

# The Fibreculture Journal

DIGITAL MEDIA + NETWORKS + TRANSDISCIPLINARY CRITIQUE



Issue 22 : 2013

Trolls and The Negative Space of The Internet

edited by Glen Fuller, Christian McCrea and Jason Wilson



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## About the Fibreculture Journal

The Fibreculture Journal is a peer reviewed international journal, first published in 2003 to explore the issues and ideas of concern to the Fibreculture network.

The Fibreculture Journal now serves wider social formations across the international community of those thinking critically about, and working with, contemporary digital and networked media.

The Fibreculture Journal has an international Editorial Board and Committee.

In 2008, the Fibreculture Journal became a part of the Open Humanities Press , a key initiative in the development of the Open Access journal community.

In 2012 the Fibreculture Journal celebrated ten years of open access scholarly publishing with the publication of its 20th Issue.

The journal encourages critical and speculative interventions in the debate and discussions concerning a wide range of topics of interest. These include the social and cultural contexts, philosophy and politics of contemporary media technologies and events, with a special emphasis on the ongoing social, technical and conceptual transitions involved. More specific topics of interest might include:

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- :: the use of contemporary media in socio-technical interventions

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## issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

### Editorial:

#### Troll Theory?

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We only talk about trolls inside a polemic. To aver that someone is trolling is to allege that their participation conceals the aims of their disruption; by implication, they are to be excluded or dismissed. The Internet's folk wisdom for trolls says: 'Do not *feed* them!' This remedy rests on a belief that acknowledgement and interaction are the barest matters of subsistence in an attention economy. To call out a troll is thus to recognise who ought or ought not speak or be listened to. Since to describe an interlocutor as a troll is to invite a third party to put them beyond the pale, the charge is often contested. We can understand this as, at once, an artefact of agonistic politics and as an attempt to avoid it. It is reassertion of the 'table manners' (Arditi, 2006) of liberal civility; like any such insistence it can be a way of forestalling political demands made outside the current limits of acceptability in political contention (Tomlinson, 2010; Shaw, 2012). It can also be used to redefine these demands as so much unintelligible noise (Rancière, 2011).

At the same time, to admit that you are trolling shows that you hold a target—a forum, a discussion or a user—in far lower esteem than the target holds itself. This reveals an obvious conflict of values. To own up to trolling is, moreover, a boast. As the troll, you affirm a playful mastery of Internet lore and practice that outstrips that of my target. You assert your distinction in a positional game which mobilises and accumulates

technological, cultural and social capital. You aggrandise yourself as a puppeteer, maintaining control over your own passions while asking the other to question the bearings of their affects: 'u mad?'. You remind them of values that preceded them, which you stand for, and propose to reinforce. The troll is proprietorial of particular forums, or even of the network as a whole. The troll looks to repel incomers, to deter the masses, or at least introduce a tiny break-flow into the circuit of discourse. Occasionally, the troll seeks to disrupt nodes of power from a perspective that looks to maintain the idea of the Internet as a space where manners and norms are suspended. But even in these circumstances, it is necessary to recognise that the exercise of the freedom to disrupt can impede the use of particular spaces for deliberation, support, or mutual aid.

The way that we talk about trolls and trolling as a phenomenon of post-Internet culture places us in a broader, longer fight over the ethos, the history, and the politics of the digital. Critical Internet studies has often come down on one side or another of the question of who or what trolling 'really is'. In this issue of the Fibreculture Journal, we have chosen to try to teach the controversy. We hope to avoid the moralistic (and thus antipolitical) work of closing conflict down (Brown, 2001). We hope to leave room for the understanding that politics is ineradicably conflictual (Mouffe, 1992; Mouffe, 2005), and that this has not changed in the era of networks (Dahlberg, 2013). We have attempted to attune ourselves to the tensions, dynamics, injuries and productivities of negativity and disputation.

The crowdsourced mirror of the vernacular, the Urban Dictionary, [usefully maps](#) the terrain over which the concept of trolling is fought. Its second most upvoted definition at the time of this writing is one that has found purchase in long-standing online subcultures and in Internet studies. Trolling is:

*The art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off, usually via the internet, using dialogue. Trolling does not mean just making rude remarks: Shouting swear words at someone doesn't count as trolling; it's just flaming, and isn't funny. Spam isn't trolling either; it pisses people off, but it's lame. The most essential part of trolling is convincing your victim that either a) truly believe in what you are saying, no matter how outrageous, or b) give your victim malicious instructions, under the guise of help. Trolling requires deceiving; any trolling that doesn't involve deceiving someone isn't trolling at all; it's just stupid. As such, your victim must not know that you are trolling; if he does, you are an unsuccessful troll. (sic)*

In the foreground is a guiding concern with delineating what trolling is not – flaming or spam. Eventually it is positively defined as an art of mediated, dialogical performance. To distinguish between trolling and not-trolling involves judgements of value, and pushes us in the direction of aesthetics – rude remarks and swear words are not trolling because they aren't 'funny'; spamming is not trolling because it is 'lame'. We are asked to become *connoisseurs*. But we get edged back again towards epistemology by the unsettling matter of deception, and the questions it opens up around truth and meaning in the Internet's City of Words, which is either too noisy or too silent for certainty. We zig back towards politics as we return to fret over what we can hope for in relations between strangers. What does it mean to issue 'malicious instructions, under the guise of help'? How does that stand in relation to real help, and how much of it can our City accommodate?

This tricksterish sensibility that informs this definition is shared in many of the redoubts of self-described trolls, and now and then in Internet scholarship. Early on, Judith Donath emphasised the ludic dimensions of trolling – for her it is a shared ritual:

*Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group's common interests and concerns; the newsgroup members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings and, upon judging a poster to be a troll, make the offending poster leave the group. Their success at the former depends on how well they – and the troll – understand identity cues; their success at the latter depends on whether the troll's enjoyment is sufficiently diminished or outweighed by the costs imposed by the group (Donath, 2002, p.45).*

Donath emphasises the play of identity and intention, a dance of veils that transpires between troll and moderator. Trolling here is not just a game, but a well-structured one. Its passage through rituals of detection and ejection seems almost collaborative. The lone troll is individuated against the field of the newsgroup's virtual community. This normally operates in Rheingoldian informational good faith (Rheingold, 1993), but it can sustain some disruption. Notwithstanding virtual communities' essential openness (and vulnerability), online interpersonal relationships are figured as manageable, the truth of identity as knowable, and intentions as legible. Negativity and playfulness can be contained by a community with the agency and authority required for self-protection. And the game is underpinned ultimately by shared understandings of truth, legitimacy (the situational set of normative forces that frame the conduct of conduct), and what would

count as their violation. Trolling is something that passes between *initiates*. The name given by the cognoscenti to trolling and its consequences – *drama* – resonates with this account of its ludic performativity.

The appreciation of lulz that we see in the first definition, and in Donath's work, also motivates scholarship that would redeem trolls, or at the very least nuance our appreciation of a set of practices that are often the stimulus for media panics and censorious reflexes. Work such as Gabriella Coleman's (Coleman, 2012b; Coleman, 2012a) and Whitney Phillips's (Phillips, 2011) has tried to extract trolling from the temporality of periodic outrage in order to consider how it emerges from longer subcultural histories, including critical and oppositional Internet cultures, and others who have resisted the privatisation of commons. Trolls on this view are provocateurs with historical links to absurdist avant-gardes. Links are made between trolls and what other researchers have demonstrated to be the Internet culture's formative countercultural ethos (Turner, 2011). For Coleman, trolling partakes of

*a rich aesthetic tradition of spectacle and transgression... which includes the irreverent legacy of phreakers and the hacker underground (Coleman, 2012a: p.45).*

Because Coleman draws on a scholarly tradition of subcultural recovery, placing trolling in a longer history – taking in punk and Dada – of transgressive, obfuscatory spectacle, her emphasis is different than Donath's. For Coleman, trolls are not the disruptors of the originary communities of Internet culture, but their defenders. They are the long-term habitués of online spaces who constitute a kind of immune-system response to the recoding of the Internet for corporate and mainstream sensibilities. They stand against the hegemonic values and a corporatised Internet; they respond to the massification of digital life. Their pranks serve as a form of resistance to the incursion of n00bs into spaces that were once 1337 preserves. However problematic their tactics, they are definitely trolling up, standing up to power and homogenisation, and keeping open the possibility of the Internet as a zone of freedom.

This is, in some ways, an old story about the friction between mass culture and subculture, avant-garde and mainstream, punk and consumer. If, in the days of institutionally restricted access, trolls and flammers used to focus on 'educating' new users in 'netiquette' at the beginning of each academic year, twenty years into the 'eternal September' that began with the influx to newsgroups of AOL subscribers, values have been revalued, certain conflict has become intractable, and some platforms and spaces have been defined permanently as fair game. In the social media era, where broadband penetration, proprietary platforms and

network effects have produced mass uptake, there are not only more n00bs than ever, there is, after all, now a suburban user-base to shock.

On the other side of this divide, a different understanding of trolling emerges. Elsewhere on Urban Dictionary we find that trolling is :

*Being a prick on the internet because you can. Typically unleashing one or more cynical or sarcastic remarks on an innocent by-stander, because it's the internet and, hey, you can.*

This does not register a performative game so much as it does a pervasive, nihilistic, ungovernable incivility. This is not the world of 4chan's rough wit, but the YouTube comment thread. Urban dictionary is not the only place we can find this perspective. Online abuse has become one of the things around which anxieties about the Internet are arrayed. Australia and the United Kingdom have both experienced broad-scale media panics about online bullying and abuse. In Australia, there has been concern over the treatment of celebrities in social media, but also so-called 'RIP trolling' where Facebook memorial pages are defaced or seeded with mockery. Internationally there have been media campaigns round trolling, and moves to strengthen regulation or enforcement.<sup>[1]</sup> 'Doxxing', or unmasking troublesome pseudonymous users, has crossed over from blogwars to become the basis of new forms of muckraking journalism. Major media corporations and tech giants have become bogged down in nymwars, post-hoc jerry-rigging and outright comment bans as they attempt to erase conflict around perennially divisive topics. All the while, as media companies are all too happy to trade on clickbait and outrage, there's a suspicion that they have appropriated and mobilised the figure of the troll in order to constrain a new outpouring of political speech. Trolling has perhaps displaced pornography as the obscenity which underwrites the demand that the Internet be brought under control.

In the face of all of this, the for-the-lulz understanding of trolling is somewhat embattled, even as, for some, the figure of the troll becomes subject to acts of preservation. The insistence that mere abuse isn't trolling as such works not just as an attempt to hold onto the categories of an earlier phase of Internet culture, it has a covert function – anyone who misuses the word might be the kind of n00b that trolls seek out. But that tends to undo itself. It leads us back to the realisation that what counts as abuse, and what counts as lulz, may just depend on which end of the stick we have grasped. The neutral standpoint from which a sure distinction could be made is not available in such a sphere of roiling conflict. The word itself is a battleground, and any word with political

force that threatens exclusion or promises valorisation, is unlikely to be easily hammered into procedural agreement. Hence, what defines a troll will continue to be disputed broadly, and situationally.

Perhaps now we are tilted back in the direction of ethics. What trolling is, and how we judge it, may turn out to rest less on the lulz derived from it, less on the murky intentions of the troll or the inherited categories of Internet culture, and more on the character of each trolling event. We need above all to understand trolling in its entanglements with desire and power. How are nonsense, lulz, play, non-communication, violence, noise and negativity being marshalled? Against whom, and by whom? What is it that's at stake in each fight about the way in which the word 'troll' is being mobilised? How is the troll being produced in disagreement? How is our judgement being appealed to and exercised? Is trolling being used as a tool of leveling or entrenchment? It is fortifying existing privileges or mocking them? Who is laughing at whom? Should we be asking trolls to back up, or join in? Are we trolling up, or trolling down?

Finally, we should ask why and how trolls, what they are and what they do, and what is discursively legitimate and what isn't, have come to preoccupy us. Jack Bratich's (2008) work on another staple of liberal Internet anxiety, conspiracy theory, considers how panics about it indicate its problematisation, its being taken up as an object for thought. Conspiracy panics are seen as windows not so much on the culture that produced them or the people who believe in them as on the forms of political rationality that take them up as problems. They 'demonstrate that trust, truth, and rationality are at the heart of the current political context' (19). In the extended liberal meditation on conspiracism and 'extremism', we see it positioned both as proximate to liberalism's own style of thought and as finally illegitimate. It is figured in discourses of expertise as a deformation of liberal scepticism, and a form of dissent that needs to be managed with forms of preventative rationality. Panic is a strategy of visibility that serves to build consent around normative judgements, including the capacity to discriminate between reason and paranoia:

*The cohesion of liberalism's political rationality comes with this injunction: to modulate thought and behavior with an eye toward limits and extremes. Responsible thought is an ethos as modus: a modulation through moderation, and vice versa. Within this will-to-moderate, dissent itself is problematized, and reasonable skepticism and rational critique are promoted (49).*

The will-to-moderate is also present in media demands to 'stop the trolls', and in the injunction that we – in distributed acts of what is known as *moderation* – work to sift trolls

from legitimate participants, trolling from responsible speech, and in doing so perform the limits of truth, rationality and trust. Acts of moderation are judgements about the range of authentic political utterance, and these acts of problematization take place in the work of institutions, in the 'netiquette' policies of the social media giants which have harnessed so much of our mutuality, and across the diffuse platforms of Web 2.0. Troll-hunting becomes an act – even an aesthetics – of liberal citizenship, in which we consent to and enact the discursive limits of liberal rationality. Although we may agree with Auerbach (2012) that the 'A-culture' of 4chan and anonymous trolling provides a space of refuge and resistance to the mandatory microcelebrity of mainstream social media, it also provides a defining outside for the 'authentic' self-revelatory performances of Facebook, where Mark Zuckerberg's single, integral self is produced as a resource for monetization and surveillance. It is the uncertain, shrinking terrain between Facebook's flat profile-self and /b/'s blank no-self that a politics of lulz might occupy for the new, playful productivity of identity.

The work of defining trolls and the consequences that flow from that work preoccupy a number of essays in this issue of the Fibreculture Journal. Nathaniel Tkacz uses Goffman and Bateson's accounts of framing to critically engage with the Wikipedia Art project as a way of organising experience and action. By showing how edit wars take place in relation to frames, Tkacz builds a critique of optimistic versions of the spontaneous emergence of non-hierarchical or meritocratic cooperation on Web 2.0 platforms. Andrew Whelan's article offers a detailed ethnomethodological analysis of an Australian current affairs segment, made in the midst of a media panic, which shows how trolls are produced, how they sit in relation to other categories, and the moral work this does. Immediately before this issue was made public the news arrived that Charlotte Dawson had died. Whelan's article concerns her activities in calling-out trolls, but it is directed at the discursive and moral work that defines trolling, not with her personally. That 'discursive and moral work' around trolling is visible in the precarious public discussions around illnesses, suicides and other deaths connected to harassment, abuse, bullying and trolling. Media engagement with trolling in the wake of deaths such as Dawson's often occurs before facts are known, since the grieving period is when discussions of morality are most useful for the media. We present Whelan's article here as it was edited during the course of 2013 and including factual changes by the author where appropriate.

This fight has lately been taking place in a number of places. Women who have managed to leverage the attention economy to feminist ends are ever more likely to encounter misogynist swarms, whom they and often the perpetrators themselves refer to as trolls. Over the last half decade this has emerged as a pattern – from [Kathy Sierra](#) in 2007, to [Anita Sarkeesian](#) in 2012, to [Adria Richards](#) and [Caroline Criado-Perez](#). Beyond these prominent and much-discussed cases, the tools of user-generated content creation have

been used to intimidate women and make reputational attacks globally available – the genre of [‘revenge porn’](#) is an example. Just as women have found ways to create networks of feminist ‘discursive activism’ and support online, feminist backlash has continued in the [subreddits](<http://www.reddit.com/r/mensrights> and [blogospheric haunts](<http://mensrights.com.au/>) of the ‘manosphere’ that defines the [‘Mens Rights Movement’](#). Too often, ‘free speech’ is defined in terms of the language and actions with which privilege is reiterated and defended.

Such swarms show us how well-worn ideals of free speech do not scale. Spreadability, instantaneity, labyrinthine backchannels and nodal proliferations do not inevitably secure a pluralist conversation – they are also used to fortify privilege. Liberal myths of a neutral space of communicative equality cannot accommodate emergent infoglut (Andrejevic, 2013), nor do they allow us to take stock of the difference between public space, which are universally accessible, and public spheres, which facilitate democratic interchange (Papacharissi, 2010). ‘More speech’ is no strategy for a hyperabundance that allows some voices to be overwhelmed. The Internet has afforded multiplications, a proliferation of atmospheres and interiorities (Sloterdijk, 2011), endless recombinations, and the performance of emergent identity. But this dynamism necessarily calls forth ‘fundamentalisms that demand reinstatement of a unified faith, race, reason, gender duality, normal sexuality, nation and/or territory that never was secure’ (Connolly, 1995). [2]. This can be seen in the ostentatious use of racial epithets and misogynist language in the key subcultural sites of trolling. But full-blown reactionary social movements thicken in the infrastructures of social media, just as the far right early on used the Internet and other media to build counterpublics. Distinctions like Papacharissi’s (2004) between the ‘impoliteness’ of rude words and the ‘incivility’ that threatens democracy might be useful in understanding the points where simplistic cyberlibertarianism ceases working. But the nature of that distinction will itself be the subject of polemic, and reactionary movements will always attempt to defend themselves as avatars of freedom. This double movement is anticipated in versions of agonistic-pluralist political theory, but not as clearly in sunnier versions of new media scholarship (Hartley, 2010). Responses may exceed the polite, sober, deliberative turn-taking, and encompass the protection of separate sphericules of support, aggressive disruption, and play.

In this context, Ryan Milner examines the production of memes dealing with gender and race on 4chan and Reddit. He finds that while some of the material circulating under the ‘hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced’ logic of lulz is narrowly stereotypical, abusive or repressive, in other instances it surfaces what the table manners of liberalism would leave unsaid, and provokes an agonistic response that builds and sharpens activism. Frances Shaw’s article shows how networks of Australian feminist bloggers develop and deploy common resources to work through the difficulties posed by

internet-powered antifeminist activities. Drawing on her conversations with bloggers, Shaw complicates both cyberlibertarian and liberal feminist accounts of dialogue, recognising the necessarily conflictual dimension of feminist discursive activism as well as those activists' need for self-protection. Vyshali Manivannan offers a rich historical account of the way that misogyny has come to function on 4chan as the glue of affiliation, and as a means of raising the barriers to entry into the space and its culture. Without apologising for the tactic, Manivannan understands it as primarily reflecting a 'desire for subcultural preservation'.

Also examining 4chan, Tanner Higgin shows how its coordinated trolling raids on virtual worlds like World of Warcraft might be motivated by the desire to preserve white male privilege and to shut down politics online, but unintentionally interrogate the unmarked categories of whiteness and masculinity, and the racial politics of game culture. There are further considerations of how the meaning and use of categories of race and identity becomes complicated when they meet the ethics and dynamics of network culture. Steve Holmes develops a Rancièrian framework for understanding grieving practices, bouncing off the [Patriotic Nigras'](#) vigilante raid on the virtual world [Habbo Hotel](#). While the PN were in part responding to rumours that black avatars had been banned from various spaces in Habbo, their real importance is in challenging seriousness, and reaffirming a playful procedural equality.

For better and worse, familiar political institutions and principles splutter in the face of a networked 'uprising' that exceeds the limits that the mass media era have placed around what could be shown and said (Breen, 2011). Some argue that the communicative flows of contemporary networks are simply recuperated by informational capitalism (Dean, 2003), others that liberal systems are robust enough to contend with the 'chaos' of changes in the way in which politics is communicated (McNair, 2006). But there is evidence – from North Africa, to the liberal democracies of the west – that the massive expansion of access to the means of political communication has caused political talk to burst its banks. The consequences are unpredictable. The inoperable US congress is in part the outcome of the right's construction of a hermetic infosphere. Occupy spread from its origin point as a hashtag, and the movements of the Arab Spring were able to route around sclerotic official public spheres. Australia's first female Prime Minister was undone in part by the way the obsessions of ['misogynists and nutjobs on the Internet'](#) were able to infect mainstream reporting. The scale, speed and affective range of political communication has outflanked the pragmatic, managerialist liberalism that has been hegemonic in the post-Cold War era. Now, everywhere, polities struggle to respond to the complexity of populism – democracy's 'internal periphery'.

Several essays that follow weigh the consequences of the expanded registers of political talk after the Internet. Anthony McCosker and Amelia Johns discuss the way in which the urban conflict in London in 2011 opened up a space for talking about race, policing and austerity, not only in the charged atmosphere of Clapham Junction during the events but later, on YouTube. Once again, the practice of subverting liberal politesse is shown to be generative of politics. Benjamin Burroughs considers the agonistic circulation of visual memes during the 2012 US Presidential election that implied that Barack Obama was unpatriotic, and shows how they are indicative of a broader and more intensive circulation of political emotion. Shannon Sindorf shows how demands for civility were used to shut down the comments space of a local newspaper, even though it could be seen to function well as a clearing house for community debate.

Proprietary social media platforms are more imbricated with/as everyday life. Forms of digital labour have become more pervasive. Cultural practices and institutions have come to reside more completely in forum threads, Tumblr posts, the blue lines of Twitter stoushes, and Facebook groups. The terms of Internet culture have changed as they have undergone a broader circulation. Troll panic, for example, not only makes more people conversant with the 'problem' of trolls, but relies on a certain level of awareness already existing.

Several papers examine what happens when the grammars and ethos of trolling meets the popular, hybridises with other practices and cultures, and becomes normal. Tama Leaver writes on the adoption of the techniques and iconography of troll culture in Facebook groups dedicated to hating on Channel Nine's Olympics coverage, showing how television viewing becomes social in the negativity of complaint. He makes the important observation that

*While scholarly work on trolling is at an early stage, distancing hard core trolling from online abuse and bullying will inevitably make our understanding of each area more precise.*

The cultural practices of trolling have generative effects. Steven Jones's paper examines a specific forum, the Guardian's Bike Blog, and with the help of Bourdieu's work on distinction shows how hostility and negativity helps to construct cycling as a cultural practice and social identity. Flaming and trolling not only work to build traffic and comments on the site (and the economics of 'click-bait' in the attention economy are important in discussions of trolling), they are generative of a sense of community and its boundaries. Internal tensions – between different styles of cycling – are shown to be as

important as the agonistic relationship between cyclists and motorists. Tero Karppi shows how trolling is defined and produced by Facebook's rules, FAQs, and media discourses around it. Drawing on Gabriel Tarde, Karppi shows how trolling on Facebook, and user interaction more broadly, emerges from networks of human and non-human actors. Lastly, Gabriele de Seta challenges the Western and largely English-language focus of much discussion around the identity of trolls and character of trolling practices with examples from the Chinese-language internet. De Seta strongly argues in favour of appreciating localised internet cultures, presenting trolling as a culturally-specific construct that has come to embody disparate kinds of online behaviour.

New media scholarship is not exempt from the uncertainty that has descended on the limits of debates, the solidity of frames, the nature of rhetorical performance, the boundaries of fields of contention, and the qualities of disruption. The email list that gave birth to this journal was, during its most active phase, in the period between the dot com crash and the Web 2.0 wave, not only a venue for theory-building, political cooperation, and extraordinary dialogue, it was racked by flame wars, miscommunications, incoherent debates, axe-grinding and difficulties in finding a shared basis for public intellectual practice. At times there were off-list attacks, long debates about the sincerity of interlocutors, off-topic digressions and, possibly, staged fights. The tensions and centrifugal forces that finally made it unsustainable were, for a while, also the condition of its vitality.

Anger is an energy, and any good troll knows intuitively the powers and desires that circulate in the vicinity of a well-placed, well-timed disruption of networked politesse. In that same spirit, we hope that as you read this issue of the Fibreculture Journal, you will encounter something that gives you at least a momentary rise, that you take the bait, that you find yourself inside a polemic. Trolololol.

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## Notes

[1] In the UK in 2011, 1286 people were convicted for online abuse under the Communications Act which makes it an offence to send ‘send by means of a public electronic communications network a message or other matter that is grossly offensive or of an indecent, obscene or menacing character’. In 2007, the number was 498.

[2] The extraordinary Internet-driven resurgence of libertarianism is best understood in this light: as the desire in place of a state of affairs that benefits an already-privileged minority who are able, citing free speech rights, to drown out the emergence of new voices and identities.

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-154 Trolls, Peers and the Diagram of Collaboration

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### Abstract:

The warm and fuzzy rhetorics of network cultures—words like collaboration, participation and open communities—have always been made possible through acts of analytic metonymy. Once an ‘open community’ has been established, to take an example, deviations are all too often depicted as one-off exceptions, as problematic individuals bent on destroying the common spaces and creations of the well-meaning many. The figure of the troll and its modus operandi of ‘flaming’ are exemplary in this regard. The act of naming someone a troll, not only reaffirms the general ‘good faith’ of the rest of the community, but also transforms antagonism into a mere character flaw. In this article, I suggest the notion of the frame, read primarily through Bateson and Goffman, can be translated into online spaces in order to make visible the structural conditions that underpin forms of online antagonism. Drawing from “article deletion” discussions in Wikipedia, I show how the ascription of negative subjectivities—trolls, vandals, fundamentalists etc.— is the result of an priori ‘frame politics’.

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I begin with two images. The first image is actually a diagram. [\[1\]](#) Call it the new diagram of work; specifically, of working together online. It is the diagram of collaboration. The diagram of collaboration is abstracted from any particular setting or function. There is no representation of time, and its spatial logics are purely relational, or topological. Collaboration takes place in the open, under conditions of openness. Workers, or participants, are first and

foremost equal. The two-dimensional bodies are literally cut from the same stuff, and their synoptic gaze is spread symmetrically and indiscriminately. Their circular arrangement and lack of distinguishing qualities further emphasises the non-hierarchical or 'peer' nature of this mode of work. Difference is only registered in the varying colours of the 2D cutouts. The vibrancy of these colours suggests they are to be celebrated, that they are generally and vaguely positive, but they have no obvious bearing on the activities of work. Colour is a difference that makes no difference. Finally, the spirit of this diagram, if diagrams can be said to have such a thing, is captured in the joined, raised hands of the cutout figures. Collaboration is working together and such togetherness is what makes it both unique and superior. [2]



[Figure 1] : Collaboration (source: <http://www.brindlemedia.net/2013/01/collaboration-boomers-geny/>)

The second image is that of the internet troll. In contrast to the diagram of collaboration, the figure of the troll is rich in detail. Personal hygiene, eating habits, bodily shape and condition, sleeping patterns, dress, dwelling; in short, the troll's entire habitus – complete with Mother's 1970s carpet – is offered here for the sake of a laugh. Combined, the picture and accompanying descriptions capture many core aspects of the internet troll, the most important of which is the sense that trolls represent a kind of pure negativity. As it is commonly remarked of the troll, it unleashes its vitriol and damaging stunts simply for the 'lulz', that is, for its own pleasure and nothing more. This pure negativity is explicitly not related to a recognisable political programme or a demand for some form of justice and instead, stems from the core of the troll's very being. Unlike collaborative peers, the troll is depicted as a lone figure. While trolls may act together to coordinate attacks, for example, there is nevertheless the sense that the troll is on the outside, too dysfunctional and destructive for meaningful relationships. The historical emergence of trolls, their possible motivations, and the range of activities that may or may not be considered

trolling, are not of direct consequence or interest (see Coleman, 2012) for this essay. There are, instead, three questions about trolls that I want to focus on: Why are the activities of trolling so commonly depicted as stemming from personality defects or character flaws and reducible to the individual? What is the effect of naming someone or thing as a troll? And what, if anything, is the relationship between the figure of the troll and the diagram of collaboration? These questions will help make visible a kind of liberal and exclusionary politics that underpins – and indeed, makes possible – much collaborative work, which I will consider in relation to writing, editing, sorting and maintaining articles on Wikipedia. Before I commence, though, a further note on collaboration.



Figure 2. The hard knock life of an internet troll  
(source: <http://blog.getsatisfaction.com/2011/04/27/infographic-the-hard-knock-life-of-an-internet-troll/>)

There is a large body of literature on collaboration as a distinct mode of working together. In the business world, the origin story of collaboration often begins with Toyota's strategy of setting up non-competitive working relationships with members of its supply chain. From around 2006 onwards, however, a body of work on collaboration emerged to specifically

describe working together online and it is this revised notion that is expressed in the diagram. The renewed interest in collaboration emerged almost exactly with the rise of Wikipedia as a popular cultural artifact. In fact, projects like Wikipedia pose the problem of working together that theorists of collaboration attempt to solve (Benkler, 2006; Bruns, 2008; Elliott, 2006; Jenkins, 2006; Reagle, 2010; Shirky, 2008). Within this literature, collaboration is commonly positioned as the kind of work that takes place in forms of organisation that do not rely 'on market signals or managerial commands' (Benkler, 2006: 60). Managerial command and control structures are replaced with non-hierarchical peer structures, which do not need to respond to the price signals of the market to organise production. With no apparent organisational a priori, collaborative work is often described as 'unmanaged', as enabling a 'spontaneous division of labour' (Shirky, 2008: 118), and as making possible what Axel Bruns describes as 'ad hoc meritocracy' (2008: 25).

If collaboration is 'open to anyone', if managerial hierarchies are replaced with peers and if there is no traditional market to organise value, how does collaboration sort desirable contributions and contributors from undesirable ones? How does one judge what is good, what belongs and what doesn't? This question of sorting offers a different way into thinking about the how of collaboration. It is a question that has rarely been considered in any detail, with the exception, perhaps, of Joseph Reagle's discussion of the Wikipedia's Neutral Point of View (NPOV) policy.

Through a consideration of the entry on Evolution, Reagle shows how collaboration is actually only possible because of NPOV, together with the assumption of 'good faith' (2010: 45–55). NPOV is the mechanism that seemingly allows both believers and critics of the theory of evolution to work together and, importantly, to work out any conflicts that arise in the process. Reagle also digs up the following quotation from Wales, which suggests that Wikipedia's co-founder sees NPOV in a similar way:

*The whole concept of neutral point of view, as I originally envisioned it, was this idea of a social concept, for helping people get along: to avoid or side-step a lot of philosophical debates. Someone who believes that truth is socially constructed, and somebody who believes that truth is a correspondence to the facts in reality, they can still work together. (Wales, cited in Reagle, 2010: 53)*

From the perspective of Reagle and Wales, therefore, collaboration is the result of certain principles that seemingly allow everyone to work together regardless of their particular point of view. Wikipedia is collaborative not because it has no hierarchies, but because

it has policies that mediate different, and indeed, often conflicting views, seemingly absorbing different perspectives into a single frame. While Reagle's work is exceptional in coupling the concept of collaboration with core Wikipedia policies, I am less certain about the possibility for NPOV and other core policies to mediate different 'points of view' and the disputes that emerge from them. To explore the role of policies and procedures in the sorting of articles, I now turn to an instance of failed collaboration: Wikipedia Art.

## Article for Deletion: Wikipedia Art

*Yes, anyone can edit. No guarantee your edit will stick, though. All edits can also be reversed and deleted. Goes both ways, you see. So if you want to say Wikipedia is your temporary canvas, until someone notices what you did, then sure, it's your canvas.*

— User: Equaczion

Wikipedia Art was a short-lived, highly controversial addition to Wikipedia. It was by no means a typical article, conceived rather as a work of concept art in the guise of an encyclopaedic entry. The article was created on February 14, 2009, by the artists Scott Kildall and Nathaniel Stern, who describe their piece as an art intervention with 'a nod to the traditions of concept- and network-based art', and further elaborate that 'Wikipedia Art is many things: an open-ended concept, an immanent object, a collaborative text and a net-work that complicates the very possibility of these distinctions' (Kildall and Stern, 2011: 165).<sup>[3]</sup> The first few lines of the entry as it initially appeared on Wikipedia read:

*Wikipedia Art is a conceptual artwork composed on Wikipedia, and is thus art that anyone can edit. It manifests as a standard page on Wikipedia — entitled Wikipedia Art. Like all Wikipedia entries, anyone can alter this page as long as their alterations meet Wikipedia's standards of quality and verifiability. As a consequence of such collaborative and consensus-driven edits to the page, Wikipedia Art itself, changes over time. (Kildall and Stern, 2009)*

Wikipedia Art no longer exists on Wikipedia. There are, however, several traces of the entry that still haunt the site. At the former address of the original Wikipedia Art webpage, readers are presented with a short message about the article's (non)existence:

*This page has been deleted. The deletion and move log for the page are provided below for reference. • 06:30, 15 February 2009 Werdna (talk | contribs) deleted 'Wikipedia Art' (A7: No indication that the article may meet guidelines for inclusion)*

*(Wikipedia Contributors, 2012c)*

The details reveal that the entry titled, 'Wikipedia Art' lasted a mere day before being deleted by Wikipedia administrator, 'Werdna'. Besides these details and the links to information about Werdna are details (in brackets and with links) about why the page was deleted. Following the link to 'A7' takes readers to the policy page 'Wikipedia: Criteria for speedy deletion'. The page provides a list of criteria for when it is acceptable for Wikipedia administrators to 'bypass deletion discussion, at their discretion and immediately delete Wikipedia pages or media' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013a). The rationale for the existence of this administrator privilege is to 'reduce the time spent on deletion discussions for pages or media with no practical chance of surviving discussion' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013a). The list of criteria include things like 'patent nonsense', 'pure vandalism and blatant hoaxes', 'creations by banned or blocked users', 'no context', 'no content', and in the case of Wikipedia Art, 'no indication of importance' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013a).

However, before Werdna had swooped in and 'speedily deleted' Wikipedia Art, thus classifying it as having no importance and 'no practical chance of surviving discussion', a discussion about its merits had already begun. When there is a significant debate underway about the validity of an article, it is usually nominated as an 'Article for Deletion' (AfD). The nomination activates a series of procedures and rules for conducting and settling debates about deletion, which are outlined in the 'Wikipedia:Articles for deletion' page. Any previous debate about the article's validity (from the 'discussion' section of an entry) is copied over to a newly designated page where the rest of the debate plays out. 'Wikipedia:Articles for deletion', further notes that 'articles listed are normally discussed for at least seven days, after which the deletion process proceeds based on community consensus' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013b). Wikipedia Art therefore followed a somewhat unusual trajectory, seemingly proving worthy of discussion and speedy deletion at the same time.

At the bottom of the AfD page is a search bar that provides access to the archive of all previous AfD discussions. It is here that the most important trace of Wikipedia Art resides: the record of the debate itself. The deletion debate was quite short, both in length and time (roughly 7,500 words over one day), but it nonetheless makes visible how the body of instructions and procedures for article deletion actually played out.

Discussants generally begin their contribution with a pronouncement of what they think the fate of the article should be, or by classifying their contribution in an immediately graspable manner. The most common classifications are ‘keep’ or ‘delete’, but in this particular debate others include ‘comment’, ‘proposal’, ‘recap’ and ‘move to project space’. The deletion discussion is opened by user DanielRigal, the same user who marked it as an AfD. This user writes:

*This is an attempt to use Wikipedia as an ‘art platform’. It is not encyclopaedic. It can never be encyclopaedic by its very nature. It can’t be referenced to anything other than itself because it is an original work based on Wikipedia. These guys need to get themselves their own Wiki and host this there. It also seems to be part of a walled garden of suspicious articles about the artists themselves (Scott Kildall, Nathaniel Stern, and Brian Sherwin). It seems that they have accounts and edit these themselves. They may, or may not, be significantly notable outside of their own circle and may, or may not, have inflated their importance in their articles. I think it needs looking at. DanielRigal (talk) 20:54, 14 February 2009 (UTC) [\[4\]](#)*

There are two main arguments put forward and several issues raised in DanielRigal’s initial post. The first and most obvious criticism is that it is not an encyclopaedic contribution. While DanielRigal does not explicitly refer to any policies, guidelines or principles, this first argument is supported by the first of Wikipedia’s five core operating principles, or ‘Five Pillars’. At the time of the deletion discussion, the first pillar read:

*Wikipedia is an encyclopedia incorporating elements of general and specialized encyclopedias, almanacs, and gazetteers. All articles must strive for verifiable accuracy: unreferenced material may be removed, so please provide references. Wikipedia is not the place to insert personal opinions, experiences, or arguments. Original ideas, interpretations, or research cannot be verified, and are thus inappropriate. Wikipedia is not a soapbox; an advertising platform; a vanity press; an experiment in anarchy or democracy; an indiscriminate collection of information; or a web directory. It is not a newspaper or a collection of source documents; these kinds of content should be contributed to the Wikimedia sister projects. (Wikipedia Contributors, 2009)*

DanielRigal’s second argument leads directly from the first and further serves to define what constitutes something as ‘encyclopaedic’. Wikipedia Art cannot be encyclopaedic, the argument goes, because it only exists on Wikipedia and therefore ‘can’t be referenced to anything other than itself’. It is an argument about ‘verifiability’ and serves to define

‘encyclopaedic’ in such terms. The post finishes by flagging concerns about self-editing (which relates to the behavioural guideline about ‘conflict of interest’) and by questioning the notability of the artists themselves (see ‘Wikipedia:Notability’).

The first to respond to DanielRigal is a user called Artintegrated, who begins by noting, ‘Whether these people do simple edits on their own pages in no way validates what they have said here. If something is true then it should stay in the article regardless’. It is targeted loosely at the concerns that DanielRigal finished on. Following this, Artintegrated writes, ‘Did you know this article is already referenced at The Whole 9 [...] just today. I feel that your idea that it can only reference itself is unfounded at this point’. This is an attempt to overcome the verification dilemma, and cuts to the heart of the Wikipedia Art experiment. DanielRigal immediately recognises the issue and responds accordingly:

*you can't have a circular chain of references. You can't reference Wikipedia from a non-RS [reliable source] blog that itself references Wikipedia. By that logic, any information replicated on two different websites and referencing eachother [sic] would be gospel truth. Referencing does not work like that.*

DanielRigal also notes that users can't write their own articles because they ‘lack objectivity’. Two more users add comments: one responds to the objectivity question, ‘there is no such thing as objectivity on Wikipedia. That is the whole point — it is inherently subjective’, and the other suggests giving the article ‘time to improve’. To this DanielRigal responds,

*Please read the article carefully and see that it can't possibly improve to become a valid Wikipedia article. It is an article about itself. It is intrinsically unencyclopaedic. I don't think it was necessarily created in bad faith but it is an abuse of Wikipedia to seek to use it as an art platform and it undermines Wikipedia as an encyclopaedia.*

The early part of the debate therefore follows two lines, one on what is considered encyclopaedic in relation to verifiability and the other on whether or not it is acceptable for editors to write material about themselves. And while DanielRigal is initially outnumbered three to one, new discussants soon come to his aid. RHaworth categorises their post as Delete and writes, ‘Only fractionally better than any MADEUP topic. Created very recently. Also a totally confused concept — a collaborative art project — fine. But trying to do it on one Wikipedia page — you must be joking mate! We also have an avoid self-reference rule’. [\[5\]](#) Contributors JohnCD and LtPowers also suggests deletion: ‘an interesting concept,

but not suitable here: this is an encyclopaedia' and 'Out of scope as a project, completely lacking in evident notability as a concept'.

At this point DanielRigal discovers the artists' own wiki, which mirrors the page on Wikipedia. It forces him to revise his initial argument:

*OK. Now I am really confused. They have a Wiki of their own at: wikipediaart.org, which has the same content as the Wikipedia article we are discussing here. I am not sure how the two are meant to relate to eachother [sic] but it may be that they are confused as to the difference between a Wiki and Wikipedia. I am not sure which site they are proposing to be the actual art work. If it is the Wikipedia article then all I have said above is correct. If it is their own Wiki then the circularity is broken and the article is not intrinsically unencyclopaedic. In that case I would like to add the following alternative reasons to delete the article: Lack of notability and lack of RS references.*

It seems now that it isn't the very possibility of the article that is objectionable, but rather that it isn't notable enough and is still not verified by reliable sources. A discussion about the location of the art project and how that bears on the encyclopaedia entry also follows. Freshaconci enters the debate by affirming DanielRigal's initial position, but then adds another layer of complexity:

*This could never be properly sourced, as it could only exist here first before it could ever be written about in order for it to be notable enough to be mentioned here. Yes, an interesting paradox, but that's not our problem. We can only go by Wikipedia policies and guidelines, and it's pretty clear that this needs to be deleted. But here's an idea: the fact that this was attempted and subsequently deleted could possibly generate enough third-party coverage to make the initial project notable enough to be included (at least as part of the artists' articles). But until then, it cannot stay. It's not encyclopedic as an entirely self-referential article.*

By the middle of the debate there is still nothing close to consensus, at least as defined in the traditional sense of 'agreement'. New arguments continue to be introduced, while some points are laboured many times over. Statements in favour of deletion come to include: 'This does not make any sense: it is an article about itself. I think the article is a breaching experiment'; 'This does not fit Wikipedia'; "'Wikipedia Art' fails WP:N and WP:V"; 'I see

no reason to make an exception for its failure to meet basic requirements for Wikipedia articles. In the absence of any reasons given for overriding Wikipedia basic policy, I see no reason not to delete ‘Wikipedia Art’; ‘Previous discussions about sourcing are besides the point, because this is an art project, and art projects are not allowed in article space’; ‘an article is an attempt to objectively capture the facts about a subject and [...] art is a subjective attempt to say something original about something. Given that Wikipedia is for objectivity and against original research it really is an incredibly inappropriate place to seek to make art’; ‘We ask for reliable sources and you give us blogs. We complain of original research and you seek to remedy it by soliciting more original research. I would have expected better’; ‘Speedy Delete — G1, G2, G3, or G11 — Take your pick. How about simply not notable, vandalism, hoax, etc? Whether it can be considered art or not is irrelevant. Wikipedia ain’t your canvas’; ‘This ‘article’ seems designed to violate as many of our basic policies as possible. Linking every word? Signatures in article space? Ridiculous amounts of self-referencing? An article that is about nothing but itself? It is absurd’; ‘WP:OR, WP:SOAPBOX, not notable, no reliable sources except one blog, trying to use wikipedia for something other than writing an encyclopedia.... why are we even having this discussion?’; and finally, there is a suggestion that Wikipedia Art is ‘most likely infringing on the Wikimedia Foundation’s copyright on the name Wikipedia’. While there are, at least in the middle of the debate, equal voices in favour of keeping Wikipedia Art, the mode of argumentation is notably different. The excerpts show how ‘Deleters’ regularly refer to policies and guidelines and how they tend to be highly dismissive of the article/artwork. For their part, the ‘Keepers’ rarely refer to established policies and guidelines to support their claims. Their argumentative mode is far more deconstructive and explorative, often challenging or attempting to redefine existing rules. For example, in response to the charge that Wikipedia ‘is not a web host for collaborative art projects’ an unsigned user questions, ‘What exactly distinguishes a collaborative art project from a collaborative article?’. In a similar vein, Shmeck provides a lengthier contribution:

*Those who care most about Wikipedia’s mission would probably agree that Wikipedia already is a collaborative art form. If you feel that Wikipedia is a beautiful thing, then at some level (whether or not you admit it) you consider Wikipedia an art form, with its own codes and conventions. This artwork can only exist as a Wikipedia page that refers to itself. Therefore, deleting would not only send the message ‘this is not Wikipedia’; it would also be saying ‘this is not art.’*

The contribution tries to bridge the gap between art and encyclopaedic knowledge that underpins many of the Deleters’ arguments: to deny the existence of Wikipedia Art is to deny the beauty and hence the aesthetic value of Wikipedia as a whole.

These kinds of argumentative strategies and attempts to redefine the terms of debate lead DanielRigal to make the following reflective comment:

*Recap: I think we have an unusual situation here in two ways. First up there are a lot of people here who do not normally 'do' AfD's. Secondly, there is a real, and I believe honest, failure of those who want to keep the article to understand the fundamental nature of the problem, or of Wikipedia itself. I don't want to be patronising but lets quickly recap Wikipedia 101: The five pillars of Wikipedia explains what Wikipedia is, isn't and also how it is run. Almost everything of importance is linked from there but I would specifically like to mention notability, verifiability, reliable sources, no original research and, last but not least, do not disrupt Wikipedia to illustrate a point.*

Immediately following this comment are two attempts by Keepers to mobilise, rather than critique or redefine, existing rules. Both Patlichty and Shane Mecklenburger mount arguments for 'notability' and 'verifiability' and the latter addresses issues of 'reliable sources', 'no original research' and the 'do not disrupt Wikipedia to illustrate a point' behavioural guideline. Once again, though, the Keepers refer to these rules in highly strategic ways or in a manner otherwise deemed unacceptable by the Deleters. Patlichty, for example, uses his own status as a 'New Media Art professor & curator' as part of his argument about notability, which is quickly pointed out and dismissed by DanielRigal, who soon after proposes to close the entire discussion and move to delete.

Although one contributor notes closing the discussion 'within the first couple of hours' is not standard practice, and suggests 'this is way too soon in the process for this to happen unless the person who put it up for deletion is afraid that those of us who support the article will ultimately see the page remain', the final part of the discussion is a flurry of suggested deletions. There are six in total, in under thirty minutes, with two added 'comments' that are also pro-delete. These rehash some of the main previous arguments, but become shorter and more forceful.<sup>[6]</sup> Finally, the administrator called Werdna answers DanielRigal's request and ends the discussion with this statement: 'Speedily deleted. No indication that the content may meet our criteria for inclusion'. At the same time Werdna deletes Wikipedia Art, leaving a very similar statement about inclusion (noted above) and a link to the A7 criterion for speedy deletion. Thus ended the life of the entry on Wikipedia Art.

## Frames

The debate about Wikipedia Art involves *a politics of the frame*. Gregory Bateson once used the concept of the frame to explore the relation between abstract, meta-communication and ‘psychiatric theory’. Among other things, Bateson was interested in those aspects of communication that signal something more than the message, or rather, that provide signals *about signals* — about how a message is to be understood. In particular, Bateson considers the question of play and how it is that human and non-human animals can recognise a series of signals as such. Bateson invokes two useful analogies that mark an entry point into thinking about frames. The first is that of a diagram used in set theory, where items are organised into specific sets in relation to axioms or basic principles. The principles define which items are deemed meaningful and belong in the set and those which are not and are thus relegated to the outside of the frame. In terms of play, the set would include all of the statements between two human or non-human animals that can be classified as such (as play) within a specified duration. Bateson describes such set theory diagrams therefore as ‘a topological approach to the logic of classification’ (Bateson, 1972: 186). From the outset, then, a frame is a mode of referring *by ordering*. A frame always sorts things as either belonging or not belonging and this process is mediated by axioms or principles — indeed the axioms are what define the frame; they are the conditions of its possibility.

The second analogy Bateson employs is the picture frame, which is considered in relation to the first analogy and in the process of identifying the ‘common functions’ of framing in general.<sup>[7]</sup> In addition to ‘excluding’ and ‘including’ certain messages or ‘meaningful actions’ (which the set theory analogy makes apparent), frames serve an interpretive or perceptive function and mark a qualitative distinction between what is included and what is left out:

*The picture frame tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame. Or, in terms of the analogy from set theory, the messages enclosed within the imaginary line are defined as members of a class by virtue of their sharing common premises or mutual relevance. The frame itself thus becomes a part of the premise system. Either, as in the case of the play frame, the frame is involved in the evaluation of the messages which it contains, or the frame merely assists the mind in understanding the contained messages by reminding the thinker that these messages are mutually relevant and the messages outside the frame may be ignored. (Bateson, 1972: 187–188)*

Frames sort, order, differentiate (in quantitative and qualitative ways) and importantly, contribute to the very differences they act upon. This performative ambiguity is captured in the phrase ‘the frame is involved in the evaluation of the messages which it contains’. The last common function I want to stress is the frame’s relation to communication. Bateson states that frames are by their very nature ‘metacommunicative’: ‘Any message, which either explicitly or implicitly defines a frame, *ipso facto* gives the receiver instructions or aids in his attempt to understand the messages included within the frame’ (Bateson 1972, 188). In regard to Bateson’s consideration of play, the statement ‘This is play’ serves as an example of an explicit metacommunicative message and hence framing device: once a person states, ‘This is play’, everything that comes after is received and responded to differently than if the statement was never uttered. Finally, the converse is also true: ‘Every meta-communicative or metalinguistic message defines, either explicitly or implicitly, the set of messages about which it communicates, i.e., every metacommunicative message is or de-fines a ... frame’ (Bateson, 1972: 188). This suggests that it is not possible to speak of something without invoking a frame, and such frames have already cut through the world before their invocation. Because a frame is defined equally by what it is not, it is not possible for a frame to be all-inclusive. One could put it as follows: *there are no frames that are open.*

Bateson’s short essay was the inspiration for Erving Goffman’s influential work, *Frame Analysis* (1974). In it, Goffman uses the concept of the frame to explore a basic question fundamental to all experience: How do we know what’s going on in a given situation? In responding to this question Goffman greatly extends Bateson’s analysis. In particular, Goffman develops a nuanced language for interpreting situations when ‘what’s going on here’ is not at all clear, such as keying, fabrication, misframing and illusion. For my purposes, the key type of ambiguity Goffman identifies is the ‘frame dispute’. He offers a simple example: ‘It is reported that what is horseplay and larking for inner-city adolescents can be seen as vandalism and thievery by officials and victims’ (Goffman, 1974: 321–322). Following from this, Goffman defines the main features of a frame dispute:

*Now although eventually one of these sides to the argument may establish a definition that convinces the other side (or at least dominates coercive forces sufficiently to induce a show of respect), an appreciable period can elapse when there is no immediate potential agreement, when, in fact, there is no way in theory to bring everyone involved into the same frame. Under these circumstances one can expect that the parties with opposing versions of events may openly dispute with each other over how to define what has been or is happening. A frame dispute results. (Goffman, 1974: 322)*

Difficulty in achieving ‘frame alignment’, coercive forces in play, open disputes — herein lays the politics of frames.

Wikipedia Art raises the question of the frame. All the characteristics of framing I have described above are operative. Rather than frame ambiguity, it seems more a question of object ambiguity: Does Wikipedia Art fit within the Wikipedia frame? But this question itself, of course, cannot be answered without making the Wikipedia frame explicit. The ambiguity of the object is at once that of the frame. While the article entry itself draws attention to the frame, this is greatly amplified during the ‘Article for deletion’ debate. All of the policies and guidelines are principles for sorting. Some of the major ones mobilised in the deletion debate included: ‘Wikipedia:Five pillars’, ‘Wikipedia:Deletion process’, ‘Wikipedia:Criteria for speedy deletion’, ‘Wikipedia:Deletion policy’, ‘Wikipedia:No original research’, ‘Wikipedia:Neutral point of view’ and ‘Wikipedia:Verifiability’. The ‘Wikipedia:Criteria for speedy deletion’ policy, for example, is very clear on what lies outside the frame: ‘patent nonsense’, ‘pure vandalism and blatant hoaxes’, ‘creations by banned or blocked users’ and so on. And even if it is not always clear when a hoax or vandalism has occurred, it is clear when something has been identified as such it is removed. It is not merely a question of whether or not Wikipedia Art belongs in the frame, however. Framing activity is going on in several places and on different levels. The ‘Wikipedia:Guide to deletion’ and ‘Afd Wikietiquette guidelines’ are procedural frames. The Consensus policy frames what constitutes a settled debate. The frame sorts the outside from the inside, but also orders the inside. As the debate proceeded, frames themselves are interrogated and ‘higher level’ frames are brought in to settle the debate — such as when a contributor writes, ‘this is an encyclopaedia’, to frame how others should interpret Wikipedia — and these higher level frames are themselves challenged in a search for ever higher frames to settle the dispute. From ‘flame wars’ in spaces of discussion (such as email lists, Usenet groups, or Wikipedia talk pages), we move to something like ‘frame wars’.

