I've started something that doesn't even sound American or British.

(Brandon laughs.)

**Kim:** And there's some words now that I'm very aware of and so if I say them the American way it sounds really marked to me, but if I say them the British way it also feels marked, like I'm impersonating. So I'm stuck in between

going “Oh, noooo...how do I pronounce this word? Oh, I’ll just use a different word.”

**Brandon: Oh the trials and tribulations of a linguist.**

**Kim:** Yeah. I know. (Sigh.)

**Brandon: Have you found that your pronunciation of the M-Set has changed?**

**Kim:** When I’m not thinking about how to say the M-Set, I don’t know what’s going to come out of my mouth! So sometimes I might say [mifaɪ], sometimes [mɛfi]. Especially with my academic supervisors. And they laugh, because you know, they’re onto me. They know what I’m doing.

So when I do that, it’s accommodation. Which is something that we as social beings do all the time. It’s a way of showing somebody that we are cooperating – or maybe not cooperating – with them, without having to directly say it. So it’s a subtle cue that means, “Hey, yeah, we’re getting along. This is a good conversation.” So we talk and I might pick up your pronunciations, or your speech rhythms or any of these other ways that we can accommodate. You hear this a lot with young girls, on, like, the subway or the bus? ... with escalating use of ‘like’ and rising intonation. It just starts to sound like a cacophony of repetition.

**Brandon: Yeah, I have a daughter, so yeah...**

**Brandon: What’s been one of the most fascinating things about your research?**

**Kim:** I think that, for me, it is to be doing something that is new and meaningful and uses the internet. And has never been looked at before. If I can get to the point where I can explain what it is that I’m doing – because that’s been one of the hardest challenges – and when people realize how what they say and how they say it matters. I’m constantly discovering new examples and having people come to me with new things that I hadn’t thought of.

**Brandon: Do people come up to you after presentations and try to offer you their own pronunciations?**


**Kim:** Yeah, people do that. Or they’ll offer other words. Or they’ll offer me rationales that I hadn’t thought of or encountered before. Or similar words that I hadn’t considered that explain why they choose the pronunciation they do. So this happens in text all the time, because we’re talking about pronunciation in text, you have to latch onto

a certain word or sound representations that describe your pronunciation. Unless you know International Phonetic Alphabet ([IPA](#)) notation, but, um ... most people don’t.

So I’m thinking, what words are people using? What are the popular words people use to describe their pronunciation? Why those words? What do those words index? What things are those words associated with and do those words represent values that can apply to the community? The obvious example is [mi-faɪ]...bah, so I say it out loud, thinking you can see my spelling in my head. Er, F-I-G-H-T, like the word ‘fight’. And people will say, “Oh yeah, well, like [MeFight Club](#)” or “because it’s *fighty* here”. So seeing it referred to like that is one way that a pronunciation can pick up a social connotation of being *fighty*. Or, like this quote that I’ve used a lot, by dirdirt, that goes:

I've always been a MEE-FAI, but I heard someone calling it Meffy, rhyming with that kid from Family Circus, and I think that's funny and charming.

But wrong.

posted by  at **5:32 PM** on March 24, 2010 [[29 favorites](#) +] [[!](#)]

And that quote got a bunch of favorites, which is interesting because people not only find it funny, but their favoriting it reinforces some of the stances and attitudes that were reflected in that comment. And of course other people see that comment and they can decide to agree with it or not agree with it, or laugh or not laugh. Whatever.

**Brandon: Exactly, exactly.**

**Kim:** Yeah. I wonder about the pronunciations of the people who favorited that comment.

**Brandon: Hmmm. It almost seems like there’s another research topic there, crossing your research with favorites.**

**Kim:** Yeah! I’d like to do that. But it’s already too big a project right now. Geez. And there’s the problem with how to address sensitivities people have about favorites. I would want to be really careful about that.