The deletion process transformed Wikipedia Art from ‘encyclopaedia entry’ to ‘art stunt’, or, if it was originally both of these things at once, it soon became ‘just art’. If there was a fleeting possibility that ‘The Wikipedia Art page is something that explains art, explores art, and is art all at the same time’, this identity was never realised; at least not in the way intended — not in the form of an encyclopaedia entry. Likewise, if there was a possibility that the Wikipedia frame could be both art and encyclopaedia, that the art frame and the encyclopaedic frame could be made compatible, Wikipedia Art made that possibility less real, instead enforcing the non-compatibility of these higher level frames. This sorting also had interpretive effects, which could be stated as follows: ‘do not approach Wikipedia Art as an encyclopaedia entry; approach it as art’ and conversely, ‘Wikipedia is an encyclopedia, which is distinct from art’. Wikipedia Art was placed outside the frame, but so too were all the arguments made in favour of ‘keep’ during the deletion discussion.

Contributors such as Shmeck, Patlichty and Artintegrated were marked as people who make invalid arguments, who don't understand the frame, while contributors like DanielRigal and Freshacconci were affirmed as productive contributors.

The politics of the frame is about sorting, of people and things, of statements, spaces and regimes of interpretation; in and out, meaningful and irrelevant, legitimate and illegitimate. Although outright frame wars are rare, there is no escaping framing, and such sorting always has political effects. A frame is always partly constituted by what it is not; it is the product of, and also produces, difference. Wikipedia is constituted by a distinct frame of knowledge, one that owes a lot to the tradition of Enlightenment, but it equally frames interaction; how debates can play out; what counts as agreement (i.e. consensus); how contributors' statements are to be received; who is productive, a mediator, an administrator, an artist, a radical, and indeed, a troll. Frames sort statements of knowledge that cannot be divorced from their subjects. Because there is no frame without an outside; no frame that isn't constituted by what it sorts out as well as in, there is equally no escape from the politics of the frame.

## On Trolls and Peers

I began with a consideration of collaboration as a way of understanding how people work together. We saw how collaboration was distinguished from other forms of working together, and in particular those characteristic of governments and firms operating within the conditions of the market. Although collaboration is used as a term that explains how people work together — how working together is organised — it often sits very awkwardly in relation to this very question (of organisation). A host of terms have emerged that tend to downplay the organising forces within collaborative work. We are told, for example, that collaboration is: 'radically decentralized' (Benkler); 'unmanaged' and with a 'spontaneous division of labour' (Shirky); self-organising (Elliott); and that collaborative work is 'non-hierarchical' and creates '*ad hoc* meritocracies' (Bruns). Without denying that such terms and related commentaries do point to novel transformations, they cannot explain how an average contribution to an open project is organised. Such a lack, I have suggested, has political consequences.

Attending to the politics of the frame goes some way in remedying this lack. The frame itself emerges as an organising force, and this force flows over the different facets of collaborative work. While collaboration might be beyond market signals and managerial commands, as Benkler suggests, the frame has its own signals ('This is an encyclopaedia')

and its own principles, from which the authority of commands can be established ('This is an encyclopaedia, therefore Wikipedia Art must be deleted'). The force of these commands does not stem from one's (managerial) position within a firm or other bureaucratic institution. Instead, it comes from the frame; more specifically, the ability to fit within the frame, to position oneself in relation to it, to mobilise it, and if necessary, defer to its authority. [8] While contributors and information architectures can accurately be described as decentralised (Benkler), contributions are nonetheless brought together and played off against one another in relation to a complex set of principles that are not weakened by decentralisation. Indeed, decentralised organisation can only exist if certain principles are especially forceful.

While the division of labour might not follow traditional patterns and might not be managed in terms of hierarchies of command, the frame shows that labour is not exactly spontaneous or unmanaged (Shirky). When Shirky writes, for example: 'one person can write a new text on asphalt, fix misspellings in Pluto, and add external references for Wittgenstein in a single day' (Shirky, 2008: 120), it is because encyclopaedias must be comprehensive, must not have spelling mistakes, and should provide references to further sources. To make clear how the frame orders work, consider if Shirky had instead written: 'one person can write a second entry on asphalt, create spelling errors in Pluto, and delete valid external references for Wittgenstein'. Work on Wikipedia is indeed ordered and organised in ways different to industrial or post-industrial models, but there is a logic to it.

Leading on from this, Bruns' account of work structures as non-hierarchical, '*ad hoc* meritocracies' is also somewhat lacking. All kinds of hierarchies exist between articles, rules, contributions and contributors and during the deletion debate these hierarchies were largely reinforced. Bruns' '*ad hoc* meritocracies', however, refer specifically to emergent forms of *leadership* that are derived from the quality of contributions: Leaders will emerge in specific situations because the community perceives them to be the best in that instance at a particular task. No doubt leaders do emerge and hold sway over specific groups or build up authority in relation to a particular task or topic. But the nature of this leadership, let's say the source of its competence and authority, plays out in relation to the frame and therefore cannot be considered *ad hoc*. The more a contributor masters the frame, the more likely it is that their contributions will be valorised within it and, in turn, that the quality of their contributions will increase access to positions of authority and leadership. We must also be very careful to qualify merit, therefore, as the 'mastery of a frame', rather than as some general and absolute quality of an individual. Finally, while Reagle (and Wales) rightly point out that NPOV is a key mechanism of enabling collaboration, I have shown that the very principles that make collaboration possible also exclude certain contributors and contributions. This is not to suggest that such exclusion is necessarily bad, just that it is necessary: the same frame that makes a coherent thing like



[Figure 3] Identifying Trolls (source: <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2012/04/03/anti-troll-or-censorship-az-law-would-criminalize-harsh-words-on-the-web/>)

Wikipedia possible, does so by sorting out what is other. In light of claims that Wikipedia's policies provide a position from which everyone can agree and work together in harmony, even if only in theory, placing the politics of the frame alongside collaboration is especially pressing. Indeed, it is not possible to make visible the genuinely agonistic realities found in Wikipedia without doing so.

What then, to make of the diagram of collaboration and the figure of the troll in light of the politics of the frame? Way back in 2006, in his opening plenary address for the Wikimania conference, Jim Wales introduced the possibility of having 'stable versions' of articles. The general idea behind stable article versions was to continue 'allowing anyone to edit anything at any time, while at the same time showing the general public something that's not too frightening'. This technical intervention was considered a better solution than 'protecting' and 'semi-protecting' pages, which rubbed awkwardly against Wikipedia's ethos of openness. The reason for suggesting this new solution, and indeed, for 'protecting' articles in the first place was to fend off the trolls. 'We have to lock certain articles', said Wales, 'because we can't afford to let the trolls make us look bad' (2006). He went on to elaborate that 'with stable versions, we can actually let the trolls do whatever

they please, and we can just block them and revert them'. Stable article versions were deemed able to disarm the trolls, but in such a way as to 'preserve the openness of Wikipedia' (Wales, 2006). Returning to the Wikipedia Art controversy in 2009, once again Wales invokes the troll to describe the project's artist-authors: 'a group of trolls managed to manufacture for the media a publicity stunt' (2009).

Trolls do not merely haunt the collaborative work of creating Wikipedia articles, swooping in from the dark corners of the net. Despite the varying history of trolls and trolling, increasingly the figure of the troll must be understood as the outcome of a particular kind of politics, a frame politics. Trolls are not the opposite but the converse of collaborative peers; they are, if you will, two sides of the same coin. Produced in the sorting of collaboration, troll refers to those who are literally 'sorted out'. But in a mode of work that claims to be open and that allows anyone to edit despite any differences, the only kind of subject that can legitimately be 'sorted out' is that which is purely negative and whose only intent is destruction. Part of this sorting process involves reducing what otherwise might be understood as a political conflict to a character flaw of one or a handful of individuals. Whenever a frame dispute occurs within the diagram of collaboration, beware! Trolls will surely be identified and eliminated.

## Biographical note

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## Notes

[1] For an elaboration of the diagram, see Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (London: Continuum, 1999), 30–34.

[2] In order to demonstrate the diagrammatic nature of this image, I encourage readers

to conduct an image search for 'collaboration'. Note the recurring circular arrangement, colour schemes, lack of hierarchy, faceless and featureless bodies and joined hands. While differences between these images are easily detected, the consistencies across images are immediately striking.

[3] The artists' own account of Wikipedia Art can be found in *Critical Point of View: A Wikipedia Reader* (Lovink and Tkacz, 2011).

[4] Unless otherwise indicated, all cited material from the AfD discussion is from, 'Wikipedia:Articles for deletion/Wikipedia Art' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2009). To avoid large redundancies, I will not continue to cite this page as I make use of it below.

[5] 'MADEUP topic' is a reference to the content guideline, 'Wikipedia:Wikipedia is not for things made up one day' and which stipulates 'Wikipedia is not for things that you or your friends made up. If you have invented something novel in school, your garage, or the pub, and it has not yet been featured in reliable sources, please do not write about it in Wikipedia' (Wikipedia Contributors, 2013c). The self-reference rule RHaworth refers to is part of the Manual of Style guidelines. It advises contributors not to refer specifically to Wikipedia when writing articles.

[6] The most notable is Huntster's contribution: 'Delete as non-notable, self-referential mess. Tried by others, and deleted. Kill kill kill'.

[7] It is worth noting that Bateson writes specifically of 'psychological frames', but to avoid unnecessary confusion I have left this dimension out of the current discussion.

[8] To be clear, I am not suggesting that frames are fixed. Frames may transform slowly over time, or quickly, perhaps as the result of a frame dispute. A frame is a form of structure whose existence is part and parcel of the details of the situation. Because of this, they are both durable and porous.

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-155 EVEN WITH CRUISE CONTROL YOU STILL HAVE TO STEER: defining trolling to get things done

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### Abstract:

'Trolling' is not a pre-given aspect of a discursive environment, which we enter into and then identify as such. This paper demonstrates that trolling is contextually mobilised as an occasioned aspect of interaction through an example: a news segment aired on the Australian network television news program Seven News in 2012. This segment is interpreted initially with reference to existing frameworks, so as to make a case about how trolling is conventionally understood, and this interpretation is then respecified through a membership categorisation analysis of the segment in question. By attending to the methods with which trolls are produced and contrasted with others, the kinds of work done by defining trolling can be shown.

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This is an article investigating trolling as an observable and reportable phenomenon, and how it comes to be sensible as such to those who describe interactional or discursive forms as trolling. The interest is not so much in what trolling 'really is' or what trolling 'really means' or what trolling 'really says about where we are now'. Rather, it is an exploration of what might be the best means by which we can understand how trolling is identified, and what the intertwined moral, cognitive, and intersubjective processes at work in this identification are. What are we even talking about when we're talking about trolling, and how do we come to understand this?

The argument is structured as follows. The first part of the article considers a particular representation of trolling in detail, a famous TV news segment, in terms of relevant literature on deliberative democracy, moral panic, and risk. It is a brief gloss of what I imagine an account of trolling and how it can be understood might look like in conventional academic terms. The second part of the article seeks to problematise this account, by situating it and the Seven News segment it is articulated through with respect to ethnomethodology and membership categorisation analysis. The emphasis throughout this close reading and discussion is on attending carefully and cautiously to what it is that people get done when they invoke trolling.

The analysis conducted is of the clip below from Seven News, 'Charlotte Dawson fights back against trolls'. The segment aired on October 23rd, 2012, during The Daily Telegraph's 'Stop the Trolls' campaign, for which the late Dawson was a spokesperson. It had a well-publicised backstory, involving Dawson's previous 'doxing' or 'outing' of a troll, which in turn led to a further bout of organised retaliatory trolling directed at Dawson, which led to her attempted suicide in August of that year. I will not go further into this story or the various ways in which media commentators and others (including trolls) contested Dawson's position in it at that time, other than acknowledging that it likely provided some context for those who viewed the segment and were familiar with it. Rather, in what follows I attend specifically to the narrative of the segment itself and the moral logic it articulates: what is the definition of trolling mobilised here and what can be said about it? In what ways can a close and considered reading of the segment shed light on how trolling is represented and defined in mainstream mass media? What are the interpretive frameworks best suited to understanding this process?



Figure 1. The online version of this paper includes an embedded Youtube clip of the report broadcast on Australia's Network Seven Television Network. That clip be found at [http://youtu.be/Bhj9ukfva\\_E](http://youtu.be/Bhj9ukfva_E)

Aside from its poignancy, the segment is instructive and cautionary as regards the heated discussion of trolling in Australian mass media and how that has been conducted in recent years. The segment can be analysed for the definitions of trolling it mobilises, why trolling is (framed as) a problem and why it comes to be such, what its effects are, and what should or could be done about it. Specifically, we could begin to understand trolling as presented in the Seven News segment in the following ways:

as a threat to the public sphere, specifically, the public sphere as a space of deliberative democratic dialogue;

as the grounds for a moral panic: more precisely and interestingly, a moral panic the media has about itself; and

as a risk to (be managed by) those who engage in online media (and indeed, any media).

These distinct themes are woven together in the segment in subtle ways, and as such, it also sets up an interesting counterpoint between reason or rationality and emotionality or affect for the parties involved (the trolls and Dawson as 'trollees', respectively), articulated through and alongside a tacit model of the moral underpinnings of this counterpoint.

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Implicit in the segment is the popular idea that trolling is radically disruptive to the ideal of the public sphere as a deliberative democratic space (where this may be read as subversive and emancipatory, or, as by Seven News, as negative and destructive). That the segment was aired at all is indicative of a kind of interest, felt presumably by staff at Seven News, and/or felt by them to be sufficiently present among the audience (perhaps on the basis of the broader media interest at that time) to warrant coverage. Somehow there was a mediated public sphere 'before', where we were safe from abuse, and now, along with the democratisation of voice social media seems to imply, there is danger and chaos: as previous reports attest, a 'HATE CAMPAIGN' (01:00), conducted by 'TWEET ATTACKERS', has put a 'Star in HOSPITAL' (01:03). Trolling is a vituperative discursive and interactional action without account or responsibility, a new pathology of democratic dialogue. It is a pathology because, as Seyla Benhabib puts it:

*According to the deliberative model of democracy, it is a necessary condition for attaining legitimacy and rationality with regard to collective decision making processes in a polity, that the institutions of this polity are so arranged that what is considered in the common interest of all results from processes of collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals (1996: 69).*

‘Democracy’, ‘legitimacy’, ‘rationality’, ‘common interest’, and ‘collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly’ – all laudable, and all ideals of the sort evidently under threat from the trolling contributions Seven News cites as problematic. These contributions – unlike Dawson’s expletives, which receive the more conventional bleeps – are overlaid with whistling sounds and asterisks (‘you fucking cunt’ [00:46:]; ‘ugly ass albino Ellen DeGeneres impersonator’ [00:52]; ‘no wonder people think your [sic] a slut’ [01:34]). In defining trolling in this sort of way and with reference to this sort of evidence, the segment produces and spectacularises a bracketed class of ‘abnormal’ or ‘deviant’ statements, the tenor of which, incidentally, is innocuous in comparison to the ferocity of some of the messages Dawson had previously received. From these, we can work back to the deviated ideal: an imagining of a space for public dialogue characterised by civility and propriety of the sort Benhabib also imagines, unsullied by these hateful eruptions of grotesquerie.

What to make of these statements? Gabriella Coleman puts it thusly:

*lulz-oriented actions puncture the consensus around our politics and ethics, our social lives, our aesthetic sensibilities, the inviolability of the world as it is; trolls invalidate that world by gesturing toward the possibility for Internet geeks to destroy it – to pull the carpet from under us – whenever they feel the urge and without warning (2012).*

For Coleman, trolling is indeed a radical counterpublic, a communicative, gestural and performative mode which indexes the contingency of rationality and of assumptions of rational and reasonable interaction and dialogue: a mode which tends to render such assumptions absurd, and as such is legible as radical political action.

This interpretation of the segment, in terms of discrepant understandings of the norms of dialogue within a deliberative public sphere, is borne out particularly by an insistence on the part of Seven News on a certain model of immediate and direct referentiality. There is only one way to speak here and only one way to understand the practice of

participation in mediated communities of speech. Utterances, so to speak, must mean what they say, for they are (to be taken as) determinedly real in their emotional effects, and are consequentially tied directly and accountably to those who produce them. They are also taken as avowedly, directly, and intentionally aimed at their singular recipients, rather than, for example, being performed for the benefit of audiences other than or in addition to these recipients. This is of course somewhat different to how Seven News and other broadcast mass media outlets operate, insofar as the audiences they speak to are not singular and the statements they produce are not\* \*to be understood as intended for singular recipients. This, then, is not just a 'vernacular' theory of meaning and representation (no Foucauldian subject positions in discourse here please); it is a theory of morality, and a theory of (authorial voice in) media to boot. Critically, this is not a model of public dialogue allowing for or endorsing anonymous contributions. The interpersonal and moral implications of statements are borne out emotionally at the site of reception, implying responsibility and accountability at the site of production. The possibility of statements without identifiable sources is here a particular moral problem. After all, Seven News identifiably mean what they say. Where would we be if mass media did not mean what they say? Should not any or everyone with access to media therefore identifiably mean what they say? Why should a model of free speech imply any right to anonymous speech?

Yet the three trolls 'exposed' all contest the moral accountability inherent in the model imposed by Seven News: 'They're just things that I say. They're things that I say on Twitter and Twitter isn't real life' (00:52). This first troll, Jordan McGuire, elaborates further later on in the segment: 'And I don't necessarily mean what I tweet half the time!' (02:05). What intention then could lie behind such invective: 'Where does that come from?' (Some psychological wellspring is perhaps implied here). 'It doesn't come from anywhere in particular, it just comes', says the second troll, Caspian Shields (01:17).

Something like a psychological account, however, is engaged with by the third troll, Ian Cameron, who succinctly iterates the distinction between the real and the virtual and then assigns a particular subjective benefit to the virtual: 'There's real life you and internet you, I think, I gain a little bit more confidence on the internet' (01:36). This is not quite a concession to authoriality or responsibility of the sort Seven News appear to be aiming for, however. Rather, it seems to frame the internet as a kind of cathartic identity playground. This sort of reasoning has been described with reference to the 'greater internet fuckwad theory': the rather deterministic idea (more precisely, alibi) that pseudonymity as a feature of online environments (rather than the people involved, their cultures of use and participation, and the social contexts which normalise them) somehow generates offensive behaviour (Nakamura, 2013). Ian Cameron elaborates further in the segment, in such a way as to differentiate 'the internet' from 'the media' (01:42) those in the latter are 'fair game' for what might be said in the former.

It is worth noting that the sequence of events and of troll contributions, and consequently the full apportioning of culpability, is somewhat unclear here. The first interaction is introduced by voiceover with: 'Charlotte Dawson meets one of the trolls who sent her abusive messages on Twitter while she recovered from a suicide attempt' (0:20). Were all of the featured trolls then latecomers to the scene, and not among those trolls who, the segment states, landed Dawson in hospital? Or only the first one? To what extent does this have implications in terms of the moral opprobrium due to the trolls, or the 'healing' aspects of Dawson's journey in the segment?

The objective Seven News work to achieve involves liquidating what otherwise is continually threatening to collapse the apparent grounds of their moral warrant to condemn the trolls: the distinctions between 'the media' (TV) and 'the internet' (Twitter), and either or both of these (but perhaps especially the latter) and 'real life'. These are to be considered synonymous, and rendering them so is presented as Dawson's job. This is to be done by re-anchoring everything in a 'real' way, in 'real life'. We learn that Dawson sought to exact retributive justice: her 'response has been to expose the trolls by forwarding their abuse to her tens of thousands of followers' (01:48). Trolls too can and will be made to learn that words are, in fact, like sticks and stones, and that the right to use them publicly entails the responsibility of facing their consequences for others publicly.

A moral high ground is implied: the trolls will be hoist by their own petard; their suffering will be on their own account, by their own cruel and venal hand. Like Julian Assange, Dawson is merely making available the record of the damning behaviour of evildoers. One might argue that, within the segment, Dawson is not above stooping to their level: after all, the action begins engagingly with her shouting 'Fuck you you cunt!' at Jordan McGuire (00:32). But this is not quite direct speech; it is couched with an explicit conditional which renders a kind of pseudo-simulated performance of trolling in 'real life': 'I'm face to face with you now, if I turned around and said 'Fuck you you cunt!', how do you feel?' This indexical prefacing utilising the 'f2f' serves to render contexts synonymous: however McGuire feels in this context (something the camera, if not the microphone, is interested in showing), is as Dawson felt in that one.

In a public sphere characterised by 'collective deliberation conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals', forwarding instances of abuse to tens of thousands of followers might seem a reasonable enough move (if perhaps somewhat 'agonistic'). But we learn immediately from a somewhat startled Caspian Shields that this also involved posting where he works to twenty-two thousand people. Was this information contained in his abusive tweets? We're not told, though it seems implausible, given the well-worn lines we have already heard about trolls hiding behind keyboards (00.35). 'It's not bullying you',

Dawson is shown explaining, talking over Caspian Shields while reaching out to touch his arm, 'it's exposing you for what you are' (02:00). Is this fair? Is it lawful? Could Charlotte Dawson and Caspian Shields ever have been said to be free and equal with respect to each other? Does Caspian Shields, by the mere fact of appearing on television, also become 'fair game'?

The theory of deliberative democracy has of course been subject to extensive critique, some of which is salient here. Such critique can be framed in relation to the cryptonormative notion of 'rationality' mobilised by the theory and its elision of issues of power:

*deliberative democracy does not deal with the normalising (coercion) and exclusion involved in the designation of a particular form of communication as the rational and democratically legitimate norm. In order to be considered legitimate deliberators, subjects must come to internalise the rules of the particular form of communication deemed democratically valid or be excluded from the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2007: 52–53).*

Trolls, by this reckoning, are those who do not, cannot, or will not successfully achieve this internalisation. Chantal Mouffe develops Dahlberg's position eloquently, in terms of a framework derived from Wittgenstein:

*to have agreement in opinions there must first be agreement on the language used and this, as he [Wittgenstein] points out, implies agreement in forms of life. According to him, procedure only exists as a complex ensemble of practices. Those practices constitute specific forms of individuality and identity that make possible the allegiance to the procedures. It is because they are inscribed in shared forms of life and agreements in judgments that procedures can be accepted and followed. They cannot be seen as rules that are created on the basis of principles and then applied to specific cases ... therefore, distinctions between 'procedural' and 'substantial' or between 'moral' and 'ethical' ... cannot be maintained and one must acknowledge that procedures always involve substantial ethical commitments (1999: 749).*

In the second section of this paper below, we shall return to this kind of thinking in a somewhat more concrete and analytically focused form.

The criticisms of the Habermasian ideal elaborated by Dahlberg and Mouffe underscore the local, contextual and normative specificity the ideal entails – a specificity trolling (as described by Seven News) disregards, is unable to recognise, or actively and wilfully assaults.

The problematisation of the normative notions of procedure assumed by theorists of deliberative democracy can be further contextualised in terms of the tacit assumptions around rationality they instantiate, particularly with reference to how rationality is predicated and juxtaposed with emotion in the Seven News segment. According to the narrative presented in the segment, reasonable, normal people such as Dawson, attempting to get on with their everyday business, are ‘troubled’ by trolls. Indeed, as Dawson herself inquires at 02:14, speaking on behalf of mystified reasonable persons everywhere: ‘Most reasonable people find them highly, highly offensive and they, they can’t understand the mindset behind them or the logic behind them, how do you feel about that?’ Arguably, this is how ideology functions ‘in the wild’ in television news confrontations of this sort. Given the small minority of Australians who actually use Twitter, most viewers probably didn’t think too much of anything about mindsets or logics to offensive tweets until Dawson invoked and thereby came to stand for ‘most reasonable people’.

Of course, Dawson’s role was not just to be reasonable and normal: she was also a celebrity, and that would seem, according to the segment – notably the intervention by the Seven News reporter, Jodie Speers, at 01:19 – to entail a certain deference in her treatment. This is notable by its absence among the featured trolls’ tweets. Speers refers to ‘people like Charlotte’, expressing incredulity at what they are apparently supposed to accept: they should just cop ‘whatever you put out there’. The implication of ‘out there’ is of course that the trolling in question takes place in a public place. And as with the third troll, Ian Cameron, the category ‘people like Charlotte’ is explicitly oriented to by Shields in terms of ‘being in the public eye’. This is an extremely specific definition of the trollee position: as we shall see presently, it is almost immediately negated within the segment itself (and, it must be said, within other media reports of well-publicised troll-celebrity interactions).

Also of interest is the emotional register of this ‘troubling’ and how it should be accounted for or responded to by reasonable, normal people. This presentation by Seven News is interesting for what it demonstrates about the occluded role and standing of emotion in the public sphere:

*emotion is thought of ultimately as the completely other of political reason; that is to say, as a sort of atavism or primitive remainder, as a symbol of everything that has been left behind by civilization and progress, and that has no proper place in the enlightened realm of liberty created by the moderns (Máiz, 2011: 34).*

The reported tweets produced by the trolls highlight this: apparently casual expressions of loathing, ridicule and contempt (all strongly gendered) are framed as taboo in the social media public sphere on account of their emotional repercussions (which is to say, Twitter is framed as a dialogical public sphere with moral and affective entailments, rather than, for instance, a public repository of latrinalia or Billingsgate). Yet Dawson's outburst at 00:32, and its position within the segment itself, both confirms and validates the normative and constitutive emotionality upon which the reasonable and rational is predicated.

This brings us to the second point: the aspect of trolling as a moral panic. As an instance of such, the Seven News segment is notable in that this is expressed, as is customary, through mass media, but relating to the perception of an assault on mass media, its norms, and its personnel (rather than on some other space or collective – behaviour in public places, standards of sexual conduct, the sanctity of childhood etc.). One could argue that Seven News (particularly in terms of the 'name and shame' strategy) is expressing a certain form of resentment about what trolls appear to be getting away with:

*This complex sentiment has three interlocking elements. First, diffuse feelings of hate, envy and hostility; second, a sense of being powerless to express these feelings actively against the person or social stratum evoking them; and third, a continual re-experiencing of this impotent hostility. The essential point distinguishing resentment from rebellion is that the former does not involve a genuine change in values. Resentment involves a sour grapes pattern which asserts merely that desired but unattainable objectives do not actually embody the prized values – after all, the fox in the fable does not say that he abandons all taste for sweet grapes; he says only that these particular grapes are not sweet. Rebellion, on the other hand, involves a genuine transvaluation, where the direct or vicarious experience of frustration leads to full denunciation of previously prized values – the rebellious fox simply denounces the prevailing taste for sweet grapes. In resentment, one condemns what one secretly craves; in rebellion, one condemns the craving itself (Merton, 1957: 155–6).*

Seven News, then, do not precisely 'rebel', although one could debate whether or not the trolls who they sought out do so. The moral panic Seven News articulate is compellingly shot through with the image of the troll as abject scapegoat. It is not just that the positions of trollee and troll are so strongly and robustly indexed to gender, class, and status. Trolls, we are invited to understand, are 'defiled selves', dysfunctional social miscreants, simultaneously hiding pathetically behind their keyboards and omnipotent in their capacity to wound their social betters.

the defiled self is imagined as deficient in those key human traits that make a moral life possible (conscience, compassion, altruism). Defiled selves are driven by an excess of otherwise ordinary human traits, for example aggression, self aggrandisement or grandiosity. Deficit and excess are two sides of the same coin. A self lacking in moral and behavioural control engages in excessive boundary-crossing, unruly conduct. This deficit/excess disequilibrium is imagined as the governing disposition of the Other. Lurching between a state of incoherence and uncontrollable self-aggrandisement, the defiled threatens to unleash a wave of chaos and ruin in civil life. Ultimately, the Other's extreme sociopathic and sadistic profile risks the collapse of a human world into a de-humanised object world (Seidman, 2012: 5).

It is this dehumanisation which Dawson is presented in the Seven News segment as combatting and ultimately overcoming, by demonstrating to her trolls that their behaviour is morally consequential. Not only this: in the segment, her victory is in some elliptical way related to the reformulation of the very institutional fabric of the social media space: a subtitle at 01:58 informs us that 'TWITTER HAS RECENTLY CHANGED RULES Users can now be removed for abuse'.

The narrative arc of the segment culminates with Dawson's 'closure': 'The thing that I got out of visiting these people and them agreeing to talk to us is the fact that their online bravado is completely polar opposite to what they are' (02:42). Dawson is presented as having 'gotten something out of this': correcting her previous misunderstanding of trolls and their power relative to hers. She is shown as having come to understand that trolls 'in real life' are weak, abject, pathetic, and cowardly; seeing the deficit which is the dialectical flipside of their pathological online excess. The distinction between the real and the virtual is transcended, by morally tethering utterances in the latter domain to bodies in the former.

This consequentiality applies to both trolls and trollees: trolls are to be taken to account for their behaviour, but trollees are also invited to take responsibility. In this sense, trolling is produced as a risk. Another subtitle at 02:13 notifies viewers: 'ADVICE FOR PEOPLE

TARGETED BY TROLLS: Block user, report to Twitter or the police'. Through these means, at a 'meta' level within the segment, the audience is quite literally framed as reasonable people subjected, like Dawson, to the risks of being trolled through their social media use. 'IF YOU NEED HELP COPING', viewers are informed, presumably with the abuse they are subject to online, they can call Lifeline (02:43). Viewers are thus democratically 'moralised' to take active responsibility for the management of their sadness and pain, as is now customary. As alluded to above, there is a further twist on the idea of the deliberative public sphere here. Whereas the interactions between Dawson and her various trolls have bore the implication that people in the public eye are or are not obliged to 'cop it' – the contested trade-off for their visibility is that they are legitimate targets for invective and abuse from members of the public who take umbrage with them – here invective and abuse become suddenly and abruptly democratic, indiscriminate, and egalitarian in their directions and targets. Viewers are to understand that they too are involved in the policing of the crisis, and that moreover their emotional vulnerability in the face of trolling is, like Dawson's, a risk to be managed (with the assistance perhaps of Lifeline, Twitter, or the police), and to be managed particularly by them:

*one common feature of the process of moralisation in everyday life is that people are called upon to engage in ethical forms of individual risk management, and these forms of self-conduct exist in tension with collective subject positions of 'harmful others'. What this implies on a conceptual level is that moralisation in everyday life contains a dialectic that counterposes individualising discourses (which call on people to take personal responsibility to manage risk, e.g. drinking responsibly) against collectivising discourses (which represent more broadly harms to be avoided, e.g. the drunk driver) (Hier, 2008: 174).*

The distinction between Hier's example of drink-driving and trolling as covered in the Seven News segment is that at no point in the latter is any advice offered on how to not troll – how to not occupy the subject position of the 'harmful others'. The risk for the viewer is not that of being, for instance, 'exposed' as a troll, the risk is exclusively that of victimisation at the hands of these harmful others. In a sense trolls are presented as only partially capable of taking on such a process of becoming responsible. Even through the sort of exposure Seven News, as an instrument of justice, can engage in, the trolls are presented as morally defective: unable, like Ian Cameron, to traverse the distinction between real and virtual, to deploy the 'confidence' present in internet trolling in such a way as to achieve moral reasonableness in real life. As Jordan McGuire puts it, employing a generational logic immediately endorsed by Jodie Speers's voiceover: 'Me, I have a very, very dull sense of what is disrespectful and what isn't because I'm just desensitised to it and that's what the majority of Gen Y is' (02:27).

Within the moral logic of the segment itself, then, Seven News is not concerned with the risks or consequences of being labelled a troll, through either deliberate or unwitting statements interpreted as trolling by recipients or witnesses. Nor are they particularly interested in exploring whatever the imputed or acknowledged deficiencies or vulnerabilities are which might render one a troll. To do so would both humanise the trolls and embed their behaviour in an alternate scheme of meaning, as well as running the risk of seriously undermining the moral certainty of the approach the segment, like so much other mass media reporting, takes on the issue. But of course, the entire segment itself can be taken as an ostensive cautionary message to potential or actual trolls: suffer the consequences of your actions (where, like drink-driving campaigns which concentrate on terrible repercussions, perhaps the most significant consequence is the subjective experience of shame as an element in a mechanism of collective risk management). You could get something a bit like (albeit not exactly like) a taste of your own medicine: not only might you find yourself on the national evening news being taken to task for your behaviour, twenty-two thousand people could be told where you work and the terrible things you have thought and said, and who knows what they might say or do? The segment does not instruct viewers in how to not be trolls; it demonstrates the moral consequences of trolling: 'That's what I do' Dawson is shown saying, 'I expose people like you' (02:03). It becomes the moral and professional obligation of media personalities to ensure the interactional norms of the public sphere are abided by.

We learn this, not just from what is said and how it is edited, sequenced, and presented, but from how that saying is also a kind of doing, because, like trolling in the segment, interaction itself is also action: 'exposing' trolls constitutes them as such.

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Thus far, I have presented an interpretive gloss of a news segment broadcast at a particular moment in the public debate about trolling in Australia. I argued that this segment can best be conceptualised in terms of what it tells us about the ideal of the deliberative public sphere and how this is framed as undermined by trolling. I suggested the segment could be understood as an interesting instance of moral panic, and that the segment presented trolling as a significant risk to viewers, a risk viewers, in turn, are positioned to take responsibility for. In presenting this account, I sought to unpack the moral logic according to which the segment operates and the values it articulates, and in making this case, I also sought to demonstrate how such a reading or interpretation might be conducted with respect to what transpires in the segment.

Before developing an alternate line of argument with which to take this account further, I want to point to some potential problems with this unpacking. Perhaps the most immediate response to such an account could be: 'that's not trolling' (it is certainly not trolling as described in the literature, for example Donath, 1999; Herring et al, 2002; Shachaf and Hara, 2010). Seven News is making a reductive error in nomenclature. Abuse directed at celebrities (which has a dismayingly long history), public or otherwise, is not trolling, or at least, contemporary trolling is broader than this, extending perhaps to attacks on the Church of Scientology, or fans of Justin Bieber, or those who would curtail the operations of Wikileaks, or perhaps those tasked with providing medical care to the Duchess of Cambridge. Alternately, such an account actually lets trolls off the hook: trolling of this sort, at least, involves systematic and targeted abuse, often directed at young or vulnerable women, and in a growing number of cases (including Dawson's) associated with suicide. Either way, therefore, it would be a mistake to ground an account of the politics of trolling in a mass media representation, particularly a sensationalistic, 'tabloid' representation. We still don't know what trolling 'really is', and are still not in a position to make any judgment about it.

This sort of criticism is indicative of some of the broader problems of understanding what is meant by 'trolling', including the issue of contextualising trolling in relation to the range of available terms with which it is now being conflated (such as 'flaming', 'griefing' or 'cyberbullying').

Moreover, in order to begin showing a direction forward from here, another line of critique could be developed. The interpretation above draws on three well-established concepts for which there are vast bodies of literature: deliberation in the public sphere, moral panic, and risk. These are ideas with intellectual cachet. As such, not only is it reassuring for us to understand discussions of trolling in this way. Mobilising such a conceptual vocabulary, the analysis bolsters our sense of being able to grasp a deeper, broader, 'bigger picture' meaning to footage of Charlotte Dawson shouting 'Fuck you you cunt!' at a twenty-year-old man in a residential street. As interpretive frames for this kind of material, then, these are relatively conventional, and this sort of work could be done in relation to any number of contemporary mass media accounts of trolling. It is straightforward and reassuring (and satisfyingly mobilises particular forms of intellectual capital), to assert that the thing to understand about trolling is really a thing to understand about deliberation in the public sphere. Does this mean such interpretations are correct?

I want to argue that such interpretations only get us so far, and that this is because they bring with them extensive, albeit largely implicit, baggage with respect to how the meaningfulness of a term like 'troll' is produced and what an appropriate academic

interpretation of this would look like. In much the same way that Seven News constitutes trolling as a morally sanctionable kind of interaction, to say that the best way of understanding how and why they do so is with reference to the public sphere, moral panic, and risk, is also to constitute and delimit trolling as explicable in a particular way. This produces another layer of interpretation and abstraction, and thereby moves us further away from the social logics of what is being done with the category 'troll', rather than closer to it.

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Making this argument requires a brief excursion through an alternate set of resources, specifically, those to be found in the research program of membership categorisation analysis and its ethnomethodological underpinnings. At the risk of making a rather subtle position appear both simplistic and prescriptive, a few basic tenets of ethnomethodology germane for present purposes can be laid out. This is an approach drawing on themes found in Schutz (1962), Winch (1990), and Wittgenstein (2001), albeit with a particular methodological and empirical bent.

As its name suggests, ethnomethodology is concerned with 'members' methods': the 'common-sense' methods people use in an indefinite range of routine activities; what 'anyone would be expected to know'. Harold Garfinkel coined the term, in the course of analysing jury deliberations:

*Here I am faced with jurors who are doing methodology, but they are doing their methodology in the 'now you see it, now you don't' fashion. It is not a methodology that any of my colleagues would honor if they were attempting to staff the sociology department ... 'Ethno' seemed to refer, somehow or other, to the availability to a member of common-sense knowledge of his society as common-sense knowledge of the 'whatever' (1974: 16).*

As this origin story makes clear, ethnomethodology is first and foremost an analytical orientation, it entails the study of naturally occurring practical activities and the reasoning that is expressed through them and used to account for them. It is:

*above all else, a policy towards enquiry, an analytic mentality, that insists on (1) doing studies, by (2) working on materials to see what can be discovered in and from them, rather than selecting problems and data on the basis of some theoretically-specified agenda. In this way it is homologous with its own subject matter, namely social order as the ongoing achievement of members of society conceived as practical actors who are themselves (1) practical analysts of, and inquirers into, the world, (2) using whatever materials there are to hand to get done the tasks and business they are engaged in (Hester and Eglin, 1997: 1).*

Ethnomethodology thus seeks to frame as the proper area of inquiry what conventional academic accounts treat as a tacit resource: the competencies of mundane practical reasoning as these are displayed or made evident.

Another way of putting this is to gesture to the distinction between ‘studies about’ and ‘studies of’ particular practices, where the abundance of studies about some practice or setting does not tell us very much at all about how that practice or setting is accomplished by its members – they miss the ‘quiddity’ or ‘just thisness’ of the practice in question (Heritage, 1984: 298–299; ten Have, 2004: 22). For instance, Jane (2012) argues about trolling that it is objectionable, while Phillips (2011) argues about it that it is resistant, but in neither case do we learn very much about how trolling as such is identified and made sensible by trollees, trolls, academics, or anyone else. Rather, the idea of trolling is ‘fixed’ and used straightforwardly as a springboard, to critique appalling misogyny in the first instance, and the vacuity of Facebook memorial pages and their relation to the 24-hour news cycle in the second. In neither case is the logic used to move ‘up’ to these imputations presented or accounted for.

Ethnomethodology thus draws a distinction between topic and resource:

*Beware of confounding the topic of one’s studies with the resources for studying them ... sociologists have naïvely taken for granted the self-same skills, practices and suppositions as members of the society. The confounding has the consequence ... of rendering sociology a folk discipline: sociology becomes naïvely ensnared in the very practices it ought to be describing (Pollner, 1987: xi-xii).*

'Indigenous' understandings, which is to say, accounts presented by members (including academics) in the 'natural attitude', are not to be taken as resources providing the basis for more elaborate theoretical explanations of what is 'really happening' (for instance, the public sphere, or moral panic, or risk). Rather, they are the topics of inquiry in themselves (Gubrium and Holstein, 1997: 42). This has some implications insofar as it applies to conventional academic work:

*Aside from opening up a field of substantive research, the idea of investigating methods has reflexive implications that problematise the division of labor between social scientist and native practitioner. In classic social science investigations, this division of labor often serves to distinguish how the social scientist amasses knowledge from how the natives organise their beliefs in a particular domain. This distinction is one that ethnomethodologists explore rather than adopt (Lynch, 2002: 486).*

This cuts both ways: the ethnomethodological orientation implies a radical critique of conventional mainstream work in the social and human sciences, and it also implies that mundane practical reasoning of the everyday variety (such as that conducted and expressed by all parties to the Seven News segment) is itself sociological in character.

Notoriously, ethnomethodology is also 'indifferent':

*Ethnomethodological studies are not directed to formulating or arguing correctives. They are useless when they are done as ironies ... They do not formulate a remedy for practical actions, as if it were being found about practical actions that they are better or worse than they are usually cracked up to be (Garfinkel, 1967: vii).*

An ethnomethodological account, therefore, would not presume to say that trolling was good or bad, or that trolling should be defended or condemned, or that ordinary members should be corrected as to their use of or understanding of trolling, or that some other position should be arrived at with respect to it. It would attempt rather to show how competent members might arrive at such positions, and how the reasoning behind such arrival is occasioned, made relevant, and displayed. This is not to imply that ethnomethodology is morally or politically apathetic, or that its analyses cannot or do not have moral or political implications. As Eglin and Hester put it: 'any proposal for change presupposes a description of what is in need of change, and any description will have

been produced by the parties to it with the use of members' methods' (2003: 127–128).

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One such method ordinary members use to get things done is membership categorisation. Consider the range of categories of persons named in the Seven News segment discussed above. By order of appearance, they are:

*TV host*  
*Online bullies*  
*Twitter trolls*  
*Online tormentors*  
*Trolls*  
*Victims*  
*People they've never met*  
*You cunt*  
*Twenty-year-old*  
*People he doesn't know*  
*Celebrities like Guy Sebastian ... and Jack Vidgen*  
*Fucking cunt*  
*Ugly ass albino Ellen DeGeneres impersonator*  
*Trolls' targets*  
*People like Charlotte*  
*Sydney truck driver*  
*Serial troll*  
*Slut*  
*Real life you*  
*Internet you*  
*Fair game*  
*Users*  
*People like you*  
*People targeted by trolls*  
*Reasonable people*  
*Gen Y*  
*A generation*  
*The world*  
*Anyone who has taken offence*

Some of these are demographic categories ('a generation', 'Gen Y', and 'twenty-year-old' as an instance thereof), while some are occupational ('TV host', 'Sydney truck driver'). Some are universal ('the world'); some ('internet you', 'real life you', 'users') are open to incumbency, while some are indexical and particularised ('you cunt'). The most compelling categories are not precisely synonymous (as e.g. 'online bullies', 'online tormentors', and 'Twitter trolls' would initially appear to be), rather, they are 'transforms' of each other, and serve to co-elaborate each other in relation to their various predicated activities. For instance, 'victims', 'people targeted by trolls', and 'people he doesn't know' do this – with respect to each other, with respect to a troll, and thereby, with respect to a moral definition of trolling as problematic. To conduct categorisation is to assemble morally consequential descriptions. It is out of this relational co-elaboration or transforming that the 'socio-logical' and moral fabric of the segment is woven.

These, then, are membership categorisations:

*commonsense units of identification for referring to people in speech. These membership categorisations (along with the rules for their application) are conventionally grouped together into membership categorisation devices (M.C.D.s). So, for example, the M.C.D. 'gender' collects together the categorisations 'male' and 'female', the M.C.D. 'family' collecting together the categories 'mother', 'father', 'daughter', 'son' etc (Wowk, 1984: 76).*

Through this set, we have a membership categorisation device, which we could call 'parties to a trolling'. On the one hand is the larger set, the trollees ('victims', 'trolls' targets' and so on), of which a particular subset ('celebrities like Guy Sebastian and Jack Vidgen', 'people like Charlotte') is newsworthy. This is a category generalised 'up' out of the particular. On the other are the trolls, who are also composed from a larger set, 'a generation' in fact, where this has certain implications for the future, given they possess 'the ability to scream whatever they want to the world with complete anonymity and often no repercussions' (02:35). Trollee and troll comprise a relational pair. The exchanges occurring between these two groups are to be assessed by an assumed audience ('reasonable people', 'the world', 'anyone who has taken offence'), which likely extends to the viewers of the segment. These categories are 'available to anyone to see'. They are recognisable and as it were 'canonical', and not unlike other membership categorisation devices we know, for instance, 'parties to an offence' in crime reporting, where there is an offender, a victim, a witness and so on (Watson, 1997: 83).

The idea is not that we are all somehow walking around with an indefinite number of such devices in our heads, waiting to have them activated. What will stand as a category and what will stand as a relation and thereby a device is a local members' matter, artfully accomplished and parsed:

categories do not reflect pre-discursive entities that are 'out there somewhere' and which members use to make sense of what is happening. Rather, what constitutes a category, and the predicates (i.e., expectable features, characteristics, behaviours, states of mind etc.) that accompany categories, are locally produced and are designed to 'do' social actions ... there is nothing a priori about the association of certain predicates with certain categories (Clifton, 2009: 3).

Categories are 'inference-rich', and it is in the unfolding of events that particular inferences and relations are topicalised and rendered relevant. This is done with extraordinary economy. Even from the title of the segment, 'Charlotte Dawson fights back against trolls', we can understand that 'parties to a trolling' is coming into effect, and that Dawson occupies the trollee role. We can work inferentially back to her categorial incumbency from the activity she is engaged in: her 'fighting back' allows us to understand she has been attacked at some previous point by trolls, and even allows us to understand that this previous attack was somehow both public and (until now) obscured from our view. This, after all, must be at least one of the reasons why the fighting back is of current interest: because events on Twitter are being imbued with a novel moral character by being presented (and rectified) in another medium.

These three principals to the drama, then, as members of their respective categories and as a collective in the device 'parties to a trolling', have category-bound predicates, agencies, and activities attributed to them, for which they are (and can be shown and held to be) responsible. The establishment of relations between categories, and the moral development and inflection of categories through their various predicates, is the means by which the segment does its work (as when 'troll' is modified by 'serial'). Consider again the opening statement: 'Charlotte Dawson meets one of the trolls who sent her abusive messages on Twitter while she recovered from a suicide attempt'. Charlotte Dawson is an individual. The troll is a representative of a larger group. 'Trollness' is articulated through the predicate 'sending abusive messages', where the recipient being predicated as 'recovering from a suicide attempt' compounds the abuse. That trolling should be held to be morally repugnant is evidenced not only in this framing, or by the offending tweets, but also in predication of Dawson's response, which is to 'expose'. Predicate and category are then conflated: 'It's just exposing the nasty. It's not bullying you, it's exposing you for what you are' (01:58). 'What you are' here, what trolls are, is 'nasty' (and asserting as much, Dawson is shown pointing out, is not bullying).

Of course, everyone is a member of many categories at any particular point in time. In addition to the categories she occupied in the segment, Charlotte Dawson was also a resident of Sydney, a daughter, a person raised in New Zealand, a reality TV personality and so on. But part of the dynamic drive of the segment is around disjunctive incumbency. That is to say, incumbents of the categories 'TV host', 'people like Charlotte', 'celebrities like Guy Sebastian and Jack Vidgen' are simultaneously occupying the categories 'victims' and 'people targeted by trolls'. They become so by being predicated as 'sluts', 'cunts', and 'ugly ass albino Ellen DeGeneres impersonators'. It is even suggested that they might be 'fair game' for this. That such things could happen is clearly indicative of a problem in the world warranting attention for Seven News; it is what Baker (using as an example a headline description of 'Killer Sheep') refers to as 'category-predicate anomaly' (2000: 103). But this is compounded by the incumbencies held by the trolls: an 'online tormentor' can be shown to be a 'twenty-year-old' or a 'Sydney truck driver' (as opposed to say, 'university student', 'loved son', 'forthright media critic' or whatever other categories the trolls could be described as occupying).

These categories then are imbued differentially with status and other moral attributes and hierarchically organised, such that they are embedded in the very structure of the interaction we are shown in the Seven News segment. Jodie Speers, at the point of her intervention in defence of Dawson, acts as aligned and critical witness to the exchange between Dawson and Shields. The other witness to the interaction, who does not speak, would appear to be Shields's employer (who might conceivably have had an interest in the twenty-two thousand now apparently aware of the location of his business and the context of this awareness). In the very articulation of what the entitlements of parties to a trolling are, it is their differential categorial status which gives warrant for Charlotte Dawson to speak over Caspian Shields, as it is differential status which renders salient a particular topicality to Ian Cameron's membership of the occupation 'Sydney truck driver'. It is also their differential status which justifies Dawson's summation having, in moral terms, the 'last word'.

Then, of course, there are the typifications which instantiate and thereby define trolling in the segment: 'you cunt' (in Dawson's ventriloquised 'real life' trolling of Jordan McGuire), 'fucking cunt', 'ugly ass albino Ellen DeGeneres impersonator', and 'slut'. These are also categories. They are, effectively, derogatory categories of the device: 'gender'. Within the segment, their public application is the predicate allowing for the adequacy of the categorisation of trolls as such. In this instance, this is how the work of trolling is done and recognised as being done.

Where Dawson was presented as comfortably 'giving as good as she got' in this respect, the potential scope for problematising this use of gender in these tweets was passed over by Seven News. The question for them was essentially the question of motive: why troll? Why troll 'people like Charlotte'? The search for motive is expressed and given normative shape across the two axes of particularisation and categorisation, where specific trollees are identified and individualised (Guy Sebastian, Jack Vidgen), and yet where particular individual trolls can be made to stand for their collective category: trolls, who are in turn of 'a generation'. Trolls are an undifferentiated mass; celebrities are uncommon individuals. Where 'victim' is an incongruous, troubling, and unseemly category for 'celebrities like Guy Sebastian', 'twenty-year-old' or 'Sydney truck driver' are incidental incumbencies for trolls.

The interesting possibility for the viewer, and for us, is that these categories are precisely those which constitute 'reasonable people' and 'the world'. As Rapley points out, 'ambiguity is a central resource for both speakers and analysts' (2012: 325). What will be the social and moral consequences, Seven News allow us to ponder, if, when 'reasonable people' have the means of publicly expressing their views, they choose to utilise these means, and thereby contribute to public discourse, with such actions as calling Jack Vidgen an 'ugly ass albino Ellen DeGeneres impersonator'?

We are in a position now to take stock, and consider what it is that membership categorisation analysis has to offer as opposed to the more conventional account presented in the first part of the paper.

It should be evident from the above that talk about trolling is a way of describing an activity in the world which gives a certain moral shape to the world. Any analysis of the ascription of trolling does membership categorisation, as does any invocation of trolling. We can identify the means of conducting the conventional form of interpretation in the first section of this paper through specifying the categories through which it is conducted in the second. That is to say, the play of categories, predicates and relations constituting the device 'parties to a trolling' is anterior, tacit to, and mobilised in any account of what trolling 'really means'. Just as trolling is produced meaningfully in the segment, the work of justifying an argument that the segment shows how the public debate about trolling in Australia is 'really about' the public sphere, or moral panic, or risk (or indeed something else), lies in the use of this device. To say with reference to the Seven News segment that it is about a perceived threat to norms of deliberation in the public sphere is to point, for example, to how trolls are predicated as having 'the ability to scream whatever they want to the world with complete anonymity and often no repercussions'. To say with reference to the segment that it is about moral panic is to point, for example, at the transformation of 'troll' into 'user', and the implication that any user is a potential troll. To say that it is

about discourses of risk is to point, for example, to the announcement directed at 'PEOPLE TARGETED BY TROLLS', in a context where such targeting has been associated with 'at risk' populations (where suicidality as a state is being consistently and repeatedly predicated to such people).

Talking about trolling is not a neutral 'capture' of the world, it is part and parcel of that world and a way of shaping the world as well. This is how we accountably talk the world into existence. Disregarding this, or arguing otherwise, is 'very much like complaining that if the walls of a building were gotten out of the way one could see better what was keeping the roof up' (Garfinkel, 1967: 22). Naming behaviour as trolling is not deploying an objective and stable descriptor to convey a meaning about a social practice which is somehow itself before we get to it, it is a means of producing social practice itself as meaningful. This goes for any ordinary members 'in the wild' whose accounts are available to us, including accounts which seek to explain what trolling 'really means' in conventional academic terms. In any instance, constitutive categories will be invoked, topicalised, and assigned in order to get that work done. As networked interactional phenomena, trolling and discussion of it are notable in that, occurring as they do and where they do, they are amenable to such scrutiny and analysis.

In turn, how we interpret the segment, other instances of trolling, and the issue of trolling at large, depends contingently on our incumbency of or affiliation with various categories: men and women, social conservatives, trolls, recipients of verbal abuse, proponents of freedom of speech, regular Reddit readers, mental health survivors, members of 'Gen Y' or whatever. Without even a rudimentary grasp of how these kinds of description are invoked, applied, and rendered salient and sensible, we have no means of determining what is happening when behaviour is categorised as trolling, whether such categorisation is appropriate, or perhaps most importantly, what that categorisation is being used to effect. If we want to understand what trolling is and what people are using the category to do (for example, what kinds of changes in the world the category might be used to advocate for), it seems a good idea to attend to the work that we and other members put in to producing it as a category.

## Biographical note

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-156 Hacking the Social: Internet Memes, Identity Antagonism, and the Logic of Lulz

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### **Abstract:**

4chan and reddit are participatory media collectives undergirded by a “logic of lulz” that favours distanced irony and critique. It often works at the expense of core identity categories like race and gender. However, the logic need not be entirely counterproductive to public discourse. Provided that diverse identities find voice instead of exclusion, these sites may facilitate vibrant, agonistic discussion instead of disenfranchising antagonism. In order to assess this potential for productive agonism, I undertook a critical discourse analysis of these collectives. Emphasising the image memes they produce, I evaluated discourses on race and gender. Both race and gender representations were dominated by familiar stereotypes and partial representations. However, while dissenting perspectives on race were repressed or excluded, dissenting perspectives on gender were vocalised and contested. The ‘logic of lulz’ facilitated both dominance and counter, each articulated with heavy reliance on irony and critique. This logic ambiguously balanced agonism and antagonism, but contestation provided sharper engagement than repression.

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*'A troll exploits social dynamics like computer hackers exploit security loopholes...'* (Adrian Chen, 2012 October 12)

In October 2012, reddit – a popular link aggregation service and public discussion forum – was embroiled in a prominent controversy. Adrian Chen, a journalist for the news site Gawker, had just revealed the 'offline' identity of Violentacrez, one of reddit's 'most reviled characters but also one of its most beloved users' (Chen, 2012 October 12). Violentacrez, who Chen calls 'the biggest troll on the web', was responsible for reddit pages (called 'subreddits') like 'r/Jailbait' (sexualised photos of young girls) and 'r/Creepshots' (sexualised photos of women taken in public without their consent). Chen accuses Violentacrez of releasing 'an unending fountain of racism, porn, gore, misogyny, incest, and exotic abominations yet unnamed' to reddit. To Chen, Violentacrez 'hacked' social dynamics with his posts, exploiting the reddit collective for his own amusement.

The unmasking of Violentacrez (who turned out to be an office worker from Texas) inspired extensive debate about the nature and role of public discourse on reddit. Some condemned Chen for 'doxxing' Violentacrez, claiming that anonymity online is equivalent to a First Amendment right, and should not be undermined even when that right is used irresponsibly. Others countered that those posting to r/Creepshots hadn't bothered with consent; why should these posters be afforded more control of their mediated presence than the girls they exploited?

The debate stirred. Prominent subreddits like 'r/Politics' responded to Chen's article by banning links to Gawker's network of sites (including Jezebel, Gizmodo, and Kotaku). In response to that censorship, the metacommentary subreddit 'r/CircleJerk' began ONLY allowing Gawker network links. Accusations bounced back and forth between participants on 'r/MensRights' (labeled as 'a place for those who wish to discuss men's rights and the ways said rights have been infringed on') and 'r/ShitRedditSays' (which catalogues 'bigoted, creepy, misogynistic, transphobic, racist, homophobic' content from other subreddits). After much discussion – and little resolution – the controversy eventually quieted and Violentacrez retreated from prominence. Left in his wake were questions of identity, antagonism, voice, and exclusion in an ostensibly 'participatory' media collective.

The goal of this essay is an empirical assessment of these questions, focusing on content and tone in mediated public discourse. It is an analysis of 'the logic of lulz' persistent on a pair of ever-vibrant and increasingly prominent participatory media collectives: reddit and 4chan. As it did during the Violentacrez debate, this ironic and critical logic often antagonizes the core identity categories of race and gender, essentialising marginalised others. However, the logic can also be employed to 'troll' those categories themselves,

at the expense of those invested in their rigid distinctions. Representations of race and gender will be analysed here, asking what ambivalent identity politics mean for mediated public participation.

Further, this logic is multimodal. It is expressed in both text and image, especially in the 'image memes' that are shared and remixed according to subcultural standards and individual creative expression on these sites. These images – and the discourses that surround them – starkly underscore the social dynamics evident in these collectives. I've argued internet memes constitute a formal 'media lingua franca', bearing multiplicities of content to dispersed collectives (Milner, 2013a). They are also aesthetic manifestations of the logic of lulz. Image memes will be of central focus here, asking how they're employed in race and gender discourse on 4chan and reddit.

These twin emphases in mind, the following section will tie image memes to the logic of lulz in participatory media collectives. The sections after will analyse race and gender representations on 4chan and reddit, arguing that irony-laden communicative practices can both reinforce essentialisms and disrupt them. The final section will assess the merits and limitations of this logic and the practices it affords.

In the sections that follow, this essay evaluates racism and misogyny akin to that at the heart of the Violentacrez debate, and therefore presents racist and misogynistic discourses. Even if it's done in the service of critical assessment, reproducing these discourses continues their circulation, and therefore may continue to normalise their antagonisms and marginalisations. The goal here is a frank discussion of the ambivalent potential of mediated popular participation. Meaghan Morris ([1988] 2007) warns against cultural studies' tendencies to either emphasise "banality and fatality" to the point of cynicism on the one hand or to "ventriloquize the popular" until it becomes detached and

benign on the other. The arguments on race, class, and gender herein could lean either way. Therefore, in this essay I will assess the voice and exclusion embedded in the banal, while attempting to avoid the trap of normalising and sterilising everyday antagonism. This in mind, I hope to highlight what Morris calls the 'aggressive, critical voices embedded in the grit and hardness of day to day life' (119).

## Mememes, Lulz, and the Mediated Public

‘Internet memes’ were a prominent part of the Violentacrez debate, as they now are with many discussions on participatory media collectives. Limor Shifman (2013) calls internet memes ‘units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by internet users, creating a shared cultural experience’ (367). The term can refer to oft-repeated phrases reappropriated from popular culture or subcultural history (like ‘that escalated quickly’ or ‘consequences will never be the same’), to remixed videos (like YouTube parodies of ‘Leave Britney Alone’ or ‘Gangnam Style’), or to captured performative acts (like ‘Tebowing’ or ‘Planking’). However, image memes – small, still picture and animated GIF files extensively circulated, transformed, and incorporated into public discussion – are especially prolific in participatory collectives. These memes are easy to produce and



Figure 1: original image of reddit General Manager Erik Martin (which TIME itself took from reddit content), an initial graphic manipulation, and a subsequent ‘image macro’ caption used on r/ShitRedditSays

can be agilely applied to diverse ends. Their ironic tone can quickly be employed for political or social debate, as I argued was the case during vibrant mediated conversation at the height of the ‘Occupy Wall Street’ protest movement (Milner, 2013b). Memes evidenced ‘pop polyvocality’; they were a pop cultural common tongue that facilitated the diverse engagement of many voices.

The ironic lingua franca predominant in memes can afford political edge. For instance, when reddit General Manager Erik Martin became a candidate for *TIME Magazine*’s ‘TIME 100 Poll’ in 2012 (TIME Staff, 2012 March 29), participants on r/ShitRedditSays took the photo accompanying the nomination and remixed it to reflect a sentiment they found appropriate for the site. When controversies swirled around subreddits like r/Jailbait and r/Creepshots, the remixed image could then be specifically captioned (fig. 2, fig.3).



Figure 2. Erik Martin Meme - an initial graphic manipulation.

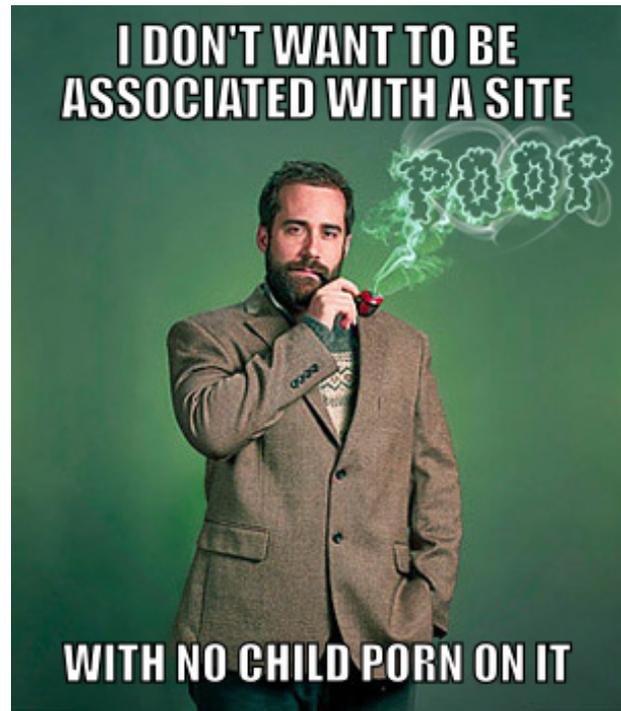


Figure 3. Erik Martin Meme - a subsequent 'image macro' caption used on r/ShitRedditSays

Through this process, Erik Martin's image becomes a visual template; it becomes an 'image macro' or 'stock character macro'. From an established template, participants add unique text to make a joke. Macro humour derives from what Shifman (2011) calls 'incongruity', a clash between expectation and experience. These clashes often occur by first setting up the joke at the top of the image ("I don't want to be associated with a site..." in fig. 3). Next, the 'stock character' in the middle of the image (reddit's Erik Martin in fig. 1) provides a visual ellipsis, a pause between set up and punch line as readers scan past it and associate it with prior context and the specific text of the image. Last, the punch line rests at the very bottom of the text ("...with no child porn on it" in fig. 3). As participants on r/ShitRedditSays and beyond created, circulated, and transformed these images, memetic remix afforded collective satire. These participants employed a logic of lulz to make political points.

Whitney Phillips (2012) says 'lulz' – a derivation of 'lol' or 'laughing out loud' – labels on participatory collectives a detached and dissociated amusement at others' distress. Conceptually, it's the fundamental logic of trolling, a discursive strand Phillips says is wrought with the 'self-reflexive' and the 'absurdist', an 'opaque influence' on these sites. 'Both ubiquitous and invisible,' Phillips says, 'trolling permeates the online ecosystem' (2). Trolling performs the work of both 'cultural critic' and 'cultural syphon', using humour and antagonism to rile angry responses and shift the content and tone of the conversation.

However, as Phillips (2012) explains, even if trolling can be ‘equal opportunity laughter’, it still disproportionately targets minorities and women. This fits with Lisa Nakamura’s (2002) observations about the exclusionary force of dominant race and gender identities in participatory media. The harshest test of the logic of lulz is how it is used to engage the most core of identities. If the tone of these representations is exclusionary, then there is cause for concern. However, if these identity categories intertwine in polyvocal public discourse, then perhaps there’s public utility in the logic of lulz.

In short, exclusionary *antagonism* should be less evident than adversarial *agonism*. Chantal Mouffe (2005, 2009) defines antagonism as ‘relations between enemies’, but sees a healthier agonism in ‘relations between adversaries’. She argues that ‘conflict in liberal democratic societies cannot and should not be eradicated’ (2009: 551). The collective reality of public life necessitates the existence of factionist discourse, since ‘when dealing with political identities, which are always collective identities, we are dealing with the creation of an ‘us’ that can only exist by its demarcation from a ‘them’ ’ (550). Agonistic conflict is the core of a ‘counterpublic’ model of mediated public discourse (see Lincoln Dahlberg, 2011). Counterpublics succeed when they can utilise ‘critical-reflexive spaces of communicative interaction’ to ‘contest dominant discourses that frame hegemonic practice and meaning’ (Dahlberg 861).

But counterpublic critique necessitates a lack of dominant abuse or repression of minority perspectives. To Mouffe (2005), agonism is achieved by embracing public participation that encourages adversarial ‘pluralism’, acknowledging the equal rights of disparate perspectives to clash. Participation must be premised on the ‘values of liberty and equality for all’ even if it also embraces ‘dissent about their interpretation’ (121). Antagonism rejects those values outright, pushing voices out of the public sphere. For the logic of lulz afford vibrant, agonistic public discourse, multiple perspectives and counter perspectives should be evident. Voice should be evident over exclusion, even if that voice is not monolithic in content or tone.

Analysing communicative specifics will illuminate public discourse in the participatory media collectives that afford both identity exclusion and pop polyvocality. The logic of lulz – and the trolling that most explicitly evidences it – reflects the ambivalent potential of this contested commons. To Kelly Bergstrom (2011) ‘to troll is to have negative intents, to wish harm or at least discomfort on one’s audience. To be trolled is to be made a victim, to be caught along in the undertow and be the butt of someone else’s joke’. To Phillips (2012) trolling need not be ‘inherently regressive’; it’s all about ‘who uses the tools’. Gabriella Coleman (2010) says the mischievous engagement of the mediated ‘trickster’ may serve a political purpose. Violentacrez is an extreme example of Bergstrom’s (2011) harmful

antagonistic troll, but Coleman frames trolls in more forgiving – if not wholly prosocial – terms:

*cunning, deceit, lying, provocateur, mischief, audacious, thief, play, shrewdness, audacity, grotesque, over the top, appetite, shocking, fun, delight, wit, trap, subversive, ability, wanderer.*

By this conception, the practice of trolling may serve public ends, creating discomfort, but also productive engagement with political adversaries and othered identities.

The rest of this essay will apply these questions on memes, identity, and lulz to representations of race and gender on 4chan and reddit. Its ultimate question is how exclusion and voice operate within the logic of lulz.

## 4chan, Reddit, and Analysing Lulz

For a broader project on mediated cultural participation, in 2011 and 2012 I undertook an analysis of participatory media collectives where discussion online is at its most vibrant, disembodied, and raw. Collecting discourse most heavily between April and December 2011, I wove a corpus of thousands of discussion threads and their accompanying images. Drawing from that project, this essay addresses two prominent, interrelated, yet distinct participatory collectives: 4chan and reddit. On 4chan and reddit, members of the mediated public consistently employ a logic of lulz. As they do, participants on each site extensively represent race and gender in their discourse.

4chan is a notorious ‘image board’ network. While the site is divided into a multiple boards – forums for a multitude of interests from anime to fitness – its ‘random’ board (known as ‘/b/’ for its URL: 4chan.org/b/) is the most active and raw. /b/ is built on the premise of anonymity. Participants are not required to post with any pseudonym or credentials, and most don’t. Threads are not archived (becoming inaccessible as new threads push them away) and are scantily organised on the barebones site. The board comes with a boilerplate warning at the top of its page, which reminds participants that trolling is its guiding aesthetic. ‘The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood,’ the warning has long read. ‘Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact’.

In the shadow of this warning, 4chan has developed an ‘anything goes’ reputation. It is avant-garde or lewd, depending on the person being asked and the thread being read. This environment of anonymous public discourse means extensive engagement with race and gender identities.

Reddit – the epicenter of the Violentacrez debate – is increasingly notable in mediated public discourse. Like 4chan, it also contains boards (its subreddits) devoted to multiple topics. In reddit’s case these subreddits are innumerable, since participants create them. This affords the ability for both r/ShitRedditSays and r/MensRight to exist in the same media landscape, and operate within a similar lingua franca, even if each subreddit can develop its own unique memes, norms, and discourses.

On reddit, new posts – and comments within those posts – can be ‘upvoted’ and ‘downvoted’ by other users. Upvotes mean ‘karma points’ for posters, quantifying their contribution to the site. The highest-voted comments reach the top of the post, the highest-voted responses to those comments reach the top position under parent comments. The highest-voted posts reach the tops of their subreddits. Those top posts are seen on the ‘front page’ of the site, based either on the subreddits a participant subscribes to, or, if not logged in, by a rank of default subreddits. Reddit tends to inspire complex and intricate discussion, but its upvote system can potentially contribute to a ‘tyranny of the masses’, pressing down unpopular perspectives until they’re hidden from default view.

Taken together, 4chan and reddit are each vibrant sites of mediated public discourse. They each prominently feature a logic of lulz and extensively engage with race and gender identities. All this means that they are exemplary research sites in an analysis of how social dynamics are hacked and identities collide in participatory media collectives.

In order to assess the multimodal commentary and representations on these sites, I have employed critical discourse analysis (Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, 2009). Critical discourse analysis is sensitive to the subtle and powerful relations between communication created (in all its multimodal dimensions) and ideology reinforced. Exclusionary, dominant ideologies discursively undermine broad cultural participation. Antagonistic ideology is antithetical to agonistic engagement. Assessing micro-level representations regarding race and gender provides a means for evaluating identity antagonism on these sites. The next two sections will undertake that assessment.

## Race, Poe's Law, and Ambivalent Irony

Participatory media collectives have, historically, been white and privileged. In Lori Kendall's (2002) analysis of a 'Multiuser Domain' called BlueSky MUD, she finds whiteness is assumed unless explicitly stated otherwise, as is class cohesion. Likewise, Nakamura (2002) finds that in Excite chat communities:

*The organizing identity does not include 'white' as a category; it is not on the menu at all. This omission is a disturbing example of the colonialist or imperialist gaze that sets up a racial other; whiteness is defined by its invisibility rather than its presence. The racial category of 'whiteness' is assumed to be a default option, thus creating a guided reading of the web that assumes that the reader is white. (105)*

Ronald Jackson, Chang Shin, and Keith Wilson (2000) call whiteness a 'constructed centrality'. The problem is that 'if whiteness is unmarked, it becomes distributed throughout social spaces and eventually functions as a 'universal insider' ' (72). Because of this:

*White people do not have to change who they are, how they talk, or how they behave. The talk and behavior of whites occupy a legitimised cultural space of social interaction, in which the identity of whiteness is acknowledged as normal and standard. (82)*

Kendall (2002) finds whites have similar statuses on BlueSky. BlueSky participants defend their lack of racism by arguing they hardly notice if anyone they talk to is 'black'. After all, how could they in a 'disembodied' online environment? But 'in these statements, the ultimate test of whether race matters online is the ability of black people to pass unnoticed as black. This emphasises the presumed desirability of hiding blackness and the assumption that people online are white' (210). It also boils race down to an easy binary: white or black, white or not white.

This constructed centrality is why a logic of lulz can reinforce oppressive ideologies, and repress minority value in the discourse. Michael Billig (2001) analyses how KKK joke sites support oppressive ideology with antagonistic humour. Because of this, 'the person finding the joke funny is implicitly accepting these stereotyped assumptions about the nature of the other' (277). Phillips (2012) finds similar practices in her analysis of 4chan's /b/.

Here, participants on both 4chan and reddit employed stereotypes for quick shortcuts to ironic humour. Further, racial representations were partial, and privileged the constructed centrality of whiteness without much contestation from participants.

Race was constructed on these sites multimodally, commonly mixing image and text in representations. For instance, one image macro series, called Successful Black Man, was particularly popular on reddit. [\[1\]](#) Like other image macros (see fig. 1, fig. 5), Successful Black Man is at its core a visual template. From this template, participants add unique text to make a joke. The macro is derived from a photo on the stock image website Shutterstock entitled “Handsome African American business man dressed in a black suit”. In the Successful Black Man macros the image inspired, a racist premise is established in the top clause of the added text; the bottom clause inverts that premise to deliver the punch line. ‘These streets are mine...’ the top clause in one example reads; ‘...investing in residential development is a great idea’, reads the bottom clause.

Steeped in stereotype, Successful Black Man could further ingrain inegalitarian representations (e.g., ‘You want to get iced...tea after another round of golf?’, ‘I do not tip...less than 20 percent’, ‘I can’t read...this newspaper without my coffee’). Familiarity with racist tropes is necessary to get the joke. If common perceptions that blacks are uneducated, cheap, and violent didn’t exist, neither would Successful Black Man. The name of the macro itself creates a racially-presumptuous association. If a black man is successful, he requires a modifier in front of his name to set him apart from a ‘normal’ black man. He’s novel enough to premise a joke. Successful Black Man is the exception that proves the rule. The title makes apparent invisible associations between blackness and a lack of ‘success’ (defined narrowly and materialistically). It also assumes a readership likely to see an ‘other’ in Successful Black Man.

On the other hand, the macro – in its play on stereotypes – might undermine them. The turn of phrase that comes with the second clause punch line lampoons tendencies to unproblematically accept negative representations. The humorous incongruity ‘works’ because dominant cultural assumptions lead readers astray. Stereotypes ensure that the class comfort or social responsibility in the second clause creates a clash. That clash works as what Christian Burgers, Margot van Mulken, and Peter Jan Schellens (2012) label an ‘irony marker’, a ‘meta-communicative clue’ that helps readers understand an utterance as ironic. The punch line functions as a ‘reversal of valence between the literal and intended meaning’ (292) of the set up. Readers are trolled by the first clause in the macro, and the bait and switch in the second clause reverses a dominant discourse. The mischief reminds us – in a small way – to not take all stereotypes at face value.

As memetic remix affords the freedom to apply creativity to multiple ends, less ambiguous examples of racism existed on 4chan and reddit. 4chan in particular had a tendency toward racist discourse. On 4chan's /b/ board, broader social conventions regarding race were antagonised for commentary or humour. In discussions of race, polite dynamics were hacked for reaction and play in ways seemingly inconsistent with Mouffe's (2005) criteria for inclusive agonism.

While many racial identities were othered, people of African descent bore the brunt of the critique. For instance, in a /b/ thread entitled Community College Negro, racism was the punch line, not the premise. The thread birthed a macro that inverts Successful Black Man, using a different stock image of another black male. This stock character is younger, and smiling in front of a row of lockers. The same juxtaposition between top clause and bottom clause exists as in Successful Black Man, but here it's used to convey underachievement and deviance (e.g., '14 different scholarships..1.3 GPA'). The macro spawned dozens of transformations in its single thread (e.g., 'went to college...just to sell drugs out of dorm room'; 'failing me...is racist'; 'library quiet floor...yelling at La'Shonda'). Successful Black Man conveys what Burgers, van Mulken, and Schellens call 'ironic blame'; the macro begins with a 'negative' set up before a 'positive' reversal. Community College Negro is 'ironic praise'; it begins with a positive set up before a reversal to a social negative. The second clause incongruity brings the punch line back to stereotype, not away from it.

On 4chan, this racism was sometimes 'memetic' itself. It was the stable core by which participants creatively remixed, displaying technological and subcultural literacy. For instance, one 4chan thread proposed readers 'build their fort' based on the original image in Figure Four.

The challenge was for participants to use proficiency and creativity in editing and illustrating to fill in the space between the white 'you' and a horde of threatening minorities. Racism became the premise for a memetic game. Most solutions played on prevalent stereotypes (e.g., putting a child of African descent in front of the minorities to scare of absentee fathers; inserting a sign for 'Wite Wimmins, Fryin' Chikins, n watermelons' with an arrow pointing the other way; a sign that reads 'jobs' here in front of the 'you' character). These images were premised on xenophobic essentialisms of a homogenized outgroup. However, the consensus 'winner' of the thread (fig. 5) did not rely on stereotypes as much as portray the most complex fort from any invading threat.

In the thread, a racist premise was used to encourage humorous contribution. This premise reinforced oppressive ideologies, as was the case in Billig's (2001) study. 4chan posters operated in an environment where racial stereotypes were an understood and largely unchallenged assumption.

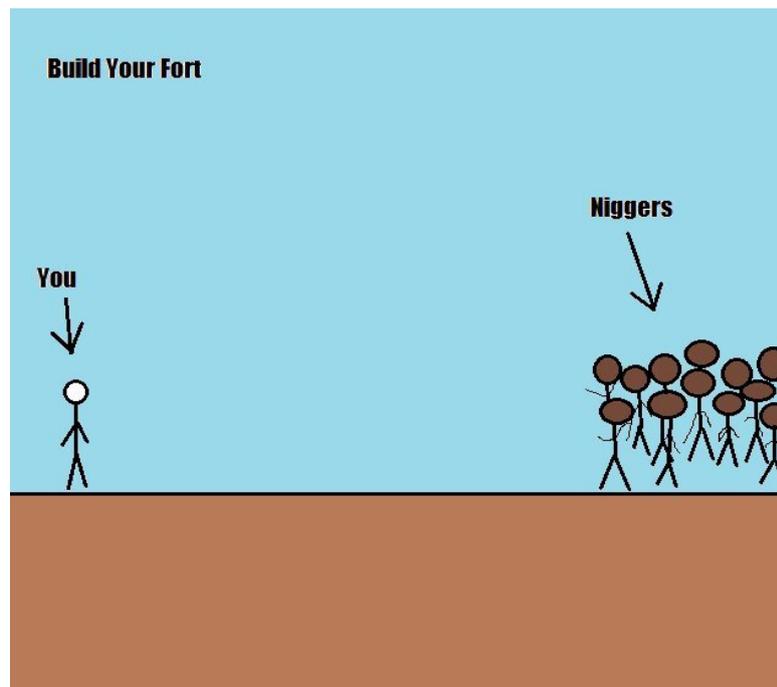


Figure 4. A template posted to 4chan, calling for remix. The premise assumes that participants are white, and that interaction with the uniform minority masses is undesirable.

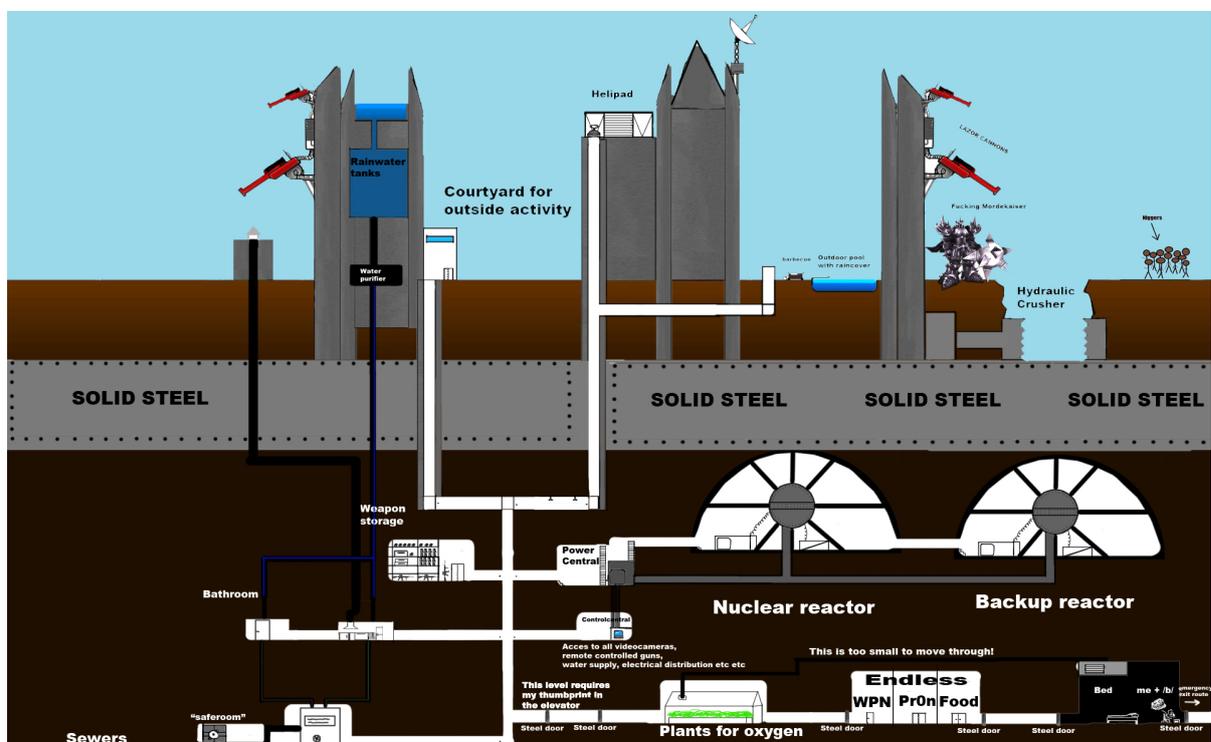


Figure 5. A remix on the premise established in figure two. For this poster, the threat was sufficient enough to merit multiple towers, lasers, underground bunkers, and solid steel reinforcement.

This unchallenged assumption represents a communicative blur inherent to the logic of lulz. The line between playful (if antisocial) irony, satire, and parody and ‘earnest’ racism is difficult to differentiate. Looking at the artifacts alone – and even the threads that accompany them – it’s difficult to gauge intent. The logic of lulz was prevalent enough to blanket a considerable amount of antagonistic discourse in these collectives. The posts above could be the expressions of ‘genuine’ racists; they might also be downplayed as ‘just for the lulz’, a troll on ‘politically correct’ sensibilities. The difficulty in separating ‘ironic’ antagonism from ‘earnest’ antagonism is prevalent enough that it comes with a name in these collectives: Poe’s Law.

According to the participatory media reference site, Know Your Meme (‘Poe’s Law’, undated) Poe’s Law ‘is an internet axiom which states that it is difficult to distinguish extremism from satire of extremism in online discussions unless the author clearly indicates his/her intent’. It was named for a 2005 forum thread on Creationism where a poster going by Poe declared that ‘without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that someone won’t mistake for the genuine article’. The term has become a way for participants to express confusion or ambivalence to seemingly antagonistic content. Poe’s Law – and the ambiguity it represents – indicates the difficulty in parsing out – within the logic of lulz – ‘ironic’ and ‘legitimate’ identity antagonism.

Even /b/’s infamous boilerplate warning is subject to Poe’s Law. The boilerplate claims that ‘the stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact’. In early 2013, a participant on the subreddit dedicated to collecting 4chan content, r/4chan, posted an alleged suicide note from a pilot. The pilot promised that the suicide would come as a plane crash during a full flight. Participants in the thread wondered if the crash would really occur. When one poster cited the boilerplate warning as evidence the suicide clearly wouldn’t happen, another responded by asking ‘you don’t seriously believe that cop-out disclaimer is always true, do you?’ The discussion turned to difficulties in parsing out the ‘bullshit’ on 4chan. No matter the message, participants in these collectives lived in the shadow of Poe’s Law.

Poe’s Law is born from an ambiguous ‘stance’. Shifman (2013) argues that beyond content (what a meme says) and form (how a meme looks), we must consider its stance (‘information memes convey about their own communication’, 367). How memes stand in relation to each other and broader discourses is revealed in their ‘participation structures’ (which voices are included and silenced), their ‘keying’ (the tone and style they adopt), and their ‘communicative function’ (whether its emotive, phatic, poetic, etc.). Seemingly racist content or form may be an attempt to ‘key’ satire through a hyperbolic, antagonistic

tone, but may also reinforce unequal participation structures in doing so. The banal can carry both simultaneously. When content and form are so grounded in lulz, communicative function becomes ambiguous.

Indeed, it may not even be possible or helpful to try to separate ‘true’ identity antagonism in these collectives from antagonism ‘just for the lulz’. As Patricia Lange (2006) argues about ‘flaming’ (expressions of directed anger online in some ways a vernacular ancestor to trolling), declaring content a ‘true troll’ would require knowing both communicative intent and public reception. In the absence of either, we only have best-guess speculations. Hence, Poe’s Law.

The blur between irony and earnestness makes room for discourse otherwise impermissible. The logic of lulz combined with the repression of alternative perspectives



Figure 6. An image of Pope John Paul II annotated with slang. The term’s use might have been a nod to the ‘coolness’ of black terminology (along with common phrases like ‘haters gonna hate’ and ‘u mad’)

meant there was a free use of racist language and imagery on 4chan’s /b/ board. Epithets more broadly impermissible were not off limits. Rampant use of the racial slurs on 4chan may have just been ‘for the lulz’, but it still represented a hacked social dynamic, one that favoured a white centrality. Racist discourses helped establish a participation structure premised on repressions of diverse voice. But derivation of these slurs was also common on /b/, and may have perhaps keyed less antagonism. For instance, ‘Nigga’ – with the ‘soft a’ of the ingroup – was often used on 4chan (see fig. 6). 4chan consistently reappropriated hip-hop vernacular. However, the joke in figure four comes from an incongruity that reinforces stereotypes, from associating an unlikely and ill-fitting source with the phrase. The term was often placed in macros over images of white men, underscoring its irony. As in Lange’s (2006) case, reading intent is difficult given the ambiguous logic of the forum.

Still, overtly racist discourse was prevalent on 4chan's /b/; minorities were consistently marked for their minority status. In the case of people of African descent, those markings relied on stereotype (e.g. criminality, stupidity, and savage masculinity). Even if Poe's Law and Lange remind us it's hard to assess ideological intent in discourse, racist labels and attributions still discursively trapped a minority identity through antagonistic stereotype. Like the 'build your fort' thread (figs. 4, 5), their stance does the discursive work of separating a human 'us' from a savage 'them'.

The tone of this discourse precluded the adversarial encounter Mouffe (2005) finds so essential to productive agonism. The discourse cast an enemy. In the voices excluded, in the humour employed, and in perspectives forwarded, an outgroup was consistently implied. Poe's Law or no, lulz or no, the discourse was antagonistic. Further, it was antagonistic to an outsider counterpublic not vocally present to counter.

Stereotypes were levelled against majority populations on 4chan too. However, in line with Nakamura's (2002) findings, they implied the white and Western are the invisible insider. For instance, in common threads about differences between Europe and America (lines drawn along the two dominant population centres on the site), Americans were critiqued for being unintelligent or overweight, Europeans for being weak or pretentious. These critiques, even if they featured disparaging images of people with light skin, were levelled at national differences, rather than racial differences. The races of minorities were emphasised and critiqued explicitly; critiques of whites did not typically emphasise race.

It may be easy to dismiss 4chan as anomalous, given its level of explicit racism. On reddit, racial discussion was less antagonistic and less explicit. Still, race was a marked category for minorities in reddit image memes and was an invisible category for whites. Instead, whites were often used to stand in for the class comfortable. One example of such class critique popular on reddit is a macro called Sheltering Suburban Mom (fig. 7) based on an image of romance novel writer Carly Phillips. [2] There is no clear indication how she became associated with the meme.

Sheltering Suburban Mom is the prototypical cul-de-sac Christian, a socially-conservative, white, middle-class American who does not see the hypocrisies she posits (e.g., 'supports war on drugs...can't live without valium', 'claims not to be racist...tells son he can't date a black girl'; 'pro life...unless it's her daughter's baby'). The macro critiques a political and social class sheltered from complex inequalities. However, it reinforces the invisibility of dominant whiteness in its critique of class.



Figure 5: Sheltering Suburban Mom, an image macro series. The macro series – whose name marks her class status, not her race – is the macro manifestation of the stereotypical, detached suburbanite.

In the case of another popular macro, called High Expectations Asian Father, racial minority and class comfort both exists in a single portrayal. [3] However, race is the marked category. The stereotypical high expectations of Asian parents are skewered in the macro (e.g., ‘Facebook?...why don’t you face book and study?’; ‘Asian with no A’s...sin’; ‘B+ on blood test?...failure run through veins’). The emphasis is predominantly on education, a class mobility concern, but race is the marked attributive category. Despite the class emphasis of the content, the title of the macro and the nonstandard English often applied as part of the joke foreground race, not class. While racism may not have been overt on mainline reddit, its discourses still marked race for minorities and made it invisible for whites.

Racial representations on 4chan and reddit had their differences, but operated under similar logics. The racism on 4chan was more explicit, but reddit also perpetuated a white centrality. Both worked to repress difference. A lack of multiple voices engaging – even in conflict – meant one-sided public discourse. The logic of lulz was employed partially and exclusively, and even with Poe’s Law casting doubt on the authenticity of the antagonism, the discourse itself was antagonistic. The next section will assess gender representations on these collectives, which evidenced heavy counterpublic contestation.

## Gender, r/ShitRedditSays, and the Arts of Making Do

Along with being white, participatory media collectives have also historically been male-dominated, both in population and in discourse. These spaces have therefore been masculine, if uniquely masculine. As Charlie Gere (2002) explains:

*The early hackers at MIT and Stanford established one of the central archetypes of computing subculture, which continues to this day, that of the intellectually advanced but socially and sexually awkward male, who is prepared to devote most of his time to an engagement with the possibilities of digital technology, to the exclusion of almost anything else. (132)*

Likewise, Kendall (2002) says that ‘since the 1980s, the previously liminal masculine identity of the nerd has been rehabilitated and partly incorporated into hegemonic masculinity’ (81). Kendall (2002) analyses how participants on the BlueSky MUD joke about their chances with women. She finds that ‘the joke is intended to be on the participants themselves, regarding their nonhegemonic masculinity, but women are the ultimate butts of the joke’ (87). Women are still detached objects, even if they’re unattainable ones. Even in these jokes – meant to be commentary on atypical masculinity – inequality is discursively reproduced.

The problem is masculine forms are, as with race, the constructed centrality dominant in mediated collectives, while feminine forms are the marked minority and ‘thereby highlight the femininity of the person as an essential aspect’ (Klaus Fiedler and Jeannette Schmid, 2001: 264). Such demarcations can mean a hostile environment for marginalised groups, thus souring participatory potential. In this way, a cycle continues which normalises partial forms of understanding. Engaging in these collectives often means performing masculinity, thus embedding the ideologies further.

The discourse that ‘The Internet’ is a male space persists, despite the fact that the number of women and men ‘online’ has been balanced as far back as 2000 (Nakamura, 2002). Phillips (2012) finds the male gaze predominates 4chan, and reddit’s similar reputation for misogyny came out during the Violentacrez debate. Both reddit and 4chan were prone to gender antagonisms. However, gender was also the subject of explicit agonistic discussion. Partial representations of gender were met with contestation from participants explicitly identifying as female. This meant hostile argument, but also agonistic engagement.

Engagement did mean contesting a dominant masculine stance. Gendered language marked females similar to how racial language marked minorities. The phrase ‘bitches love’ was commonly remixed in image memes. It quotes an episode of the show *The Boondocks* where a character is texting and says ‘I sent that bitch a smiley face...bitches love smiley



Figure 8: An annotation of a 1788 painting by Jacques-Louis David entitled *Portrait of Antoine-Laurent Lavoisier and His Wife*. The annotation frames portrait with dismissiveness and exasperation, the hovering female in the image is distracting the male from his rational pursuit. She’s told to ‘get the fuck out (GTFO)’ so he can do his science.

faces'. In memes, it was often applied to male voices like Spider-Man ('I spun that bitch a web...bitches love webs'), William Shakespeare ('I'm writing that bitch a sonnet...bitches love sonnets'), George Washington ('I'll give those bitches freedom...bitches love freedom'). These male characters all somewhat dismissively go about their standard business in order to impress some vague and denigrated female. Other examples of gendered language were more antagonistic (see fig. 8).

Poe's Law haunted gender antagonisms on the site as much as partial representations of race. The caption in figure eleven could be satirising a perceived misogynistic tone of the original work; it could also be adding a layer of sexism less evident without the text. Many examples are hard to brush off as 'just lulz' (see fig. 9).



Figure 9: a two-layered 'Demotivational poster', a play on the aesthetics of common 'motivational posters' that frame a picture in black and offer a motivational phrase in white text under it. The 4chan image offers a pair of misogynistic statements. In this Demotivational, a statement against domestic violence is met with dismissive derision twice over. The effect is jarring. The original image – and the statement it makes against domestic violence – is doubly muted.

The participation structures imbedded in antagonistic memes – marking women for gender, issuing authoritarian commands, and applying denigrating labels –work toward exclusion ('back to the kitchen' was a common phrase; one annotated image reads 'if you watch *Cinderella* backwards, it's about a woman who learns her place'). That these images reflect the dominant discourse – the banal standard – means irony can shelter bigotry. Morris ([1988] 2007) says banality intertwines 'lordly pronouncement' and 'mimetic popular performance' (143). Predominant inequalities are reinscribed in everyday interactions. Lulz or no, 4chan and reddit were wrought with identity antagonism.

Many image memes portrayed women as stupid, irrational, and inconsistent. A macro series called Woman Logic plays on perceptions of hypocrisy in how women think. [4] The incongruity in each is premised on an ironic connection between women's 'logic' and supposedly illogical statements (e.g., 'don't want guys to look at my ass...wear shorts that have words on them'; 'I'm so fat!...wait for compliments'; 'pluck your eyebrows out...draw them back on'). A common image used in the macro features a young, blonde, white girl staring off and lifting her hand up as if to say 'what's the big deal?'. The macro contrasts how 'women' reason and the understood norm of 'sound' logic, the invisible masculine.

These images key a masculine participation structure; the constructed centrality is male. This occurred in conversation as well. On 4chan's /b/ board, it was common practice to tell a female participant posting her picture to also show 'tits or GTFO [get the fuck out]'. In one annotated image, a shot of Vito Corleone from the film *The Godfather* is overlaid with the following command:

*you come to us, hat in hand, with your story of gaia-faggotry and ask for our attention. and yet you do not show the proper respect and offer neither tits or a tasty sammich. the godfather says GTFO.*

The oft-repeated warrant for the demand is that 'there are no girls on the internet', so a female wanting to make her gender identity salient during a discussion must make it physically explicit. The demand reifies the board as a male space. The assumption is that if you're specifically referring to your female gender (or 'your story of gaia-faggotry'), then you must only be looking for validation (or coming to 'ask for our attention').

For these participants, displaying their female body is the demanded penance for the transgression of interrupting the board's invisible masculinity. The process is intentionally antagonistic and coercive to participants who mark themselves as female. In one oft-shared

screenshot, a 4chan participant claims that the only reason to come out as female is to ‘get your girl advantage back’ through sexual manipulation (displaying a common tendency to deny male dominance by arguing ‘pretty girls’ get whatever they want). Therefore displaying that body ‘is, and should be, degrading for you, an admission that the only interesting thing about you is your naked body’.

This tendency echoes an established problem. In Kendall’s (2002) analysis:

*...the gendered social context on BlueSky casts women as outsiders unless and until they prove themselves able to perform masculinities according to the social norms of the group. Women who are able to do so find acceptance within the group, but their acceptance reinscribes masculine norms, which continue to define women as assumed outsiders and outsiders, by definition, as not men. (100)*

On 4chan’s /b/, marking gender meant marking the ‘feminine’ against a male centrality. To be an ‘anon’ (a 4chan slang label for participants in the collective, short for ‘anonymous’) was to be discursively male. To mark one’s self as ‘femanon’ meant reifying outsider status.

Counter-intuitively, another discourse was prevalent alongside discourses of subjugation, violence, and stupidity: ‘the friend zone’. The friend zone is a forced platonic relationship. When one friend wants romance and another doesn’t, the former is in the friend zone. Women who put ‘nice guys’ in the friend zone were accused of abuse, manipulation, and neglect. A macro called Friend Zone Fiona is premised on this perceived injustice. [5] Fiona ‘loves you...like a brother’, ‘totally wants you...to meet the right girl someday’, and ‘invites you over...to fix her computer’. The friend zone discussion was prevalent on reddit, where ‘nice guys’ would often lament their limbo status. Those in the friend zone received sympathy and, in the process, ‘friend-zoning’ girls were villainised. As with the Woman Logic macro, the woman is a prototypical ‘pretty girl’: young, thin, white, and blonde. The image juxtaposes the first clause premise and the second clause punch line to elevate hopes, and then crush them. Addressivity is commonly second person. The nice guy friend (the implied reader and addressee) is left with the scraps of the relationship.

But there were extensive pushbacks against the notion of the friend-zoned nice guy on reddit. Some contended that cross-sex friendship is itself a fulfilling state, that ‘nice guys’ aren’t always so ‘nice’, and that niceness alone is not what keeps a relationship platonic (see fig. 10). Image memes existed that troubled broader reddit conventions, applying a

logic of lulz to respond to dominant perspectives. Memetic humour and irony were tools to counter a dominant discourse.

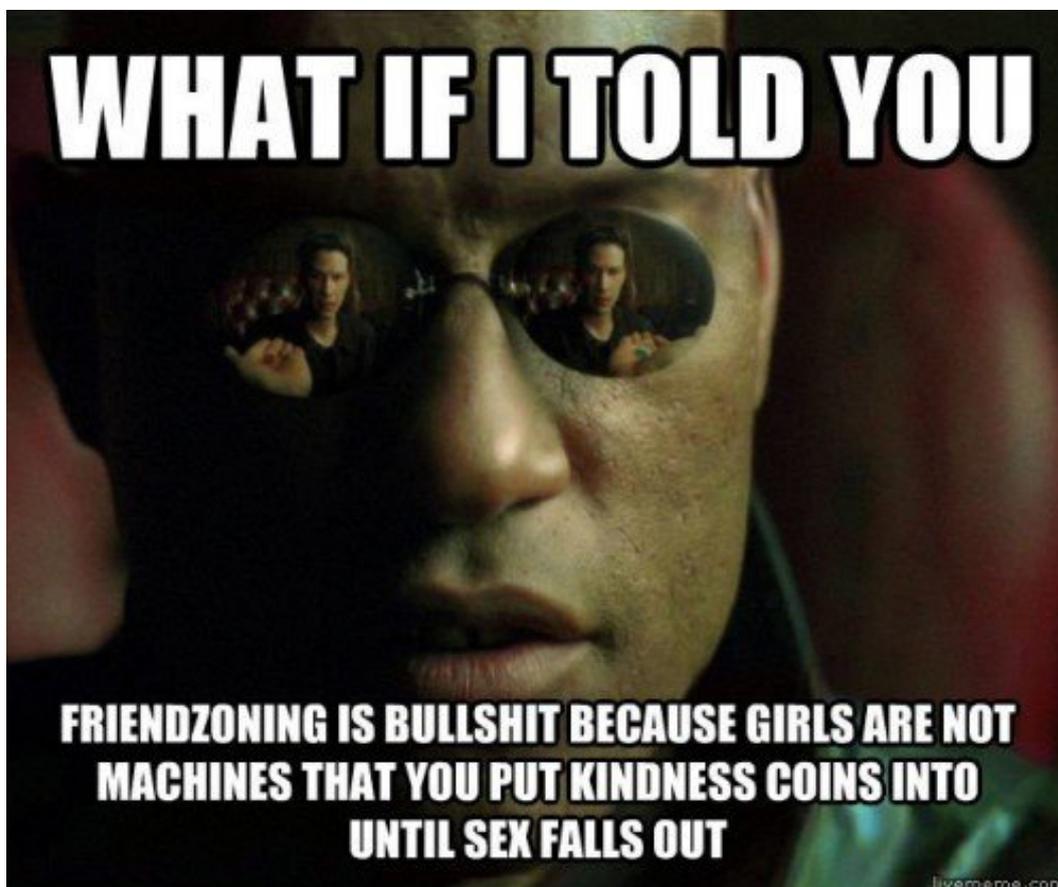


Figure 10. A *Matrix* inspired macro that critiques friend zone logic. Its thread inspired critiques of the ‘pseudo chivalry’ that inspires guys to be friends but get mad when that friendship doesn’t turn physical.

Another push against friend zone discourse was critical of ‘guys on the internet’ at a more fundamental and antagonistic level. In many macros, the prototypical ‘internet-culture’ participant exists in the lineage of Kendall’s (2002) BlueSky MUD. He’s not only a male, but a geek and a loser as well. The insult that targeted males most explicitly was ‘neckbeard’, used to conjure up familiar stereotypes about overweight, socially-awkward males (who can’t grow facial hair anywhere except in patches on their neck, yet still try). A prototypical ‘neckbeard’ is a macro called Butthurt Dweller. [6] Butthurt Dweller ‘can’t workout...don’t want to get too buff’, ‘complains about being bullied in school...calls everyone a faggot online’, and ‘posts anti-religion threads on /b/...feels like god’. He is overconfident, deluded about his prowess, and sophomorically arrogant. The macro employs ironic commentary to reinforce negative stereotypes about participants on reddit and 4chan.

A predominant argument was that the ‘internet culture’ male is insufficiently masculine and romantically unsure. On 4chan, participants often called those who successfully perform hetero-normative masculinity ‘alphas’ and those who don’t for fear or awkwardness ‘betas’. Many 4chan participants explicitly identified with ‘betas’. However, ‘neckbeards’ weren’t marked merely for being men, but for being men who deviated from dominant masculine standards. Being a woman was essentialised and universalised, being a ‘neckbeard’ or a ‘beta’ only labeled one type of inadequate masculinity. Women were discussed in blanket terms that men were not.

Still, debates over gender essentialisations did occur, even when debates became factionist. As dominant discourses butted against dissenting perspectives, discussions representative of Dahlberg’s (2011) counterpublic model of mediated public discourse were born. In particular, pro-feminist subreddits provided participants a place ‘to form counter-publics and counter-discourses; to link up with other excluded voices in developing representative, strategically effective counter-discourses; and subsequently to contest the discursive boundaries of the mainstream public sphere’ (861). One popular subreddit was ‘r/TwoXChromosomes’, which – to quote its own description – housed ‘thoughtful content – serious or silly – related to gender, and intended for women’s perspectives’. Its meme-focused counterpart was ‘r/TrollXChromosomes’, whose subscriber count as of early 2014 proudly stated there are at least ‘47,729 girls on the internet’. A distinct example, r/ShitRedditSays took a more actively antagonistic approach to calling out sexism on reddit.

However, as these counter-spaces adopted the logic of lulz, they were subject to its inherent tensions. Trolling behaviour still meant identity antagonism; Poe’s Law still meant ambiguities regarding stance. Nowhere was this more controversial than on r/ShitRedditSays, which embraced a lulz mentality in their discussion. r/ShitRedditSays most fundamentally catalogued identity antagonisms from other subreddits, curating what it called a ‘museum of poop’. Posts to r/ShitRedditSays most often quoted comments from other subreddits deemed hegemonic, noted the number of upvotes the comment received, and then mocked the comment. Sidebar rules discouraged explicitly refuting the offending comment in its original subreddit, admonishing that readers ‘don’t touch the poop’.

r/ShitRedditSays was ripe with self-referential assessments of the subreddit made by its own participants; and Poe’s Law came with these assessments. For instance, figure nine could be said to either flaunt antagonistic exclusion in the subreddit or to satirise the subreddit’s reputation for such antagonism. It was common practice to upvote and mock submissions to r/ShitRedditSays ostensibly made by a male complaining about r/ShitRedditSays. Speculations on Poe’s Law were also common during these posts.



Figure 11: An image housed at the bottom of the r/ShitRedditSays front page. It portrays innocent redditors (fans of ‘funny joeks, post-\*ism, logic, reason, and Ron Paul’) being assaulted with dildos by members of the subreddit. The flying band is stealing reddit’s ‘internet points’. r/ShitRedditSays is often accused of being a ‘downvote brigade’ which mobilises its members to ‘bury’ offending posts with downvotes after they’re linked in the subreddit. Because of the alleged transgression, the reddit alien weeps over the death of free speech.