Here’s another topic that’s even more contentious. Usernames. I think it would be so fascinating to look at the usernames that people choose and why. But then you are directly analyzing people and their usernames, which may not be cool. And you’re making evaluations about identity and the why’s of all that. There is something interesting there, though. Even just at the pronunciation



# Common Pronunciations of MeFi:

level. Like some of these usernames that people get mixed up with other usernames. Or usernames that get analyzed or parsed incorrectly. I think it's fascinating how much reading and our knowledge about sounds influence how we perceive usernames, and the people who own them.

**Brandon:** I see what you're saying there about the written word versus the spoken word, and that with MeFi and MeFite there's both. And there's that space in between.

**Kim:** Right. This comes up in weird ways. So, for example, you're a MeFite and you go to a meetup...there's no convention or pragmatic standard about how you introduce yourself. For you it's easy. You say, "Hi. I'm Brandon Blatcher." Problem solved. And so I'm sure you did not have that problem when you went to a meetup. And I don't have it either. But there are many usernames that are challenging. And if you only know me from the internet, then my real name is kind of unnecessary at first. So do you lead with that? Do you say, "Hi, I'm Kim, but I'm 14K1m14m on the site."

**Brandon:** Oh yeah, we went through that with bylines on MeFiMag. If you only want to use your real name, then there's no connection to your MeFi name, and nobody knows who you are.

**Kim:** Right. You might as well be [Anonymous](#).

**Brandon:** Right. The social connection was completely gone. And I was thinking, why would you do that? But they had very good reasons of their own.

**Kim:** Yeah, it's super interesting. And these are new challenges when we have multiple identities. And we have reasons for why we want to put certain identities in certain places. All sorts of ways that having this in between space between text and speech is tricky to manage. People are trying to work it all out.

**Brandon:** What are some of the hardest aspects of your research?

**Kim:** Finding a concise, interesting way to explain why this matters. Why any and all of it matters. And I'm in the [humanities](#) here, so I feel pressure to justify my plight.

Trying to get across that this isn't just people arguing about pronunciation. But it's good to be challenged that way. It's good to be asked, "What's the point?" Because you should have an answer.

The second hardest thing to explain is what MetaFilter is.

**Brandon:** (Laughs.) Really?

**Kim:** Yeah. Once I take the two, five, ten minutes to explain MetaFilter, they get it. And they see why it's such a wonderful community to study for research purposes. It's bounded, there's not a lot of noise, people are invested in the community, there's a whole range of types of people, there's social equality, it's not a flashy site, it's got longevity, there are established norms ... all these really great reasons to study MetaFilter. But explaining that to somebody when they don't have any sense of MetaFilter or of online communities has been really tough.

**Brandon:** You can't just say "online communities"? People won't get it?

**Kim:** Many people won't. And people have different conceptions of online communities as well. People might think 'Facebook' and then go, "Well, I don't do Facebook." Or, "Facebook irritates me because ..." Or they may think Twitter, but Twitter has that sort of unboundedness to it. Mass, short-lived chatter. Or maybe they think of USENET. Or 4chan. If you don't know MetaFilter or online communities in general, you don't know that there are so many different types. They all have their unique structure. And that's going to crucially influence language. So I really have to find ways to explain the research that addresses all of these different backgrounds. Even within the linguistics community. I have to find some happy balance in explaining this. That's been really hard. Especially as a new researcher doing something new with a leading-edge community on the internet.

**Brandon:** You feel kind of challenged perhaps by the old guard?

**Kim:** Yeah, yes. And the other thing I'm doing is taking some really well-established, wonderful sociolinguistic theories and adapting them so that they apply to internet communities, to the way we communicate online. Theories that explain how we assign social meanings to things or

“IT'S GOOD TO BE CHALLENGED THAT WAY. IT'S GOOD TO BE ASKED, "WHAT'S THE POINT?" BECAUSE YOU SHOULD HAVE AN ANSWER.”

how things become stereotypes ... doesn't work quite the same in text.