The broader reddit population (and r/MensRights in particular) often accused r/ShitRedditSays participants of contributing nothing to productive public discourse, but instead being as hegemonic as the patriarchal forces they supposedly resist. After all, one of the sidebar rules for the subreddit read:

*RULE X: SRS is a circlejack and interrupting the circlejack is an easy way to get banned. For instance, commenters are not allowed to say ‘This post is not offensive’ or ‘This is not SRS worthy.’ Instead, if you do not know why the shit-post was submitted to SRS, get the fuck out.*

The explicitly stated aim of r/ShitRedditSays is a 'circlejack' where participants answer gender antagonism on reddit with their own antagonism, mocking more than discussing. The moderator post introducing the sidebar rule change expressed frustration with so many questions about why something belonged in r/ShitRedditSays and argued that 'we are not a debate club'. The logic of lulz was employed contrary to rational discourse.

r/ShitRedditSays might be considered counterproductive to agonistic public discourse for its disregard for more rational public debate. However, Peter Dahlgren (2013) sees value in more expansive engagements between counterpublics:

*Adherence to what we might characterize as a 'straightjacket' of rational speech for the civic subject thus undermines the potential richness and vibrancy of political discussion in favour of an illusory deal, and is likely to deflect civic engagement rather than enhance it. This is not least true in the age of Web 2.0, with all its possibilities for creative expression. (75)*

Perhaps r/ShitRedditSays wasn't a space for rational debate, but it was a space for participants to employ the logic of lulz to counter dominant discourses on reddit as a whole. Morris, borrowing from Michel de Certeau (1984), labels reappropriations of banal hegemonies 'the arts of making do'. Working within the lingua franca that predominated the broader reddit, participants on r/ShitRedditSays made do with what they had, critiquing from within.

This counter, of course, assumes that participants on r/ShitRedditSays were themselves being earnest in their posts and comments. The role of r/ShitRedditSays as a 'troll' subreddit was contested on the broader site. In a thread on the subreddit 'r/BestOf' accusing r/ShitRedditSays of being a downvote brigade, one poster commented that 'my take is that SRS is full of people who think they're complete trolls, but don't understand that it doesn't count as trolling if you actually believe the things you say'. The next poster speculated that participants on r/ShitRedditSays really didn't believe anything they posted, and 'if that's true, they may well be some of the best trolls reddit's seen'. A third exhibited further confusion: 'I don't think even THEY know any more if they're joking or they're not'. Poe's Law haunted the discourse of r/ShitRedditSays, even as it contested gender antagonisms on the broader site.

Just like discourses on race, discourses on gender were problematic in their dominant antagonism. But nonmasculine perspectives were present, vocal, and antagonised back. In these arguments, multiple participants expressed multiple views utilising the logic of lulz – mischief, irony, and disruption – in their critiques. We're left with questions on whether this engagement was closer to adversarial agonism or to the antagonism of enemies, and the shadow of Poe's Law looms large. However, counterpublics engaged on gender issues extensively and vibrantly.

## Hacking the Social

A 4chan participant, in a common 4chan practice, once described /b/ via annotated image (fig. 12). The comment was on the fierce and dirty process behind the memes that spread beyond the site. The pretty flower is the result of Morris' ([1988] 2007) banal 'grit and hardness', the cultural work of the rawest core of mediated cultural participation. Before Facebook or Twitter, before reddit even, memes are violently forged deep within in the antagonisms of 4chan's /b/. Before the rest of the mediated public engages with the newest ironic artifact, established social dynamics have been hacked and exploited in the name of lulz



Figure 12: An annotated and photoshopped image posted to 4chan's /b/. The image tells a story about the participatory practices that birth memes. So the story goes, by the time 'the internet' gets a meme, /b/ has gone through hell to make it.

The logic of lulz is vital to 4chan, and to reddit as well. It is core to the grammar and tone of the lingua franca shared by mediated cultural participants. The Violentacrez debate spawned serious attention and serious controversy; r/Creepshots was shut down with Chen's exposé in October 2012, but the trolls and the lulz have not gone away. Instead, as of early 2014, 'r/CandidFashionPolice' is a 17,000-subscriber subreddit. It began in November 2012 and posts the same content as r/Creepshots. However the creepshots are now veneered with titles like 'gurl those are some ugly shorts' and 'dayuum, look at dat fabulous dress'. The subreddit – labeled as a forum where 'people post candid photos of women and then we judge their fashion choices similar to TLC's what not to wear and E!'s FashionPolice' – is serious objectification in an ironic frame. It's an example of the identity antagonisms left in trolling's wake.

When looking at race and gender representations on 4chan and reddit, we're left with a pair of lessons. First, as Phillips (2012) argues, trolling can be a communicative tool applied to diverse ends. It can be used to support regression and exclusion, or progression and agonism. Trolling is banal on 4chan and reddit. Morris ([1988] 2007) says it is the 'common place' birthed out of social practice. The prevalence of the ironic frame means a lingua franca of contestation, one that can both broaden and limit voice.

The logic of lulz – in all the essential identity categories it antagonises – does not operate in the narrowly rational realm. However, neither do members of the public. As Dahlgren (2013) argues:

*...the version of the civic self that is most coherent is precisely the one where rationality and affect, reason and emotion, are in constant interplay. The life of democracy requires that people be informed, and that they discuss and deliberate, but also that they be emotionally engaged, aroused to involvement, and at some point made to feel that they are sufficiently empowered to make a difference. (76)*

This empowerment is essential for the logic of lulz to work well. Lulz must be coupled with polyvocality. Publics need counterpublics; trolls need countertrolls. Participants on r/MensRights and r/ShitRedditSays might each label themselves as 'counter' and their opponents as 'hegemony'. Arguments are sharpened and refined when points clash. One-sided trolling means the logic of lulz is served for exclusion rather than voice. Trolling – at its best – may not be narrowly rational, but it can be a way to stir issues that are often left invisible in more narrow or polite discussion. Even if the relations are between enemies instead of adversaries, contestation is more vibrant than repression. Exclusion is always more antagonistic than voice.

Second, however, the logic of lulz – that hyper-humorous, hyper-ironic, hyper-distanced mode of discourse – can cause tensions by the ambiguity of its stance. The real challenge for public discourse in participatory collectives may not narrowly be disembodiment or affect, but Poe’s Law. As Shifman (2013) argues, even when we can easily read content and form, stance has more subtle dimensions. Tone and intent are hard to read, as they were when Lange (2006) argued for the difficulties in labelling a ‘true’ flame. Irony markers can be employed ceaselessly to a multitude of ends. The problem is not with the ‘lean’ medium (4chan and reddit are capable of vibrant and robust multimodal communication); the problem is the ironic norms foundational to the logic of lulz. ‘Only joking’ can be used to ‘whitewash’ exclusion and silence countering perspectives, online or off. Adversarial levity can be a benefit, but a lack of earnest engagement – conflicted or otherwise – undermines those benefits.

In an environment of banal antagonism, participants made do with what they had. They hacked social dynamics so extensively that trolling itself became an expected norm. While repressive and abusive trolling – the kind attributed to Violentacrez – is antagonistic and counterproductive to public discourse, the practice can have its productive, agonistic dimensions as well. However, this awareness shouldn’t preclude acknowledging the very real inequalities that persist. As Morris ([1988] 2007) argues:

Cultural studies is a humane and optimistic discourse, trying to derive its values from materials and conditions already available to people. On the other hand, it can become an apologetic ‘yes but...’ discourse that most often proceeds from admitting class, racial, and sexual oppressions to finding the inevitable saving grace. (130).

Trolling wasn’t a saving grace. The logic of lulz facilitated old inequalities. But the social dynamics hacked by that logic could be hacked to diverse ends. With enough voices engaging and enough of a balance between irony and earnestness, the logic of lulz could be a tool vibrantly employed.

## Biographical note

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## Notes

[1]. “Successful Black Man” (2011) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/successful-black-man>

[2]. “Sheltering Suburban Mom” (2011) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/sheltering-suburban-mom>

[3]. “High Expectations Asian Father” (2010) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/high-expectations-asian-father>

[4] “Women Logic” (2011) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/women-logic>

[5] “Friend Zone Fiona” (2011) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/friend-zone-fiona>

[6] “Butthurt Dweller” (2010) <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/butthurt-dweller-gordo-granudo>

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-157 Still 'Searching for Safety Online': collective strategies and discursive resistance to trolling and harassment in a feminist network

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the discursive responses that participants in a network of feminist blogs developed to handle trolling in their community. Internet communities develop strategies to deal with trolls in their networks. In particular, participants provide instructions and guidance to support each other to deal with trolls and harassment, and engage in intra-community discussion about the significance or insignificance of trolls. My paper explores the practices that feminist bloggers engage in to resist silencing practices, and the ways in which the silencing of female voices does not work in these contexts. I argue that trolling and discursive responses to trolls are collectively developed and enforced. Using a case study from my research into Australian feminist blogging networks, I argue that these networks have developed particular collective responses to trolls.

## 'Trolling in a feminist forum' redux

The issues of trolling and cyberbullying are often linked in the media (see for example Brockie, 2012, which is emblematic of these discourses). Although both harassers and trolls are present as a problem for feminist blogs, I see trolling and harassment as separate issues. I take a more ambivalent approach to trolling, not assuming that trolling is always harassing, and indeed demarcating harassment as a slightly different issue. In what follows I review both the academic literature on trolling and strategies to deal with the trolls (particularly in feminist discursive contexts), and then review discourses on trolling and moderation in my interviews with participants from Australian feminist blogging networks.

My research on feminist blogs in Australia comprised interviews with 20 bloggers from around Australia between the period November 2009 and March 2010. The network that I studied was defined and delimited using the network analysis program IssueCrawler, which ensured an empirical basis to the network based upon a pattern of mutual and ongoing links between blogs in the networks. My interviewees were selected from this network. Following on from the interviews, I developed a modified grounded theory which was then used to analyse particular case studies of discussion and activism within Australian feminist blogging networks. I focus my analysis of these interviews and texts from feminist blogs to the ways that these bloggers spoke about and dealt with trolling and harassment. In this paper I generally refer to bloggers by their blog name or the pseudonym that they use for blogging, unless they have specifically requested otherwise. Names given without quotation marks are their real names. Blog names are given in italics.

In this paper, I take the position that trolling and harassment are both silencing practices (Jane, 2012), demarcated by degree and violence. Silencing practices can be defined as actions that aim to diminish the space for others in public debate. However my interest is not in showing the ways that this silencing works, but indeed the ways that it does not work, or is at least intervened in through the tactics of the networks that oppose them. My paper explores the practices that feminist bloggers engage in to resist silencing practices, and the ways in which the silencing of female voices does not work. I focus my past work on the politics of affect in feminist blogs (see Shaw forthcoming) specifically on the subject of resistance to trolling and harassment as silencing practices, and frame these practices as a collective labour among participants in these networks.

## Trolling, feminist blogs, and women online

Trolling has been defined as ‘the act of deliberately posting inflammatory or confusing messages on the Internet in order to provoke a vehement response from a group of users’ (Cassandra, 2008: 5). The classic text from Susan Herring et al (2002) over a decade ago has been very influential in understandings of the political meanings of trolling in feminist spaces. However, Jane (2012) argues that beyond Herring et al’s (2002) text, academic studies of trolls and ‘flaming’ routinely trivialise ‘the experiences of flame targets’ while defending or even celebrating the discourse of flame producers. In contrast, media texts have more fully addressed the politics of these behaviours (Jane, 2012). In 2007, Gaden wrote that feminist bloggers face challenges ‘that can be frustrating and even frightening’ (Gaden, 2007). Likewise, Little (2010) draws on her own experience as a blogger to argue that ‘women who write in cyberspace are exposed in ways that people who present online as men are not’.

In the literature there are also a number of references to the ways in which women bloggers can resist these challenges and exposures. Gaden argues that practices such as the ‘feminist carnival’ are important resources for online feminist networks, generating a sense of ‘safety in numbers’ (Gaden 2007). The carnival refers to the practice of feminist bloggers to curate a list of links to posts within their networks, usually once a month, and hosted on different blogs each month. The practice serves to bring new voices to the network and also to strengthen existing links. Through the carnival format, participants also curate and aggregate a diversified but collective response to current issues and events.

Wazny (2010: 10) in her study of moderating practices on the Gawker network site Jezebel, argued that there are a very strict set of expected behaviours on the blog. The site’s ‘policies regarding banning and disemvowelling [...] cut down on the amount of trolling that occurs on a website’ but also, she argues, means that the site ‘can more easily fall prey to an echo-chamber effect’ (Wazny, 2010: 10). Here, disemvowelling refers to the practice of removing vowels from a harassing comment to render it unintelligible to the reader. She describes commenting on Jezebel as ‘regimented and closed’ (Wazny, 2010: 16). Such commentary highlights the tension between ‘safe spaces’ and ‘free spaces’ in internet discourse. She acknowledges that without this practice, trolls may be more successful in derailing productive feminist conversations and achieving an emotional response within the community on the site.

Because of the large volume of conversations and participants, simply reaching a

community consensus not to 'feed the trolls' when they appear may not be as effective as a consistent refusal to publish such comments, or the practices of disemvowelling and banning offensive comments and commenters (Wazny, 2010: 17). While Wazny (2010: 17) expresses concern that the closedness of the Jezebel site goes against liberal feminist principles of equality and freedom, such practices of moderation are common in the feminist blogosphere. I would argue that such practices of moderation also enable freedom for particular discourses to flourish, while constraining others. Participants often argue for the necessity of such practices to enable feminist discussions to take place, as we will see when I return to the analysis of my interviews with feminist bloggers in the Australian context. However, such arguments highlight the need for nuance in a discussion of moderation as a collective practice. In this paper I consider these tensions, as well as the conditions particular to Australian feminist networks, which are different from United States-based sites and networks.

Anti-feminist discourses flourish in many spaces online. Jane (2012) uses the word 'e-bile' to refer to the 'extravagant invective, [...] sexualized threats of violence, and [...] recreational nastiness' that dominates internet discourse. This discourse is 'often markedly misogynist' (Jane, 2012: 2). By necessity, feminist bloggers must find ways to deal with these discourses. Little (2010: 221) writes that she has 'become increasingly emboldened about deleting nasty comments and banning commenters who just want to provoke others and get people to argue with them'. These sentiments were echoed in many of the interviews that I had with different bloggers in Australian feminist blogging networks. In particular women expressed a sense of ownership and a sense of space about their blogs, constructing phrases such as 'this is my space' to express this sense. As Little (2010: 221) says, 'I don't owe anyone admission into my living room, let alone these stray dogs who just want to pee in the corners and drive away all of my other guests'.

The next part of this paper draws upon my interviews with feminist bloggers to explore the strategies and tactics used to resist silencing practices in online discourse. Cassandra (2008) discusses the importance of managing conflict in discussion forums and comment threads. She argues that a large part of these efforts are in the moderation practices that users develop. This perception was shared by my research participants, who as people actively involved in feminist claims-making and feminist interventions in both online and mainstream media discourse, found themselves often the target of harassment, 'flaming', and 'trolling', and engaged in practices of moderation and deterrence. However over the course of my research, discourses about how to deal with such behaviour began to change.

## Moderation

Dealing with trolls is an inextricable part of the blogging experience of most of the women that I interviewed as part of my research. Chally Kacelnik (in interview, 2009), recalling a particular event where a blog post of hers was linked to and received attention on Reddit.com and was then ‘inundated by trolls’ explained to me that trolls are ‘people who are there just to tear you down no matter what you’re thinking’. She sighed as she explained how distressing she found those messages. ‘That was a few days just warding them off and dealing with the fallout from that’, she said. Another blogger explained her own experience of trolls and harassing commenters in this way:

*[One commenter] spent several years hanging around the blogs of women almost exclusively and just making the most repulsive personal remarks. And then attacking the blogger and other commenters for perceived anti-Christian bias or for being too middle class. Just really unappealing guy who just would not shut up, because my blog doesn't have the technical capacity to block certain people as individuals ('Lucy Tartan', in interview 2010).*

But some people felt that they were lucky to have avoided the worst possible consequences of being a woman writing a blog. ‘I’ve been actually singularly fortunate, I think, because you hear all the time about feminist bloggers getting really nasty emails’, explained Chally Kacelnik (in interview, 2009). Likewise, ‘News with Nipples’ (in interview, 2009) felt that it happened to others but not to herself. ‘I know some of the other girls, whose blogs I go to, they do get quite nasty trolls on there, who will just say horrible horrible things, but I haven’t had any of that happening’. Clementine from ‘Audrey and the Bad Apples’ (in interview, 2010) told me why she thinks feminist bloggers are so prone to trolls and vitriolic commenters:

*That's another interesting thing with the comments, is that tying back to that idea of being a woman and writing things, that I think that it offends people, a lot of people, it offends people that you're a young woman and you have the audacity to presume to share your opinion with the world as if it matters. And they may be people who live their lives in a way that they don't think that they're particularly misogynist at all because hell, they love their mother. They love their girlfriend, you know? They don't rape people. But they don't actually really like it when women get all up in their face about things, you know?*

'Tigtog', one of the main bloggers at the Australian feminist group blog Hoyden About Town, discussed her sense of the importance of moderation within the feminist community that she maintains, and also in broader feminist networks. Hoyden About Town 'rarely gets trolled now', she explained, as a result of a tightened moderation procedure. 'A lot of people when they find that they are going into permanent moderation, so that their comments simply won't be published automatically, they just don't bother anymore', 'tigtog' explained (in interview, 2009). Permanent moderation refers to the fact that the blog uses a system of profiles with no anonymous posting allowed. The first time a person under a particular profile submits a comment they are automatically sent into moderation, but after that comments are published automatically, unless one of the moderators flags that profile for continual moderation. The system also logs IP addresses. She attributes her strictness in dealing with trolls to her history as a participant in Usenet discussions; 'we were strict on netiquette and keeping on topic and not letting people troll us unreasonably [and] it was something I wanted to demonstrate as a way of keeping [things on track]'. In a blog post from 2007, 'tigtog' had framed moderation practices as essential for creating and maintaining safe spaces for feminist discussion, and does not see this as in any way contradicting freedom of speech, but in fact saw it as maintaining such freedom for women (or anyone) writing a blog:

*Choosing not to allow someone else's comment on one's own space is not censoring them (they are always free to say it on their own blog), it's simply not publishing them. A commitment to the principle of free speech does not mean forgoing one's right (and responsibility) to shape the content on your own web publication, including the comments made by readers (different bloggers will obviously have different thresholds for 'unacceptable' and will explicate those thresholds as they choose). - 'tigtog' (2007)*

I asked 'tigtog' if she saw herself as a facilitator of discussion. She agreed, explaining that 'originally when I started, I just wanted to have my voice heard. 'Listen to me! Listen to me!', but now I'm actually a lot more interested in getting something that generates a good discussion' ('tigtog', in interview, 2009). She spoke about building strategies so that different voices are heard in feminist blogging networks, as well as strategies to discourage trolls and people who want to derail discussions, in order to create a space for productive feminist politics. She sees moderation as important in creating such a space and hopes to influence others' practices by example, because 'three or four years ago, there were a lot of feminist bloggers who were reluctant to moderate their blogs' ('tigtog', in interview 2009). As a result, she thinks that people are a lot more comfortable 'telling people that they're being off topic':

*There's a lot more understanding of the different styles of trolling that are used to disrupt a discussion and derail it off onto something inconsequential. And people are more used to calling that out for what it is, even in blogs that don't moderate heavily you have commenters who are more willing to say 'I see what you did there, not falling for it', which is good! Because I think in blogs a few years ago, a lot of people came onto them who'd never really been in online discussions before, so they'd never seen that sort of behaviour before. And it's just like anything, it takes a while to see the patterns and get used to calling them out ('tigtog', in interview 2009).*

Other bloggers who were also participants in conversations on Hoyden About Town mentioned to me how successfully comments were moderated on the site. As 'Fuck Politeness' said (in interview, 2009), 'I can't handle reading the comments on a lot of blogs. For me [moderation is] about carving out that space where you can say, look fuck off with your trump cards that don't actually mean anything'. She sees Hoyden About Town as carving out this space successfully. 'They're the only blog that I can see that really does that, and does it effectively I think' ('Fuck Politeness', in interview, 2009). 'Blue Milk' (in interview, 2010) explained that one of the reasons she avoids reading big mainstream political blogs is that they are not as well-moderated as the big feminist blogs who 'look out for that sort of trolling behaviour'. Likewise, 'Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony' told me that she writes for both Hoyden About Town and a progressive politics blog which is not explicitly feminist, and finds that she is careful about what she posts on the latter blog:

*For instance the last article I posted on Hoyden [About Town] was about domestic violence. Now if I post something that on Larvatus [Prodeo], I'll probably get a host of trolls [and] I'd just get a lot of unnecessary grief and have to spend a lot of time moderating ('Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony', in interview 2009).*

Feminist bloggers use a number of strategies to deal with trolls and harassment, strategies that range from the playful to the serious. 'News with Nipples' (in interview, 2009) told me that 'one of the other girls, when she gets nasty comments, she changes all of their spelling to make them look like [they] can't type'. Sometimes the practice of moderation in feminist blogs can take the form of an expectation that others will do the same and that they have a responsibility to their readership that nasty or harassing comments do not make it through. Some valued this sense of responsibility, and others found this expectation (at times) unreasonable. Talking about another blogger, 'Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony' explained that:

*[The blogger] has been shitpanned on several occasions for leaving things up in her comments which were hateful, though she does do quite a lot of deleting and moderating but she gets a lot of comments coming in and I just don't agree with that idea that she's responsible for what's in her comment thread, I think she's responsible for what she writes ('Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony, in interview 2009).*

One of the reasons that 'Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony' thinks that moderation should not be compulsory is that by allowing certain people to communicate, their hateful ideas will be made visible to others: 'I think it's good that these people are out there and shown up for what they are' ('Blogger on the Cast Iron Balcony', in interview 2009).

These practices of moderation and expectations for one another's moderation practices, whether for stricter moderation or for the display of the reality of hateful ideas, show norm-setting and the collective negotiation of boundaries at work in feminist networks. The participants in the network ask one another to engage in specific forms of labour to protect the mutual spaces that they engage within, although these expectations are by no means always shared or agreed upon. Nonetheless they create norms of engagement that involve the practice of care and work to guide and shape discussions in productive ways.

## #mencallmethings and other strategies of accumulation and display

In their strategies against trolling, feminist bloggers may also make a point of drawing attention to trolls by making visible the discourses that trolls use to derail discussion (Shaw forthcoming). For example, Jane (2012) explains that her:

*[C]iting of uncensored e-bile [...] represents a deliberate strategy to speak of the ostensibly unspeakable so as not to perpetrate – and thus perpetuate – the tyranny of silence about the sexually explicit nature of this material.*

This strategy of 'speaking of the unspeakable' through 'heaping' and accumulation (Tomlinson 2010) is commonly used in feminist blogging networks, for example through the use of the Twitter hashtag #mencallmethings. Bloggers have made the abuse and threats they experience visible through the a meme, that spread to other social networks and blogs, and received mainstream media attention (see, for example, "[Troll Attack Campaign

Goes Viral]” (<http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/trollattackcampaign-goes-viral-20111108-1n4j4.html>). The meme drew on building concerns within the international feminist community about whether simply making trolls invisible was the right approach, because women continued to experience harassment whether that harassment was published or not:

*The usual response to complaints of trolling and abuse online is ‘Don’t feed the trolls’, [i.e.] don’t respond to them or pay them any attention and they’ll go away. They don’t. They’re still there, no matter what you do. But not feeding the trolls creates a culture of silence, where women feel that they are alone in the abuse they are suffering. Only by exposing it can we beat it. (‘Fat Heffalump’, quoted in Sanders 2011)*

In internet culture in general, and blogs in particular, guidelines for behaviour make attempts to address problematic practices such as trolling and harassment. However, such a doctrine of ‘civility’ is problematic for feminist bloggers. In an illustrative response to one such code of conduct, Australian feminist blogger ‘Lauredhel’ adapted it for a feminist readership:

*So, my draft Blog Reader’s Code:*

*If a blogger has a ‘feminine’ pseudonym – Don’t threaten to rape and kill her.*

*If a blogger says something you don’t like – Don’t threaten to rape and kill her.*

*If a blogger disagrees with you publicly – Don’t threaten to rape and kill her.*

*If a blogger has a photograph of herself on her blog – Don’t threaten to rape and kill her. >(‘Lauredhel’ 2007)*

The Blog Reader’s Code continues in the same pattern, satirically taking the code of ‘civility’ to task. This Code sends up other bloggers’ concerns with maintaining civility in online spaces, and trusting others to maintain such civility, exposing the specific threats and dangers that women writers are exposed to in public space. In all interviews in this study, women either described harassment and threats that they experienced, or told a story of other women bloggers who had experienced harassment and threats. One research participant had her real name exposed in a comment by someone who was insulting and harassing her. This was experienced as directly threatening. As described above, some women who had not experienced direct threats themselves said ‘I’ve been

fortunate' (e.g. Chally Kacelnik, in interview, 2009).

Civility is also a problematic concept in feminist blogs for reasons explored by Tomlinson (2010: 48–60). Tomlinson discusses the way the trope of civility is used to re-position people on the basis of gender and race. This is a strategy that depoliticises political speech by framing it as 'disagreeable' or 'demanding' (Tomlinson, 2010: 46). Women and women of colour are marked by their gender and race and as a result considered subject to 'specific forms of surveillance' (Tomlinson, 2010: 46) and policing by others. Readers and audience are free to 'chastise and instruct the author' (Tomlinson, 2010: 47). Women writers, and women of colour in feminist communities (in particular) 'must allow audiences to demand civility from them, while the audiences excuse incivility in themselves and others' (Tomlinson, 2010: 48). Some trolls couch their comments in civility while simultaneously de-railing discussion. For example, a concern troll couches his or her attempts to derail discussion in terms of concern, thereby maintaining 'civility' while also engaging in trolling behaviour. The meme of the 'concern troll' has also been taken up in the Fat Acceptance community, to describe someone who reproduces fat-phobic discourse out of 'concern' for others' health.

There are also participants who are not trolls, but whose views are opposed to members of the community. Feminist bloggers have come up with strategies, such as bingo cards, to deal with not only trolls, but also with ignorant bystanders, and others who engage in online political discourse in apparently good faith. Bingo cards contain a set of common and expected talking points or arguments against feminism (or breastfeeding, or fat acceptance, or any number of other examples of counterhegemonic discourses). Common derailing discourses are thereby identified and made less potent because they are labeled as predictable and clichéd. These can be readers who hold opposing beliefs about gender and feminism but are not intentionally commenting in order to disrupt or derail discussion. However, bloggers in the network do not make this distinction too sharp, because trolls often do hold strong beliefs about (and against) feminism, and engage in trolling and harassment in feminist blogs precisely because they hold anti-feminist beliefs.

Anti-feminist discourses are also present in the comments on mainstream online news. Many of the women interviewed discussed the aversive reactions that they had to seeing the opinions of the 'vocal minority' on public news websites and in the comments on their own blogs. For many, the visibility of these opinions is disturbing. 'CrazyBrave' told me:

*I remember being really surprised just to see the kinds of things people thought it was reasonable to say on media sites. [It's] not even the responses to feminism, the responses to feminist women. Just the kind of... any woman saying anything is attacked for her femaleness, is what it is. And I think that's awful, and that makes me identify much more strongly as a feminist. And makes me go harder too, on the people who are being [like that]. ('Crazy-Brave', in interview, 2010)*

The existence and expression of these opinions therefore makes anti-feminist viewpoints more visible, and radicalises feminists who have previously assumed that these opinions were not widely held. The idea that feminism is no longer needed or 'has won' is quickly debunked through even the shortest exposure to online discussion of mainstream media. The response that feminist bloggers have towards these opinions was frequently expressed as an emotional one. It is shocking, horrifying, or depressing to read:

*One of the things about the internet that's really depressing is that the vocal minority are so vile, you know? At the end of all the news stories, they're so horrible, and it's predictable. ('A Shiny New Coin', in interview, 2010)*

Some bloggers talked about their involvement in feminist blogs as a way to avoid coming across these discourses. However, sometimes people with anti-feminist views come to feminist blogs. 'CrazyBrave' (in interview, 2010) believes that this happens because of 'pushback'. Women are pushing forward, for change, and antagonistic visitors resist that push for change:

*One thing that really amazes me about feminist blogs, is how hard you actually fight to have to have a space for a feminist discussion. Even online where there's no limit to how many conversations can go on there, [blogs] have to be policed. ('CrazyBrave', in interview, 2010)*

Feminist bloggers have used backchannels such as Twitter to provide support for one another in the face of trolling and harassment (see also Shaw forthcoming for further analysis of this practice). An example of this is the previously mentioned #mencallmethings Twitter hashtag, but bloggers also use backchannels in particular instances of abuse and trolling, to draw others' attention and awareness to a person or a discourse. Others may be warned to watch out for particular people and to moderate them if they are encountered. In this way, many feminist bloggers see moderation as a responsibility that is shared within the network. Such moderation practices promote a sense of safety and community

that aims to allow feminist discourse to flourish, and that fosters an ethics of attention to intersectional issues. For a feminist politics, safety and freedom are not seen as values in conflict. Attempts to create or promote some degree of safety in particular online spaces are seen in fact as ensuring the freedom of those views and ideas to be developed and carried on. However, in spite of these efforts, harassment and threats, as well as intra-community conflict, remain a significant problem for individual feminist bloggers, even when they are not made visible. For example, the Australian blogger Chally Kacelnik, after a long stint on the staff of the international, US-based blog Feministe, wrote her final post on that site:

*As much as we have amazing conversations so much of the time, dealing with commenters here has taken over a lot of my life and commanded too much of my effort and spirit. [...] [N]o one should have to put up with the kind of thing I was getting from readers simply because of who I was. I have received violent threats, I have received remarks about my family and my racial background. I have received the more mundane forces of attempts to hijack almost every single conversation and make it about something closer to feminist and social norms, which seem curiously aligned at times. I have taken every kind of pressure you can imagine. ('Chally', 2011)*

This post makes clear that although feminist bloggers aim to make a safe space for intersectional feminist discussions – as was repeatedly mentioned in interviews – internal conflict brings up difficult affects for feminist bloggers. My interviewees were more tentative in discussing these aspects of their experience, but conflict and disagreement has an undeniable part to play in the affective landscapes of feminist communities. In part this is because in Australian networks conflict is less ubiquitous than in international feminist networks – by which I mean that the majority of specific instances of conflict discussed by my interviewees, the majority were in US-based group blogs such as Feministe, as in the above example. Nonetheless conflict was part of blogging participation for many.

In a blog post, 'Spilt Milk' (2010) drew out the complicated, sometimes difficult relationship she has with her blogging practice, evoking the affective ties that she has to her blog and those who read it. She has come to rely on it for 'catharsis and exploration and expression'. But her relationship to her blog is also a relationship with other bloggers. The space is 'mine' but it's also 'yours'. 'Spilt Milk' has changed as a result of her blogging practice, and she is still changing, and 'changing in front of you'. Through her blog she has come in contact with difficult affects; 'ridicule from trolls' and 'conflict with others' but also meeting 'fabulous people' and being 'humbled' and 'honoured' from the value that her blog has for others. She hopes others 'don't mind' her changing in front of them.

The intimate relations that are generated within this feminist online community are part of the process of writing together a feminism or feminisms that are responsive to the changing social environment. As feminists in the blogging network have argued, anti-feminist rhetoric is more visible than ever in the words of trolls and other participants in online media. The development of a support network for feminists in the feminist blogosphere should not be understood in any way as a withdrawal from the political, except in a sense that it is an aversive politics that defines itself in opposition to particular discourses. Instead it is a space in which feminist ideas are developed, and shaped through moderation policies and a careful (though imperfect) commitment to discursive practices that are not exclusionary. For online feminism, due to news media forums, and the often no-holds-barred style of attacks on feminists from 'trolls' and anti-feminists, communities must also learn to defend themselves in new ways to the new visibility of extremely offensive, as well as apparently reasonably mainstream, ideas and views.

## Conclusion

In networks where people develop attachments of intimacy and identification, there is a degree of affective investment that leads to 'risk' as well as 'safety'. Australian feminist bloggers discuss the development of 'safe spaces' for feminist discourse, at the same time that they talk about the risk and restraints of intimacy and the political in these very same spaces. The development of intimacy brings with it a sense of risk, in terms of exposure to harassment and trolling particularly, but also in terms of being careful about speaking or writing without thinking because of the way that acceptable discourse is defined within the community. Women are also subject to anti-feminist resistance to their participation, or experience high levels of trolling (as in Herring et al, 2002).

As such, bloggers in oppositional political networks where discursive politics take place build affective relations to participants within the network as well as its opponents (Shaw, 2012; Shaw, forthcoming). I have explored the ways, in particular, that bloggers describe the practices and defences that they have built up to repel trolls and disruptive others. If trolling and harassment are silencing practices, feminist bloggers have developed (imperfect) strategies to resist such silencing, and to create a space for feminist discourses. Feminist bloggers hold a relation of antagonism and aversion towards 'trolls' and anti-feminists in internet-based discursive space, as well as parts of the mainstream media (see also Shaw, forthcoming). Bound up in this aversive politics are the practices of moderation that feminist bloggers have developed to delimit allowable expressions, a practice of defining the offensive that disallows these discourses from entering the 'safe spaces' of feminist blogs, except in opposition.

New people coming into communities develop an awareness of their right to disallow harassment and offensive comments in their own blogs by observing moderation practices on other blogs. Sometimes moderators have clearly outlined policies, but other times moderation tactics and guidelines will be negotiated over time. Bloggers talked about their sense of responsibility to create a safer space for other feminists on their own blogs. These desires and aims, however, are in constant conflict and tension with the fact that blogs are not always affectively 'safe' spaces. Bloggers' negotiations of feminist politics with others can be emotionally hurtful and risky, particularly in the negotiation of intersectional feminism, privilege and power. Participants with intersecting identities describe being excluded, ignored, and policed at times by mainstream feminist discourse. Further, the presence of trolls, targeted harassment, and threats of violence make public blogs a sometimes dangerous place for women writers. These conflicts and tensions are not just an important part of bloggers' experiences in the network, but are also politically important.

## Biographical note:

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## issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

FCJ-158 Tits or GTFO:

The logics of misogyny on 4chan's Random - /b/

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### Abstract:

The decentralised, anonymous imageboard 4chan is decried for its discursive construction of gender, particularly on its Random - /b/ board. However, /b/'s misogyny demonstrably results from an internal moral panic about cultural exclusivity. New users unbalance 4chan's anti-normative, anti-celebrity, and anti-leader ethic by posting self-photographs primarily featuring women. These users are strategically targeted and trolled based on their exposed identity aspects. While this practice is untenable offsite, viewing misogynistic discourse as a strategic, regenerative practice onsite is necessary as /b/ occupies an extreme point on the genealogical continuum bridging the transgressive cultures of bulletin-board systems, shock sites, and hacker culture.

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### Introduction: The adoption of 'cumdumpster'

On June 15, 2008, a 4chan user identified as female using the colloquial portmanteau 'femanon', posted an erotic photograph of herself on the Random - /b/ board, and requested advice regarding a recent breakup, a marriage proposal, and whether she could easily commit marital infidelity. She asserted that the marriage would be for love but simultaneously

stressed the money and government insurance she would receive by marrying an Air Force man. [1] Six minutes into the thread, moderators began editing the post, transforming the original poster's (OP) request into an ad hominem self-assassination and banning her for authoring it. Wordfilters specifically tailored to the June 15 post in question altered this seemingly benign request for advice into a paraphilic interest in excrement, animal anthropomorphism, and transsexuals, in addition to demeaning the OP's potential husband and insurance concerns. Wordfilters are an automated form of moderation that replace a word or string of words with another word or string of words. They are normally used to filter out offensive words (such as profanity, racist or sexist epithets, and so on) and facilitate other forms of low-level censoring on web forums. On 4chan's Random - /b/ board, the wordfilter logic of censorship is inverted to make the source material more offensive as opposed to removing offensive words. Most significantly, the wordfilter exchanged 'femanon' for 'cumdumpster' (Anonymous, 2008a):



Figure 1. On 4chan's Random - /b/ board, the wordfilter logic of censorship is inverted to make the source material more offensive as opposed to removing offensive words.

The thread only lasted thirty minutes but was temporarily affixed to the first page of /b/, heightening its visibility and extending its lifespan. Although several words were filtered, 'cumdumpster' was singled out by 4channers as 'win', 'lulz', and necessary 'chemo'. [2] As 4channers tested the wordfilters to verify their authenticity, they unanimously expressed gratitude for 'cumdumpster' in particular, one user even deeming it as potent a warning as 'a human head on a pike' (Anonymous, 2008a).

As wordfilters are used on the Random - /b/ board to attack the logics of confessional self-publicity with offensiveness, this warning has been misread by mainstream media and its public as simply bigoted. Online economies are split between high visibility, which relies on identity disclosure and prestige measures like followers, ratings, and consistent usernames; and what David Auerbach (2012) calls 'A-culture': the intentional disconnect between online and offline selves where participants use fluid usernames and resist all forms of identity disclosure. Arguably the apotheosis of A-culture, 4chan's Random - /b/ board is the most robust alternative to and dedicated antagonist of economies of self-publicity. Its impenetrable, anti-normative ethos facilitates sensationalist description

(KTTV, 2007; Douglas, 2008; Schwartz, 2008; Grossman, 2008), but in actuality, the ‘head on a pike’ is not uniformly aimed at female participants, many of whom disclose their gender in accordance with /b/’s normative social structures and practices and are treated no differently for it. [3] Rather, misogynistic discourse is one variant within a canon of trolling practices meant to exert collective control over new, casual users who disregard /b/’s habitus. These new users bring with them the behavioural values of economies of self-publicity: egocentrism, narcissism, indicators of offline identity, and identity-based prestige. Such qualities are necessary to participate in the dominant online cultural economy of self-publicity on social media platforms, where participation means ‘public-by-default, private-through-effort’ (boyd, 2011). These users are colloquially singled out as ‘newfags’ on 4chan, where they enact the very practices toward which 4channers are so antagonistic: namely, unnecessarily violating zero identity by groundlessly revealing identity factors; or by ‘camwhoring’, a term used to refer to the practice of posting personal photographs as a prestige measure symptomatic of interactions on rating sites and social media platforms.

These users, dubbed ‘newfags’, barraged 4chan once its existence came to light following 2006 media coverage of offsite raids and a dirty bomb hoax. Once secretive and exclusive, 4chan ascended to prominence in 2008 following Project Chanology and the emergence of the politicised activist group Anonymous. [4] Expecting the dominant paradigm of online interaction, newcomers flooded /b/ with photographs, low-content greetings, requests to be rated, and offers to perform for /b/—behaviours that either conform with cultural economies of self-publicity or presume that /b/’s normative social structures merely run counter to dominant cultural economies. This behaviour, termed ‘newfaggotry’, consists of introducing to /b/ the logics of self-publicity and imposing socially normative interpretations of ‘anti-normative behaviour’ onto /b/’s practices without understanding the habituated dispositions actually comprising them. Such behaviour is met with antagonistic trolling practices intended as a deterrent to newfags disinclined to acquire and internalise /b/’s cultural logics through habituation, or the repeated performance of particular bodily, affective, and cognitive repertoires through which social competence is made commonsensical and routine (Bourdieu, 1977: 82–83).

By contrast, the logics of self-publicity call for stabilised, traceable identity through consistent usernames, ostensibly excluding trolls and supposedly creating an environment for freer expression. However, since user contributions are forever linked to a single identity, prestige measures are such that users become popular for recognisable successes and ostracised for a single failure. Thus, strong-identity environments may be oppressive with regard to the generation of novel content, as they foster cultural economies that foreground narcissism and the need for a continually reinforced self-image (Dibbell, 2010: 85). Power in these communities favours users whose profiles indicate longtime

membership and whose posts are recognisably successful, encumbering newcomers with anxieties concerning sociometric status. Consequently, creative experimentation stagnates. Dissimilarly, 4chan utilises the per-message anonymity of its Japanese predecessors 2channel and Futaba Channel, where identity is unverifiable across posts (Stryker, 2011: 108, 130–135; Auerbach, 2012). Its zero-identity principle reduces social context cues to discursive style and is intended as a panacea for the social anxieties inherent to self-oriented reputation systems. In the absence of strong identity, meritocratic principles wholly replace traditional prestige measures; creative experimentation is prone to increase as the costs of failure decrease; and homogeneity occurs as a result of ratiocination and social-situational exigencies as opposed to pandering. It is telling that 4chan originated following the institution of registration fees to promote strong identity at Something Awful (SA), its Western antecedent (Stryker, 2011: 107).

The antagonistic trolling practices directed at newfaggotry on /b/ are highly variable, demonstrating misandry, racism, heterosexism, religious discrimination, ableism and mentalism, weightism, general lookism, and so on. This is in keeping with the long history of performative 'insult dialectic' that can be mapped through popular culture to the Afro-American practice of 'the dozens', which Dollard (1939: 8–10) argued was organised around gratification gained through the expression of forbidden themes (remarks about one's family and mother in particular) and aggressive interactions that escalate as participants trade insults. In accordance with this insult dialectic, 4channers tailor abusive rhetoric to the revealed identity factors of the offending newfags in question, deterring self-oriented practices through personalized demoralization. Thus, the majority of trolling practices employ insults based on visible or stereotypically presumed attributes about participants: for example, 'asspie' or 'ass-burgers' [Asperger's syndrome], 'fat permavirgin', 'Narutard' [*Naruto* fan], or 'underage b&' [banned]. Similar to 'the dozens', the loser is the participant who takes the insults at face value, rather than being part of an exchange. Thus, the more likely an insult is to offend, the more likely it is to be habituated into 4chan's boundary-policing trolling practices.

Within the canon of trolling practices on 4chan, misogynistic remarks are seemingly presumed most effective at provoking the normatively moral reactions that expose newfags and are central to 4channers' performance of insult dialectic. Misogynistic discourse is no more rampant than other forms of interactive insult on /b/, but it is perhaps more visible given the prevalence of photographic identity disclosure by women, the seeming lack of irony surrounding their degradation, and the cross-culturally graspable outrage affect experienced by outsiders. Rather than targeting all female participants, this particular trolling practice targets only those female participants that post revealing images of themselves. They are known as 'camwhores' and are considered through this inverted logic of self-publicity to be the gravest transgressors against /b/'s social

structures. This is not to say that male camwhores do not exist, or that trolling practices directed at camwhores are solely sexist. Whether because of the logics of self-publicity or the fact that /b/'s meritocracy is largely built on the successful deception of geeky users in an environment saturated with suspicion, identity-revealing photographs primarily feature women. 4channers' apparent misogyny is largely—though not wholly—designed to maintain the cultural exclusivity of a transgressive, anonymous space where trolling is the signature mode of discursive politics. The pervasive bigotry of /b/'s misogynistic trolling discourse indicates not widespread prejudice but anxiety over the increasing encroachment of economies of self-publicity, which threatens zero-identity anonymity.

Misogyny as trolling practice may have crystallised with the 2008 implementation and linguistic assimilation of 'cumdumpster', but it predates the wordfilter to the first influx of so-called 'camwhores', whose discourse demonstrated a failure to acclimatise and whose sheer numbers threatened /b/'s subcultural integrity. Significantly, while there is no record of the neologisation of 'femanon', the word was in documented usage prior to 2006, when it was rarely contested. Discourse suggests that 'femanon' was filtered because it was overused by 'camwhores' to the point of stifling novel content and exasperating /b/'s mostly absent moderators. While all of 4chan's wordfilters were deactivated between 2007 and 2010, 'cumdumpster' remains in common parlance. Its retention seemingly reflects the cruel, misogynistic humour popularly ascribed to /b/. However, it indicates a rationale more closely connected with 4channers' deindividuating collectivism, implicit zero-identity mandate, and antipathy to egocentrism, narcissism, and hubris. In selecting to individuate from the collective through gratuitously disclosing her gender and including an erotic photograph, the OP of what became the 'cumdumpster' thread violated zero-identity; her transgression was amplified by the attention-seeking quality of her post. As one 4chan user noted, 'The fact that you introduce yourself as 'femanon' proves that you are an attention whore. True anon has no gender' (Anonymous, 2008a). Although misogynistic trolling practices constitute significant cultural capital in 4chan's alternative hierarchy of authority and power, the glorification of these practices downplays 4chan's replication of the asymmetrical power relations of dominant social structures it claims to overturn. Appreciating misogynistic discourse as part of a broader strategy of regenerative subcultural practice is radical but necessary to understanding /b/ on its own terms.

## 'A-culture': The cultural logics of Random - /b/

Posing a stark contrast to the trust networks of social media, the incongruity between normatively constructed expectations and 4chan's discursive reality encourages performative role-play in the form of anti-normative, egregious, and abusive dialogue.

These practices serve as informal structures of socialisation and coincide with the anthropological notion of the habitus. Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 54–57) defines ‘habitus’ as the synthesised locus of norms and regularities that serve as principles of practice in societies that lack formal codification. There are some principles underpinning the practices that characterise participation on 4chan that are more visible than others. For example, 4chan lacks the option of registration and default usernames are ‘Anonymous’, adopted by over 90% of users. Users who do otherwise are deemed culturally incompetent. Above all else, however, is the capacity of participants to participate; that is, there is a commitment to commitment itself. Cultural competence is dictated not only through the performative offense of gate-keeping insults but also by consistent presence, as content refreshes rapidly on /b/ and is irrevocably deleted. Unlike other forms of communication online that are continually archived into databases, this permanent ‘refresh’ of content necessitates the transmission of collective memory through orality and the sharing of personal archives to which 4channers save material they deem worthy (Bernstein et al, 2011: 5–7). 4chan’s cultural economy is therefore penetrable only by immersive lurking or extensive perusal of sanitised databases like *Know Your Meme* or *Oh Internet*, which aggregate and explain some of the more popularised memetic references and mainstays of Internet culture. These repositories are accessible to the mainstream public and are anathema to 4channers, who are valued based on the cultural capital they demonstrably possess and distribute (Bourdieu, 1990: 54; Manivannan, 2012). [5] These constitute the system of dispositions that generate and organise the unconscious cultural practices structuring relationships between the individual and the collective. As the social tendencies that guide behavioural dynamics, habitus is neither fixed nor permanent and, as a product of history, generates practices—which constitute more history—influenced by that history. As 4chan lacks an official archive, this history must be acquired and internalised through protracted lurking, which precipitates the habituation of dispositions distinctive to a cultural economy founded on zero identity. In the absence of conscious rule, the past experiences generated by history, deposited in committed participants, craft a dispositional stance that assures the constancy and ‘correctness’ of practices over time (Bourdieu, 1990: 53–4).

This summates Auerbach’s (2012) ‘A-culture’: the set of logics, dispositions, and practices resulting from complete detachment from offline personae and sublimation of social identity to shared communal interests. A-culture provides an intentional disconnect for individuals who do not want to be known, demographically categorized, or ranked in a hierarchy of identity-based prestige. It offers a lack of accountability, of lasting indicators of stigma, and of bars to visibility, parameters that are intrinsic to economies of self-publicity. A-culture participants come together in diffuse communities that possess a greater collective mentality, where content reifies a shared culture and sense of belonging that surpasses abiding individual differences. The anti-leader, anti-celebrity, consensus-based meritocracy espoused by 4chan’s A-culture flexibly absorbs differences without making them apparent, precluding identity-based conflict until identity factors are disclosed.

A-culture on 4chan is characterised by its dehistoricising velocity, elitism, self-documentation, self-mythologising, self-awareness, and constant ironising as a means of competitively displaying different knowledges and their permutations (Auerbach, 2012; Hutcheon, 1994: 93). Like Japanese *otaku*, or individuals stigmatised for their obsessive interest in stereotypically geeky pursuits, 4channers embrace their alienation from mainstream culture and take pride in their collective shame. As such, it is practically expected that 4chan retain the normative gender associations geek identity typically imposes on technological access, particularly given that *otaku* stereotypically distrust discussions of *otaku* subjects initiated by non-*otaku*, who are popularly presumed to be female (Eglash, 2002: 49; Azuma, 2001: 5)



Figure 2. Like Japanese *otaku*, or individuals stigmatised for their obsessive interest in stereotypically geeky pursuits, 4channers embrace their alienation from mainstream culture and take pride in their collective shame.

4chan's A-culture is bounded by two conflicting impulses: a penchant for deviancy and contingency and an espousal of skepticism, deception, and derision. Auerbach (2012) identifies three primary economies organising these qualities: suspicion, offense, and unreality.

*Suspicion:* On 4chan, the economy of suspicion is a consequence of radical opacity, as discourse is not always independently verifiable and unverifiable discourse is the signature of trolls. Within this economy, gullible posters who disregard these verification standards instantly reveal themselves as outsiders. The overall effect is that discourse is never taken at face value and dubious claims must meet the burden of proof demanded by the collective, as in the generic exhortation, 'pics + timestamp or it didn't happen'.

*Offense:* Designed as a barrier to entry, 4chan's economy of offense pertains to its antisociality, willful alienation, and uses of outrage affect. Auerbach (2012) notes that participants are not necessarily bigoted given A-culture's constant play of self-referential irony, although free speech—both normatively moral and genuinely hateful—may be suppressed or absorbed due to the equilibrium of offense.

*Unreality:* Finally, contingent on the economies of offense and suspicion, the economy of unreality reformulates participation as masquerade, as A-culture absents collateral indicators of embodied reality. Discourse is presumed fictional by default unless incontrovertible proof is provided, engendering simultaneous detachment and investment within participants (Auerbach, 2012). The result is the perpetual experience of cognitive dissonance, made bearable by the unremitting suspension of belief no matter how plausible the narrative (Greenwald, 1969: 385–6).

These spaces rather than their inhabitants nurture a social libertarian ethos and surplus of shock images and obscenity, allegedly establishing an undifferentiated assemblage. Social classes manifest, however, in the form of established users and newfags and their respective canons of practices and cultural capital. Bourdieu (1990: 58–59) describes class habitus as the 'homogeneity of conditions of existence' that enable the objective harmonisation and adjustment of practices in the absence of conscious rule, reference to norms, or direct interaction. Power is socially and symbolically constructed in such spaces and is constantly legitimised through the interplay of systems of agency and structure. Members are unconsciously informed by the internalised class conditions and conditionings produced by historical experience regarding how to react to cultural stimuli and manipulate cultural capital, which replaces material assets in these power matrices, permitting alternate forms of domination.

In a sense, these two antagonistic sets of practices are engendered and harmonised such that 4chan becomes a differentiated society of established users with a shared historical experience, and 'newfags', created by the shared experience of a lack of identical history. The practices of each class habitus 'presuppose mastery of a common code' (Bourdieu,

1990: 59), as members of the same class are likely to have been confronted with similar situations. For instance, established users are accustomed to recognising misogyny as an ironic measure of deterrence and acknowledge the possession of this awareness as cultural capital. By contrast, ‘newfags’, who have internalised the media’s sensationalist rhetoric rather than 4channers’ sensibilities and schemes of perception, equate cultural capital and social competence with positively responding to misogynistic requests and performing for /b/.

Ultimately, sites that function through this logic of A-culture and inculcate participants with a correlative habitus owe their continued existence to ‘newfags’ (or an equivalent), whose imposition of an alternate, unwelcome habitus and attendant practices of self-affirming identity disclosure allow experienced participants (4channers) to reproduce and reinforce the normative social structures of the site (/b/) in the absence of an archive, explicit norms, and moderation. Misogynistic discourse and knowledge of its ironisation occupies an increasingly privileged place in /b/’s normative trolling practices and acquires greater cultural capital given that offline gender discrimination is a cross-cultural, sensitive issue and consequently possesses reliable outrage affect among newfags. Thus, the three economies of A-culture generate trolling practices that produce and reproduce /b/’s unique anti-normative social norms and socially motivated rhetorical actions calibrated to those norms. However, trolling itself has yet to be satisfactorily pinned down. Simultaneously configured as pathological depravity and harmless tricksterism, trolling has become an overly used, devitalised concept that is not truly applicable to 4chan and thus needs reevaluation (KTTV, 2007; Coleman, 2012b: 99). As the mainstream media continues to misrepresent trolling within normative frameworks, it is imperative to consider trolling as a stratified phenomenon modulated by participant characteristics, the space and habitus in which it occurs, and its onsite situational exigencies.

## Trolling as disruptive practice

Although the term arose in online contexts, the logic of trolling applies to both online and offline interactions. From its outset, it was predicated on resistance to a dominant paradigm, whether in the form of hierarchical rule or authoritative assertions presented as indisputable. It sought to construct alternative hierarchies of cultural capital, where authority was derived from an awareness of the flaws of dominant institutions and practices of power and an ability to perform and enact this knowledge through oppositional or ambivalent practices of disruption. Creative disruption has long manifested symbolically and materially, as in art pranksters’ ‘Great Art Swindle’ of 2000, Jonathan Swift’s anonymously published *A Modest Proposal*, or Orson Welles’s radio drama *War of the*

Worlds (Deseriis, 2010: 65–67; Coleman, 2012a; Phillips, 2011: 6). [6] Social engineering, or the psychological manipulation of others, is similarly pervasive, including the thirty-six stratagems of Chinese warfare, grifting, telephone pranking, the countercultural actions of the Yes Men, and routine identity management strategies. The flourishing existence of offline disruption undermines technologically deterministic arguments linking trolling to disembodiment and anonymity. The assorted disruptive and deceptive practices of private investigators, confidence artists, and pranksters suggest that disruptive behaviour is filtered through diverse moral and political sensibilities.

Early online trolling emerged as a social practice tempered on Arpanet and Usenet and as a post-hoc label applied to participants who were intentionally disruptive, posting naïve questions with obvious answers, expressing vituperative condescension, or performing assorted forms of demagoguery (Donath, 1999: 42–3; Hoey, 1992). Such posts engendered flame wars, escalating conflicts that were irrelevant, irresolvable, and prolonged, overwhelming productive discussion (Pfaffenberger, 1996: 373). Flame wars generally began when a troll posted ‘flame bait’, a post deliberately designed to provoke hysteria. They could last for months and grow intensely personal within self-oriented cultural economies (380). Early flame wars also functioned as homeostatic mechanisms regulating linguistically-signalled factional group identity: for instance, alternating capitalisation was perceived as the language of trendy would-be hackers, who were derided for it and ostracised by experienced alt.2600 users (Donath, 1999: 37–38).

Early Usenet trolling mirrored flaming to a certain degree; it was likened to the act of trawling bait, awaiting responses, and revelling in the ensuing commotion. As systems with reduced social context rely on discursive cues to signal reputation and status, flaming practices were ad hominem, defamatory, accusatory, threatening, or intentionally inane. In environments organised around traditional reputation systems, identity depends on conventional signals, or unreliable signals of personal traits that correlate to custom or convention; correspondingly, invested interactants must defend their reputations lest trolling remarks become associated with their identities (Donath, 1999: 32). Flaming was refined into taxonomies of flame wars, flame warriors, and implicit rules of engagement, such as Godwin’s Law and its codicil Formosa’s Law. [7] ‘Doxing’, or the revelation of personal details via leaking documents, emerged as a trolling practice as well. Jason Fortuny, who posed as a submissive masochistic woman on Craigslist’s ‘Women seeking Men’ forum and then doxed the men who replied, was himself doxed on Usenet; notably, this was viewed as a self-regulatory measure, purportedly reacting to his inability to cope with being trolled in return (TwistyCreek, 2006; Schwartz, 2008).

On Usenet, these trolling practices became overt responses to situational exigency after September 1993, colloquially known as ‘eternal September’ (Fischer, 1994), the moment when an influx of newcomers permanently overwhelmed veteran users and irrevocably altered the site’s demographics and habitus. These newcomers were ignorant of Usenet’s habitus and unwilling to lurk long enough to learn its behavioural dynamic. Thus, deceptive discourse proved instrumental in identifying longtime users, who possessed a sense of 4chan’s particular linguistic registers and could therefore distinguish flame bait from naïve posts. This socially motivated trolling practice is largely ‘a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players’ (Donath, 1999: 42). In this game, the troll’s objective is to be accepted as a legitimate participant by echoing common concerns and interests; the objective of other participants is to identify trolling postings and compel the troll to leave. The success of either party depends on their comprehension of identity cues specific to the discourse community in which the game takes place: that is, a successful troll is able to mimic the rhetorical voice appropriate to the trolling practice, while a successful participant is cognisant of and able to produce evidence of trolling behaviour. Success is also dependent on whether or not the troll’s enjoyment is diminished or nullified by participants’ reactions, as veteran users also know better than to reply to a troll (42–3).

These self-regulatory, communally-sustaining trolling practices remained intact on Usenet’s descendants and 4chan’s predecessors, like *Something Awful* (SA) and 2channel. SA seeks to minimise and contain onsite trolling but encourages and mythologises offsite trolling that is morally authoritative and emotionally disruptive, as in satirical articles about online shrines to stillborn infants or anorexic, pedophilic, and zoophilic forums. Additionally, forum members who are too sincere or trustworthy (in direct opposition to A-culture’s economy of unreality) risk further dissemination of their personal disclosures (Auerbach, 2012). For instance, SA member Redfox, who confessed to sniffing his sister’s underwear, had his behaviour exposed to his parents by a fellow user who was able to deduce his offline identity (Redfox, 2003). Deceptive discourse offsite may also serve as retribution for scammers and proof of intellectual superiority, as in the P-P-P-Powerbook prank where the would-be victim of escrow fraud scammed the scammer into purchasing a fake laptop (Harris, 2003). [\[8\]](#)

By contrast, the zero-identity anonymity of 2channel facilitates sockpuppetry and renders nearly all conventional signals unreliable. Despite the absence of identity markers, 2channel’s trolling incorporates racist and ethno-nationalist discourse. 2channel’s bigotry transpires along particularly fraught racial lines, as in participants’ reflections on the sexual depravity of Korean women, rumours that Koreans eat cats, or statements correlating Koreans to colonial slaves (McLelland, 2008: 828–30). Given A-culture’s economy of unreality, however, it is impossible to conclusively verify whether posters are voicing sincere opinions or are ‘doing it for the lulz’, the oft-cited rhetorical defense that normalises trolling behaviour online (Manivannan, 2012).

The dispositions of A-culture develop at the group-specific level and are continually reinforced through users' implementation of structural and social sanctions against individuals who abuse community mores (Baym, 1998: 60). On /b/, these social sanctions are formulated as trolling. The economies of suspicion, offense, and unreality create an environment in which gullibility is evidence of cultural incompetence and the endlessly competitive posting of increasingly deceptive and offensive material is championed. Moreover, standardising offensiveness controls for genuinely bigoted speech by removing the contrast between normative offense and hate speech (Auerbach, 2012). 4chan's discourse adopts the practices of trolling identified here as flaming, spamming, doxing, and prankish discursive deceptions. However, its radical opacity ensures that each is differently mediated by A-culture's economies of suspicion, offense, and unreality. Crapflooding has evolved from spammed evangelist posts on Usenet to the repeated posting of shock media like Goatse, Tubgirl, 'shitting dick nipples', and mutilated corpses. Flaming has developed from comparing participants to Hitler to derisively captioned offensive images. 4chan's misogynistic discourse revolves largely around captioned camwhore photographs and 'tits or GTFO', short for the ironic insistence that women should provide timestamped photographs of breasts and then cease to participate, at least under a gendered identity.

Thus, classifying 4chan's misogynistic trolling practices requires considering the rhetorical actions and frameworks available to 4channers at the time. Although personal motives tend to manifest in dialogue, the class habitus of established 4channers privileges communal motives. Onsite misogyny especially illustrates the unification of crapflooding, flaming, doxing, and identity deception as a single boundary-policing social practice. Rhetoric such as 'cumdumpster' and 'tits or GTFO' was generated from and reemerges during socially exigent circumstances, often incorporating each of the aforementioned trolling practices. Carolyn Miller (1984: 157) theorises that generic conventions develop out of an objectified social need for action. She defines exigence as 'a set of particular social patterns and expectations that provides a socially objectified motive for addressing danger, ignorance, separateness' (158). Rhetorical genres are categories of discursive action particular to specific social contexts and, when they jointly recur within a society, they represent a large component of social action. As such, rhetorical genres provide indexes to sociocultural patterns (162–3). Exigence necessarily arises from the social motivations of the community, in this case the perceived need to preserve subcultural integrity as sensationalist reportage attracts newfags who create a new, unwanted class habitus based on cultural economies of self-publicity.

## Trolling practices and the skewing of the A-culture habitus

Anonymous 4channers who violate 4chan's zero-identity principle by disclosing their gender are disciplined with stereotyped, shaming, gender-based insults. For instance, when male users post photographs of themselves, they are received with comments like 'cock or GTFO', 'you look like a faggot', 'permavirgin', 'eat your own cum', 'cock in X', 'X in cock', or 'X in anus'. As with 'tits or GTFO', these flames are oriented toward undermining socially acceptable traits of gender, such as male virility, while also spamming the individual with posts conflating self-worth with sexually degrading behaviour. However, self-disclosures of femaleness predominate on /b/, and so misogynistic discourse occurs more frequently than its misandrist counterpart.

As per the economy of suspicion, once any discursive identity disclosure is made, photographic evidence is required. [9] The offensive requests function as a means of identifying newfags, as users who perform for /b/ demonstrate their failure to understand the ironic nature of the rhetorical genre, lack an appropriate understanding of /b/'s habitus, and cannot reproduce its social norms. Newfags are disciplined through toxic shame, as trolling practices discursively reconstruct transgressors based on negative stereotypes of self-disclosed or community-exposed identity aspects (Baker, 2001).

Despite the zero-identity principle of 4chan's A-culture, newfags are distinguishable from established users as their post content reflects a lack of social competence within the class habitus of established users: for instance, they lack familiarity or versatility with native speech patterns or cultural capital, indicating a lack of immersion in the site; or they attempt to force content into popularity, implying the egotistical, narcissistic logics of cultural economies of self-publicity. However, quintessential newfag behaviour is typically met with suspicion, as the rhetor may be an experienced user employing these behaviours to troll a community easily offended by them. [10]

The rise in misogynistic trolling practices coincides with the influx of female 'camwhores', itself corresponding to cycles of sensational reportage that began in 2006, peaked twice in 2008 and 2010, and then stabilised. Until 2007, /b/ was relatively exclusive. In 2006, Jake Brahm brought the first curious journalists to 4chan after he was credited with a dirty bomb hoax authored as an attempt at a new meme. After reaching memetic popularity, Brahm's story diffused to more normative spaces where it alarmed users and was brought to the attention of the Department of Homeland Security and the FBI. Brahm was arrested and sentenced to a federal prison term, house arrest, and a substantial fine (Anonymous,

2006a; U.S. v. Brahm, 2007). This story received limited media coverage at the time, mostly occurring in 2008, the year Brahm was sentenced.

Between 2006 and 2007, a sharp increase in offsite raids on online communities such as myg0t, eBaumsworld, and Habbo Hotel and actions against Hal Turner led to stricter moderation on /b/, an emigration of veteran users to other imageboards like 7chan, and increased media coverage. In 2007, Fox News affiliate KTTV aired a spectacular and almost parodic report on Anonymous, characterising them as 'hackers on steroids', 'an Internet hate machine', 'a hacker gang', and 'domestic terrorists' (KTTV, 2007), juxtaposed against stock footage of exploding vans and anonymised interviewees experiencing online and telephone harassment. Cole Stryker (2011: 152) notes that this was 4chan's 'eternal September moment'.

The 2007 massification led to an influx of new users who, in flooding a space recently sapped of its veteran users, further challenged its habitus by ignoring the symbolic and material conditions of participation. 4channers' various cultural and ethical genres of engagement began to crystallise around media misrepresentations, including but not limited to the notion that 4channers' behaviour is completely divorced from a moral hinge, that zero identity affords impenetrable protection and indivisible alliance with the 'hivemind', that this hivemind is easily convinced to raid ordinary individuals over members' personal problems, and that 'tits or GTFO' is a *prima facie* rule of engagement.

Most significantly, new users brought with them the egocentrism and narcissism intrinsic to radically transparent social media systems. As media sensationalism linked zero identity to aimless trolling, new users accustomed to economies of self-publicity misinterpreted A-culture's economies of suspicion, offense, and unreality, and therefore behaved as though the mere act of engagement rendered them immune to trolling. For longtime users, A-culture's economies overlapped such that verification measures tailored to outmanoeuvre identity deceptions were ironically offensive and requested post hoc in response to attention-seeking behaviours. These measures were not a prerequisite of participation and were expected to be outmanoeuvred, not fulfilled.

New users fail to understand the need for verification measures, and the importunate and demanding quality of new users' participation indicates reduced technical awareness, savvy, and facility with respect to BBS culture, scripts, and 4chan's specific rules of engagement. Offensive discourse—once sustained by material like genital mutilation, landmine victims, and aborted fetuses—has been reinterpreted and attenuated by newfags who equate abhorrence with pornography and bigotry but are prone to moralising when

flamed themselves. Bizarre, obscene, and facetious verification standards are obeyed rather than understood as a warning to comply with A-culture, including preemptive, unnecessary fulfillment of ‘tits or GTFO’ that directly contravenes the zero-identity ethic.

4chan’s notoriety spiked again in 2008 following media coverage on Project Chanology. While Anonymous was gingerly romanticised even as it was vilified, 4chan was strictly moral panic material. The 2008 reportage discussed the swastika symbol topping Google’s Hot Trends, the Sarah Palin email breach, and the trolling of Bill O’Reilly and Oprah. *The New York Times* credited the email breach to ‘computer hackers’, citing campaign manager Rick Davis’s statement that it was ‘a shocking invasion of the governor’s privacy and a violation of law’ (Falcone, 2008). *Gawker* quoted O’Reilly as describing 4chan as ‘despicable, slimy, scummy’ (Carlson, 2008), after which 4channers hacked his website and leaked the information of 205 subscribing users to WikiLeaks and 4chan. A 4chan’s pedophilic posting to Oprah’s online forum furthered media moral panic as Oprah read it on her talk show, resulting in heightened public attention to 4chan but successful subcultural transgression, as mainstream media failed to notice signals of trolling obvious to insiders: for instance, the memetic reference to ‘over 9000’, a *Dragon Ball Z* reference, and the poster’s pseudonym ‘josefritzl’, the name of a rapist who repeatedly impregnated his daughter:

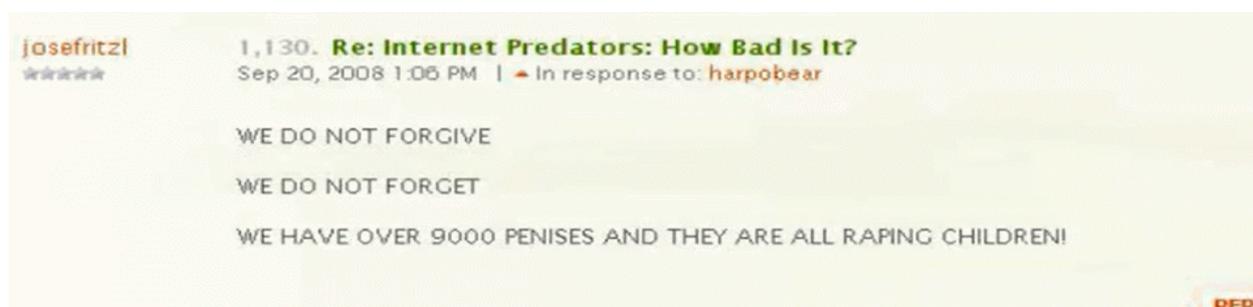


Figure 3. mainstream media failed to notice signals of trolling obvious to insiders.

The invisibility of these deceptive signals proved that 4chan remained impenetrable to the mainstream public, but this did not inoculate 4chan itself. The media moral panic solidified with the 2009 to 2010 coverage of 4chan’s manipulation of *Time*’s ‘Person of the Year’ poll, pro-WikiLeaks hacktivism such as Operation Payback, and its trolling of Jessi Slaughter, a tween girl with an account on Stickydrama. *Gawker* admonished 4chan regarding the Jessi Slaughter case, ‘sometimes the Internet beats up on an 11-year-old girl, posting her address, phone number and making her cry. Bad. This is what happened to Jessi Slaughter’ (Chen, 2010). Although not a 4chaner, Jessi Slaughter was perceived as representative of the female camwhores skewing /b/’s habitus. She was self-celebrating on Stickydrama, feigning authority and toughness, and was deceptive about her age, habits, and personality, flaming commenters who interrogated her. When her videos were posted

to /b/, she was viewed as a camwhore, and she was trolled online and offline to exemplify communal self-disciplining even though she herself was not a community member.

The Jessi Slaughter case clarifies a gap in 4chan's misogynistic trolling practices. As she did not camwhore on /b/, she did not constitute an appropriate target according to /b/'s habitus. According to /b/'s social structures, the cultural logics of self-publicity are only targetable when they appear onsite and threaten the class habitus of established 4channers. As *Gawker* journalist Adrian Chen concluded, the Jessi Slaughter case was an instance of 4chan going too far—in terms of both offline normative social structures and 4chan's own habitus. To put this plainly, such offsite trolling practices are more attributable to the class habitus of A-cultural sites like 4chan being internalised by 'newfags' who then enact such practices in strong-identity spaces. However, it is equally important to note that the figures targeted in offsite raids comprise acceptable topics of discussion on 4chan, illustrating problematic aspects of 4channers' schemes of perception.

Although offsite trolling practices lie outside the scope of this article, it is worth mentioning that communally endorsed offline practices tend to be political rather than prejudicial. Onsite discussions suggest that acceptable raids are organised around the political concerns of geeks, like censorship and Internet policy, as well as resistance to the very bigotry enacted onsite in trolling practices, like the targeting of Hal Turner and the Westboro Baptist Church. Self-proclaimed established 4channers distance themselves from apolitical offsite raids, acknowledging that 4chan's ethos is untenable elsewhere and will be covered by the media in a way that will attract newfags, who will bolster a rival class habitus. 4channers frequently discuss the problematic nature of exporting 4chan's habitus, as in the trolling of Anita Sarkeesian by Video Games—/v/ in 2012, or /b/ users' deceptive and derogatory comments around the 2012 Aurora shooting or the George Zimmerman trial. Users claiming long-term membership attribute this mindset to newfags, who misinterpret the logics of raiding to mean simply attacking anyone who seems dislikable or easily provoked.

## Conclusion: 'Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact'

The presumption of Western male heterosexual identity is invisibly imbricated into 4chan's subculture, undermining its post-identity politics paradigm. 4chan is not universally accessible, as Internet access is limited in portions of the world and controversial content is often censored, contributing to 4chan's largely Western demographic (Bernstein et al,

2011: 5). However, misogynistic trolling practices are less a reflection of this asymmetrical power structure than of the desire for subcultural preservation. It exists as a subset of bigoted discourse, including misandrist and racist rhetoric, all of which target users who violate anonymity, misinterpret irony, and attempt to normalise 4chan's class habitus of established users.

The rationalisation of misogyny as a socially motivated rhetorical action is facilitated by the economy of unreality, in which narratives and personae never achieve fruition and participants are sheltered from inextricable engagement and guilt (Auerbach, 2012). Narrator and spectators are simultaneously invested in and detached from /b/'s discourse, resulting in an environment of constant play. However, the agonistic playfulness of this economy of unreality is fundamentally breached by newcomers expecting either hard prestige measures or total anarchy. As offensive rhetoric is simultaneously unreal and suspect to habitual 4channers, it is integrated into the moral panic reaction and often remains playful, surreal, and objectionable by normative standards.

In a 2007 thread that occurred after the KTTV special report, a 4chaner posted a photograph of herself and announced that she was not a camwhore; she was an amateur model sharing images from a photo shoot. She signed off '/b/itch', but despite her feigned toughness, she retaliated when flamed, indicating her investment in an online persona. When crapflooding 'tits or GTFO' failed, users turned to visual vernacular, posting images of elderly women's genitalia, vaginal prolapses, furry pornography, and female anime characters being beaten by men. The OP's photographs were made into motivational posters ordering her to GTFO, wear cleaner underwear, and have a tubal ligation, after which she stopped contributing photographs (Anonymous, 2007d). By contrast, after the institution of the 'cumdumpster' wordfilter in 2008, outsmarting the wordfilter became a game, wherein the ability to bypass the filter using non-breaking space characters made visible the very epithet 4channers wanted eradicated. In outmanoeuvring the wordfilter, 4channers' discourse gave rise to 'good job, femanon', 'femanonigger', 'femanigger', 'femanon', 'femdumpster', and 'cumnigger' (Anonymous, 2008b).

In the eyes of the subculture, these two threads are not that different. Outwitting the 'cumdumpster' wordfilter permitted users to simultaneously celebrate and parody it. It made outsiders of offended users and technologically unskilled users. It helped define subcultural boundaries that had been blurring since media coverage in 2006. The economy of unreality permits these contradictory uses of bigoted discourse: one in which the OP is treated harshly as a gender-identifying individual outside of the magic circle of play; another in which misogynist and racist rhetoric becomes an unreal, playful point of solidarity.

The wordfilter itself later inspired a parody thread proposing a 'cumgarbagemen' filter, where users of indeterminate gender and race skewered stereotypical white male behaviour, and male users

posted timestamped images of their pectorals and penises in a satirical strike at 'tits or GTFO' (Anonymous, 2010a). These users were flamed with increasingly specific verification standards, such as 'computer mouse in cock or GTFO', images of a female anime character hurling a male by his penis and ordering 'GTFO and take your penis with you', 'butthurt spermshooter detected', 'gb2office', and 'cumgarbagemen aren't worth anything but pics and dicks' (Anonymous, 2010a). Female users identified as 'femanon', 'newhags', 'samedykes', and 'niggerettes', while male users referred to themselves as 'cumdumpers' and lamented their objectification in the manner of female camwhores who self-objectify themselves. This thread was praised for its originality and its cleverness in satirising 4chan's culture in 4chan's cultural terms. The catch, of course, is that all discourse is similarly parodic, whether or not it possesses an antecedent to parody. The subjects of satire are the normative conventions of offline reality. Had the amateur model understood that, she might have been welcomed.



Figure 6. Well Trolled.

## Biographical note

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## Notes

[1] The original post read:

Sup, /b/, femanon here.

My boyfriend of two years broke up with me last Saturday saying he thought I was fat. But, a friend just asked me to marry him. It's definitely a love thing... he's joining the Air Force and would get more money if he was married. Also I would get government health/dental/vision insurance for as long as I stayed married to him. I haven't had health insurance in about 6 years.

The only thing I'm worried about is my love life. Would guys be less interested in dating/fucking me if I were married under these circumstances?  
(pic related: it's my corset) (Anonymous, 2008a)

[2] 'Chemo' is the term applied to any measure that can foreseeably cure 'the cancer that is killing /b/', a memetic phrase referring to any and all symptoms of /b/'s apparent decline in quality. On /b/, the most aggressive form of 'cancer' is believed to be individuals whose contributions suggest an unwarranted sense of self-importance and a desire for complimentary attention.

[3] Long-term nonparticipant observation on /b/ indicates that discursively revealed identity factors essential to dialogue are implicitly permissible—for instance, signalling one's gender in discussions of dating, sexual failures, significant others, sexual orientation, urination, genital piercing, and so on; or signalling one's race in discussions of traveling in ethnically homogenous cities or countries. Users who flame such revelations are swiftly chided themselves as newfags for being unable to distinguish between self-publicity and necessary revelation.

[4] In 2008, Anonymous launched a trolling attack against the Church of Scientology in an operation dubbed Project Chanology. The group exceeded /b/'s cultural boundaries, including members of other fraternal transgressive online cultures such as Encyclopedia Dramatica, Something Awful, users of a variety of \*chans such as 7chan and 420chan, Wikipedia editors, former antagonists of Scientology hailing from Usenet, and offline activists utilizing conventional street protest tactics (Coleman, 2012b). The group should not be confused with 4channers, who adopt the username 'Anonymous' onsite.

[5] Unlike *Know Your Meme* and *Oh Internet*, the troll folklore repository Encyclopedia Dramatica is authored in the same ironising, self-aware, and self-mythologising fashion that characterises much of 4chan's discourse. As such, it remains largely impenetrable to outsiders.

[6] The Great Art Swindle involved the invention of an artist, Darko Maver, whose radical performance art included the positioning of dismembered mannequins as a social critique of murder, war, and suffering bodies. Maver was arrested and killed in prison, announced in a press release accompanied by a photograph of the corpse. The episode was later revealed as 'an active riot' against 'a capitalist art system', and Maver himself as fictitious, 'pure mythopoesis' (Deseriis, 2010: 67–68).

[7] Godwin's Law states that 'as a Usenet discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches one'. Formosa's Law states that 'the truly insane have enough on their plates without us adding to it', suggesting that purely irrational posters are impervious to flames and the situation cannot be improved through trolling.

[8] The P-P-P-Powerbook prank began when an SA user's eBay auction of a Powerbook drew the attention of an escrow scammer. The user, Jeff Harris, polled the SA forums regarding how to react and, following consensus, constructed a fake Powerbook using a three-ring binder, cardboard and paper cutouts, and a permanent marker. He obtained the scammer's address and even compelled him to pay an exorbitant customs fee (Harris, 2003).

[9] Cumtart-kun is a notorious male 'camwhore' who achieved infamy for ejaculating onto a Pop Tart and eating it, documented with photographed evidence.

[10] These trolls tend to reveal themselves as trolls at the ends of their threads, upon which they are applauded for 'successful' trolling in a community used to this particular practice.

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-159 /b/lack up: What Trolls Can Teach Us About Race

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### **Abstract:**

This article explores the racial politics of trolling by examining virtual world raids conducted by users of the internet message board 4chan. Since these raids deploy offensive language and imagery that play upon African American stereotypes and history, they can be understood as participating in an ironic, post-political racism that masquerades as enlightened yet maintains online spaces as bastions of white heterosexual masculinity. Moving beyond this frame, however, this article looks away at these performances and considers how they might also be understood as unintentional yet productive interrogations of racial politics and logics within game cultures and technologies.

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*I hate racists (even if I sometimes play one on the internet).*

*Paulie Socash (Phillips, 2012)*

## Closing Pools, Posing Questions

I'd been a fringe observer of 4chan and /b/ for years, aware but ignorant of its pleasures and horrors. Then in a particularly aimless night of YouTube browsing, I watched something that plunged me into the /b/ abyss. It was a player made *World of Warcraft* (WOW) machinima video featuring a white human avatar dressed in plain clothes and a wide brimmed hat. This wasn't remarkable, but what followed him—a group of dark skinned human avatars—was. Couched in a Benny Hill sensibility, the video featured a pack of 'slaves' who chased and were chased by the 'slave master' through the city of Stormwind to crowds of (one can assume) perplexed, entertained, and offended onlookers.

The 'slave chase video' as I refer to it (it's long since removed and I didn't get a chance to archive it) was a troll. Trolling tends to be thought of as rhetorically baiting others usually into frustration and anger. Although it has become an increasingly hot topic of debate in light of 'RIP trolling' on Facebook and the exposé on the troll Redditor 'Violentacrez,' trolling has long been a fixture of internet discourse (Chen, 2012; Lynch, 2012; Phillips, 2011). Irony—the backbone of trolling—has been used for rhetorical effect for centuries, but trolling as we currently understand it is most often traced to Usenet groups in the early 1990s. Whitney Phillips describes this 90s era trolling as 'disrupt[ing] a conversation or entire community by posting incendiary statements or stupid questions onto a discussion board' (2012: para. 3). Judith S. Donath documented this era of trolling, exploring it through the lens of identity performance (1999). This work expanded an existing concern over inauthentic, and potentially malicious identity performance (especially gender performance) common among early internet scholarship (O'Brien, 1999; Rheingold, 2000; Turkle, 1997). During this era, it was less that the troll identified himself/herself as a troll, and more that he/she was accused of 'trolling.' It's a subtle but important difference that speaks to the formalisation and pride attendant to modern trolling. According to Phillips, modern trolling is a 'game ... that's steeped in a distinctive shared language, subcultural trolling is predicated on the amassment of lulz, an aggressive form of laughter derived from eliciting strong emotional reactions from the chosen target(s)' (2012: para. 4). As time has passed, some trolls who take the discourse seriously view trolling as well practiced performance art.

Representative of this evolution, the slave chase video is part of a larger troll/meme genre referred to as 'invasions' or 'raids.' The incarnation studied here began with invasions of *Habbo Hotel*. Created by a Finnish developer the Sulake Corporation, *Habbo Hotel* is a free avatar-based online virtual community driven by teen users, and focused primarily on socialising. It continues to be a popular destination today. While *Habbo* raids have been a favourite activity of trolls, July 12, 2006 was the date many identify as the greatest of all, and as with most memes each iteration has offered diminishing returns ('The Great

Habbo Raid of July 2006,' n.d.). Responding to alleged banning of black avatars by *Habbo* moderators, users of the message board 4chan.org organized a massive disruption of the *Habbo* community. The users entered the world and selected characters with suits, dark skin, and afros, referred to themselves as 'nigras,' and stormed one of *Habbo*'s most popular social destinations, the pool. There the raiders shouted racial slurs, formed swastikas with their bodies, and blocked access to the pool and other popular spaces using *Habbo*'s collision detection to effectively trap other users (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The users entered the world and selected characters with suits, dark skin, and afros, referred to themselves as 'nigras,'

These raids, which took the motto 'the pool's closed!' as their rallying cry, initiated the template from which subsequent raids iterate. Beyond the dubious earnestness and effectiveness of the protests, they certainly initiated a fascination with distributed political action that continues today in the far more powerful attacks by the hacker collective Anonymous, and which were riffed on by the WOW slave chase raid and its ilk. Surprisingly, Chris Poole, better known as moot, the founder and clown prince of 4chan, has spoken out against raids. During a question and answer session at 2007's Otakon, Poole referred to an afro clad audience member's request for a board dedicated solely to 'invasions' as 'the cancer that is killing /b/ [that is, a sector of 4chan]' (LordGrimmie, 2007). Poole implied that activism, and efforts to spread 4chan's influence beyond its boundaries, were ruining the lulz of the insular and anonymous community. Invasions were letting the secret out, and boring holes into the safe space of 4chan. The crowd applauded.

As evidenced by their targets (Habbo Hotel and WOW), the pool's closed style raids of interest here could be seen as peaking in the late 2000s. They continue today, however, and demonstrate how trolling more generally oscillates between harassment, lulz, and protest/intervention, creating controversy not just between troll and trolled, but between trolls. I would go as far as to say that all trolling has a version of politics; even those trolls who claim to do it just for fun have a stake in protecting that fun. It's what's behind the fun, or what's truly at stake, that's of more interest.

The natural inclination is to laugh or cringe at raids chalking them up to lulz, racism, or some mixture of the two. But having played WOW since launch, and researched racial representation in videogames, I found the slave chase video extraordinary because it produced unintended but nonetheless provocative stray signifiers; it made the racial subtext of WOW explicit. If it's possible—I understand that for some it might be impossible—to look beyond the racist discourse embedded within this performance, the raids, particularly the WOW raids, remind us of the importance of blackness and race more generally to these spaces. By analyzing the raids we can understand the cultural politics of trolling and its post-politics, or the way some trolls discursively cloak discriminatory and/or hateful business as usual within anonymity; we can also explore the possibilities opened up by strategic use of irony and performance to think through, expose, and confront issues of race. I'd like to investigate these two poles of trolling—post-political discursive practice and socio-political critique—by looking more closely at raids that deploy blackness in virtual worlds.

## 4chan and Discursive Barriers

While 4chan became synonymous with troll culture and the raid or invasion style troll, it had simple beginnings as an image sharing message board created by Poole in 2003. /b/, a sub-board of 4chan dedicated to 'random' content, is the most notoriously generative and offensive board, and the community that has iterated and refined the fine art of the troll including the raids and invasions. Once considered an underground phenomenon, 4chan has grown to 22 million monthly visitors and has become a significant influence on internet trends (xoxofest, 2012). I defer to the following description of 4chan from Julian Dibbell:

*Filled with hundreds of thousands of brief, anonymous messages and crude graphics uploaded by the site's mostly male, mostly twenty something users, 4chan is a fountainhead of twisted, scatological, absurd, and sometimes bril-*

*liant low-brow humor. It was the source of the lolcat craze (affixing captions like 'I Can Has Cheezburger?' to photos of felines), the rickrolling phenomenon (tricking people into clicking on links to Rick Astley's ghastly 'Never Gonna Give You Up' music video), and other classic time-wasting Internet memes. In short, while there are many online places where you can educate yourself, seek the truth, and contemplate the world's injustices and strive to right them, 4chan is not one of them. (2009: para. 1)*

As Dibbell notes, 4chan is anonymous and quite famously so. Users can identify themselves within a post using something called a 'tripcode' but this is rare and usually done to momentarily verify one's identity. The vast majority of users are completely anonymous (hence the name 'anon' for a user), and most posts disappear in a matter of seconds or minutes. Nothing is archived server side. This anonymity is something Poole staunchly defends, and has been more vocal about in light of recent controversies over privacy and identity spawned by Facebook and Google (Fowler, 2011). According to Poole, 'Anonymity and ephemerality are the two things that kinda define 4chan' (xoxofest, 2012) and by allowing users an anonymous bastion on the internet people can 'reinvent' themselves, collaborate, and achieve a kind of 'authenticity' difficult to find in other communities (Halliday, 2011: para. 6). Since 'the cost of failure is really high when you're contributing as yourself' in less anonymous places both on and off the internet, Poole has re-framed 4chan as a productive and collaborative avant garde community (Halliday, 2011: para. 7). It's hard to argue with. Many of the most beloved fixtures of internet culture trace their origins to /b/, and more recent factories like 9GAG and Reddit each bear significant influences.

So does this mean the popular association of 4chan with depraved hideousness is a mischaracterisation or misunderstanding? Not exactly. It's impossible even for Poole to deny that at any given time the boards, especially /b/, are full of offensive imagery and language that would make most cringe. In Poole's view the 'notorious reputation' of 4chan is a means to end and not an end in itself. He frames 4chan's offensiveness as a strategic effort—a coordinated and improvisational meta-troll—by anons to police their borders. It's a kind of discursive security system meant to repel those who don't fit the 4chan mold. As Poole puts it 'you have to be cut of a certain gib', and if you find yourself offended or disgusted by 4chan, chances are anons 'don't want you using it' (xoxofest, 2012).

This kind of discursive policing is nothing new. Anyone who has had inside jokes, or been involved in or excluded from a clique knows the subtle and not so subtle language of exclusion and ostracization. But while it might be tempting to downplay 4chan's discursive practices as simply an extension of these more local and relatively less harmless examples,

the board's use of racism, sexism, and homophobia affiliate it more with a different scale of discursive practice that's institutionalized, traumatic, and powerful. 4chan's use of culturally offensive language and imagery as a kind of enculturation apparatus rings true of a dominant ideology that's been a fixture of internet discourse since its inception, but also larger socio-political apparatuses like Jim Crow. Using sensitive cultural terms to establish the boundaries and norms of internet communities is nothing new, but with 4chan and similar communities where trolling is a favoured mode of expression it's less an implication and more an explicit hail (e.g. 'Tits or GTFO').

## Keeping the Internet 'Free'

This is why I'd like to propose that the targeting of race, gender, and sexuality by trolls is not only for the lulz or because of its controversy; rather, anons who engage in racist, sexist, and homophobic trolling are also representative of a larger effort to preserve the internet as a space free of politics and thus free of challenge to white masculine heterosexual hegemony. When internet spaces formerly coded 'white, 'straight,' or 'masculine' get challenged by diversity, there's often an anxious and sometimes hateful prodding of sensitivities—and the viewpoints and people they represent—most acutely felt by women, people of colour, and queers. Anita Sarkeesian, a critic who produces a video blog series on feminism and media called *Feminist Frequency*, was the target of a massive trolling campaign after she posted a Kickstarter for a video series on sexist tropes in videogames (Lewis, 2012). In her talk at TEDxWomen 2012, she offered a counterpoint to Poole's sanitized view of racist, sexist, and homophobic discourse. She views the offensive language and imagery as the product of a 'boys club' that '[creates] an environment too toxic and hostile to endure' (TEDxTalks, 2012). In her experience, the exclusionary discursive practices of 4chan were not limited to 4chan. She was not just being kept out of a message board or a chat room, but out of videogame culture completely. Although not connected with the trolling campaign against Sarkeesian, self-identified troll Paulie Socash provides insight into how trolls defend their behaviour:

*People who are overly earnest and serious online deserve and need a corrective. I started [trolling] because there was no way to have rational conversations with some people and because I like to debate things. But there's also a time to just say, You are an idiot, which is the most basic, entry level of trolling and most honest people will admit they have done it. (Phillips, 2012)*

As Sarkeesian's case illustrates, 'overly serious' is often code for 'politically correct' which in turn is code for anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-racist.

Are raids then part of this assault on progressive politics and equitable representation? On the surface, they seem to fall right in line with the harassment Sarkeesian and others have experienced. Raids draw from a well of offensive and politically charged racial history, imagery, and language meant to engage sensitivities and offend. But how then do we reconcile the initial stated intentions of the *Habbo* raids: assaulting racially/ethnically discriminatory moderation practices? This complex and contradictory politics that undermines its own intentions can perhaps best be clarified via a brief overview of Anonymous, the hacker group that first gestated on 4chan and has since become one of the most recognized hacktivist organizations (Crenshaw, n.d.).

Though Anonymous maintains much of the ironic humor and playful essence of troll culture as well as many of the tactics, they have strategically jettisoned most of the politically charged speech we associate with 4chan lingo. Their decentralized activist campaigns against a litany of enemies from Visa and MasterCard to the Church of Scientology to PayPal to the Westboro Baptist Church have been drawing headlines and have many reconsidering what activism looks like in the 21st century. Both Dibbell and E. Gabriella Coleman have highlighted Anonymous's chaotic and yet powerful political interventions and tactics which have mobilized thousands, raised significant awareness, and taken down some of the most trafficked websites in the world (Dibbell, 2009; Coleman, 2011; Coleman 2012). Even though they've had success, the organization has 'no leaders, no hierarchical structure, nor any geographical epicenter' and therefore it's been difficult to pin down a consistent ideology guiding Anonymous (Coleman, 2011). Coleman sees Anonymous as indebted to but moving beyond troll culture, becoming 'a political gateway for geeks (and others) to take action' and this action seems to cohere around the issue of 'internet freedom' (Coleman, 2011). Coleman's ideological distillation here offers a useful reconciliation of all types of trolling. Raids, the misogynistic campaign against Sarkeesian, and Anonymous each are distinctive kinds of trolling, yet they are all united by the common desire for freedom whether from diversity, political correctness, or censorship. By operating under the banner of freedom, raids can both argue for equal representation of people in *Habbo* while also deploying stereotypes that actively denigrate the people they're fighting for.

For a time, videogames—the battleground for both Sarkeesian and raids—offered an ideal solution to these contradictions. Game worlds were advertised and understood as boundless power fantasies—toys basically—with negligible social impact or cultural importance. This, as Nick Dyer-Witheford and George de Peuter point out, is false and is increasingly recognized as such:

*games, once suspect as delinquent time wasters are increasingly perceived by corporate managers and state administrators as formal and informal means of training populations in the practices of digital work and governability...A media that once seemed all fun is increasingly revealing itself as a school for labor, an instrument for rulership, and a laboratory for the fantasies of advanced techno-capital... (2009, xix)*

Yet many people still seem ignorant of or incredulously deny the cultural and political significance of videogames. Commenters on videogame sites offer a particularly severe example, and one relevant to discussions of trolling given the likely overlap between trolls of games blogs and trolls of gamespace more generally. The privileged, deflective, and derisive rhetoric of internet commenters has become so common in fact that many critics have codified it (dbzer0, 2011; O'Malley, 2012; Scalzi, 2012). By diminishing social justice oriented perspectives wherever and whenever they arise—from Kotaku or Second Life—games are preserved as places of escape safe from messy political squabbles that make the game world and real world less fun. It's a mutation of the peace loving and techno-utopian conceptualization of the internet and cyberspace forged by Stewart Brand and other early counter-cultural and anti-establishment internet pioneers who viewed cyberspace as a frontier of democratic community that could eclipse or transcend political divisions (Turner, 2008). As key sites of political fantasy and struggle, cyberspace and now gamespace nurture, as Vincent Mosco explains, the 'central myths of our time...the end of history, the end of geography, and the end of politics' (2005: 13). The unifying thread behind all three dominant myths is an illusory freedom whether it be from past violence, market borders, or cultural politics. Not coincidentally, all of these freedoms are especially desirable for free market loving white men of able means looking to escape responsibility for persistent, institutionalized oppression.

## Trolls and Race

The desire for freedom results in an ideological split among anons; this split forms the contradictory foundation of raids making them so hard to parse. On one hand, there are the post-racial anons who espouse a depoliticized view of the net and consider race a funny antiquity. On the other hand, there are anons who believe race is real, but, due to the anonymity of the internet, anxiously struggle with the lack of reliable markers visual and performative difference at the interface. Consequently this anxiety compels many anons to rehearse the fixity of real world racial division. With these two perspectives intermingled in one thread on /b/ or a raid of Habbo, the line between ironic parody of traditional racist language and actual indulgence is blurred. Offensive and derogatory discourse is so frequent and wide-ranging that one either leaves offended or gives into an ironic

detachment that sees race, gender, and sexuality as comedic fodder. Even so, while the anons that participate in raids like the slave chase probably represent a mixture of both the ironic racist and traditional racist viewpoints, it's safe to say the majority would identify with the former.

Lisa Nakamura sees little difference between the two. From her perspective, ironic racism, specifically the repeated use of 'nigger,' is 'enlightened racism' (BerkmanCenter, 2010). Drawing on Susan Douglas's concept of 'enlightened sexism' wherein sexism is perceived as funny and acceptable by the 'enlightened' because sexism has been solved, racist terms like nigger can be used by those 'who are known, or assumed known, not to be racist' (quoted in Daniels, 2010: para. 5). From this perspective 'The n-word is funny because it is so extreme that no one could really mean it. And humor is all about 'not meaning it.' If you take humor and the n-word, you get enlightened racism online' (quoted in Daniels, 2010: para. 5). Enlightened racism is the comedic cousin of the 'I am not racist, but...' disposition of post-racial society, a rationalization of racist discourse presuming erroneously that racism is over and that because of this, and the speaker's progressiveness, that he/she is not racist. In fact as the following Encyclopedia Dramatica entry for 'Nigra' illustrates, the only problem from the perspective of the enlightened is people who continue to identify racism:

*the Internets is largely Anonymous and because the term was invented by a /b/tard (a cyber being of indeterminate and irrelevant sex/age/heritage) in the virtual, 'colourblind' environment of Habbo Hotel as a way to say 'nigga' without alerting their dirty word Department of Habboland Security feds, any suggestion that the word 'nigra' is racist is not only completely without merit, it's racist against the inhabitants of Internets. ('Nigra,' n.d.)*

Potential racism is peculiarly and illogically disproved in the case of 'nigra' because the word was not intentionally meant to be racist (as if racism only exists when intended) and was created by someone of indeterminate and irrelevant race (as if racism is the exclusive domain of specific races). Moreover, in a common tactic of colorblind deflection, any contrary claims are themselves racist because racism is conflated with seeing race.

While I agree with Nakamura's diagnosis, and her reframing of ironic racism as regression masquerading as progression, there remains something about raids in particular that exceeds this categorization even if it is unintentional. While raids operate under the guise of a post-racial and enlightened Internet where racism is the exclusive domain of super villain racists like the KKK, they betray this ideology through a compulsive reintroduction

of blackness into pervasively white spaces. Consider this provocation: if race doesn't matter to anons then why choose black avatars? In a post-racial world, the enlightened deployment of blackness in the form of nigra would be funny, but it would not be a satisfying troll. Clearly anons, at some level, understand the continued importance of race on and offline and deploy it for its arresting power as a signifier both in virtual and physical space. And it's this power that I first recognised in the slave chase video. Although /b/ might deploy race as an absurdity, they end up making an argument for its centrality to online interaction and games.

## /b/lack up

I made these observations, and came to these conclusions in 2010 while observing /b/ silently or 'lurking.' For months, I sat idly at the edge of the board's depths, hoping to catch the shimmer of a thread announcing another invasion like the one I had witnessed in the slave chase video. I saw the birth, death, resurrection of and nostalgia for memes. I underwent the familiar life cycle of a '/b/tard'—initial disgust seeding lingering curiosity enabled by moral numbness giving way to obsessive monitoring of favoured threads/memes, ending in an aged distance and disinterested pining for halcyon days.

Finally in August 2010—having all but given up on witnessing an actual raid—I opened a window to /b/, hit F5 to refresh the list of threads, and my luck turned. I caught the tail end of the largest raid of WOW I had seen in my research. My mouse wheel spun as the mountain of replies to the original call for participants (commonly referred to as '/b/lackup') blurred by. Most of the thread was mundane: questions about where to go, proud declarations of name selection, and exclamations of joy at finding the raid. At the end of the thread, there was much celebration over a job well done. By some counts nearly two hundred brown skinned anon avatars gathered in the city of Stormwind, and ran in a crazed mass through the world annoying and entertaining onlookers.

The raid was much like the other raids I had previously archived and studied through video clips and screenshots: a spontaneous call to arms on /b/, a prompt assembling of brown skinned and inappropriately named level one humans in the Alliance capital city of Stormwind (Figure 3). As was the case with this raid, there's almost always a parade through the city with stops in areas of high player density such as the bank or auction house. Racist slurs are shouted. The mass of nigras embark on a cross-continental journey involving a boat ride which doubles as a slave ship (Figure 4). The raid usually ends with mass deaths at the hands of monsters, other players, or simple negligence. But sometimes the lulz just run out, or, as in the case of the raid I witnessed, accounts get banned by customer service representatives.



Figure 2. By some counts nearly two hundred brown skinned anon avatars gathered in the city of Stormwind, and ran in a crazed mass through the world annoying and entertaining onlookers.



Figure 3. '...a spontaneous call to arms on /b/, a prompt assembling of brown skinned and inappropriately named level one humans in the Alliance capital city of Stormwind.'



Figure 4. The mass of nigras embark on a cross-continental journey involving a boat ride which doubles as a slave ship

A mere week after the August 3, 2010 raid it was almost completely forgotten. There was a YouTube video with just under four hundred views and thirteen comments, but it is now removed (Figure 5). Little mention was made of the raid the following day. Its existence was limited to its happening. But this doesn't mean it was without impact. It is exactly this ephemeral, temporal experience that makes these raids compelling. They transform space, troll, and, most importantly, challenge and reveal the racial boundaries of the community.

The raid I documented, more akin to the slave chase video than the pool's close Habbo raid, was far more interested in deploying race primarily as an easy trolling mechanism than trying to make a political statement. But despite their best efforts to be annoying and offensive, anons open up the possibility for critical reflection on racial representation. In each raid, the dominant whiteness of Habbo or WOW is exposed and confronted via a sudden invasion of non-white avatars. The raids create semiotic maelstroms full of offensive and provocative imagery that ignite reflection on the norms of appropriate or inappropriate imagery and/or expression in gamespace.

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Uploader Comments (Gerbillfury3)	
<a href="#">crzychzwngs</a> 1 week ago	ITS IMPOSSIBLE THAT SSOOOOOO MANY NIGGERS CAN SWIM! yourdoinitwrong. the whole video has them SWIMMING!  @crzychzwngs bring me lil water sylvie <a href="#">Gerbillfury3</a> 1 week ago
<a href="#">androoo3k</a> 1 week ago	It sucked at first, with all the healers preventing mass suicide. But we gots freed in the end. That's all that matters.  @androoo3k Yea the whole idea of it kinnda changed from "LOL LETS ALL DIE IN SW" to "LOL LETS ALL GO TO ORG" <a href="#">Gerbillfury3</a> 1 week ago
All Comments (13)	
<a href="#">schrummy14</a> 1 week ago	poop
<a href="#">JesusTehRaptor</a> 1 week ago	This is a beautiful thing,
<a href="#">r21187</a> 1 week ago	yes we have the time yes we have the pcs yes we hate all yes we have a will yes we hate you yes we are legion yes we are /b/ we are not you friends we are no you personal army we are not nice we dont forgive we dont forget we are the that nigger army we are the the ones that you hate
<a href="#">mono271</a> 1 week ago	Lawdy youz be freed!
<a href="#">norinvaux</a> 1 week ago	lawl win I wish I was there D:
<a href="#">UnethicalOwnage</a> 1 week ago	I'm so happy that the slaves escaped.
<a href="#">VictorEchoNovemb...</a> 1 week ago	praise jewsus
<a href="#">PiloyD</a> 1 week ago	Oh lawdz

Figure 5. A week after the raid a YouTube video with just under four hundred views and thirteen comments was all that remained of the raid.

## Tactical Performance, or, Don't Feed the Trolls, Learn from Them

From a certain perspective these raids are imperfect but nonetheless intriguing performances that issue a critique of character creation. They do so by exposing, through the mass replication of bodies, the limited set of programmed options with which someone

can manufacture an avatar other users identify as black. The mass of bodies recolours and re-contextualizes the space. It facilitates recognition of WOW's pervasive whiteness, or the racial and ethnic histories that motivate much of the game's character design and story (Douglas, 2010; Higgin, 2009; Langer, 2008). The repetition of 'black' bodies, and their relative sameness, also reflects back on the game itself. Character creation, adhering to myths of freedom and consumer choice in game design, presents users with a customizable avatar but always with a set of programmed options ranging from a selection of pre-built avatars to detailed systems where everything from skin colour and age to chin size can be manipulated (Douglas, 2010). We cannot ignore that these systems are made; each coded system carries its own biases and logics, and the baggage of the cultural circumstances from which those logics stem (Chun, 2008; McPherson, Stone, 1991). Thus there are errant, historical meanings in these performances. For players more familiar with the world's lore and its story of racial conflict and imperial conquest, the slave auction also makes explicit the subdued historical referents—the Atlantic slave trade, the Great Chain of Being, scientific racism, genocide, etc.—that form the foundations for the game world's allusions and metaphors. Sure /b/lackup raids troll, and they have a muddled, flawed, dangerous, and damaging post-racial politics that finds racism humorous, but they are also surprisingly similar to net art like [Joseph DeLappe's oft referenced *dead-in-iraq* piece] (<http://www.delappe.net/project/dead-in-iraq/>). The raids infiltrate space, transform it, and challenge the audience to look awry at something so familiar.

Take, for example, the slave auction trope common to these raids and present in the raid I documented. In WOW, as in most MMORPGs, there's an auction house where players can buy and sell goods by clicking on an NPC and browsing what others players have put up for auction or by putting their own items up for sale. It's usually one of the more populated areas of a major city with ten to twenty other players nearby. The popularity of the space makes it a favoured target of the /b/ raids. During a raid, the number of people can easily quadruple when counting the performers and their unwitting audience members. The raiding party fills up the front of the auction house where the auctioneers stand, and turn to face the other players shouting 'PICK ME,' or 'I's a good nigra massa! I reeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeal good at pickin' me some cotton!'. Sometimes anons will stand in the crowd playing the part of an auctioneer or slave owner.