**Brandon: What do you mean it “doesn’t work quite the same in text”?**

**Kim:** The process is different, and it can be generally slower than when you hear somebody say something a certain way, hearing other people pick that up, and then assigning a social value that says “These people, this group, says it this way.” And for whatever reason, also assigning a negative connotation to that, creating a stereotype. So that whole process is altered when you have this barrier of not being able to hear, or you are communicating maybe more directly because it's text. But then you also have memes, which spread rapidly. So the theory needs to account for both paces.

One way that communication in text is crucially different in speech is how we can quote people. Which snippets we pick up and how we represent their speech allows us to construct stereotypes about the person, about what they say, or the stance that they take.

**Brandon: Not only that, but you can go back and search someone’s posting history.**

**Kim:** That's a great point. See, I hadn't thought about putting those ideas together before. This is one of the wonderful things about doing this research. I just talk to people about it and we ... collaborate. And come up with new things to look at.

MetaFilter is great too, because on MetaTalk almost every single day somebody posts a thread with some Meta-related question and I think, “Oh ... I want to look into that sociolinguistically.” Or, “Oh, I could probably find that out in my data.” Because I have a big database that I built – I've been working on it for months straight. I'm just getting to the point where I can start doing some data crunching and writing advanced queries. I finally got over the hurdle of understanding sequel/S-Q-L/squirrel/whatever...

**Brandon: It never turns off, does it?**

**Kim:** Nope.

Well, it's just amazing how many internet-derived terms there are ... don't even get me started. [Linux](#), .gif, RegEx, LaTeX, IEEE.

**Brandon: Wow. Again, I'm kind of amazed that, wait, people pronounce it like that?**

**Kim:** Right! I'm sure I said some of those there that made you go, “Oh, I've never heard it that way!”

There's an interesting phenomenon that happens with people,

and I want to look into this – because there's something psychological going on. People have a pronunciation, and they don't even realise that other pronunciations exist. It's like they get locked into it. Or they're so focused on their pronunciation that they use another rhyming word to describe it, but don't realize that the word they chose actually has multiple pronunciations. It's also ambiguous. It's like saying, “I say MeFi like ‘meme’.” But you can pronounce ‘meme’ like ‘meem’, or ‘mem’, or ‘maym’, or ‘me-me’.

**Brandon: Wha-WHAT?**

**Kim:** HA. That's great. How are we going to transcribe that?

**Brandon: You just broke my brain. How do they get that?**

**Kim:** I don't know. But they do. And I will get to the bottom of this.

**Brandon: Any, uh, any idea how long that will take?**

**Kim:** Oh God. Could I do this forever? Perhaps. But I plan to write up and finish my dissertation within the next two years. I just cannot believe that this project has so much to it. When I started, even before the M.A. thesis, there was this teeny-tiny paper I did for a class about maxims. So, social rules within communities. You had to pick a community and note one of the pragmatic rules. I chose MetaFilter and The Maxim of Marked Sarcasm, stating that if you were going to be sarcastic you either have to be completely deadpan, which is rare and you risk being misunderstood, or you have to mark your comment in some way. To not mark the sarcasm would be violating the maxim, and people can get away with it. But generally people mark it with some weird semantics, stylistic or tone stuff, all caps ...

**Brandon: [The {\} HAMBURGER tag](#) or something?**

**Kim:** Yes, the [HAMBURGER] tag. Which ended up being sarcastic *and* ironic. I think that was one of the most wonderful threads and examples of spontaneity on the site. Somebody tries to plan something, and it ends up being what was intended, but not in the way they intended it.

**Brandon: Just the crowd at work I guess?**

**Kim:** Yeah, the brilliance and creativity of the community. I am constantly laughing because of all these wonderful people.

**Brandon: I think we're about wrapped up here.**

**Be sure to plug your research website on this.**

**You know, “Where can we go to find out more?”**

**Kim:** Ah, cool. Yes, it's [MePhiD.com](#). And I don't know how to say it.