In the image above, you can see the striking reconfiguration of bodies in space created by this performance (Figure 6). The non-participating players in the foreground are recontextualized as slave auction customers, their whiteness resignified, and the mass of brown skinned humans bringing the exclusions of the medieval setting to the surface. Skin colour is crucial to this performance; brown skin is an aberration within WOW (and when deployed is often done through a lens of stereotype), and thus inherently interesting to passersby (Higgin, 2009: 5–7). A mass of white skinned humans, while worth a glance, would not be as powerful. White human avatars, as evident even in this image, are often



Figure 6. the striking reconfiguration of bodies in space created by the August 3, 2010 World of Warcraft Raid.

seen throughout the city and surrounding areas as players congregate for guild events, general socialization or organization, or for key events like the seasonal holiday quests. Anons deploy brown skin for its attention seizing power due to its relative absence within the game world and its political baggage. They also use tactics tuned to each space. From the virtual sit-in of a Habbo pool's closed raid to the less focused and playful spontaneity of the WOW /b/lackup raids, these differences illustrate some key variables and how games each offer their own contexts in which to work. Habbo's restrictive collision detection and pathing, as well as its limited scope, became assets and integrated into the tactics of the raid. WOW's sprawling nature and more free form spatial navigation necessitates more mobile activities that travel through space forming crowds. The transitory nature of these WOW raids thus open up the possibility for rare virtuosic moments of engagement and reflection. If nothing else, they make players conscious of the multi-layered mediation of race in gamespace from code to discourse.

Raids provide a corrupt but structurally sound template for progressive activism aimed at exposing the racialized power structures of game content, the industry, and fan communities. By opening up a critical space that reflects on the culture of games and game technologies, which is to say 'at the level of technological apparatus and at the level of content and representation,' raids can be interpreted as tactical media that, in some bizarre way, manages to issue a productive gesture. The raids also demonstrate a light and agile performance based counter-discourse free of the technical barriers inherent to modding

and coding (both of which run the risk of reproducing logics of protocol and control (Raley, 2009: 16; Galloway, 2006)). Just as Rita Raley argues good tactical media should ‘not simply be about re-appropriating the instrument but also about reengineering the semiotic systems’ the raids deploy the familiar signifiers of WOW but transform the signified (2009: 16). While fatally relying on minstrelsy, raids show us the possibility for playful critical activities that engage productively with constructions of race in videogames within the games themselves. They go beyond the tried and true method of cataloging stereotypical representations by recontextualizing the larger techno-social systems of meaning making in games through those very representations, ultimately exposing the cultural logics of videogame technologies (Higgin, 2011). Perhaps most importantly, they show us it might be time to stop feeding the trolls and start learning a few tricks from them.

## Biographical note

**Tanner Higgin** (Ph.D. University of California, Riverside) is an Independent Scholar. His work focuses on race, gender, sexuality, and power in digital media. He has published an article in *Games and Culture* and the edited collections *The Meaning and Culture of Grand Theft Auto* and *Joystick Soldiers* as well as on the websites *Kotaku* and *Unwinnable*. For more visit: <http://www.tannerhiggin.com>

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-160 Politics is Serious Business: Jacques Rancière, Griefing, and the Re-Partitioning of the (Non)Sensical

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### Abstract:

This article contextualises certain elements of 'griefing' as a form of political action in virtual world by drawing on the political philosophy of Jacques Rancière. A small but growing number of scholars are starting to view griefing as an avant-garde, anarchist, or hacktivist political activity. I suggest that Rancière offers a more specific articulation of what constitutes political action and activism for griefing collectives because his understanding of politics is entirely grounded in relationship to the types of communities and individual political equality. The article focuses specifically on the Patriotic Nigras activities in the Great Habbo Raid of 2006 in an attempt to understand how a Rancièreian[eian or ian?] framework can provide some analytical tools for articulating politics in virtual worlds. I conclude that the PN do not ultimately realise a Rancierian[two different spellings] framework. They challenge not partitions of the sensible, but partitions of the nonsensical specific to the different operation of politics and community formation in virtual worlds.

## Lulzpolitik

*'We do not sleep, we do not eat, and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world.'* (Anonymous)

Trolling is a difficult phenomenon to classify in terms of its political orientation. Some researchers such as John Kelley (2011) suggest that groups like Anonymous can be situated within the anarchist political tradition. Anarchists tend to privilege bottom-up, decentralized, and horizontal networks over top-down state or corporate control (Graeber 2004), and a similar attitude and organizational structure are evident in many of Anonymous' past activities. Others are more skeptical. E. Gabriella Coleman (2011) notes that trolls' cyberactivism lacks a singular agenda and a sustained commitment to political coordination with other actors and institutions. Along different lines, Lincoln Dahlberg (2001) has questioned whether trolls can be considered as valid participants in deliberative public spheres. Trolls often seek to deceive others by posing as regular users and do not share a commitment to sincerity, rationality, and consensus building: 'Intentionally misleading others about one's claims, including relevant information about one's identity, undermines the whole deliberative process' (2001: para. 31). Trolling frequently disrupts the stability of networked communities and seems to undermine the conditions of possibility for political interaction.

Researchers are often more comfortable in making attributions of politicality when trolling practices target actual political entities or legal problems, such as the Westboro Baptist Church's hate speech or the American NSA's Internet surveillance. Cyberactivism fits a narrative of a vigilante-esque continuation of progressive political ends by other means (for example, hacking, leaking information) in the service of increasing public awareness and democratic debate. When trolling lacks a recognizable or serious institutional target, political engagement is seldom raised as a consideration. This point becomes clear if we leave the broader category of trolling and focus specifically on 'griefing': the practice of 'purposefully engaging in activities to disrupt the gaming experience of other players' (Mulligan and Patrovsky, 2003: 15). Griefing targets regular players in virtual worlds and not actual political actors like the NSA. When Anshe Chung bragged to mass media outlets to have made close to 100 million in virtual currency in *Second Life*, the Patriotic Nigras (PN) flooded her room with flying penises in the so-called 'Room 101' event. The fact that griefing alienates many players and hurts Linden Lab's economic bottom line has led some to move beyond connotations of apolitical provocation for the sake of provocation (Schwartz, 2008) to accusations of virtual terrorism (Dibbell, 2008: 4).

In this essay, I want to push against the tacit assumption that the ends and means of trolling and grieving in multiplayer virtual worlds should be measured primarily by their resemblance to or engagement with conventional political actors. Coleman warrants her claim that trolls lack an overt agenda on the assumption that some or many trolling activities fail to mirror conventional expectations for political activity. This tension is also latent in Dahlberg's complaint that trolling's lack of sincerity interferes with the formation of networked public spheres. Despite repeated assertions by scholars that networked technologies profoundly alter modes of political interaction, there remains a pervasive expectation that online political interactions should resemble the modes of conduct of the (offline) liberal political tradition. Such ideal requirements are necessary to the promotion of certain types of resistance, deliberation, and collaborative action. At the same time, a *de facto* limit on what constitutes a political act for grievers or trolls can cause researchers to miss exploring some of the unique forms of political engagement specific to virtual worlds. [1]

I shall argue that political engagement specific to virtual worlds, such as the example of grieving, can be productively grasped through Jacques Rancière's political philosophy. Although he has yet to be placed in dialogue with grieving or trolling, the political and aesthetic views of Rancière have increasing currency in the English-speaking world. [2] In his major translated work *Disagreement*, Rancière (2004) defines 'politics' in an idiosyncratic manner. For Rancière, politics is not composed of institutionally legitimate channels for political intercourse in keeping with the liberal political tradition. Rather, politics only refers to acts of dissensus against institutions that legitimate what he calls the 'police order' that maintains unequal 'partitions of the sensible.' The latter is Rancière's term for norms of decorum, hierarchy, and identity that deny individuals the ability to act out a presupposition of political equality. Politics for Rancière is simply action – not reflection or assertion or debate – borne out of this presupposition of political equality. For precisely this reason, his work constitutes a refreshing return to pragmatism and activism in a critique-filled academic landscape where claims for action grounded in normative politics are largely met with well-justified but enervating anti-essentialisms and anti-foundationalisms.

In what follows, I explore and extend Rancière's thinking through the discussion of an older event: the PN's infamous 2006 *Habbo* Raid (edit: see Higgin in this issue). While the PN are currently active on patriotcnigras.net and have committed more recent offensives, I have selected this example for two reasons. The *Habbo* Raid's familiarity offers the benefit of requiring little in the way of expansive description, and the primary goal of this essay is the development of a Rancièrian analytical framework in relationship to grieving. More importantly, the *Habbo* Raid like many of the PN's activities was the epitome of nonsense. It employed offensive memes and procedural disruption on the flimsiest of motivations. The

PN responded to unsubstantiated rumours that system admins were disproportionately banning African-American avatars from the hotel. While the PN acted out of what might seem like a presupposition of racial equality, the comparative inequality that they challenged was fairly inconsequential. There are far more overt and pernicious instances of actual racism in virtual worlds that the PN could have targeted such as the racialized Horde avatars employed in *The World of Warcraft* (Nakamura, 2010). The use of these alleged bans as weak pretense to disrupt an entire virtual world could easily be interpreted as a self-interested exploitation of complex issues of representation in digital spaces.

The *Habbo* Raid therefore requires a different articulation of resistance and politics in virtual worlds and a better understanding of the different forms of exclusion and presuppositions of equality that are proper to the PN's interpretation of grieving. From the PN's perspective, only *nonsense* exists on the Internet. Of all the various splinter cells affiliated with trolling, the PN perhaps most fully embrace Anonymous' satirical goal: 'the Internet is serious business.' According to Encyclopedia Dramaticae entry, it is 'a phrase used to remind [the player] that being mocked on the Internet is, in fact, the end of the world' (2011: para. 1). While their motivations for each disruptive activity inevitably differ, the PN always attempt to make players such as Anse Chung feel embarrassed when they take their personas, politics, and businesses in *Second Life* or other virtual worlds 'too seriously.' Seriousness exists in part when players or software companies attempt to establish boundaries that equate identity, meaning, decorum, behaviour, and commerce in virtual social settings with the seriousness or reality of their offline equivalents. For the PN and like-minded griefers, there is no issue, meaning, or event that exists on the Internet that is serious enough that it cannot be converted into nonsense: a joke or opportunity for the online humiliation of a player or software company. It is those who believe otherwise – those who do in fact take the Internet seriously either for racist purposes or for progressive political ends – who are the most laughable of all.

An extension of Rancièrè's political philosophy demonstrates how the ability to fully embrace nonsense against seriousness on the Internet operates as an important form of politics for griefers. 'Seriousness' for the PN's *Habbo* Raid is akin to a Rancièrian partition of the sensible. Seriousness is specific to the particular ways in which Internet users can operate within conditions of possibility structured by the protocols of a given virtual world or networked community. Like many griefers or trolls, the PN acts for '*lulz*' or 'win': the desired online audience response to a successful act of disruption or humiliation. While grieving or trolling activities most often generate only mildly annoying noise for other players within an online space, the PN's specific use of *lulz* and win in the *Habbo* Raid marked the breaking point or moment of dissonance for a system that has otherwise been functioning to support 'partitions of seriousness' at a procedural level (defined below). A Rancièrian political act means that what counts as political is measured by virtue of the

effect that it generates and not by its sustained engagement with a single actor or issue. Disruption—provocation for provocation’s sake—is not enough. Rancière’s political goal of dissensus obtains when what people see is changed, the sensible is repartitioned, and a regime of the perceptible is challenged. Requiring a virtual world-specific extension of Rancière’s thought, the PN acted in the *Habbo* Raid not primarily out of a presupposition of political but *procedural* equality that was designed to safeguard all players’ creative agency to engage in nonsense against invisible police orders of seriousness.

## Occupy Habbo

Estimated at around 150 individuals by Bakioglu (2009) and originally based in the 7Chan and Something Awful websites, the PN – formerly the /b/lockers – are an offshoot of the larger online community Anonymous. While the targets of trolling and grieving groups vary greatly, the PN has taken a special interest in making life difficult for Linden Labs customers. Their manifesto claims ‘ruining your *Second Life* since 2006’ as a primary purpose for action (‘Patriotic Nigras,’ 2012: 2). Describing a 2006 attack, Dibbell writes:

*[S]hortly after 5 pm Eastern time on November 16 [in the Albion Park section], an avatar appeared in the 3-D-graphical skies above this online sanctuary and proceeded to unleash a mass of undiluted digital jackassery. The avatar, whom witnesses would describe as an African-American male clad head to toe in gleaming red battle armor, detonated a device that instantly filled the air with 30-foot-wide tumbling blue cubes and gaping cartoon mouths. For several minutes the freakish objects rained down, immobilizing nearby players with code that forced them to either log off or watch their avatars endlessly text-shout Arnold Schwarzenegger’s ‘Get to the choppaaaaaa!’ tagline from Predator. (2008: 3)*

This episode demonstrates several idiosyncratic staples in PN’s tactical arsenal and particular interpretation of grieving: engaging in gridwide-system disruption across numerous platforms, spamming through offensive memes involving self-consciously ironic and stereotypical African-American avatars with Afros, and hacking or repurposing in-game objects created both by game designers and players for anti-social effects.

From July 6–12, the *Habbo* Raid occurred at the *Habbo* Hotel hosted by the Finland-based Sulake Corporation. *Habbo* is a virtual chat room designed for teenagers to socialize

through textchats in a variety of simulated hotel/resort-style public areas. According to primary sources (Sklar 2009; Bakioglu 2009), 4Chan's *b/* (random) boards provided the exigency for the raid by circulating the accusation that the *Habbo* web admins were disproportionately banning black avatars based on their skin colour. In response, a group of 4channers calling themselves the */b/lockers* occupied the entire hotel. The largest raid occurred on July 12 as the */b/lockers* were joined by other Anonymous-affiliated websites. The collision detection in the *Habbo* avatars meant that a 'physical' occupation of space was possible because avatars would not run through each other. The PN blocked access points to popular chat areas with black avatars in Afros and Armani suits, rendering these spaces impossible to walk through. The PN spammed the textchats with memes, self-parody, and racist jokes. At one point, they arranged their avatars into their trademark Swastika pattern—what has since become known as the 'Swastiget' meme. The Pool Area was a central target in the raid. The PN explained to other players that the pool had to be barricaded due to an AIDS outbreak. In direct response to allegations of the banning of black avatars, the PN claimed that black avatars had to be in the Pool Area to 'guard the safety' of white avatars. As documented by the website KnowYourMeme, 'Pool's Closed Due to Aids' became the PN's rallying cry along with 'harbl'—the community-specific code word of 4chan for penis (para. 1).

The PN's tactics in the *Habbo* Raid were not random or uncoordinated, and the effects of this raid extended beyond a momentary disruption. Even when systems admins retaliated, the PN developed a 'Pool Tool' software program that reactivated a banned player account. They also provided user-friendly instructions on how to spam *Habbo* by avoiding the censor filter. The PN achieved *lulz* by July 12. *Habbo* had to shut down as members of *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, 4Chan, Anonymous, and other affiliated troll communities and allies joined the raid. The *Habbo* Raid eventually manifested in non-digital variants when activists in Afro wigs and suits formed a Swastiget and protested outside of Sulake's physical headquarters. To make sure that the consequence of their protest was more than just a singular event, the PN have continued to spam the pool on the same day each year as a perpetual reminder of their presence and perhaps to affirm Anonymous's slogan that graces the top of this essay, 'We do not sleep, we do not eat and we do not feel remorse. We will tear you apart from outside and in, we have all the time in the world.'

## Sitting Down at Habbo's Lunch Counter

The political implications of the *Habbo* Raid make little sense if we evaluate them through the requirements of a liberal public sphere predicated on sincerity or consensus-building. Rancière's framework in *Disagreement* is helpful to situate the PN's actions

because his articulation of politics does not require any universal target (state, monarch, corporation), sustained agenda, or require any specific form (reasoned dialogue, letters to the editor, protests) to engage in a political struggle. He offers a deceptively simple claim: politics is a form of action borne from ‘the presupposition of the equality of anyone and everyone’ (2004: 17). Equality is never the result of top-down political processes or deliberative entities in political institutions that determine the definition of equality. Equality is not something that a state can legislate, an Internet provider can preserve, or a *Habbo* administrator can distribute and apportion. These formal institutions necessarily convert individuals to passive objects of political distribution. Rather, politics is a form of solidarity that obtains through a bottom-up presupposition of those who act out of this presupposition of equality.

Rancière at once wants to avoid reducing politics to common forms of progressive identity politics (queerness, feminist, blackness) while simultaneously giving a definition to politics to enable action on behalf of these groups: politics is an ‘empty freedom’ that all possess. He maintains that all individuals possess equal intelligence, not in the sense of having specialized knowledge like a quantum physicist but in the sense of a potentiality or faculty for creating conditions for their own well-being with others. Equality only exists through a demonstration of an individual’s equality vis-à-vis a social system—virtual or otherwise. Politics lies in our concrete practices, not outside or in abstraction from social conditions. Unlike Jürgen Habermas, who criticized the Internet’s fragmentation of the ideal conditions for a rational public sphere, Rancière does not believe that individuals need to secure abstract conditions under which they can discuss and debate who will be a distributor and who will be an object of distribution in a given political hierarchy. Politics can only emerge from *within Habbo* by the activities of individual players in the service of a presupposition of some semblance of equality.

Before examining the PN’s interpretation of equality for the *Habbo* Raid, it is necessary to describe the partitions of the sensible that Rancièrean politics works against and the police orders that sustain them. According to Rancière, politics is an event that arises only with respect to the resistance of police orders that maintain partitions of the sensible and that keep the demos—the ‘count of those who have no count’ from participating as equal actors (2004:29). Politics only exists in relationship to verifications and enactments of equality. When four freshman students from North Carolina A&T walked into a lunch counter at a Woolworth’s in Greensborough in 1960, sat down, and asked to be served, they enacted politics. The police order, the sum total of institutions, discourses, and affective states that enabled legalized segregation and *de facto* racism, had established a clear partition of the sensible that refused to allow black bodies political equality with white bodies. The police order is not to be confused with those professionals who wear badges and make arrests (although they are certainly related). The police order is also not equivalent to Marxism’s false consciousness or to Michel Foucault’s earlier work on knowledge/power

and the production of docile bodies. The police order is much less specific and concerns in general the establishment of communicative and behavioural norms as they are invented, circulated, reaffirmed, and produced to be then distributed to define how bodies are ordered by these norms: 'Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the system for legitimating this distribution ... I propose to call [this system] the police' (Rancière 2004: 28). The police naturalize and justify the institutions that structure social hierarchies to the extent that they form a continuation of our daily lives and identities. Rancière's description is worth quoting at length:

*The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, [and] sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task, it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.'*

Conventional theoretical splits between public and private or economic classes are already engaged in maintaining what he calls partitions of the sensible (*partage du sensible*) that sustain the police order.

These two forms - police inequality and political equality - 'must remain absolutely alien to each other, constituting two radically different communities even if composed of the same individuals' (34). Politics therefore means *actually sitting down at the lunch counter* and making visible a form of political equality that the police order commands to be invisible. The four freshmen did not stand outside with picket signs asking for political equality. Rather, they acted as if they were politically equal subjects who expected to be served in a manner identical to a white customer. By occupying the lunch counter, these freshmen disturbed the partition of the sensible not through participating in deliberative consensus but by manifesting an act of *dissensus*. According to Rancière, dissensus is 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of experience ... The activity [of politics], by presuming equality, is itself challenge to the police everywhere' (2006: 35, 59).

From this initial framework, it is possible to begin classifying the PN's presupposition of equality and establishing specific partitions of the sensible that they challenged. Working within the police order in the *Habbo* Raid would have included filing legal 'cease-and-desist' orders or trying to use reason in chat rooms, Wikis, bulletin boards, or social media to solicit more players to engage Sulake's interest in this problem. Acceding to these

terms of engagement would have meant accepting Sulake's authority to set the terms of who is and who is not an active distributor of political equality in a virtual world. To qualify as an enactment of politics, the PN also could not have sought to permanently close down *Habbo* or to occupy it for all time. Politics for Rancière only exist in making visible police inequality through a verification of political equality in spaces where inequality exists. Politics is only what 'shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only place for noise' (30). Rancièrian politics does not seek to take the form of a new police order, a new mode of government or a more equitable distribution of wealth, commodities, or avatar access to the pool area.

While it is clear that the PN made black avatars visible in an area (a police order) that they were prohibited from, the presupposition of equality is of a qualitatively different order than non-virtual world forms of politics. A declaration of political equality grounded in the capacity for speech and action would have to point first to partitions of the sensible at the levels of software and hardware such as is the case of the 'digital divide': those economically prohibited from access to the technology that is necessary for participating in the construction of online identities in *Habbo*. As a point of comparison, it is not as if *Habbo*'s system administrators banned IP addresses from predominantly African-American regions of the United States. Similarly, we should count disproportionately incarcerated African-American prisoners who are often denied the ability to participate in online virtual worlds as they serve their sentences. These individuals arguably would be an actual 'count of no count' for a virtual world. Digital divides and prisoners are in fact reflective of police orders of political equality, but these are not the types of police inequality that the PN was principally interested in challenging in the *Habbo* Raid.

## Partitions of Seriousness

In virtual worlds, players' creativity offers a space where police orders could be formed and contested, with little 'real world' consequence. Mia Consalvo argues that games cannot be measured by the rules that structure daily life. The anonymity of the Internet and virtual worlds means that players are able to 'experiment with actions, identities, and practices that in real life are forbidden' (Consalvo, 2007:186). Participating in a griefing raid will have few negative consequences for any participants in comparison to Occupy Wall Street protesters who face professional police harassment and incarceration for enacting politics. Despite similarities in the partitions of the sensible, it is nearly impossible to create an exact analogy for occupying a segregated lunch counter and occupying a hotel in a virtual world precisely because the consequences of griefing and police orders manifest

differently in virtual spaces: 'Although griefers are in some cases believed to behave as they do because there are no consequences for them, many would argue that there are no real consequences for their so-called victims either' (142). Consalvo's comments do not ignore the real emotional harm to players that griefing can cause. Her perspective reflects an understanding that police orders within virtual worlds are not designed to effectively legislate or manufacture truly effective partitions of *political inequality* in ways that correspond exactly to their offline equivalents.

As T.L. Taylor (2011) has noted, all players—griefers and non-griefers alike—must be seen as productive agents and we must resist the temptation to be frustrated with those who fail to play 'right' (159). If right play is limited to Anshe Chung's *Second Life* hubris (from the PN's perspective) or the system administrator's ban of black avatars, then Taylor's comments indicate a potential inroad for a Rancièrian analysis. The PN could be said to have enacted politics not out of a *presupposition of political equality*—a concern specifically born in reaction to the algorithms of liberal political philosophy and expectations of daily-life communications protocols—but out of a presupposition of procedural equality for experimentation specific to partitions of seriousness in virtual worlds. I add the term 'procedural' to 'presupposition of equality' simply to reflect the fact that all actions in virtual worlds are bound up in the conditions of possibility structured by the software protocols of the virtual world and these protocols in turn structure a virtual world's police order (Bogost 2010; Galloway 2004). A presupposition of procedural equality affirms (verifies) the equality of players' immanent faculties to create nonsense and resist 'seriousness' where in-game structures have promoted seriousness in any form. Procedures refer to seriousness explicitly supported by software protocols (*Habbo* admins) or tacitly supported by players like Anshe Chung who act as if *Second Life* economies were as serious as real world economies. In fact, it was the attempt to remediate offline forms of political inequality into a virtual world that constituted a 'serious' partition of the sensible in the *Habbo* Raid. As I will discuss below, procedures also include invisible partitions of seriousness such as a company's data collection of player habits in order to improve the commercial viability of the game.

Procedurality and the affirmation of nonsense vis-à-vis seriousness emphasize one major point of difference and extension from a strict Rancièrian account of politics. For Rancièrè, an act of dissensus that does not participate in the verification of human political equality would not count as politics. He would likely view the *Habbo* Raid as an act of dissensus that exposed a partition of the sensible without ultimately serving political equality. By contrast, equality for the PN presumed the collective right to declare any serious activity as nonsense—a conception of politics that they interpret as specific to procedural equality in virtual worlds. From their perspective, the procedural effort to treat meaning or events (seriousness) in *Habbo* as somehow equivalent to their offline equivalents enacted a

partition of seriousness. The PN operated out of a presupposition of the procedural equality to engage in dissensus against police orders of inequality when topics, subjects, and behaviours affirm that seriousness exists. Whatever the system will allow (for example, nonsense) to be made manifest is whatever players should be allowed to creatively foreground as nonsense against partitions of seriousness at the procedural level.

Such a suggestion does not authorize non-serious forms of racism at either procedural or non-procedural levels. Nor is it a contradiction to declare that the PN's particular anti-racist gesture is motivated by an affirmation of players' creative ability to traffic in nonsense against seriousness rather than by political equality in Rancière's strict sense. The former is the expression of politics proper to the PN's verification of procedural equality. As I interpret their actions, nonsense is an empty signifier. Nonsense has no content except with regard to challenging partitions of seriousness. By definition, nonsense *cannot* be instrumentalized for serious racist purposes *or else is it no longer nonsense* and is no longer attached to a verification of one's ability to engage in nonsense against partitions of seriousness. The use of racialized content and other offensive memes in their raiding activities were only a means to very specific and non-racialized end. According to one PN member, '[Offensive memes are] only one element, he insists, in an arsenal of PN techniques designed to push users past the brink of moral outrage toward that rare moment – at once humiliating and enlightening – when they find themselves crying over a computer game' (quoted in Dibbell, 2008: 4). Simply stated, an endorsement of nonsense in the context of resisting partitions of seriousness does not result in an 'anything goes' abandonment of a progressive politics of representation. Rather, the declaration of nonsense signals the possibility that politics will be enacted in relationship to a virtual world's partitioning of seriousness. This ability to produce nonsense is a collective presupposition to any and all virtual world players, especially those who have 'too much time on their hands.' By making partitions of seriousness visible, the PN attempted to call all players' attention to actual restrictions on the creative nonsensical freedom to resist seriousness that they always already possessed. Their favoured Swastiget meme thereby served as a heavy-handed and intentionally clichéd reminder that seriousness in *Habbo* is akin to fascism or totalitarianism.

The PN's identification of seriousness could be said to take the form of a specific type of activism and advocacy for an alternative communal 'norm' of nonsense on the Internet. However, it is more accurate to claim that these actions did not result in the establishment of new 'norm' because the politics of nonsense was only asserted in relationship to partitions of the sensible, and the PN's politics did not outlast its enunciation in relationship to re-partitioning seriousness. When political action did occur, it only exposed (made visible) what the PN viewed as a partition of the sensible in a virtual world that sustained a police order of seriousness while asserting their collective egalitarian right to enact

nonsense against seriousness. For Rancière, politics always has to obtain within a presupposition of collective (procedural) equality (of the resistance to seriousness). Except when they decide to act out of this presupposition to resist seriousness on behalf of the Internet collective, the PN cannot be said to engage in politics. The PN's actions are not therefore properly characterized in negative stereotypes of anarchists or nihilists as 'unstructured agent[s] of chaos lashing out haphazardly at government and civilian alike' (Reichert, 1969: 28). The PN's politics in the *Habbo* Raid obtained with very specific goals in mind: lulz and win in relationship to seriousness and a presupposition of egalitarian procedural equality.

## Aestheticizing Procedures

The partitions of the nonsensical that are exposed through the PN's enactment of politics mean that 'victims' are tacitly complicit in certain police orders by virtue of playing the game. Visibility must occur at a procedural and system level of disruption or else dissensus would fail to reveal a given partition of the sensible to all players who were interacting with the system. Rancière's politics changes a partition of the sensible via aesthetic acts. Aesthetics is thus 'a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience' (Rancière, 2006: 13). The aesthetics of politics is 'a matter of appearances' that introduces 'a visible into the field of experience' (Rancière, 2004: 74, 89). Where human voices are invisible, unrecognizable and reduced to phone (noise) of animals, politics is what enables speech, 'thus making apparent both a body and capacity that had been discounted from the sensible arrangement of police aesthetics,' working toward a community born of aestheticization the 'virtual or immaterial community of equalities' (Rancière, 2004: x). Procedurality offers an additional method of extending Rancière's thinking for politics and the visibility of 'speech' in the *Habbo* Raid. It is the procedures themselves that must be made to speak.

In identifying procedural seriousness, the aesthetics of the dissensual act in the *Habbo* Raid were tied specifically to a reminder of how players' 'immersion' in virtual worlds is artificial. Immersion functions to support partitions of seriousness. In this context, seriousness is tied to protocols and corporate agendas that are 'invisible' when researchers describe a virtual world through personal player ecologies or the game's representations and narratives alones—a problem Lisa Gitelman among others has well-described as 'screen essentialism' (2008: iv). Along these lines, Bakioglu (2009) offers a productive distinction between 'grief play,' ('a type of game play') and 'griefing' ('disruptive cultural activity'). She suggests,

Claiming that they are causing turmoil for lulz (or laughs), griefers treat their activities as mere game play. However, underneath the rhetoric of game play based on targeting those who take the 'Internet as serious business,' there exists a cultural phenomenon with serious effects. They not only jam the world's signification system and subvert the bourgeois taste by spamming the environment with offensive objects, but also attack capitalistic ideology. By crashing sims and significant media events, and regularly launching raids in-world that result in causing businesses to lose money, thereby hurting the virtual economy at large (2009: x). While griefers temporarily inconvenience other players, such activities cause system lags and other protocological disruptions (De Paoli, 2010). Raiding, Bakioglu claims, spams servers and makes the entire virtual world run at slower levels. He writes, 'Every object (including avatars) uses up a certain amount of server space, that is, the resources of the server such as memory. This type of environmental poaching breaks the system in a much more fundamental way than merely attacking the content of the world' (2009: xi). There is no act of disruption in a virtual world that is unaccompanied by various human—coders, engineers, legal teams, graphic designers—and nonhuman actors—hardware, software, fiber optic cables. All actors and networks work together to create the emergent assemblage that Taylor (2009) calls the 'play moment' that griefers' politics resist. If the system operates normally while making racism invisible at a procedural level, then procedural disruption and flooding banned spaces with black avatars is the proportional political act of dissensus until lulz is achieved.

Hardware effects are worth mentioning because creativity and nonsense are not the only potential outcomes of the forms of collective solidarity that the PN engaged in the *Habbo* Raid and elsewhere. Many of their activities can engage with political inequality. The PN's procedural effects in raids in virtual worlds address the (serious) police orders tied in with the economic stability of companies such as Sulake or Linden Labs. It is easy to forget that the PN's particular attack on Anshe Chung, for example, cannot be isolated or abstracted from the other actors, networks, and assemblages that sustain players' abilities to play. Many of the PN's raids in *Second Life* express a partial desire to re-partition the sensible at protocological levels and encourage conversations about the production of subjectivity through corporate 'big data' surveillance. Maia Bäcke (2009: 111) has gone so far as to suggest that Foucault's critique of control and surveillance is useful for understanding the level of surveillance designed into *Second Life* by Linden Lab. The PN's hostility to surveillance indicates that political equality and the resistance to seriousness are hardly incommensurate. Surveillance enables corporate seriousness and potentially circumscribes players' creative abilities to engage in nonsense. To the extent that police orders threaten to make virtual worlds 'serious' places in any capacity, the PN will likely continue to find motivation for nonsensical enactments that presuppose creative procedural equality.

## Conclusion: We Have All the Time in the World / Ain't Nobody Got Time fo' Politics

In my analysis of the *Habbo* Raid, I have sought to avoid imposing a rigid Rancièrian framework on the PN's activities. Rather, I have attempted to extend his general political concepts to illuminate certain aspects of the PN's acts of dissensus against partitions of seriousness as a neglected aspect of political activity in virtual worlds. This analysis was not designed to be comprehensive, and it is my hope that these initial efforts will encourage others to explore Rancièr's rich corpus of writing in greater detail and specificity with regard to trolling and grieving. [3] For those who still balk at the idea of grieving and nonsense as a political activity, I submit that one major benefit of considering Rancièr's political philosophy is that grieving does not always have to be political. He readily concedes that the ideal manifestation of politics in the 'real world' seldom occurs given the strength of dominant police orders and the likelihood that politics cannot do away with police orders once and for all (Chambers 2012: 41–43). [4] Rancièrian politics is in constant need of verification and rearticulation through a variety of aesthetic and procedural practices. As virtual worlds grow in popularity, Rancièr's thinking can enable the recognition of important mechanisms through which politics and grieving have aligned in the past and will continue to align in the future.

A Rancièrian articulation of the PN's politics additionally elucidates attempts by game theorists to see rule-breaking as creative and agentive acts of playful transgression. In this context, seriousness remains a significant obstacle in the political assessment of grieving. Julian Kuecklich (2004) has observed that dissensus and art in the 'real world' enjoy a privileged relationship while any disruptive form of play in a virtual world is all too often interpreted as terrorism or nihilistic vandalism. This double standard is yet another police order that the *Habbo* Raid calls into question. Players who view all grieving activities as mere vandalism or virtual terrorism often take their own roles in the game 'too seriously' (see Dibbell 2008). Lacking formal political actors, virtual worlds are conventionally regarded as inferior realms of political activism when they are evaluated only by comparison to examples such as the lunch counter sit ins of the Civil Rights era. Indeed, my implied comparison between the two forms of occupation in this essay was deliberately intended to provoke this tension. The PN's presupposition of procedural equalities confronts any analytical elitism that reduces politics to 'serious' (offline/real-world) forms alone. Such a declaration of the politics of nonsense against seriousness is not the 'end' of the possibility of political activism online. It is to recast entirely the categories and units of political analysis grounded in consensus, deliberation and political equality that we traditionally use to identify political interaction among grievers in virtual worlds.

This reorientation also enables researchers to better locate emergent forms of political participation in networked communities. Li and Marsh (2008) along with O'Toole et al. (2006) have rejected widespread assumptions that there has been a decline in political participation in the West among the young. Mainstream commentary mistakenly equates disengagement with formal political structures with a general apolitical attitude (see Halepka 2011). Li and Marsh maintain that it is not apathy but alienation that denies the youth a voice within a '... political system which does not allow them a real, that is effective, voice. Thus, they find a voice and the community online' (248). Griefing may not be a necessary condition of politics on virtual worlds and the Internet as a whole, but it has certainly become a sufficient one. Griefing and trolling increasingly will enable a new if unconventional 'count of no count' to find a voice in a Western political landscape whose corporate-dominated political terrain poses formidable barriers to meaningful access to political persuasion. Given the American government's heavy-handed reaction to the recent Edward Snowden NSA leaks that forced the closure of Lavabit, the company who offered Snowden and other activists secure e-mail services, one could easily suggest that the Internet and virtual worlds lately have become too serious and require a radical reassessment of the value of nonsense and dissensus as enactments of politics. Such events will only increase the need to explore political philosophies like Rancière's that can productively situate acts of networked and virtual disruption against variety of virtual police orders.

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## Biographical Note

**Steve Holmes** works across fields of rhetorical history and theory; media studies; videogames and virtual worlds; material rhetorics; and cultural theory. He has several publications in these areas, including a recent article in *Terms of Play: Essays on Words that Matter in Videogame Theory* (McFarlan, summer 2013) that explores political 'algorithms' in Markus Persson's *Minecraft*.

## Notes

[1] I want to clarify from the outset that my argument in no way intends to call into question the outstanding work of activists who challenge political exclusion through sincere deliberation in offline and online public spheres and by engaging actual political actors. I firmly believe that online political activism requires sensitivity to multiple and flexible tactics to address a variety of different police orders in virtual worlds and networked spaces. Consequently, it is of the utmost importance to better describe the actual enactments and effects of politics in virtual worlds rather than to declare grievers' forms of politics a priori as better or worse than models of cyberdemocracy grounded in deliberative democratic ideals.

[2] For comprehensive introductions to Rancière's thinking, see Todd May (2008; 2010) and Samuel A. Chambers (2011).

[3] Among many of his concepts that I did not address due to considerations of length, Rancière lists the self-suasion of political equality as a precondition for politics. In one passage, he writes, 'Furthermore, [politics] is an act undertaken not in relationship to other competing factors (e.g., within previously sanctioned channels and institutions), but through an internalized dialogue with the self. In fact, the first step toward politics begins not with an interlocutor—a demonstration of equality in a message delivered to another—but within the self as it has been subjugated to partitions of the sensible: 'Proving to the other that there is only one world and that one can prove the legitimacy of one's action within it, means first of all proving this to oneself' (50). Self-suasion and the idea of a 'self' are already fraught terms with regard to the Internet's anonymity.

[4] One potential problem with Rancière's political theory should be noted: the use of one partition of the sensible to diagnose another partition of the sensible to react against. From this perspective, whatever a group interprets as a presupposition of equality would only ever reflect equality as already defined by some previous partition of the sensible. This difficulty may explain why politics is never totalizing and politics only exists in relationship to specific enunciations against specific police orders. Foucault's understanding of power might be useful as an illustrative analogy: there is no 'outside' to police orders or end of police orders. Along these lines, I agree in part with Samuels' (2011) interpretation of Rancière in that we can only engage in 'impure politics' rather than achieve a permanent state where police orders disappear entirely (48).

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-161 Productive Provocations: Vitriolic Media, Spaces of Protest and Agonistic Outrage in the 2011 England Riots.

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### Abstract:

The intense social upheaval that spread through a number of UK cities in the riots and protests of August, 2011 signalled the terrifying speed with which passionate disaffection can turn to uncontained violence. At stake in the dense and volatile debate that ensued, and in the acts of violence themselves, were contests over spaces as well as competing models of democracy, publics and citizenship, including the appropriate use of social media. Within these debates, almost universally, rational deliberative discourse and action is assumed to be the only route to legitimate “civil” society. So what is to be made of the violent physical contest over city squares, streets and property, as well as contests over acts of participation and demonstration played out online through the hundreds of eyewitness videos posted to sites like YouTube and the endless flow of often vitriolic words in blogs, comments spaces and social network sites? This paper uses a video posted to YouTube titled ‘Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011)’ to examine the passion and provocation that flowed beyond the city streets to enliven, intensify and sustain forms of protest and civic engagement. We argue that the aggressive and antagonistic tenor of the Speaker’s twenty minute monologue, the bitter vitriol that flowed through the comments space, and even the act of posting it constitute significant elements of a generative, ‘agonistic’ public, to use Chantal Mouffe’s term, that operates in multiple spaces and outside of the rationalising discourse demanded by mainstream media and government. This paper develops a richer understanding of these spaces of protest, and the concept of provocation central to these events.

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*To act, then, is neither arriving at a scene nor fleeing from it, but actually engaging in its creation. (Isin, 2008: 27)*

## Introduction

The intense social upheaval that spread through a number of UK cities in what became known variously as the ‘London riots’, ‘England’s summer of disorder’, or more generally the ‘2011 England riots’, signalled the terrifying speed with which passionate disaffection can turn to uncontained violence. In the aftermath, much investment was made in searches for causes, as governments, scholars and the general public wondered how normally peaceful city streets across the country could come to resemble a war zone. Much of the commentary in the mainstream media reflected traditional ideological debates between the left and right of the political spectrum. Conservative politicians blaming the events on the actions of a ‘criminal underclass’, whilst social and political commentators on the left drew parallels between these and previous incidents of rioting in London in the 1980s, where government cuts, poverty, youth unemployment and racial discrimination—particularly related to police treatment of Afro-Caribbean youth—characterised the unrest (Scarman, 1981). Racial discrimination was also identified as a major trigger for the 2011 riots, with the police shooting death of Mark Duggan being perceived as the main catalyst early on (Newburn et al, 2011; Morrel et al, 2011; Hope, 2012; Waddington, 2012; Lea and Hallsworth, 2012). Economic inequality and disadvantage were also identified as factors that contributed to youth disaffection in areas where rioting and looting took place, with welfare cuts and acute perceptions of inequality related to ‘Global Financial Crisis’ austerity measures identified as factors that fuelled youth anger and feelings of hopelessness in certain locations (Newburn et al, 2011; Lea and Hollsworth, 2012).

And yet, despite these perspectives providing the primary categories of explanation for the riots, a number of commentators and researchers also pointed to new experiences of collective organisation, action, emotion and consciousness related to technological developments in social media that served to differentiate these riots from previous forms of civil disturbance. Criticism of the negative uses of mobile and social media flared and took hold. In particular, many commentators argued that the use of social networking services and new media technologies (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, and Blackberry Messenger [BBM] services) played a ‘substantive role in the riots’ by speeding up the flow of communications across multiple spaces, allowing events to be broadcast and shared between members of the public, eyewitnesses and those participating in the unrest in real time (Newburn et al, 2011). However, while these developments could, alternatively, have been considered in terms of the plurality and dynamism of new public spaces of protest and civic engagement, the overwhelming focus of discussions has been to connect these technologies causally

with what happened on the street, thus reducing social media to the status of an instrument that ‘incites and organises’ crowds to participate in acts of ‘public disorder’. For example, in *Reading the Riot: Investigating England’s Summer of Disorder* (2011) Tim Newburn and colleagues provided evidence that BBM, primarily, but also Facebook and Twitter, were used to incite and summon crowds to particular locations for the purposes of engaging in public acts of disorder (Newburn et al, 2011: 31–32). This understanding was also echoed by Prime Minister David Cameron, who called for the closure of the Blackberry Messenger network in order to stop the violence and looting (Newburn et al, 2011).

Reactions such as those of David Cameron signal the immediate and accepted conflation of violence and criminality in the streets with aberrant ‘misuse’ of technologies of communication, mobile networks and social media, with the aim of imposing greater restrictions on their use. Smartphone technologies and social networking sites did appear to play a key role in the organisation and spread of the riots, but looking for a causal link to public disorder diminishes the complex forms of sociality, emotion, protest and civic engagement at play. Provocation and incitement are important features of all media during times of public unrest and riot. We argue in this paper that beyond the superficial sense of incitement and escalation of public disorder, mobile devices and social media platforms also enable generative forms of public expression, collaboration, contest and conflict in the form of interjections or provocations, particularly in their capacity for affecting visual and audible access to events and in providing a space for productive—even if often antagonistic and vitriolic—exchange.

In this paper we explore the contest of publics, race and citizenship that unfolded during the 2011 England riots through a detailed analysis of two videos posted to YouTube, the transformations of the spaces of protest they enabled, and the agonistic interactions they provoked. The videos—titled ‘Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011) 1 of 2’, and ‘Clapham Junction Speaker (London Riots 2011) 2 of 2’—were recorded and uploaded by YouTube personality and activist Charlie Veitch. They capture a 20 minute monologue delivered by a local Clapham Junction man of West Indian descent named Neville, during one of the clean-up events organised through Twitter and Facebook. Neville’s speech act, whilst at times angry and confrontational, articulates and embodies local disaffection and tension and provokes extensive, if often vitriolic, exchange in the comments fields, both during and well after the riot event. It is this ‘extended’ space of online reaction and conflict that points towards the generative potential within these events.

Further, we argue that what is at stake in the dense and volatile debates erupting online, and in the acts associated with the recorded events, are competing models of democracy, publics and citizenship, and contested modes and spaces of protest. Videos

such as these, publically available and circulating through social media, form the basis for emergent 'spaces of protest', to use Judith Butler's (2011) phrase, that might seem to extend some of the aggressive, antagonistic behaviour characteristic of the violent rioting, and yet which ultimately transforms that aggression and antagonism to more productive ends. Rather than conforming to accepted 'civil' processes of 'deliberative democracy' the contested and provocative nature of these interactions point to modes of democratic participation and citizenship that align with Chantal Mouffe's account of 'agonistic pluralism' (2000; 2005). Mouffe's notion of agonism is helpful here because it points to the potential behind the kinds of adversarial and vitriolic contest that can follow from open modes of civic engagement. In Mouffe's model, the institutions of democracy should aim to allow 'collective passions...to express themselves over issues which, while allowing enough possibility for identification, will not construct the opponent as an enemy but as an adversary' (Mouffe, 2005: 103). Agonistic contest occurs when conflicting parties acknowledge that they are adversaries but nonetheless 'operate on common symbolic ground' (Papacharissi, 2010: 161). Unlike models of deliberative democracy, in Mouffe's account of agonistic pluralism 'the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public, in order to render a rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs' (Mouffe, 2005; 103). Passions and affects, she argues, play a crucial role in securing allegiance to democratic values (Mouffe, 2005: 95). Mouffe's broader proposition is that: 'far from jeopardizing democracy, agonistic confrontation is in fact its very condition of existence' (Mouffe, 2005: 103). That is, the antagonistic tenor of the Speaker's twenty minute monologue, the bitter vitriol that flowed through YouTube's comments space, and even the act of recording and uploading the videos, constitute significant elements of a generative, agonistic public that operates in multiple spaces and outside of the rationalising discourse demanded by mainstream media and government.

The epigraph to this paper points to the need to theorise these acts, or, in this case, a range of acts of provocation, as central to the creation of the scene of citizenship. We engage theoretical approaches to acts of civic engagement, spaces of protest, publics and counter publics to conceive the passion and conflict arising in the streets, alongside the use of social media tools, and to illustrate the productive role of provocation in shaping an emerging form of agonistic pluralism. The following section introduces the intervention into the scene of protest offered by Neville's provocative speech act in the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos. Section three elaborates on the place of passion, cruelty and conflict in the city, drawing on the work of Nigel Thrift, Bülent Dicken and Michael Warner, and considers the reorientations brought about by uses of digital and networked media. In the final section we engage with the relation between acts of provocation and the field of social media contest. We highlight the importance of the act of videoing and uploading the speech, and YouTube's comments field in enabling agonistic forms of engagement, with the conflict outside of the normative ideals and established institutions of 'deliberative democracy'.

## Disrupting the Visual-Discursive Scene

Reflecting on the protests against the Mubarek regime in Egypt's Tahrir Square in January and February 2011, Judith Butler joined other scholars to describe technologies of mediation, particularly as they are transformed by digital, mobile and social media devices, as an integral part of the scenes of protest as they unfolded. More than this, Butler argued that 'the media is the scene or the space in its extended and replicable visual and audible dimensions' (Butler, 2011). Events like the England riots and those in the Middle East, while still dependent on embodied interactions on the street, become 'extended' visual and audible scenes of protest, moving beyond the local spatial and temporal context, and opening up multiple mediated spaces across which 'the scene' travels to become 'both there and here' (Butler, 2011). Participatory forms of citizenship enabled through strategic acts of filming, recording and uploading scenes of protest to social networks, as well as public engagement with this content in online social environments, can likewise be understood as political acts in themselves, opening up new vistas of public communication between bodies on the street and online actors. This might be aligned with those forms of media practice defined as 'activist' or 'tactical' where new media provide 'powerful tools for challenging the givens of mainstream or popular culture' (Lievrouw, 2011: 1). But where tactical media use a range of techniques to disrupt and challenge mainstream narratives (Guertin, 2012), the 'rogue', amateur or witness media of the streets uploaded as hours of video footage, photographs, comments and blog posts are often in the first instance incidental, even accidental, but no less passionate and incendiary.

Certainly this was evident in the England riots with thousands of amateur images and videos circulating on YouTube, and through other social media networks, setting the tone for public discourse by showing live and uncut scenes of burning streets and buildings, milling and running crowds and violent confrontations between often masked protagonists and heavily armoured police. In one specific example, as reported by *The London Evening Standard* (8 August 2011) a video showing shaky camera footage of police allegedly surrounding and brutalising a young girl lying on the road while a woman screams at police spread quickly through the Tottenham community and more broadly through online networks, acting as a significant provocation to the violent confrontation with police that ensued and which is widely regarded as the trigger to the riots, though the validity of the video was later contested (*The Guardian*, 7 December 2011).

This interaction points to the significance of YouTube both as a site that broadcasts events from multiple viewpoints but also as a social network enabling new forms of interaction with the scene of protest. Superficially, pejorative notions of incitation could be attributed to the uses of social media in this and other instances, but many thousands of hours of

amateur video uploaded to sites like YouTube also provide rich and detailed access to the scenes of riot, while extending the visible scene far beyond that made available through broadcast television coverage. As Baker argues, these practices allow new forms of public protest and community to emerge that 'traverse and intersect geographical public space and the virtual public sphere' extending the speed and scope of civil unrest (Baker, 2011). Of course, this is not to say that public broadcast and commercial news coverage of the riots was sidelined by social media representations. On the contrary, as described by Butler (2011) and later affirmed in the 'Reading the Riots' report (Newburn et al, 2011: 33), mainstream media remains an important part of the contemporary media environment which also exercises its own kind of incitement for commercial reasons. As one informant put it:

*They had maps on the news showing where it had spread to... I think they had it red round where it was going off bad and I think Birmingham, London, I think Manchester... And I was like 'Birmingham?' and I went straight on the train. (22 year old man who clashed with police in Birmingham, Reading the Riots, 2011: 33)*

It is important to note that these modes of incitement are still bound by structural inequalities embedded in the mainstream public and commercial news media, which preserve the status quo by representing the street protesters as 'deviant' and the events as forms of social 'disorder'. Adding to, and affecting this ecology, the limited and limiting frames of traditional news outlets have become starkly contrasted with alternative mediated and networked spaces for protest, activism and expression (in this instance based around YouTube). We aim to show how these new media modes and practices offer an alternative infrastructure for a radical pluralism to form around many of those who experience the social conditions at the heart of the disaffection and disorder. This is conveyed through signature visual content which, by the nature of being filmed on location, often in fluid and volatile social environments, conveys a visceral sense of danger and violence that implicates the body as a body at risk or in some way 'on the line', for instance, in the body holding the phone or camera 'face to face with those they oppose, unprotected, injurable, injured, persistent' (Butler, 2011). Where the business of mainstream news is to report the dramatic image of violence as event, on video-sharing sites such as YouTube the image of violence itself becomes the context through which passion is constituted and intensified. That is, beyond the spectacle, video and social media sites can act differently to establish outlets for the expression of disaffection and forms of civic engagement even where they are no less aggressive, antagonistic and incendiary as scenes of burning buildings, looting and violence. The two 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos carry a simmering aggression in far greater duration than mainstream media sites permit, in a way that extends the scene of protest and establishes alternative spaces for civic engagement (often in the form of vitriolic exchange). The subject of the video,

Neville's speech act, its upload and the dynamic exchange within the comment space highlight the plurality of opinion and forms of protest, citizenship and identity normally excluded from the rational 'public sphere'.

The two videos were uploaded to YouTube on 10 August 2011, the day after what reporters described as hundreds of youths looting businesses in the Clapham Junction station area of Battersea, overwhelming police for several hours (The Daily Telegraph, August 2011). They depict a man of West Indian background who reacts angrily to predominantly white members of the crowd who have come to clean up 'his' neighbourhood. He swears and uses sexually explicit language, shouting that white people claim to be 'with the black people of this country' but that they 'smile with you and then fuck you up the arse'. In response to this a white police officer, one of about seven represented in the clip who hold the public behind police barricades whilst a scattering of public officials (including the Lord Mayor) and police occupy the central public space, confronts the man over the tone of his language and his use of other provocative gestures. Neville continues to deliver an unbroken and passionate monologue about the issues that led to the riot, including police discrimination and harassment toward black youth, welfare cuts and a growing gap between rich and poor.

The tenor of Neville's speech is angry, adversarial and provocative, but it also alternates between different forms of communication with the crowd as he answers questions and shares moments of reciprocity, whilst at other times he aggressively talks over the top of anyone who contests him. The response to Neville by police and public is interesting. As the video progresses, a small crowd starts turning away from the recognisable political figure of the visiting Lord Mayor to face Neville. They respond to Neville's speech by clapping, contesting and recording it on their phones, supporting the idea that new media technologies can create new platforms for speakers who are frequently silenced or excluded from public debate and thus new spaces for protest (Butler, 2011; Lievrouw, 2011). Whilst this is occurring the policeman tries to silence Neville, despite the crowd showing interest in what he has to say. This is interesting for a number of reasons that are significant to our discussion.

Firstly, as Neville himself articulates, the action of the policeman to intervene in his speech reflects a racialised form of power operating in the space of protest, which identifies the 'loud' speech of a West Indian background man as a sign which disturbs 'white' understandings of propriety and order in public space. At one juncture in the video Neville highlights this refusal to acknowledge members of the black community as citizens who have a right to speak and act as a core reason for the tension felt between police and the black community, which Neville embodies in his speech.

*Neville: Tell me to shut my mouth... I speak up, and because I speak up I get hassled. When I stand up for my rights to have a right to speak, just like any other citizen in this country, I get hassled [...] Why? Because I'm loud. I'm a West Indian. West Indians talk loud. That's how we are. But did they want to go and find out about that before they turned around and said I'm an aggressive person?*

Here Neville highlights the kind of racism that is often experienced in everyday, public spaces, where the bodies and speech of minorities are encoded as dangerous in their 'unsanctioned' difference (Lobo, 2013) to white social norms and expectations of public engagement and speech, leading to actions that seek to suppress or exclude these expressions. This provides a vivid example of what Connolly (2010), Nayak (2010) and Lobo (2013) describe when they talk about whiteness as a 'force' which materialises in spatial relations of power, in disapproving gazes and in embodied gestures and actions in public which create 'affective pressures' (Connolly, 2010: 150). Lobo describes how these pressures are felt by their target in ways which, rather than subduing emotion, provoke equally embodied and affective modes of response, such as 'flared nostrils, heaving chests and defiant eyes embodying indignation' (Lobo, 2013). These relations are revealed in the Clapham Junction video in the way the policeman regards Neville's speech, not as an exercise of his civil rights, but as an expression of the untrammelled emotion that often leads to violence, and which therefore must be censured. And yet, it is also precisely the affective register of Neville's speech—the passionate anger he expresses—that provokes the crowd to listen to him, and to engage with his sense of outrage.

This leads to a second observation, which echoes Judith Butler's claim that the political is not only located in the ideas which are vocalised in speech or writing, but that the bodily act of speaking, or filming and uploading an event, is itself political insofar as it is an exercise of freedom, of the right to speak and act, often in defiance of powers that would seek to regulate such speech and action (Butler, 2011: 4). This is evident in the Clapham Junction speaker videos to the extent that, although Neville's speech is defiant in tenor, there is also an absence of a clear political message. This is made explicit one minute into the video when the producer of the video asks 'what is your message to the people?' to which he responds directly to camera saying 'I aint' got no message to the people' before speaking angrily about the Lord Mayor coming to Clapham Junction and being cheered by the crowd despite him doing nothing to stop the rioting. The political intervention here is Neville's speech act itself, in the force of his enraged, though measured affective disposition, with its rhythm, continuity and intensity sustained over the 20 minutes of the two videos and beyond them. It is also tied to the multiple acts of recording, video upload by activist Charlie Veitch, and by the capacity provided by Google for user comments, video responses, sharing and embedding across multiple sites.

The angry tenor of the speech and the physical presence of Neville on screen and within the crowd continue the logic of passionate protest and disaffection criticised by media commentators and politicians as beyond rational civic discourse. As what might be considered an antagonistic rant, where at points Neville shouts down others who challenge him, the monologue severs dialogue and serves as the kind of unchecked, one-way form of communication often feared of online bullies and trolls. The video producer at several points prompts Neville to keep him speaking. Neville identifies himself as a person who is victimised by police and accused of being ‘aggressive’ because of his cultural and racial background. In one of the only points at which he engages directly with others, he turns this accusation back onto a member of the crowd saying ‘I didn’t raise my hand to the officer, I didn’t raise my hand to that arsehole over there’. This version of events is quickly contested by two members of the crowd (one of whom is the man he refers to) who claim that Neville had earlier told them he was going to ‘beat them up’ and ‘burn their house down’. An angry confrontation erupts between the three men:

*Bystander:* You said you were going to burn his house down  
*Neville:* Yeah? And why... And why?  
*Bystander:* I’m just saying mate.  
*Neville:* And why? [Neville repeats this loudly, drowning the man out]  
*Bystander:* I don’t know  
*Neville:* Exactly, so shut up. You don’t know [he keeps repeating loudly]  
*Bystander:* You said you were going to take him around the corner and beat him up, and then you were going to burn his house down, so...  
*Neville:* [talking over the top of him] You don’t know what the argument was but you want to jump in too. So you want to shut up and find out the facts

Neville then turns and berates the crowd (who are starting to contest his mode of delivery), saying ‘you don’t know the facts so why chat?’ Despite the asynchrony, or perhaps because of it, this antagonistic exchange also enlivens the YouTube comments field with commenters addressing Neville’s refusal to answer the question and blaming his cultural background for his treatment. This contest is carried somewhat seamlessly into the YouTube comments field:

*I’m the guy with his back to the camera. What this video doesn’t show is this guy threatening to beat up someone else in the crowd, and telling him that he was going to burn his house down. This clown is a complete joke and should*

*have been arrested instead of being given a platform to come out with his lies and nonsense (k75pete, August, 2011)*

In response to this juncture in the video, at least on the surface, the comments space seems to open up the possibility of unchecked flow of racial bigotry and vitriol. Many users respond directly and aggressively to Neville on the points he makes on the basis of an exclusionary racism, for example: 'IF YOU DONT LIKE UK WAY OF LIFE THEN FUCK OFF AND GO AND LIVE ELSEWHERE YOU BUNCH OF RATS!!!!' (TheFlyingScotsman01, August, 2011). Despite the obviously racist and aggressive tone of these comments, or at least in part because of it, Neville's 20 minute monologue sustains a space where he is not silenced but through speech enacts an antagonistic presence, embodies a point of view, and carries his perspective beyond the limited boundaries and barriers of the street to a newly constituted locale that now includes several hundred thousand onlookers and several thousand responses continuing long after the events. For some commenters, however, via the prompting, recording and uploading of the video by Charlie Veitch, Neville comes to represent, on first appearance, the 'internet troll' (along the lines of Bergstrom's 2011 definition) who loudly, aggressively, violently and skilfully provokes, in this case on the basis of a discourse of poverty and racial inequality. We will return to what can be understood as an agonistic politics opened up by the often vitriolic and racially bigoted exchanges online, but first turn to the audio-visual and communicative 'spaces of protest' that are at play in the events on the streets at Clapham Junction on 9 August 2011, as they are transformed by the modes of mediation and networked communication available through YouTube.

## Extending the Spaces of Protest: Passion within and Beyond the Streets and Squares

Fuelling cycles of media attention and multiplying action and reaction, protest turns to riot where it is intensified by the flow of passion in the overflow of disaffection, frustration, rage and rampage and, above all, by affect unchecked by the normal constraints of social order. City spaces along with corresponding institutions of law enforcement traditionally impose the constraints that might keep such passion in check. However, as Nigel Thrift describes in his account of affect, space and politics, cities can be understood precisely as 'roiling maelstroms of affect' (2007: 171). More than simply the socially articulated emotions that accompany, for instance, civic discourse on race relations or low socio-economic disadvantage, affect can be considered 'a set of embodied practices that produce visible conduct as an outer lining', where context is vital, and where very often 'the source of emotions seem to come from somewhere outside the body, from the setting itself' (Thrift,

2007: 171). To better account for the flow of affect across the dynamic scene of protest as described above, in this section we consider city and social media as equally active in supporting and modifying the conditions of aggressive protest. What we see in the England riots and other examples of protest and disorder is that the zones of inclusion and exclusion imposed by the city, by its 'material supports for life' (Butler, 2011) and sociality, but also by the barriers that designate spaces of public congregation and action, are disrupted and transformed by the alternative networks of communication and audio-visual materialities of messenger services, social media and social networking platforms.

Conflict, or even cruelty, can be positioned as central to the functioning life of the city as it is also mapped onto networked publics. For instance, Bülent Dicken's analysis of the problem of nihilism considers the city as a space of antagonistic conflict precisely to challenge the idea that violence, cruelty and irrationality are exceptions. Dicken looks to Nietzsche's depiction of the pre-Socratic Greek polis as a starting point, the success of which was 'its readiness to accept conflict as an ontological given, as part of life' (Dicken, 2009: 112). The polis took for granted the 'contestation of a plurality of antagonists' in a mode of politics able to 'accommodate cruelty' (Dicken, 2009: 113). Dicken identifies in the writing of Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Mouffe the centrality of violence, passion and affect, framed as the omnipresent potentiality held within and mediated by the city: 'Even though the city is basically a reasonable form of human togetherness, passions thus remain significant elements of conduct in it. And because there are passions, social identities cannot be constituted independently from passion, or, antagonism' (Dicken, 2009: 114). For Spinoza (1951: 268), and Deleuze (1992) following him, the city is the solution because it organises encounters and relations and, as Thrift puts it, modifies or engineers affect. Above all, Deleuze says, 'A City is so much the better the more it relies on joyful affections: the love of freedom should outweigh hope, fear and confidence' (1992: 272). And in this way it helps to transform the violence of antagonism into active, productive forms of 'compatible association' (Deleuze, 1992: 265).

What the city as a collective, shared space preserves is the plurality of (passionate) thought and speech, even if at a price:

*what the citizen renounces by committing himself to a collective, common affection is his personal affection. Thus, even though freedom to act is surrendered to the city, 'affections of reason', that is, freedom of thinking and speech, cannot and should not be surrendered. That remains an indispensable natural right, the compromise of which is precisely what introduces violence into the city (Dicken, 2009: 117).*

This is why discourses of inclusion and exclusion, of criminality, race and citizenship, become so central to the context of riotous protest. Likewise, destruction of property becomes the marker in terms of which actors fall outside of the rational contract of inhabitation in the city. And for Spinoza, it is 'fanaticism', and 'radical nihilism' in Dicken's terms, 'which turns to a wholesale destruction of the city' (2009: 117). In other words, protest fails to support 'compatible association' where its violence turns to its own destruction.

In scenes of riotous protest, damaged and burning buildings, ordinary objects such as bottles, bins, and cars take on and heighten an intensive energy. Normally, urban space is carefully designed to produce and modify affect as 'a form of landscape engineering' that has the purpose of maintaining socio-political order (Thrift, 2007: 171). Affect operates in the city as the 'remainder', as irrational and excessive, as forces that always threaten to exceed constraint, for instance in the case of crime, or the energy and potential violence of crowds. But in addition, local territories have their own 'emotional geographies' that are mapped onto attributes of race and social capital, so that belonging and exclusion are composed and negotiated by those who reside or pass through (Nayak, 2010). While commentators, politicians and police were quick to criminalise participants in the 2011 England riots and hence exclude them from legitimate citizenship and from public discourse, collective acts of rioting and property destruction emerge out of particular, localised contexts of affect and embodied history.

The 'Reading the Riots' report and subsequent research has traced some of this context in its geographically and historically contingent forms (see for example Hope, 2012). At a general level Lea and Hollsworth (2012) describe the violence as an outcome of 30 years of neoliberal social policy in the UK, which has dismantled the welfare safety net for the most disadvantaged and cut public spending to a range of youth services. In particular they argue that the self-organised aspects of the riot and riot response mirror government policy emphasis on 'localism and self-help'. Urban regeneration schemes have gentrified inner-city urban areas to the degree that poor residents are now treated as outsiders in their own communities, with signs of wealth and privilege beyond their means being 'flaunted' by the new urban consumer (Jeffrey and Jackson, 2012). Lagrange (2012) elaborates on these themes to argue that in both the UK and France the social life of many of the young people living in 'riot-affected' areas reflects these changes, with communities being increasingly 'fractured along class, racial and ethnic lines' (Hope, 2012: 3). In particular, there is an intensely felt spatial and local dimension to these perceptions of inequality, which is reflected in reportage on the riot experience in Clapham Junction and other spaces of unrest. The social geography of Clapham Junction is divided into the area 'south of the railway' where upwardly mobile and affluent professionals and families have moved in, and the area north of the railway, where there are a number of 'deprived' estates (Morrel et al., 2011: 17).

This notion of a divided community is also discussed by Spalek, Isakjee & Davies (2012) who describe the riots as a 'struggle over place and belonging' with the actions of the rioters representing an effort to 'take back the spaces from which they felt excluded' (2012: 14). This research does well to reveal the human geography of a building maelstrom of affect, but we can also consider the manner by which this 'boils over' through networked channels of communication that help to reconfigure the broader spaces of protest. We might say that in public protest, bodies act to 'make a claim in public space', but as Butler argues, this idea 'presumes that public space is given, that it is already public, and recognized as such' (Butler, 2011). For the England riots the spaces to be considered public are multiple, contested, and uncertain, often recognised as such only after the fact. What of the online spaces for replication and circulation and additional interventions – many of which are 'private' in the sense of being corporately owned and structured (by Google, RIM Blackberry IM systems, Twitter, Facebook)? Butler argues that assembly and speech reconfigure public space as potential spaces of protest, but that the crowds are increasingly moving outside the square and street.

*At such a moment, politics is no longer defined as the exclusive business of public sphere distinct from a private one, but it crosses that line again and again, bringing attention to the way that politics is already in the home, or on the street, or in the neighbourhood, or indeed in those virtual spaces that are unbound by the architecture of the public square. (Butler, 2011)*

The politics associated with these spaces of protest rely on the creation of multiple 'publics' distinguishable from what Michael Warner conceptualises as 'the public' as a 'kind of social totality' (Warner, 2002: 49). The distinction is important here for moving beyond the material constraints of city spaces, streets and squares or abstract ideals of democratic institutions and a 'fourth estate' to consider a public as composed also of so many micro encounters, relations, modes and platforms for expression, including online encounter and interaction. Publics and 'counterpublics', in Warner's sense, are dispersed, multiple, emerge around events or even texts, and are increasingly assembled through networked forms of access, communication and mediation. But likewise, 'virtual spaces' for protest are only virtual in the sense that online networks contain potentialities and capacities for acting and congregating, or for passionate investment in a cause, even if these capacities are not actualised or remain ineffectual. They are not immaterial, in fact just the opposite. Online publics also have to assemble and constitute around and through specific sites and events, images and acts. For instance, city squares and streets act as material supports for action, and themselves act as part of a struggle to constitute a public. But also, this struggle integrates with digital, networked forms of support, affecting the visible boundaries for activism, protest and provocation spatially and temporally.

Passion, disaffection, poverty, racism and inequality remain essential catalysts as individual and collective action (in the form of spatial occupation, speech, image creation and circulation, as well as physical confrontation and material destruction or theft) finds alternative outlets to the policed and barricaded streets. Baker (2011) argues that the rage and anger underlying the riot formations, whilst still emanating from structural issues pertaining to experiences of social disadvantage and inequality (particularly in the Tottenham riot) have also been joined by new experiences that have reshaped the riots' spaces of formation. A new type of crowd theory is required to account for the way that new media technologies have allowed collective forms of emotional community and public consciousness to emerge which 'traverse and intersect geographical public space and the virtual public sphere' (Baker, 2011). In the context of the England riots, Baker sees new media technologies as extending forms of reflexive communication, emotion and action beyond relations of spatial presence and proximity in ways that feed into new forms of consciousness and protest, allowing individuals to form publics capable of 'occupying' both geographic and virtual public arenas. And yet, while social network sites are identified as a technological innovation that produce new forms of connectivity and congregation, we are arguing here that it is excesses of emotion and acts of often aggressive provocation that maintain and sustain civic congregation across geographic and virtual public space. Passion and provocation are paramount.

Like Dicken, Butler insists on returning the space of protest to the body and its material supports in an attempt to account for those who remain foreign, excluded from the classical polis or the recognised public realm. And this echoes Nancy Fraser's critique of Jürgen Habermas' deliberative conception of the public sphere, a concept, Fraser argues, that is based on exclusion and the multiple counterpublics that exist often without voice or access to legitimate public discourse (Fraser, 1992; Papacharissi, 2010: 117). We can follow this logic into televisual and online spaces, not to designate an abstract, locationless space of protest, but to highlight the materiality of online protest and contest. Passion and affect flow spatially and temporally beyond the immediate scene of the street, to amplify it beyond its original staging—embodied here in the figure of Neville—and in the passion flowing through antagonistic and vitriolic comment exchanges that result in the posting of the videos by Charlie Veitch as a further act of online provocation.

Neville fights with his embodied presence, his dominating voice and continuous monologue to maintain an expressive space and an immediate public that forms around him on the street. But it is clearly a contest:

*The policeman grabbed my arm because he wanted to take me over there so nobody could hear me say what I wanted to say. I didn't touch the policeman,*

*I didn't come to him but I got grabbed anyway. For a person to have an argument you must have an argument with somebody else but I was the one that was grabbed—why? Because I'm loud, because I speak my mind and because I'm black. (Neville)*

But these spatial disjunctions and contests are extended through the potential created by mobile audio-visual technologies and social media platforms to provoke the formation of additional emergent, more pluralistic publics. The passion expressed by Neville as 'The Clapham Junction Speaker' circumvents the material barriers put in place to distinguish legitimate (Johnston) from marginalised (Neville) speech. These processes reconstitute the local space of protest for the more dispersed public that forms online in the act of witnessing and responding. Through such multiple modes of mediation, the local is also 'recast outside itself in order to be established as local, and this means that it is only through a certain globalizing media that the local can be established, and that something can really happen there' (Butler, 2011: 8). To understand this flow of passion within and beyond the streets as constitutive of local and city spaces and sociality we can also turn to a line of political and social theory that considers the city as constitutive of forms of democratic society.

## Social Media Acts of Provocation and Contest

As the contest moves between the crowd that envelops Neville's speech through mobile, networked mediation to the comments field of the YouTube videos, the local is recast outside itself to generate dispersed, multiple publics. The two Clapham Junction Speaker videos attracted around 400,000 views between them and 4,500 comments, mostly in the days and weeks following the events, but the comments and discussion continues on more than two years later. Neville's words, his presence and the image of the street as site of contested protest become significant, recursive provocations that refold the maelstrom of affect that flowed through the riots into the comments field. Provocation vitalises and intensifies social media publics in many dynamic and often contradictory ways (McCosker, 2014). We examine this sphere of expression and activity for its contribution to the ecosystem within which the England riots could unfold and resonate. Central to the sustained digital resonance of the riot and its dispersed voices of protest, is the contestation, the vitriol and passion that manifests in the commenting practices made available by YouTube.

The vitriolic expression and aggressive interaction surrounding the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos within the YouTube comments field, like the riot and looting, could be

seen as simply aiming to disrupt and dismantle deliberative modes of discourse and civic participation. Similarly, the negativity, racism, bigotry and vitriol that fill the comments field might be understood to convey a sense of aggression that equates to the violence and destructiveness perpetrated ‘in the streets’. However, such an equation glosses the productive potential of these modes of exchange and the sites that support them, which we locate in the totality of the spheres of expressive action that include Neville’s speech, the act of recording and uploading it, the interjections from others within the crowd, and the multiplicity of voices that follow in YouTube’s comments field (in addition to the many blogs and social network sites and forums in which it was embedded or discussed). The analysis here aims to capture the patterns and tenor of the expression and exchange that unfolded, and highlight some of the points at which the events on the streets provoked equally—but differently formulated—passionate responses online. In the context of the broader media landscape and the spatial politics discussed above, comment activity such as is evident here presents an opportunity to think through the contested notions of democratic participation, forms of citizenship, public action and legitimate protest.

One of the fears of under- or un-moderated online forums and large scale comment fields, particularly where they deal with sensitive topics such as the riots, is that they simply give voice to and perpetuate forms of bigotry and incite hatred and further violence. There are many examples of aggressive, vitriolic enmity expressed as responses to the ‘Clapham Junction Speaker’ videos in ways that simply seek to disrupt Neville’s point of view and his embodied position as of West Indian descent. For example: ‘this guys a fucking twat more black people in jail cuz they commit more crime FACT its not racist its purely true’ (xkallumx, August, 2011). But despite the obvious hostility, oppositional reaction of this sort often incorporates the commenter’s point of view as an extension of the discourse, multiplying the voices able to emerge as part of this collective space for expression. For example:

*More black people are in jail because they commit more crimes. This is fact and his ‘oh look at us we’re so poor’ argument is the same sort of shit the little fuckers try and use to justify what they done. Fuck that. I grew up poor. I still am poor and I get stopped by the old bill regularly but I don’t feel the need to steal PS3’s, xBox’s and iPhones. Fucking waste men. Oh and Charlie Veitch is a cunt too. (ProperBoShank, August, 2011)*

YouTube’s user-based flag and removal system provides some moderation on the basis of Google’s policy that prohibits racial vilification and violent incitement. While there is less vitriolic and extreme bigotry expressed in the comments than might be expected, race and class identity politics are clearly central throughout. For example, as a typical commenter

argues: 'The economic down turn and increase in fascist laws are effecting all races of this country, but if you think you are targets because of your race then you think these factors are only effecting you which is the delusion' (Danster82, August, 2011). In this vein, commenters often express their disagreement with Neville that racial inequality might be a factor in the tensions and generalised disaffection, and in the process disavow legitimate differentiation of experiences and the plurality of voices of protest. Nonetheless, this kind of disavowal is also contested, most effectively by the commanding centrality of Neville's continued monologue and presence.

As with much of the political discourse and public commentary surrounding the riots, including the perspective of Prime Minister David Cameron who designated rioters as 'criminals, pure and simple', and others who spoke of a 'feral underclass' (Hope, 2012; McDonald, 2012), race features throughout these exchanges as an exclusionary category and a field through which hostility could be expressed. This is not surprising given Chantal Mouffe's influential notion that 'democratic logics always entail drawing a frontier between 'us' and 'them', those who belong to the 'demos' and those who are outside it' (Mouffe, 2005: 4). One commenter, for instance, emphasises the link between race, social discordance and lack of 'reasonable' discourse:

*sooo, the fact that he is west indian explains why he is yelling and telling people to shutup instead of speaking in what many people believe in, a reasonable tone for dialogue, well does this mean that the races can't live among each other in a comfortable harmony? I'm just asking (AK8591, August, 2011)*

Though a 'reasonable' tone of dialogue is called for, it often seems to be the elision of speech or the platform for protest that is sought under the guise of conditions of rational deliberative discourse, precisely what protesters, and Neville, must step outside of or persist in the face of in order to speak at all.

The value of the comment space, along with Neville's speech act and its recording and upload, is dismissed too quickly, however, if judged solely on the basis of whether they conform to the 'civil' operation of deliberative and consensual democratic public exchange. Some commenters defend Neville's speech act and recognise the difficult conditions from which it emerges; for example:

*Government and media never broadcast people like this who know what's going on instead they give us these out of touch idiot politicians who order people around but make everything worse. Yes man, don't know this man's name, but I'd like to hear him more! (TheAuthentikate, August, 2011)*

While many simply challenge or dismiss his points (and his right to speak) in order to proffer their own, others take up specific aspects of Neville's complaints, for example, regarding the role of policing:

*'Where were you last night?' The Police aren't in their position to help the people, they're there to enforce compliance and generate revenue. This man knows it better than most and I'd guess... (continuityofliberty, August, 2011)*

A seemingly inexhaustible contest over causes and solutions unfolds through the comments, not always with detail and nuance, and not simply toward an outright victory of opinion or understanding, but in a mode of perpetual provocation:

*He lost his credibility as soon as he talked simply about black people. I'm white as a sheet and the government and the system's always fucked with me. But does he mention white people being screwed with? (Bubo25, August, 2011)*

Responding to this comment, the following poster attempts to encourage an alternative, historically informed, perspective:

*@Bubo25 - He is making the point that blacks are treated badly by the government more so than white people. People that come with this 'you know where the door is' talk need to look at things from other people's perspectives. The government were the ones who encouraged west indians to come to this country in the first place throughout the 60's. Therefore making it their country too so don't then treat them like second class citizens (bahding165, August, 2011)*

Though this kind of direct dialogue is less common than individual comments, it occurs too often to dismiss. In this vein, interested, and disturbed by what he sees as a key feature of internet comment cultures, Geert Lovink has noted comment posters' 'hostile

anxiety to engage with other neighboring voices' (2011: 58). He argues that: 'the actual existing lapse of rationality results in an avalanche of random and repetitive comments. There is a widespread unwillingness to reach consensus and to come to a conclusion in a debate' (Lovink, 2011: 58). While Lovink sees this—somewhat ambivalently—as a failing of the overabundance of internet comment fields and practices, it is precisely this lack of consensus, the evident irrationality and passionate individualism, as well as the intensity of emotion revolving around the continuous generation of provocation and (re)action that reveals the positive capacity of unmoderated comment spaces. That is, while not always dialogic in the strict sense of an ongoing conversation or consensus, the comment field as described here enables the emergence of 'a 'life politics' able to reach the various areas of personal life, creating a 'democracy of emotions'" (Mouffe, 2005: 15).

The kinds of provocative, often vitriolic and antagonistic but massively multiple expression acts throughout the comment fields, as well as in Neville's speech act, and Veitch's act of recording and uploading it to YouTube, enact agonistic forms of contest as an alternative model of citizenship, acts that incorporate forms of passion and conflict but are no less productive for it. These are not 'smart mobs' in Rheingold's (2002) celebratory understanding of online group action, or even a 'disunified multitude' as Papacharissi puts it (2010: 158). The acts remain almost primarily dissociated, impassioned expression relaying a range of points of view without an internal dialogical order. These can be conceptualised as acts of multiple initiations—of a space of protest, of a constitutive public, of passionate expression of the conditions of existence, of provocations for further exchange.

## Conclusion

Provocation is uncomfortable because it straddles stasis and inertia, becoming the point of transition between one state and another. We take comfort, then, in naming and 'differentiating' the provocateur as, for example, activist, troll, or rioter. Isin and Nielsen consider the centrality of acts for the constitution of citizenship (2008). While for Isin 'acts of violence, hospitality, hostility, indifference, love, friendship and so on' are not reducible to citizenship, they can be intertwined in significant ways (Isin, 2008: 19). Drawing on Robert Ware (1973), Isin argues that 'the essence of an act, as distinct from conduct, practice, behaviour and habit, is that an act is a rupture in the given' (Isin, 2008: 25). That is, central to the infinitive verb form 'to act' is the sense of 'putting in motion', 'to begin, create or disrupt' (Isin, 2008: 21, 22). The force of an act, as a form of provocation becomes evident in this creative disruption that is equally constitutive of the individual or group: 'To act means to get something in motion, to begin not just something new but oneself as the being that acts to begin itself' (Isin, 2008: 27). Importantly, Isin's understanding of

acts of citizenship includes the potential to 'act up' as disgraceful or anti-social conduct. It points toward the kind of agonistic social formations outlined by Mouffe and Dicken, where passion and violence might be incorporated through city spaces, institutions of democracy along with new social media platforms. In short, and reflective of the possibilities of alternative spaces of protest such as those analysed here,

*'Acts' are ruptures or beginnings but not impulsive and violent reactions to a scene. By theorizing acts, or attempting to constitute acts as an object of analysis, we must focus not only on rupture rather than order, but also on a rupture that enables the actor (that the act creates) to remain at the scene rather than fleeing it. (Isin, 2008: 27)*

A rupture in the given initiated through acts of provocation need not be borne out as violent destruction. Events such as the August 2011 England riots are a reminder that excesses of affect and passion remain fundamental forces in the city, but increasingly move between online, networked spaces of communication and 'congregation' in an extended geography and duration. Our analysis of the modes and spaces of protest as they move beyond the city streets and squares has sought to maintain this distinction between 'radical nihilism', as Dicken (2009) puts it, in which disaffection turns to violent destruction and looting, and forms of speech and spatial appropriation that also seek to disrupt but do so in order to turn antagonism into a more productive mode of democratic contest.

In our analysis of the 'Clapham Junction Speaker' videos, Neville as speaker, Veitch as activist, YouTube as platform and the multiple commenters all play their part as critical provocateur. And there are many other possibilities for disruptive acts that should be supported and sustained, understood for their productive potential rather than condemned as equivalent to the violent destruction on the streets. These events are specific to the circumstances and material contexts that gave rise to them, yet share commonalities with other protest events in recent years under the banner of the Occupy movement or the many sites of protest and revolt throughout the Middle East. It may also be the case that these modes of civic participation can be initiated in ways that might become part of legitimate public discourse, before the eruption of violent destruction in the form of riot and looting. Such political aims require, however, acceptance of a model of democracy able to accommodate antagonistic contest in the form of pluralistic agonism.

## Biographical Note

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## issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

### FCJ-162 Symbolic violence in the online field: Calls for 'civility' in online discussion.

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#### **Abstract:**

In this paper, I argue that enforcing norms of civility in a deliberative space can be dangerous, as a requirement of civility can be used as a tool to stifle dissent and reinforce existing arrangements of power. I analyse the comments that led to the closing of the online comments board of a community newspaper in Greeley, Colorado in the United States, the editor of the paper's justification for shutting down commenting, as well as the few comments that made it to the forum in response to the announcement before the commenting function ceased. I find that despite the fact that comments were often rude and insulting, they were performing a vital deliberative democratic function.

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## Introduction

In light of early high hopes for the democratic potential of online discussion, the reality of attacks, hostility, vitriol, and at times racist and sexist sentiments can be alarming (Coffey and Woolworth, 2004; Carlin, Schill, Levasseur, and King, 2005; Hlavach and Frievoegel, 2011;

Richardson and Stanyer, 2011; Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2012). According to some, if these spaces are to be valuable, the participants should have to maintain some level of mutual respect. Concerns over vitriol in anonymous online comments have led some newspapers that maintain online forums to alter their commenting systems. Some have abandoned anonymity, some require comments be tied to Facebook identities, and in some cases, newspapers have closed their comments sections entirely (Mart, 2010; Bangert, 2011; Crider, 2011; Kennedy, 2012). The rationale for freedom of expression is that healthy democracy requires that its citizens be able to freely speak their minds. Online newspaper forums are imagined to be sites of free expression and of various forms of public deliberation that are considered to be vital to democracy. But an insistence on ‘civility’ in a deliberative space can be dangerous, as the requirement of civility (which is often equated with ‘politeness’) can be used as a tool to stifle dissent and reinforce existing arrangements of power.

In this paper, I analyse the comments that contributed to the closing of the online comments board of a community newspaper in Greeley, Colorado, in the United States, along with the justification made by the editor of the newspaper for shutting down commenting, and the few comments that made it to the forum in response to the announcement before the commenting function ceased. I argue that despite the fact that comments were often rude and insulting, they were performing a vital deliberative democratic function. The justification for the forum’s closure provided by the newspaper’s editor expresses regret that commenting does not reflect a polite ideal of political discussion, and argues that the state of the forum was not serving the interests of the newspaper’s readers or the newspaper itself. Many of the newspaper’s readers disagreed, and saw the shuttering of the forum as a blow to free public expression, and suggested that the move was motivated by financial concerns on the part of the newspaper company.

I then discuss these findings in the light of the potentially problematic nature of private or corporate ownership of spaces of public discussion. I conclude that corporations have an interest in associating themselves with polite discourse, but that mutual respect and real social change can be antithetical. The closure of a newspaper’s online forum could be interpreted as an expression of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) on the part of the newspaper company, stifling voices that do not serve its interests and consolidating cultural capital in the hands of elite dominant groups. The exercise of symbolic violence in order to silence impolite speech is used to further a cultural policy, encouraging tame expression and discouraging comments that some find uncomfortable or insulting. Accusations of ‘incivility’ and ‘trolling’ are used as a tool to silence viewpoints or groups that are deemed unproductive. In public debate, one person’s attack may be another’s burning objective, and discomfort may be necessary for its successful delivery.

## Political talk and deliberative democracy

Some justifications for providing spaces for free public debate are rooted in theories of deliberative democracy. Stephen Coleman and Jay Blumler (2009) write that deliberation, 'in its most basic form, entails talking with other citizens about political questions in an honest and open-minded way' (Coleman and Blumler, 2009: 4). Deliberative democracy theory considers informal deliberation to be central to the ideals of democracy, which Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright (2001) state as 'facilitating active political involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus through dialogue, devising and implementing public policies that ground a productive economy and healthy society, and, in more radical egalitarian versions of the democratic ideal, ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth' (Fung and Wright, 2001: 5). In deliberative democracy theory, democracy cannot be reduced to its formal aggregative processes, such as voting. 'In contrast [to voting-centric or aggregative theories of democracy], deliberative democracy focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will-formation that precede voting' (Chambers, 2003: 308).

Mutual respect is often thought of as a requirement of deliberation (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge, 2012). Seyla Benhabib (2002) states universal respect and egalitarian reciprocity should be guiding, normative principles of deliberative democracy, but Benhabib proposes a democratic deliberative model that also allows for contestation between different opinions and viewpoints, indicating that respect and disagreement can coexist. To capture the point that discourse can be both democratically valuable and lack adherence to any etiquette or politeness, Zizi Papacharissi (2004) conceptualised politeness as something separate from civility in online discussion. Papacharissi's concept of 'incivility' included threats to democracy, the assigning of stereotypes, and threats to the rights of others, while 'impoliteness' included name-calling and vulgarity, acts that hinder conversation's ability to run smoothly and have typically been associated with civil discourse. Reconceptualising civility for its democratic contribution rather than its adherence to politeness allowed Papacharissi to count contestation and critical argument among discussion participants as democratically valuable even if it was impolite. Similarly, in an analysis of argumentation in online political discussion, Marcin Lewinski (2010) found most online discussion to be filled with fallacious argumentation, irrelevant, unqualified, unoriginal arguments, straw person arguments, and abusive language, but he concluded that the kind of argumentation that arises in online forums (which he termed 'collective criticism') can lead to better testing of arguments and positions, and ultimately more sophisticated opinion formation among participants.

Online forums offer a space in which cultural contestation can take place. Internet forums are located within what Benhabib (2002: 21) describes as the unofficial public sphere, and are important to the formation of will and opinion. Online political forums have been overwhelmingly thought of as sites of democratic deliberation (Freelon, 2010). Informal deliberation may not be likely to result in deciding upon solutions to all social problems, whether it is conducted in living rooms, on sidewalks or in online discussion forums. However, according to Jane Mansbridge (2012), informal talk does not have to be directed at coming up with a consequential, binding decision to be important in a deliberative system, even if that talk is merely expressive and does not appear to be deliberative. Mansbridge describes how it is through everyday talk that some ideas are legitimated and advanced over others, and a well-functioning deliberative system will pick up on the best ideas while discarding the worst ones. One of the most important functions of everyday discussion in a deliberative system, according to Mansbridge, is to collectively decide what should and should not be considered part of the realm of the political. Mansbridge defines 'political' as 'that which the public ought to discuss' (Mansbridge, 2012: 89). She argues that social norms will adequately decide what is appropriate for public discussion and what is not. In a deliberative system, it is through informal public discussion that it is justified whether any issue is deemed to be something that should be talked about in public.

## Corporate spaces as sites for free expression

When online commenting spaces are owned and run by private corporations, a vibrant public debate may not be the primary purpose of the forum, even if that is its stated goal. Corporations have financial interests and shareholders that they are ultimately accountable to, and we need not assume they have free public expression at heart when they host online forums alongside their content. Commenting drives page hits, and advertisers are fond of those.

Historically, free expression does not tend to fare well in corporate-owned spaces. Herbert I. Schiller (1989) described how corporate values and perspectives have a way of crowding out other voices and viewpoints. When do corporate-owned commenting spaces become 'inhospitable places for restless intellectuals and social nonconformists,' as have private shopping malls? (Schiller, 1989: 100) When a corporation owns a space, it ultimately decides what does and does not happen within it. The private shopping mall 'effectively insulates [shoppers] from seeing, hearing, or encountering expression and ideas that might, however slightly, disturb the mood, routines, and tranquility of daily shopping' (Schiller, 1989: 101). The open political debate that had been possible in public city spaces was no longer welcome in the private shopping mall.

Newspapers are not shopping malls, and they perform a vital social role in the dissemination of news, providing the public with the information that fuels informal debates in a deliberative democracy. If that is the case, what better place to have those debates than directly below the newspaper articles themselves? Robert McChesney (1999) noted the potentially intoxicating effect of the marriage of the utopian rhetoric surrounding internet technology and the rhetoric surrounding the mythology of the free market. But, he predicted, no matter how high our hopes for its democratic potential, the internet would develop along the same profit-focused paths as have other corporate media. Internet companies do not have contributions to a thriving democracy as their primary goal any more than does The Walt Disney Company.

Despite the appearance of democratic participation in corporate-owned interactive online spaces, users' attention and voices are easily shaped and dominated by corporate interests and discourses (Dahlberg, 2005). Jodi Dean (2009) wrote that communication technologies act to obscure the capitalist nature of the system in which they operate. According to Dean, we are in a condition of communicative capitalism in which the rhetoric surrounding communication technologies is merged with the rhetoric of the market, so the celebration of inclusion, participation, and contribution leaves us incapable of meaningful examination of the injustices of global capitalism. In communicative capitalism, the goal of the communication technology company is to filter all communication through its network, so every utterance becomes a node in the network, adding to the profit and control of the company, and making resistance to it difficult or impossible (Mejias, 2012). The more we communicate with corporate-owned communication technology, the less power each utterance has.

A good amount of research has been done on the fate of free expression in corporate-controlled space. Farooq Kperogi (2011) researched user-generated content on corporate-owned websites and found that contributions from citizens do not necessarily create a more democratic public conversation; in corporate-sponsored spaces, even user-generated media are being coopted by corporations, limiting their democratic potential. Danielle LaFrance and Lisa Nathan (2012) found that commercially owned social networks provide increased organising potential for activist groups, but at a cost: activists' messages risk being compromised by the very corporate tools that can allow such groups to grow and publicise. Thomas Corrigan and Jennifer Proffitt (2011) explored the trend of the purchase of campus newspapers by large media companies and concluded that when university newspapers are purchased by for-profit companies, freedom of expression is compromised by the profit motives of the corporation.

On the other hand, corporate internet spaces can be used to further democratic goals in ways for which they were not designed. For example, Marcin Lewinski and Dima Mohammed (2012) analysed status updates made to Facebook during the Egyptian phase of the Arab Spring. They found that though Facebook is often thought of as a trivial entertainment or diversion, and a colonised commercial space rather than a site of public sphere activity, during the Arab Spring it became a site of deliberation and mobilisation. The use of Facebook during the Arab Spring demonstrates that deliberative practices can arise from structures that were not intended to be deliberative.

## Forum closures as symbolic violence

The United States claims to have no cultural policy (Miller and Yudice, 2002: Chapter 1). In the absence of a state cultural policy, the U.S. allows culture to be directed by either the public or corporations. As the ones with more resources, corporations will likely be the ones to fill in the gap. Justin Lewis and Toby Miller (2002) described two typical approaches to cultural policy: the facilitate-the-market approach, in which it is believed that the free market will best decide the direction culture should take, and the dirigiste approach, in which the state sees itself as the protector of certain forms of high culture from transitory public tastes.

If an online comments forum is closed, then we have lost a cultural space in which Benhabib's (2002) cultural contestation can take place. Public conversation is cultural, and culture is political (McGuigan, 2003). When a newspaper closes its online forum due to the disrespectful comments it contains, the newspaper company is acting out both forms of cultural policy. Because it is a private business, its public actions are manifestations of market forces. At the same time, the company is acting, at least in name, as the protector of public taste. The Portland Press Herald shut down its comments board in October 2010, and the editor stated that the decision was made to 'protect the public, our readers, and the subjects of our stories' from 'hurtful and vulgar' comments (Kiesow, 2010), betraying a belief that it is the duty of the newspaper to maintain a certain kind of expression, and the preferred cultural expression does not include 'vulgar' remarks. But who decides what is 'vulgar' and hence should be excluded from the public conversation? And what is the justification for excluding such expression? Conversation that is pleasant to read is not necessarily the most productive to deliberative democracy. 'Social harmony is bought at the expense of those whose tastes are not only aesthetically unacceptable but, more importantly, potentially contestatory' (Miller and Yudice, 2002: 11).

It is hard to argue against civility. 'Civility' is what Karen Tracy (2010) described as a platitude, or an 'insipid, banal' insistence on an 'abstract, noncontentious value claim' that most people would agree with (Tracy, 2010: 122). A requirement of civility in discourse is less likely to be examined and interrogated precisely because it is a abstract platitude and sounds like something that should be reached for. But things that do not invite examination are sometimes those that should be scrutinised. An insistence on something vague like 'civility' in discourse can be used to achieve suspect ends, especially when trumpeted by elites. As Darrin Hicks (2002) describes,

*Dialogue, civility, teamwork, and collaboration are the current buzzwords of industry. These processes have been co-opted by powerful governing agents to describe their working procedures for managing disagreement and resolving problems, procedures designed to reproduce institutional power and to manage radical challenges to that power. (Hicks, 2002: 251)*

Hicks argues that it is difficult for those within a deliberative space to challenge those in power when playing by their rules and working within their processes.

The management of online forums on the basis of civility (at least, a more traditional definition of the concept similar to 'politeness'), can be seen as a form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) by the owners of the websites. Symbolic violence is exercised when those in a dominant position (in this case, the owners of the news organisation that operates the affected online forums) exercise power over those who hold less cultural capital (in this case, the site's users) in order to organise cultural capital in ways that benefit those in power. The closure of a forum is a direct, less symbolic form of control, but symbolic violence is also exercised in indirect ways, such as through demands that comments be written in a particular rhetorical style. If the online social field is typically characterised by an elevated tone and emotional language, any efforts to discourage hostile speech could be seen as an exercise of symbolic violence, including the flagging and deleting of 'unacceptable' comments, as well as the complaints of users of the online forums, who have internalised norms of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Thus the users exercise control over each other, unwittingly distributing cultural capital in ways that favour those in a dominant position. One form user management takes is accusations of 'trolling.'

## ‘Trolling’ accusations as a form of control

Scholars have defined trolling as a participant in online discussion’s purposeful attempt to provoke others and derail otherwise productive or on-topic conversation. According to Claire Hardaker (2010), ‘A troller is a CMC [computer-mediated communication] user who constructs the identity of sincerely wishing to be part of the group in question, including professing, or conveying pseudo-sincere intentions, but whose real intention(s) is/are to cause disruption and/or to trigger or exacerbate conflict for the purposes of their own amusement’ (Hardaker, 2010: 237). Hardaker states that what constitutes trolling is relative, and based on the norms of the community. Appropriate behaviour in one online space may be considered trolling in another. John Kelly, Danyel Fisher and Marc Smith (2009) argue that what seems to make a troll a troll is inauthenticity, and they call those who sincerely voice marginalised or extreme opinions ‘fringe authors,’ while the ‘troll’ is inflammatory solely for the sake of disruption. On an online discussion forum, however, the behaviour of a fringe author and a troll may look the same. It is impossible to tell the motivation of a user by reading his or her post.

Trolling can be very effective in derailing conversation and can negatively harm users’ feelings of trust and community. Herring et al (2012) analysed the actions of a troll on a feminist online forum. They found that the troll succeeded in provoking members and disrupting conversation. At the same time, because the term ‘troll’ has such a negative association and history, the act of labeling someone a ‘troll’ can be used to silence a commenter who shares an unpopular or unwelcome opinion (Bergstrom, 2011). On an online forum, a commenter who shares an unpopular opinion, or who posts with an elevated tone or language can be labeled a troll and find his or her comments discounted or excluded from the discussion.

## The contested role of mutual respect in deliberative discourse

Despite the claims of some deliberative theorists (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004; Dryzek, 2010; Mansbridge, 2012) that deliberation must be characterised by mutual respect, some expression that appears to be disrespectful may be justified in a deliberative process or space. The demand that all public discussion be marked by respect may be not only unrealistic, but damaging to democratic deliberation. Indeed, there seems to be a tension within some of the theory and literature on deliberative democracy between on one hand, a belief that people cannot deliberate properly without some level of respect, and on the other hand, the recognition that apparently disrespectful expression may be necessary

to get one's voice heard. For example, Mansbridge (2012) argues that mutual respect and consistency in speech should characterise deliberation, but at the same time, she acknowledges that people sometimes need to take extreme or offensive positions in order to achieve authentic deliberation. Tracy argues that, 'It is important to recognise that almost any passionate, angry comment will be seen by its target as a rude and disrespectful attack' (2010: 203). Where is the line, then, between purely unproductive trolling and seemingly hostile expression that advances an excluded point of view?

Tracy argues that rather than a blanket insistence on 'civility' in deliberative discourse, we should make room for what she calls reasonable hostility.

*Reasonable hostility, as I define it, is an expression of anger that most people would judge reasonable. It is emotionally marked, critical commentary about another's action that matches the perceived wrong to which it responds. As people are connected to their ideas, and emotion and arguments are expressed together, the idea of reasonable hostility captures how people actually talk. (Tracy, 2010: 203).*

Similarly, Lynn Sanders (1997) argues that the requirement of mutual respect in deliberative dialogue is unrealistic, and can be damaging. Many of the guiding values of deliberation are actually conservative, not democratic, she argues, and in supposedly mutually respectful deliberation, compromise is achieved through dominance, inequality, and exclusion.

Chantal Mouffe (1999) argues that communication free of power or authority of some kind is impossible, and that conflicting interests can be productive in public deliberation if brought into the light. Those involved in deliberation, Mouffe writes, should acknowledge the inevitable power issues present, and that the interests of the groups or viewpoints involved cannot necessarily be aligned. 'Hence, the importance of distinguishing between two types of political relations: one of antagonism between enemies, and one of agonism between adversaries. We could say that the aim of democratic politics is to transform an 'antagonism' into an 'agonism'' (Mouffe, 1999: 755, emphasis in original). That agonism, according to Mouffe, can and should be channeled toward democratic ends. Shiv Ganesh and Heather Zoller (2012) argue that an agonistic approach to dialogue, one that sees conflict as inevitable and necessary, is best suited to the creation of social change.

Indeed, social change needs what Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud (2009) call an ‘uncivil tongue,’ as calls for ‘civility’ have often been used as a tool to silence unwelcome voices and keep the oppressed in their places. Voices that are positioned outside the dominant structure are sometimes labeled ‘uncivil’ even if their goals are democratic (Sullivan, Spicer and Böhm, 2011).

Returning to online newspaper forums, it seems that newspaper companies tend to hold disdain for disrespect in commenting, viewing it as inappropriate and unproductive, while the commenters themselves hold a different view of such discourse. Bill Reader (2012) found that journalists who work for the news organisations attached to online discussion forums envision that such spaces should be an ideal of polite, rational debate, but they feel that respectful, meaningful public discourse has been overrun by vile, anonymous trolls. The commenters themselves, Reader found, had a different interpretation. He found that participants in forums often felt that anonymity and lack of censorship were essential to maintaining a vibrant space for free expression, and that the disrespect and rancorous tone of much of the discussion was far from an actionable problem, and in fact could be necessary at times to express viewpoints that were missing from public discourse.

Considering that accusations of incivility in commenting have been used to denounce and censor online forums, I explored what was taking place on an online discussion board before the forum closed due to claims of incivility. Was it disrespectful? Was debate over public issues taking place? How did the editor frame the shut-down, and how did commenters react to the closure?

## Method

The *Greeley Tribune* is a small, community newspaper in northern Colorado in the United States. Owned by Swift Communications, Inc., it reports mainly on local topics, but also covers national and international issues. Its comments forum was anonymous (with registration required) and user-moderated, in which registered users could rate comments with a thumbs-up or a thumbs-down, as well as flag them for review and possible removal by newspaper staff. The commenting system was discontinued on 30 April 2011, shortly after the *Tribune*’s editor, Randy Bangert, published an announcement that commenting would cease due to the incivility of the posts it contained (Bangert, 2011). In order to examine the content of the forum that may have led to its shut-down, the last week of comments were analysed using textual analysis.

Analysis was informed by Papacharissi's (2004) distinction between impoliteness and incivility. Though often conflated, and 'incivility' is often used to mean 'impoliteness,' this analysis considered the two to be separate. Comments were coded as disrespectful or impolite if they were patronising, condescending, hostile, or rude; made an attack or threat; or contained insults, vitriol, or profanity. Such impoliteness could have been directed at another user on the comments board or at any person or group. Respect or politeness, on the other hand, was characterised by courtesy, respect for others, or consideration.

Comments were also coded for their political substance. Substance was defined by its potential contribution to social discourse. A comment was considered 'substantive' if the author was making some kind of political (in a broad sense, not limited to electoral politics), social, or cultural point. The quality of the argument was not a factor when determining substance. Whether a comment was on-topic was not a consideration, nor was ideological orientation, style, or factual accuracy.

Textual analysis was also used to analyse the *Tribune's* announcement of the shut-down in order to uncover its stated motivation, as well as the reaction of some participants in the forum, as 19 comments reacting to the announcement were posted before the system was shut down. The framing of the closure by the *Tribune* was compared to its framing by the forum's users to determine if the characterisations of the move were similar or different.

## The last week of comments

The two biggest debates in the last week of commenting on the *Tribune's* forum (from 24 April to 30 April 2011) discussed the issues of whether religion should be used as the basis for laws and the authenticity of U.S. President Obama's birth certificate. The comments often demonstrated overt disrespect, both toward other commenters and toward public figures and groups, but the commenters were furthering what Benhabib (2002) and Mansbridge (2012) cited as one of the purposes of public discussion: to decide what does and does not belong in the public debate.

One of the biggest debates during the last week of commenting at the *Tribune* was in response to an article titled, 'Crime of adultery may be repealed in Colorado,' published on 26 April 2011. This debate eventually devolved into vicious attacks on the religious by the non-religious and vice versa, but first, many commenters expressed the view that religion

should have no place in law-making. For example, one commenter replied, 'Just another law with it's [sic] roots in the Bible that has absolutely no business being administered by our Government.' Another user commented, 'I'm glad they are trying to repeal such idiotic statutes. These are religion based crimes and have no place in the laws of the State or the federal government.' The discussion became more and more heated, as insults began to appear in the comments: 'Even the mightiest evangelical hypocrite has to ask themselves if either of these two laws would ever hold up to the scrutiny of our Supreme Court. As right leaning as it is, that answer would still be no.' The tone became more and more elevated as the discussion continued and multiple exclamation marks and all capital letters were used to emphasise points:

*you can't legislate morality....period! this includes, substance abuse, same sex marriage, prostitution, gambling, and many others. so the if we only had a brain the DEA, ATF, and Vice Squads all over the country would be a fraction of the current spend and we could turn most of these moral indiscretions into tax revenue. Because after all folks in America there is only one real GOD - MONEY...*

Commenters eventually moved on from debating the appropriate place of religion in law and began calling each other 'sinners' and 'scripture-slingers,' but before the conversation devolved into mere attacks, it consisted of a substantive discussion of the social function and rationale for laws.

The other *Tribune* article that sparked a great deal of debate in the last week of commenting was an article published on 27 April titled, 'White House releases Obama birth certificate.' Despite the frequent attacks on other commenters, U.S. President Obama, and Donald Trump, among others, the debate over the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate amounted to much more than a he-said-she-said string of insults.

Though some commenters discounted this new evidence of Obama's U.S. citizenship ('Obama was adopted by an Indonesian man and had to have Indonesian citizenship himself to attend his Muslim school in Indonesia. Could Obama, in Indonesia, have dual citizenship? Somebody has to sort this out. '), most of the commenters responded to this article with an expression of relief that the distracting debate over Obama's citizenship was over, including some attacks directed at those who ever believed Obama's birth certificate was fake, as well as attacks on television personality Donald Trump, who was quoted in the article, and who was partly responsible for keeping suspicion of the authenticity of Obama's citizenship alive, for example: 'Trump needs to shut his pie hole. I would never vote for this arrogant jerk!!'

Some of the comments amounted to attacks on other commenters without any substantive discussion of the issue. For example, 'Libhole....your leftist BS Facts HAVE NO CREDIBILTY WITH ME! How many times do i got to tell you...ya bone head.' This comment attacks a previous commenter with whom he or she disagrees, calling him or her a 'bone head' who offers 'leftist BS facts.' In addition to insults, this comment contains the use of all capital letters in order to provide emphasis and the appearance of yelling. In another comment, a commenter attacks two previous commenters with insults and imagery: 'Criminy, roadkingclassic - your posts should come with creepy organ music, apt accompaniment to the insane self-applauding cackling you like to include in your meaningless rants.....' Attacks and elevated language are characteristic of much of the discussion on the forum, and do not provide the appearance of rational, calm discussion.

This discussion, however, similar to the religion debate, provides substantive political debate in addition to an inflammatory tone and attacks. Some accused those questioning the authenticity of Obama's birth certificate of racism:

*Why can't the witch hunters just come out of the closet and admit they can't stand the fact that a black man named Obama is the president. To them it's like finding out their Daughter is dating a Mexican!! Racism is interesting if you look at where is comes from. It's a learned self protection mechanism - If we reject anything different via a warped perception of hate and fear, then we will be protected from outside harm. It's no different than your parents trying to convince you that you would get hairy palms or go blind if you masturbate! It's boogy man BS and it's sad so many Americans still have this mental illness.*

This commenter is arguing that not only does the birth certificate issue have no place in public discussion, but that its origins are in 'hate and fear.' The fact that this is even an issue, this commenter claims, is because of underlying racism among the U.S. public. Others expressed similar sentiments:

*I'm a conservative registered republican relaxed 'grey matter' - so what's your point again? that the presidents policies have something to do with his birth certificate? you say you don't like his policy which is fine, it's a democratic country, but we all know it's about a black man named Obama being president that drives you people crazy. I don't agree with many of his policies, but I respect him as a human being and especially as our president! the birther nuts should be ashamed - and the Donald???? I would vote for Donald Duck before that bigot.*

This commenter combines accusations of racism against those who advance the ‘birther’ controversy with attacks on Donald Trump, as well as the use of multiple punctuation marks, which adds to the elevated tone of the post.

Other commenters express suspicion that the birther controversy served as a distraction from more important political issues, as in the following comment: ‘Tou [sic] are right, SP. Obama was better off not releasing it. It kept small minds off of the important stuff.’ Others questioned the timing of Obama’s release of his long-form birth certificate, accusing Obama of using the birther controversy as a distraction from other, more important political issues:

*So why release it now? To distract from Syria’s appointment to the UN Council on Civil Rights? Maybe to gloss over Bernanke’s presser later today? Maybe to take people’s minds off the rapidly rising costs of food and gas? Or perhaps the most likely, to make The Donald look stupid (not that he needs much help)? If it was the latter, I’m afraid Obama only encouraged Trump to make further demands.*

This comment ties what many believed to be a frivolous matter to larger political issues, arguing that the controversy served to purposely distract the U.S. public from other, more substantive concerns. Other comments discussed above linked the birth certificate controversy to possible discomfort with a black President, pointing to wider issues of racism in the U.S. Hence, though discussion of a seemingly frivolous debate about Obama’s citizenship, commenters were making substantive points about politics and racism. Many commenters were expressing a feeling that this issue had no place in public discussion, while others took the argument further and suspected that the fact that it was occupying so much attention pointed to deeper problems with the U.S. public.

## The paper’s justification for the closure

In his announcement of the closing of the comments section, *Tribune* editor Randy Bangert decried the ‘ugliness and vile name-calling’ the anonymous forum contained (Bangert, 2011). He stated that the purpose of providing an online forum for reader comments was to foster engagement in the news, ‘but is it really the kind of engagement we want?’ Bangert laments the poor quality of web discussion, comparing it to the content of the *Tribune*’s news content: ‘We have standards in print - one of which is civility, and another of which

is identification of the person making the comment.' It is hard to argue against civility (by which Bangert seems to mean 'politeness'), as it is hard to argue in favour of 'ugliness and vile name-calling,' but as the above analysis of the *Tribune's* online comments noted, there was much more substance contained in the forum than name-calling and attacks. Hence, when Bangert states that, 'There's been a debate in the newspaper industry for quite some time about whether it makes sense to allow anonymous reader comments on our websites,' it leads to the question, makes sense to whom? To the public? Or to the newspaper?

In his announcement, Bangert predicts that some users will not react well to the closure of the commenting system:

*Before our web readers form a 12-step support group and plot how to fire-bomb the editor's office, let me emphasize it's only a test. For at least a few weeks, we're going to monitor the reaction from our web readers, as well as the impact on our web traffic.*

Bangert predicts how the users will handle this 'test' (comments on the *Tribune* have since been reactivated, but they are not public, and limited to those with subscriptions to the newspaper). He suspects commenters will react with both anger and grief at the loss of the ability to comment. The *Tribune* knew their forum was important to at least some users.

## How the commenters reacted to the shut-down

Indeed, we see Bangert's prediction of users' reactions reflected in the 19 comments that were posted in response to the announcement and before comments were shut down. Some commenters decried the shut-down as censorship ('America was a great thing back in the days of free speech. So long good friends.'), while others suggested that people needed to be less sensitive ('I really LOVED what everybody had to post- ah c'mon, are most people really THAT thin skinned besides the Tribune PC police? I think this 'censorship' will bite you in the butt!'). Many commenters said they would miss their discussions ('So long, gang, it's been fun...').

One commenter expressed the opinion that not only was this decision a misguided one on the part of the *Tribune*, but also suggested that the strategy was motivated by financial concerns:

*Web based advertising revenue is driven by unique visitors and page views. I can think of a few struggling print newspapers who would probably be envious to have the number web hits the online Tribune generates in just one day, and yes the comment section is probably driving a lot of this traffic.*

*Since most print newspapers will eventually be forced online anyway, regardless of how many get thrown in our driveways to drive up circulation numbers, driving away online readers certainly won't help readership in the long run*

*The Denver Post, who's [sic] online readership seems quite healthy, allows comments and from what I can see is pretty much self censored.*

*Eliminating online commentary supposedly so readers won't be subjected to the same vitriol found in literally every corner of internet media seems convenient for those who only prefer to cling to the dead and dying print media. Probably not a good thing if you're a newspaper trying to survive anyway it can.*

*It's been fun, see 'ya...*

This commenter displays a rather sophisticated understanding of the economics and current state of the news industry. He or she questions whether the *Tribune's* stated concern over impoliteness makes sense not only for its contribution to public discourse, but for the finances and ultimate longevity of the newspaper. After all, this vitriol objected to by the *Tribune's* editors and management is 'found in literally every corner of internet media.' Depriving the public of a discussion space they find valuable, this commenter predicts, will only hurt the *Tribune* in the long run.

The very last comment to make it through before the shut-down is, fittingly, an insult:

*'You're a complete coward, Randy Bangert, and your newspaper is crap.'*

## Discussion

During the last week of commenting on the *Tribune's* comments board before it was shut down, two heated debates ignited; one over whether religious morality has a place in lawmaking, and the other over the authenticity of President Obama's birth certificate and citizenship. Both debates involved many comments that were impolite and used elevated, hostile language and personal attacks on other commenters and on people and groups outside of the board, but both discussions also contained a great deal of substantive, political discussion and debate. One deliberative function that was being acted out in both of these debates was what Benhabib (2002) and Mansbridge (2012) have described as one essential to informal public deliberation, namely the debate over what should and should not count as 'public,' and so which issues belong in public debate. In the debate over religion, forum participants debated whether religion should be a rationale for deciding what is and is not criminal behaviour, or if religious morality should be considered a personal and private matter. In the argument over Obama's birth certificate, not only were commenters debating whether the issue should be one taken up by the public, but they were also pointing to political and social reasons as potential explanations for why it was an issue of public concern in the first place.

Does the rancorous tone of these debates discount them as unproductive? When looking at insults on others and inflammatory language, many of these comments might count as trolling, if trolling is defined by posts that are inflammatory. But the attacks serve other functions, notably, as a vehicle through which to make substantive political points. Focusing on the tone and character of attacks used in the discussions risks losing sight of the deliberative role such debates perform. The commenters were contesting political and cultural issues, exchanging opinions and information in order to figure out what should be considered public issues. As Kelly, Fisher and Smith (2009) argue, trolling and substantive arguments appear the same if looking at their inflammatory tone.

But to Swift Communications, Inc., owner of the *Tribune*, what was happening in their online space was unacceptable. Whether motivated by the desire to distance itself and its reputation from such rancorous debate or by a desire to avoid offending its advertisers, or both, it shuttered the forum, depriving the public of one outlet for deliberation. I have characterised this move on the part of the *Tribune* as an expression of symbolic violence, an attempt to organise cultural capital along lines that benefit those in power. It may be unrealistic to expect corporate-owned websites to be spaces for free public expression, as their ultimate interests lie in profit and not in a healthy, deliberative democracy. During the U.S. culture wars, 'market forces' were used as a tool of censorship, arguing that market forces should be allowed to regulate art (McGuigan, 2003). We may be seeing a similar

trend in the corporate enforcement of 'civility' in online spaces, one in which both market forces and calls for civility are being used to justify both censoring and removing sites of public debate. 'The right of citizens to express outrage and seek change if they feel wrongs are being committed is central to any understanding of democracy' (Tracy, 2010: 201). And yet, one site of such outrage, online discussion forums, are being vilified for the outrage they contain.

Unproductive trolling does exist, of course, but drawing boundaries between trolling and reasonable hostility can be problematic. After all, who gets to decide what is and is not productive to debate? Are these distinctions that we feel comfortable making? Are these distinctions that we want someone else to make, especially when they may have financial motives at heart?

One thing to note is that the findings of this study indicate that participants on the *Tribune's* comments board discussed the announced forum closure in terms of its possible financial motives on the part of the corporation that owned the newspaper. In Dean's (2009) discussion of communicative capitalism, the rhetoric of the market and the rhetoric of participation are wedded. Dean wrote that in our condition of communicative capitalism, the inclusion, participation, and contribution enabled by communication technologies is highlighted in a way that obscures the capitalist nature of the system. This study did not find evidence of the latter half of that phenomenon. Forum participants emphasised their right to participate and contribute in public debate, but stated that the profit motive of Swift Communications was hindering that right rather than aiding it.

## Conclusion

When it comes to the democratic potential of the internet, glittering, utopian hopes have not worn off. Internet technology does have potential to connect people in ways never before possible and allow them to deliberate in new ways and in new spaces. But possibilities are not realities, and a nuanced approach to online communication may be necessary, one that takes the type of space into account when we imagine what is possible within it. Maybe it is not realistic to expect the commenting spaces associated with corporate media companies to be venues for free public expression, and perhaps we should direct those hopes toward spaces that are less likely to be compromised by outside interests.

## Biographical note

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-163 Olympic Trolls: Mainstream Memes and Digital Discord?

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### **Abstract:**

While the mainstream press have often used the accusation of trolling to cover almost any form of online abuse, the term itself has a long and changing history. In scholarly work, trolling has morphed from a description of newsgroup and discussion board commentators who appeared genuine but were actually just provocateurs, through to contemporary analyses which focus on the anonymity, memes and abusive comments most clearly represented by users of the iconic online image board 4chan, and, at times, the related Anonymous political movement. To explore more mainstream examples of what might appear to be trolling at first glance, this paper analyses the Channel Nine Fail (Ch9Fail) Facebook group which formed in protest against the quality of the publicly broadcast Olympic Games coverage in Australia in 2012. While utilising many tools of trolling, such as the use of memes, deliberately provocative humour and language, targeting celebrities, and attempting to provoke media attention, this paper argues that the Ch9Fail group actually demonstrates the increasingly mainstream nature of many online communication strategies once associated with trolls. The mainstreaming of certain activities which have typified trolling highlight these techniques as part of a more banal everyday digital discourse; despite mainstream media presenting trolls as extremist provocateurs, many who partake in trolling techniques are simply ordinary citizens expressing themselves online.

## Introduction

During 2012, the Australian and international press frequently deployed the accusation of ‘trolling’ as part of a wider moral panic about supposedly anonymous online abuse facilitated by social media. The term trolling has been applied to a range of activities, many of which are simultaneously labelled abuse, (cyber)bullying and general mischief. Despite clear early work on trolls in Usenet discussion groups (Donath, 1999), there is surprisingly little detailed research on trolling, and what exists is largely focused on the provocative and ephemeral internet image board 4chan, and the related Anonymous movement (Phillips, 2011b; 2012a). As 4chan has been a hotbed for the creation of online memes—jokes and images, often combining text and visuals, following a particular style or grammar, which are rapidly spread across the internet—memes and trolling have often been tied together. However, this paper focuses on a more banal example of memes as deployed by a Facebook group dubbed ‘Ch9Fail’ which gathered commentators angry with the coverage of the 2012 London Olympic Games by the Australian free-to-air broadcaster, Channel Nine. This article seeks to examine whether a protest group using memes is necessarily engaging in acts of trolling. To situate this examination, I will begin with a brief overview of existing research on trolling, reviewing the way trolls and memes have been tied together, along with the importance of context, especially the role of anonymity. With that framework in mind, I will take a cursory look at how the accusation of trolling was used in Australian press in 2012. In doing so, inherent contradictions emerge, especially when the most prominent examples of people ostensibly on the receiving end of trolling turn out, themselves, to have been ‘trolls’ at some point (at least going on the broad implicit definition of trolling used in the press). Shifting contexts somewhat, the paper will look at the Olympic Games, especially the tensions that emerge when a global sporting event which is touted as the pinnacle of human goodwill and achievement is meticulously sliced into national broadcasting rights and sold to the highest bidder. The 2012 Olympics were notable, too, for the role of memes and social media commentary during the Games, with the most widespread examples being the hashtag #NBCFail and the ‘McKayla is Not Impressed’ meme. Finally, building on these overlapping contexts, I will examine the Ch9Fail group, which appears to deploy the techniques of trolling – memes and provocative images of celebrities to engage the media and provoke a response – but ends up having decidedly banal aims and outcomes. The conclusions reached will argue that more precise notions of trolls and trolling are desperately needed, and when looked at closely, online abuse on one hand, and the use of memes on the other hand, can both exist without any reference or relevance to trolling whatsoever.

## Trolling: From Usenet to 4Chan

While trolling is widely associated with anonymity online both in the press and in scholarly work, this was not always the case. Early work focusing on Usenet discussion groups (Donath, 1999) and online discussion forums (for example Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler, and Barab, 2002), found that provocateurs in those groups tended to deploy persistent identities, albeit often pseudonyms (in online spaces where a username rarely resembled a full legal name), in an attempt to appear a legitimate and sincere member of the group in question. The key characteristic of trolling in these early studies was that the individual frequently tried to provoke arguments for the sake of argument, rather than having a consistent point or desiring anything other than the continuation of disagreement, often disrupting the regular discussion patterns of a group or community. Donath's (1999: 45) work also points out that the presence or history of trolling in a group can cause a higher level of mistrust amongst group members, and lead to alienating interrogations of new group members who, for whatever reason, might be suspected of trolling. Trolling in discussion forums and online communities is often described as harmful to online communities and groups since they increase levels of distrust and distract from the purpose of the online community (Herring et al., 2002; Ortega, Troyano, Cruz, Vallejo, and Enríquez, 2012; Shachaf and Hara, 2010).

The correlation of trolling and anonymity has emerged in the last decade, particularly due to the interest from the media, and scholars, in the participants in the 4chan imageboard – a discussion forum based around image sharing. Significantly, while it is possible to create a username, almost all posts on 4chan—and certainly on the infamous '/b/' or random board—are anonymous, with no listed username, no persistent identities and thus a very different sense of community, if that is even an applicable term. As 4chan has no official archive, posts tend to remain on the boards only briefly, with even the most popular threads disappearing within hours. Whereas most 'anonymous' sites on the web are really deploying pseudonymity - handles but not real names - 4chan is anonymous in the truer sense of the word (Knuttila, 2011). As many web services, including prominent social networking service Facebook, mandate the use of real names on the web, anonymity has been increasingly pathologised. Reviewing a range of sources, Hardaker (2010: 224), for example, summarised this trend as arguing that 'anonymity can also foster a sense of impunity, loss of self-awareness, and a likelihood of acting upon normally inhibited impulses, an effect known as deindividuation'. Since 4chan holds up anonymity as a core part of its identity, with 4chan founder Christopher Poole publicly championing the need for anonymous spaces online (Poole, 2010), trolling and anonymity have been frequently tied together.

The other major reason 4chan is well known is for spawning the Anonymous movement, which initially drew media attention for physically protesting against the Church of Scientology in 2008, with members wearing the distinctive Guy Fawkes masks to hide their identities. These protests by Anonymous were seemingly the first materialisation of troll culture in the offline world. Since then Anonymous has been associated with protests and actions in support of Wikileaks and in assisting with protests in the Middle East. Of course, as Coleman (2011) notes, due to their mode of operation, there is no way of guaranteeing, or even knowing, if the same people are involved in all protests, or different people are involved in each protest or action. Nevertheless, even if the active protesters of Anonymous are not the same anonymous individuals on 4chan at that very moment, both groups revere their unidentified status and encourage the uncertainty it entails.

While the protestors and activists of Anonymous may have more explicitly political aims, the vast majority of self-styled trolls on 4chan prefer to operate online only. 4chan participants often describe their rationale as being in it for the 'lulz' (Schwartz, 2008); lulz being a variation of the abbreviation for Laugh Out Loud (LOL), which has more ominous overtones that Phillips (2011a: 69) characterises as 'a particular kind of aggressive, morally ambiguous laughter indicating the infliction of emotional distress'. Coleman (2012) argues that some trolls may be seen, and may wish to be seen, in light of tricksters of mythology, from Loki to the North American Coyote, whose bile and mischief nevertheless disrupts for a reason. Indeed, Whitney Phillips's (2011a, 2011b) research into attacks on web memorial pages has, for example, identified a particular code of practice underlying this form of trolling. While media reports tend to emphasise the distress memorial page vandalism causes for the family of the deceased, Phillips (2011b) argues that the main targets are not legitimate mourners, but 'grief tourists' who did not know the victim but nevertheless profess their sense of loss online. Trolls are characterised as seeing, for example, the sentiment 'I didn't know you but I'm very sorry you're dead' as a 'a flashing neon declaration of trollability'. Thus, while their methods are highly questionable, trolls may be attacking the inauthenticity and self-centred exhibitionism of grief tourists rather than actual relatives and mourners. Moreover, when mainstream media reports run stories decrying the actions of trolls, they both amplify the pleasures of trolling, vastly widening the awareness of the trolling, and thus encourage the very actions they ostensibly denounce. Indeed, Phillips (2011b, 2012a) argues that trolls and the media form a symbiotic circle, with trolls being encouraged and amplified by the coverage, and the resulting activities of trolls fuelling further sensationalist stories. For trolls, media attention paid to their activities simply makes the lulz louder and sweeter.

One of the most recognisable stylistic elements of 4chan and trolling is the creation and perpetuation of internet memes of various forms, including image macros: the same or similar images with different text, following stylistic particular rules. Two of the longest

running memes, LOLcats (cat pictures with specifically stylised text) and Rickrolling (fooling someone into clicking a link that unexpectedly takes them to Rick Astley's 1980s hit 'Never Gonna Give You Up'), originated with 4chan. Similar to the term viral media, memes are often described as 'self-replicating', occluding the human agency driving their distribution and widespread remixing (Jenkins, Ford, and Green, 2013: 18–21). However, at least in the context of 4chan, the agency behind memes tends to be more evident, akin to 'microcosmic nests of evolving content' (Phillips, 2012b). In the ephemeral imageboard structure of 4chan, it is not individual posts which persist, but rather shared styles, images and ideas; these will persist 'if enough users engage a particular piece of content, either through reposting or remixing, it will enter the subculture lexicon. It will become, in other words, a meme' (Phillips, 2012a: 9). By successfully deploying and remixing memes, trolls are able to assert their 'cultural literacy and to bolster the scaffolding on which trolling as a whole is based' even if, due to the anonymous nature of 4chan and trolling, no specific individual is identified in the process (Phillips, 2012b). Thus, along with anonymity and seeking lulz, memes are a core part of 4chan and trolling culture. However, while researchers have clearly identified specific attributes of trolling, the use of the term by the mainstream media is far from precise. **Trolling (in the) Australian Press**

Trolling became a national issue in the Australian press after television personality Charlotte Dawson ended up in a psychiatric hospital battling depression apparently fuelled by abusive exchanges with twitter users (editor: see Whelan in this issue). While many commentators questioned Dawson's decision to retweet abusive tweets, citing the mantra 'don't feed the trolls', her tale was nevertheless leveraged in various ways (Moses and Hornery, 2012). One Australian newspaper attempted to utilise the media panic with a 'Stop the Trolls' campaign and online petition, but despite several front page stories the campaign failed to gain much traction ('Twitter must be held accountable,' 2012). Weeks later, after Dawson's recovery and interviews about that recovery, she herself was accused of making abusive comments during a red carpet event and deleted her twitter account, protesting that there were, importantly, still lines she never crossed (Knox, 2012).

Also in 2012, when Australian Rugby League star Robbie Farah received tweets from a pseudonymous account defiling the memory of his recently deceased mother, he told the press social media laws needed to be stronger to prosecute abusers (Jackson, Patty, and Gardiner, 2012). However, just days later, Farah had to apologise himself after a reporter found a past tweet from Farah suggesting Australia's Prime Minister should be sent a noose for her fiftieth birthday (Paine and Farr, 2012). Indeed, following the implicit definition of trolling extrapolated from these examples—deliberate online provocation for the sake of getting any reaction at all—then, as Jason Wilson (2009) argues, a number of Australian newspaper columnists might be considered 'trollumnists' themselves, taking provocative rather than meaningful or consistent positions. With trolling basically meaning any online

abuse, the line between those being trolled, and the trolls themselves, seems blurred at best.

These 2012 examples are by no means the only times the term trolling has appeared in the Australian press. In 2010, for example, the term was used to describe people posting provocative posts and vandalism on memorial pages for deceased Australia teenagers (Dickinson, 2010; Moses, 2010). While the attacks on memorial pages may align with broader trolling aimed at supposedly inauthentic grief tourists as mentioned above, the wider use of 'troll' in the Australian media has diluted the term to such an extent that any online abuse or bullying seems to be trolling. Notably, when an episode of the SBS investigative discussion television series *Insight* tackled the question of trolling, the high-profile self-identified trolls who were interviewed distanced themselves from pointless online abuse, arguing that there was always an aim to trolling; trolling and bullying for the sake of bullying were described as quite different things ('Trolls,' 2012). However, the discussion never reached any depth, because representatives of the Australian press continued to argue that any online abuse was trolling, leaving the program with epistemological questions about what constitutes a troll rather than reaching any meaningful conclusions. Thus, despite fairly clear criteria emerging from recent scholarly work in the realm of trolling, the imprecision with which the term, or accusation, is used in the Australian press means that almost anyone online who has ever used a harsh word or criticised someone might be labelled a troll. The point here is not to lament a binary division in the meaning of the term troll between academic and press uses, or even to sketch a continuum of activities that are considered trolling in different contexts, but to argue that if trolling is situated as a practice to be addressed, then the term at least needs to be better explicated in each instance in order to ensure arguments and discussions of trolling are actually talking about the same thing.

## Olympic Contradictions

The modern Olympic Games may have begun as a global sporting goodwill event intended to celebrate the human spirit, but the current incarnation is inevitably situated within the complexities and contradictions of media saturation and celebrity culture. During the Opening Ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics many historical events were celebrated, with one of the most contemporary being the invention of the World Wide Web. At one point, Web inventor Tim Berners-Lee appeared and gigantic letters appeared across the stadium stating 'This Is For Everyone'. Yet this celebration of the global reach and democratic ideals behind the Web sits uneasily alongside the realities of dissecting, marketing and distributing Olympic coverage and broadcast rights. Far from universal

access, many countries had televised and online coverage that was technically restricted – geo-blocked – so it was only available in that specific country. Far from available ‘for everyone’, access to coverage of the Olympic Games was piecemeal and proprietary, with online access in many countries only via paid apps or bundled with cable subscriptions. This failure to balance the message and medium is exactly the sort of inauthenticity which might be considered troll bait, attracting the attention of trolls whose self-styled mission may well be to make visible and comical such glaring contradictions.

One of the most prominent examples of a national rights-holder making questionable choices was the decision by NBC in the US to delay most big Olympic events until local television primetime, despite between five and eight hours time difference between London and the US. While time-shifting has been a common practice for many years, in an era where social media tools such as Twitter and Facebook mean that the results of events are often being discussed mere seconds after they finish, the potential for spoilers (knowing the results before being able to see the events) is enormous. Of the many responses lamenting NBC’s Olympic broadcasting decisions, one of the most well-known and humorous was the Twitter parody account NBC Delayed (@NBCDelayed). Simply put, the NBC Delayed account made increasingly farcical tweets announcing breaking news that was more and more anachronistic. An early promotional tweet suggested ‘Tune in tonight for the Olympic Opening Ceremonies in Beijing #NBCFail’ referring not to the current games, but the previous Olympics in China four years earlier. Tweets got increasingly amusing, including the reference to 2007 ‘BREAKING: John McCain picks Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as VP running mate’; 1969 ‘FLASH: Neil Armstrong walks on moon, ‘a giant leap for mankind’’; and even earlier. The account amassed over 25,000 followers in only a few days and received considerable media attention with the technology blog TechCrunch, for example, declaring ‘Satirical Twitter Account @NBCDelayed Is The Best Part Of NBC’s Olympics Coverage’ (Gallagher, 2012).

While parody Twitter accounts might not immediately be associated with trolls, memes often are, and the 2012 Olympics provoked a range of different memes. The Opening Ceremony proved a fertile source for memes, with favourites including images remixing both the pre-filmed scene with Daniel Craig’s James Bond skydiving into the arena with Queen Elizabeth II, and the antics of Rowan Atkinson’s Mr Bean during a performance of Chariots of Fire (Rintel, 2012). While these memes were largely affectionate, amplifying and enjoying the Opening Ceremony, a somewhat more critical meme featured US Olympic gymnast McKayla Maroney. After Maroney fumbled a final jump, misjudging her landing, she won the silver rather than expected gold medal. On the podium she was seen scowling at the gold medal winner and this seemingly petulant and unsporting response led to the ‘McKayla Maroney is not impressed’ meme which features the scowling image of Maroney photoshopped into any number of historical or significant events. A gallery of the most humorous of these memes resides on the bespoke Tumblr account <http://>

mckaylaisnotimpressed.tumblr.com (see Figures 1 and 2). Patrick Davison suggests a meme can be defined as ‘a piece of culture, typically a joke, which gains influence through online transmission. While not all internet memes are jokes. ... what makes Internet memes unique [is] the speed of their transmission and fidelity of their form’ (Davison, 2012: 122). The global audience for the Olympics meant that a vast number of people were in a position to get the joke (having watched the medal ceremony), and thus the Maroney meme spread rapidly online, not just on social media but also reported in the mainstream press (Cohen, 2012).



Figures 1 (above) and 2 (below). McKayla is Not Impressed with the Creation of Adam; or NBC's Olympic coverage.  
Source: <http://mckaylaisnotimpressed.tumblr.com>



Both the NBC Delayed Twitter parody account and the McKayla meme described above are to some extent critical of the distribution and sporting ethics of the Olympics, but also reinforce the ideal of the Olympic Games. NBC Delayed is really a plea to watch the Olympic events live, while the McKayla meme's critique of unsporting behaviour largely upholds the ideal of sporting goodwill rhetorically driving the Olympic Games. Despite the widespread popularity of @NBCDelayed it was nevertheless the case that 'the 2012 games were still the most watched TV event in US history' (Sambrook, 2012: 3). Similarly, McKayla Maroney's long-term reputation does not seem to have been negatively impacted by the meme; if anything, she's better known and better loved to the extent that when her team visited the Whitehouse, US President Obama actually posed with Maroney as both of them made her infamous scowl (Lavender, 2012). Rather than acts of trolling, these examples show mainstream memes and related humour as a more normalised part of the cultural conversation around events like the Olympics, aware of the contradictions at play, but not so much attacking as playing with them. The following section will examine a more coherent group that deployed memes during the Olympic Games to try protest the quality of the Olympic coverage in Australia.

## Ch9Fail: Olympic Trolls?

The 'Channel 9 Olympics Coverage sucks' Facebook page, or Ch9Fail for short ([www.facebook.com/ch9fail](http://www.facebook.com/ch9fail)), was set up during the first full day of Olympic competition. It became a hotspot for unhappy Australian viewers frustrated by the quality of televised coverage provided by the free-to-air broadcaster Channel Nine. In Australia, the rights were successfully co-bid for by free-to-air Channel Nine, whose online delivery included recaps, while pay television vendor Foxtel provided a multi-channel subscription service, with a bundled iPad-only app providing real-time online viewing. Most Australians rely on free-to-air, with only 30% having subscription TV. Thus, when Channel Nine's Olympic coverage prove to be riddled with national myopia, excessive advertising and promo placement, time-shifting events despite claiming to be 'live', and extensive focus on only a few types of sports, complaints filled social media. The 'Channel 9 Olympics Coverage sucks' page quickly attracted an audience, peaking at 28,000 'likes' during the Games themselves. The page's members used derisive language, and employed many memes in their pillaring of Nine's coverage and commentary team. While these characteristics might mark the Ch9Fail page as a locus of trolling, a more detailed look at the way the page was deployed marks certain similarities but also key differences with the features of trolling as identified in relation to 4chan. [Fig3]Figure 3. Channel Nine Summary Meme. Source: [www.facebook.com/ch9fail](http://www.facebook.com/ch9fail)

The single most popular image posted on the Ch9Fail page was a meme satirically summarising Nine's Olympic coverage. Quite a complex image, it features 22 panels, each showing the timestamp, with additional captions on 10 of those images. The repeated pattern shows host Karl Stefanovic making a banal comment, cutting to Olympic swimming events with Australian competitors, cutting away to a different sport for 30 seconds, and then a series of advertisements and promotional shorts for Channel Nine shows premiering after the Games. The final panel shows Stefanovic holding his Gold Logie award (an Australian audience-voted television award), with the text 'Bam Bitches, My Wife Has a Hot Arse'. This image received 3364 'likes', 450 shares (indicating the image was re-posted to the sharer's own Facebook profile or timeline) and 211 comments. Certainly, some of the comments on this post are edging into illegal (or not clearly legal, at least) territory and some are clearly abusive toward Stefanovic and his co-hosts. Representative comments agreed with the tone of the image ('the worst olympics coverage of all time'); provided examples of poor coverage ('Tonight they crossed from a rowing final - with Aussies in it and medals on the line - to a swimming heat! I am not joking'); suggested ways to access online coverage outside Australia ('BBC for me using VPN. Get to view any sport you want'); made fun of viewers only accessing free-to-air broadcasts ('Lol at all the poor people who don't have Fox and its 8 olympic channels'); or complained about the hosts ('I have an uncontrollable urge to punch Stefanovic in the face'). For the Australian press, these features would also certainly make the Ch9Fail page commentators trolls — as deliberate online provocation for the sake of getting a reaction — and this point would certainly be reinforced by other images and memes deployed on the page.



Figures 4,5 (Above) and 6 (Over). Memes about Channel Nine's swimming focus. Source: [www.facebook.com/ch9fail](http://www.facebook.com/ch9fail)



A large number of the images posted on the Ch9Fail page utilised common memes from across the web. Most bore the watermark of meme generator pages, meaning that the users posting these images simply found the appropriate website, chose the background image, entered the text and the meme was produced online, with no Photoshop or image editing needed (unlike the Summary Meme above, which would have required at least some image editing skill to create). The memes complaining about the dominance of Swimming over any other sports included Trollface ('Trollface / Coolface / Problem?,' 2012), Success Kid ('I Hate Sandcastles / Success Kid,' 2012) and Imminent Ned ('Imminent Ned / Brace Yourselves, X is Coming,' 2012) (Figures, 4, 5 and 6 respectively). Each of these combined a simple image and text which followed the grammar or syntax of that particular meme. These

posts received between a few hundred and a thousand 'likes', with proportionally less comments compared to the Summary Meme. While one of these images is a recognisable character from the television series Game of Thrones, the other two only make sense as memes. Indeed, the fact that the Trollface meme can be deployed in such a banal context suggests that even the iconography of trolling, if not the wholesale practice itself, has entered mainstream culture, moving away from the subcultural fringes. Some of the comments did demonstrate that these images were not all familiar, especially the Game of Thrones Imminent Ned meme, but were readily circulated by visitors to the Facebook page. However, despite some of these memes originating from Troll culture, in the Facebook page their usefulness is more like a rallying cry or shared complaint at the online water cooler rather than disruptive abuse. If anything, these memes implicitly championed an idealised notion of the Olympics in terms of goodwill, an ideal not reflected in the partial and partisan coverage offered by the Channel Nine coverage.

Probably the most abusive language and images found on the Ch9Fail page was reserved for host Karl Stefanovic. He was the focus on a number of memes, although the abuse never went beyond the sort of childish name-calling that can be found across thousands of other Facebook pages and online discussion forums. The Facebook page did manage to



Figures 7 (top), 8 (left) and 9 (Right). Memes focused on Karl Stefanovic.  
Source: [www.facebook.com/ch9fail](http://www.facebook.com/ch9fail)

provoke some media attention about their disappointment with Nine's coverage (Kermond, 2012; Murdoch, 2012) although the page itself was embroiled in an ongoing network rivalry, with suggestions that one of the page organisers might work for the Seven television network (Marcus and Nauman, 2012). That rivalry aside, the key difference between this page and 4chan trolls is motivation: the Ch9Fail page does not appear to be in it 'for the lulz'. Most active members of the page had a clear aim: to critique Channel Nine's Olympic coverage, and, for some, to recommend better practices for future events of a

similar nature (evident, for example, in many messages congratulating the ABC for their subsequent coverage of the Paralympic Games). Later in the Games, when Australians succeeded in the athletics, the some posts were straight-forward congratulations; the post 'Sally Pearson delivering another GOLD in the 100m Hurdles. Well done!', for example, received more the a thousand 'likes'. If there are traits of trolls that can be seen as consistent, then the core characteristic has to be an almost pathological resistance to authority (Phillips, 2011a, p. 70). If there was a core to the usually playful criticism of the Ch9Fail page, it was that the members simply wanted broadcasters and others in authority to do their work better. Indeed, the seeming resistance in the Ch9Fail page can be understood using Jodi Dean's (2010, p. 4) notion of 'communicative capitalism' which describes the way seeming critique and reflexivity actually serves to reinforce existing power relationships and the status quo; the Facebook page thus acted as a release valve which allowed members to critique the coverage but at the same time pointed to it, encouraged viewers consumption of it, and required deeper engagement with the coverage if only to further an ultimately ineffective critique.

The question of anonymity is also important since Facebook users certainly use real names (or names that sound real) and there was no evidence that most people posting on the page had set up pseudonyms. As Lee Knuttila argues, this is an important difference:

*Unlike 4chan, Facebook relies on individuals that one knows, or at least those that have been accepted as 'friends'. Facebook's tagline states, 'Facebook helps you connect and share with the people in your life'. This is a key step away from the experience of contingency, as those you interact with are necessarily approved; engaging with a truly anonymous stranger is rendered impossible (Knuttila, 2011).*

Whether they think about it or not, Facebook users write comments, even abusive ones, deploying a recognisable name. Indeed, comment systems on newspaper websites which use and display Facebook identities have been deployed as one way to keep anonymity at bay and encourage commentators to take responsibility by using their 'real' identities (Binns, 2012: 553). That is not to say some of the comments on the Ch9Fail page were not highly abusive, but the fact that this abuse was tied to an identity, and that the comments were made in such a comparatively safe and contained environment, makes the abuse less direct and appear less explicitly threatening. While the Ch9Fail group might have been abusive at times, this does not appear to align with the concept of trolling emerging from existing academic work.

## Conclusions

It is unlikely that any of the 28,000 Facebook users who liked the 'Channel 9 Olympics Coverage sucks' page self-identify as trolls, nor do their actions and traces online meet with scholarly definitions of trolling extrapolated from the activities of 4chan. From the limited examples presented in this article, motivations seem to be one of the core differences between online abuse in general terms and trolling; trolls are in it for the lulz, but many of the groups, movements and individuals deploying some of the tools associated with trolling have more banal and concrete aims. The active participants on the Ch9Fail page utilise memes, abusive language, and courted media attention, but they did so either to vent their frustrations or try to galvanise change. The venting clearly succeeded, but there is no direct evidence that any meaningful change was achieved. Facebook's insistence on real or recognisable names distances participants from the anonymous nature of trolling; this does not mean people using their real names are not abusive, but it does distance them from the cultural specificities that appear to drive people that self-identify as trolls. Many memes might have highly questionable origins, whether starting on trolling boards or elsewhere, but their use and distribution is now decidedly mainstream. Far from abnormal, the rapid distribution and remixing of memes is now a core part of online culture, filling Facebook and Twitter as readily as 4chan (Jenkins et al., 2013). Memes are now a feature of everyday discourse and discord in a digital culture.

For some sections of the popular press in Australia, and elsewhere, the accusations of trolling has the same utility as being called a terrorist or unAustralian; the term attracts attention and readers, but the more it is used, the less precise it becomes. While scholarly work on trolling is at an early stage, distancing hard core trolling from online abuse and bullying will inevitably make our understanding of each area more precise. It is the common nature of abuse and bullying which make them problematic, and the accusation of trolling somehow distances these problems from the everyday. Sensationalist articles pointing to trolls cloud broader issues as to how social media influences and changes bullying or abuse. Deepening our cultural understanding of all of these issues matters, but that depth will only emerge if the term troll stops being a magnet for moral panics and is given the critical and analytical attention it deserves.

## Biographical note

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-164 'Don't be Rude on the Road': Cycle Blogging, Trolling and Lifestyle

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### **Abstract:**

This article examines hostile noise on the UK Guardian's Bike Blog. Like the Internet, the bicycle has been framed as a redemptive technology at the heart of new forms of urbanity and citizenship. The article examines these struggles, concentrating on how accusations of trolling police the boundaries between cycling as a sphere of autonomous play and a more 'ethical' disposition that links cycling to environmental and social responsibility. It argues that a sense of community is established through the embattled relationship with a 'petrolhead' mode of online writing which asserts the pleasures of unrestrained lifestyle-as-fun and contests the claims to good citizenship made by pro-cycle bloggers. The article asks whether cycle blogging is constituted by its games of taste and its defensive response to trolling, or if conjoined strategies of netiquette and on-road etiquette framed in terms of 'responsibility', offer a route to legitimacy.

## Introduction

In her introduction to *Cyclebabble: bloggers on biking* (2011: ix), the British journalist Zoe Williams argues that, whatever cyclists' differences, 'We revel in our differences: Lycra mankini or tweed trousers tucked into your sock? Traffic lights - a suggestion or an order? Racer or hybrid, helmet or commando, freewheel or fixie. Nothing sours the bond'. And yet the *Guardian's* 'Bike Blog', the on-line discussion board from which the selection of posts in *Cyclebabble* is drawn, is partly constituted by precisely such a souring of the bond. Accusations of trolling abound, from both within and outside cycling's various practices and subcultures. In particular, discussion is regularly prefaced or framed—as in the quote above—by a set of negative conventions (such as riding through red lights, the exemption of cycling from 'road tax', or the wearing of 'inappropriate' clothing), which are variously used to condemn all cyclists, to condemn particular sorts of cyclists or to provide a point of departure from which the individual contributor can establish their own virtuous distance. Even if a writer takes issue with such conventions, therefore, the negative consensus around the meanings of cycling serves to generate and police the practice of cycle blogging.

Like the Internet, the bicycle has been figured as a redemptive and global (or at least 'North European') technology, capable of being at the heart of new urbanities and new forms of mobile citizenship. Like the Internet too, the bike is a technology whose meanings are struggled over by different social groupings. Having been largely abandoned as a means of mass transportation in Britain and elsewhere, cycling has instead become associated with a shifting mixture of 'subversive play and utopian futures' (Aldred, 2012: 97), which express the dispositions of particular middle-class fractions. In this article, I deal with these struggles for meaning and the connections that on-line writers make with their off-line identities and embodied cycling activities. By analysing Bike Blog in the light of debates over taste and citizenship, I concentrate on the boundaries drawn, and policed through accusations of trolling, between cycling as a bio-political sphere of 'healthy', autonomous and frequently expensive play and a more 'ethical' disposition that links cycling to environmental and social responsibility. At the same time, a fragile sense of on- and off-line community is established through the embattled relationship with a sometimes imagined and sometimes insistently present 'petrolhead' mode of on-line writing which asserts the pleasures of unrestrained lifestyle-as-fun and contests the tastes and claims to good citizenship made by pro-cycle bloggers. The essay asks whether the field of cycle blogging is constituted by its games of taste and its defensive response to real or assumed trolling, or if 'civilizing processes' of netiquette and on-road etiquette offer a route to a form of 'professionalization' and thereby to legitimacy.

To examine these issues, the article analyses the archive of contributions to the *Guardian's* Bike Blog from its appearance in 15 June 2009 to the end of December 2012. '*Guardian*' is used throughout the article as shorthand for a range of on-line and print media owned by the UK's Guardian Media group: the Monday-to-Saturday *Guardian* newspaper and the Sunday *Observer*; the website [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), which reproduces almost all of the newspaper's news, editorial and comment pieces, together with some original content; and a network of discussion boards which are routinely referred to as 'blogs'. While in the blogosphere more generally, bloggers write blogs, to which other contributors append comments, in the *Guardian's* case any such distinction is blurred, so the discussion constitutes the 'blog' every bit as much as the (generally) journalist-written article that occasions the discussion. Similarly, comment posters on the boards are regularly described as 'bloggers', even if they are only occasional visitors to the pages.

Bike Blog was chosen since [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk) is amongst the world's most-visited English-language newspaper websites (its own research claims it to be the world's third most popular newspaper website in any language (Media Briefing, 2012)). [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk)'s relative success stands in stark contrast to the long-term decline in sales of the print versions of the *Guardian* and *Observer*. Indeed, in 2011 editor Alan Rusbridger announced a 'digital first' strategy, foregrounding the problems faced by print in an online age. Crucially in terms of the discussion here, 'digital first' does not currently involve the website operating behind a paywall, thereby encouraging the contribution of posts from readers who may balk at having to pay for content. While the blog is primarily British (indeed, southern English) in its topics and comments, it regularly attracts comments from around the world, and covers global cycling issues. So, for example, during two weeks on October and November 2012, Bike Blog dealt with cycling matters from Oregon, Yemen, New York and Sydney as well as its UK 'home'.

Bike Blog's breadth of readership is crucial when considering trolling and other forms of on-line hostility. Although the *Guardian* umbrella covers a spectrum of political and cultural positions, it is generally characterised as occupying a space on the 'progressive' liberal-left of the British press, at some ideological remove from the majority of British national newspapers. A prominent trope in hostile comments is therefore that the paper's readers are 'guardianistas' – modish, metropolitan liberals. Although other UK regional and national newspapers cover cycle-related stories and invite reader responses on the topic (most notably the *Times* with its campaigning 'Cities Fit for Cycling' site) no other paper has a regular discussion board dedicated to cycling (though the London *Evening Standard* carried a short-lived bike blog).

Although the *Guardian* had previously run a regular 'Two Wheels' column, Bike Blog was an offshoot of the paper's 'Ethical and Green Living' section, first appearing in its own right with a column entitled 'What Moves You to Get on Your Bike?' on 15 June 2009. Bike Blog was envisaged as a weekly discussion piece accompanied by a podcast, but open-to-comment postings have been much more frequent than this: between June 2009 and December 2012, guardian.co.uk posted over 700 bike-related features on Bike Blog. Numbers of comments varied from less than ten on several topics to approaching 900 on the topic of 'cycle haters'. Although around 400 of these articles were studied, the sample here is limited to discussions which either contained direct accusations of trolling, or broached a variety of legal or etiquette issues. This poses some problems in terms of how the article attempts to capture the character of trolling on the Bike Blog. As Patrick O'Sullivan and Andres Flanagin note in their discussion of 'flaming', while there might be a consensus that trolling 'consists of aggressive or hostile communication occurring via computer-mediated channels' (2003: 71) there are considerable differences in the perceptions of senders, receivers and third party observers about whether such communication represents a 'real' violation of community norms or a misinterpretation on the part of one or other interactant (see also Lange, 2006; Neurauter-Kessels, 2011). Nonetheless, explicit accusations of trolling enable us to see the positions taken by those prepared to name the troll and the reactions of those named as trolls. [1]

Equally, however, the article examines on-line comments in which trolling is not explicitly marked. O'Sullivan and Flanagin note that a further problem with writing on flaming is the assumption that it is overwhelmingly negative and destructive, and research is therefore 'framed in terms of finding solutions to the 'problem' of uninhibited or inappropriate messages' (2003: 74). By contrast, I show that the 'troll function' of valorising negative conventions is generative : although it establishes limits to what is writable on Bike Blog (and doable offline) it is also 'click bait' that provides opportunities for writing, traffic for the website and the legitimation of positions taken by some writers. Writing about an earlier period of internet discussion systems, in which the troll had the more specific role of provoking an indignant response from someone new to the forum, and a more legitimated disposition [2], Michele Tepper (1997: 40) argues that trolling serves to generate profits in distinction within the on-line field. Trolling, she notes, is accepted within on-line subcultures, because it enforces 'community standards and [increases] community coherence by providing a game that all those who know the rules can play against those who do not.' Although the troll may well be an individual from the shifting 'community' of Bike Blog contributors, the troll function is nearer to this sense of a set of rules and (negative) conventions which can form a capital on which a poster can trade. Moreover despite the often high level of hostility shown between pseudonymous posters on Bike Blog, trolling can also consist of relatively playful games within which humour and deep knowledge of community conventions are highly valued.

In what follows, I provide a context for thinking about these rules through a discussion of the dominant regime of mobility in late modern societies, and the relationship between this regime and practices of computer-mediated communication (CMC).

## From automobility to moral mobility

In this section I review key writing about transport in late modernity. I note potent correspondences between cycling and the internet around their common promotion of a model of renewed participatory democracy and citizenship. However, there is no necessary relationship between the two technologies and their associated practices, and I go on to suggest some problems in linking cycling and the internet as redemptive technologies which automatically generate virtuous behaviour.

The most encompassing theoretical engagement with these issues has been the description of a hegemonic regime of 'automobility'. For Mimi Sheller and John Urry (2000: 738), this is a near-global phenomenon, exerting 'an awesome spatial and temporal dominance'. Automobility links embodied mobile practices and their representation on the internet for it is both 'the predominant form of 'quasi-private' mobility that subordinates other 'public' *mobilities* of walking, cycling' and so on and 'the dominant *culture* that sustains discourses of what constitutes the good life [and] what is necessary for an appropriate citizenship of mobility' (739, original emphasis). As a consequence, they argue, 'society should be reconceptualised as a 'society of automobility''. While some individuals and groups may practice other forms of mobility, these exist in a subaltern relationship to automobility since the institutions of civil society, including the internet, cannot 'be conceived of as autonomous from these all-conquering machinic complexes' (Sheller and Urry, 2000: 739).

In her discussion of cycling and citizenship, Rachel Aldred (2010) argues that automobility's privatization of public space, its reinforcement of inequality and its cultivation of consuming individualism are problematic for democratic citizenship. By contrast, her research amongst cyclists in Cambridge indicates that, for her primarily middle-class respondents, cycling can produce a number of potential forms of citizenship that point outside and beyond the 'carcoon' (Wickham, 2006: 4). She notes four dimensions of cycling citizenship: 'being responsive to environmental issues, taking care of oneself, being rooted in one's locality, and responding to the social environment' (2010: 39). Cycling therefore appears to be a form of 'resistant mobility' (Green, 2012: 274), or 'virtuous mobility'.

This virtuousness has undoubtedly become central to health and transport policy discourses. Tim Jones and his co-authors (2012: 1407) write that cycling has entered the policy domain as a response to a number of problems associated with car dependency and more broadly with late modernity: congestion and environmental degradation; the disembedding of face-to-face social relations; obesity and cardiac illness, such that Aldred describes it as a “win-win solution’ to public health, environmental and economic problems’ (2012: 95). This policy discourse has, in turn, entered popular conceptions of the meanings of cycling. Through their interview work with different groups of Londoners, Judith Green and her co-authors argue that a new ‘moral transport hierarchy’ has been established in which ‘car travel clearly occupied the bottom rung’ (2012: 280). By contrast, cycling was at the apex, with ‘the moral worth of cycling [resting] on its construction as the ultimate mode for meeting a range of citizenship obligations’ (2012: 280). For Green *et al*’s respondents, therefore, cycling offers a route towards the flexibility, freedom and independence of ‘true’ automobility, for, ‘If car driving once provided the ... promise of autonomous and efficient travel, in accounts from our participants, cycling now unequivocally offered this possibility’ (276).

This reconstruction of citizenship and reclamation of public space bears comparison with the countercultural values regularly claimed for the internet and the blogosphere, technologies which activists have claimed as privileged tools for the construction of virtual communities, subcultural playgrounds and ‘netizen’ democracy (Curran, 2012: 38; Hauben and Hauben, 1997). As Bart Cammaerts notes, a Habermasian notion of the public sphere is regularly invoked in discussions of the blogosphere, depicting it as an independent arena ‘where public opinion is formed through communicative action, through the free and open exchange of rational arguments between status-free citizens’ (2008: 358). Zizi Papacharissi (2002), however, argues that there is frequently a slippage or imprecision when depicting the internet as a public sphere. While it may have the potential for promoting the democratic exchange of ideas and opinions, it is exclusionary to some and what she describes as a ‘public space’ to others, open to a multiplicity of voices who may have little interest in rational public debate. ‘A virtual space enhances discussion’, she claims, while ‘a virtual sphere enhances democracy’ (2002: 11). As we shall see, there is no necessary direction to this travel: blogs (including Bike Blog) constantly shift between operating, in Papacharissi’s terms as ‘spheres’ and ‘spaces’.

For some authors and activists, the bike and the internet can form powerful associations. Green *et al* note that the cycling citizen is a hybrid of ‘active’ and ‘activist’ conceptions of citizenship. While the active citizen has rights and obligations in relation to the nation state, the activist cycling citizen is ‘engaged in struggles over rights in sites as local as the city streets, or internet message boards, as well as globally, across international borders’ (2012: 273). Similarly, in his discussion of Critical Mass protests, Zack Furness (2007: 301)

argues that the online circulation of self-produced bike advocacy mirrors the leaderless organization of the ride, and celebrates 'xerocracy [self-produced media] over corporate media' as much as 'bicycling over car culture'. Horton, meanwhile, in his study of cycling in the environmental community, argues that, while the car and television set are absent or marginalised in the lives of environmentalists 'the computer screen ... facilitates for British environmentalists a rooted but networked sense of local belonging to a globalised green community' (2004: 750). And Aldred (2012: 107) describes how activist cycle blogging, represented by the London 'Cycling Embassy of Great Britain' ([www.cycling-embassy.org.uk](http://www.cycling-embassy.org.uk)) has been a key part of local and national environmental campaigns.

Against the regime of automobility, therefore, 'vélomobility' (Horton, Rosen and Cox, 2006: 2) has routinely been constructed as a virtuous practice and CMC as an element of this. But there is no necessary connection between these two technologies. As hypermodern convenience devices, computers share many characteristics with cars, not least their participation in processes of disembedding or 'unbundling' face-to-face relationships and territorialities of home, community and work. Indeed, Sheller and Urry themselves imagine that the future involves both a more diverse ecology of mobility and an (albeit significantly less privatised) intensification of 'carcooning' through the hybridisation of the car with a range of convergent ICTs. 'Thus, any public vehicle could instantly become a home away from home: a link to the reflexive narratives of the private self in motion though public time-space scapes' (2004: 171). We – and contributors to Bike Blog show an awareness of this – should therefore be cautious when envisaging a carless future or hybridising netizen democracy and cycling citizenship.

This section has shown that there is widespread agreement over the negative impact of a regime of automobility in late modernity. Cycling has come to the centre of policy discourse and been widely accepted as an exemplar of moral mobility, while its advocates have described urban futures based on the conjoined technologies of the bicycle and the internet. But, as the next section shows, acceptance of cycling is not the same as acceptance of cyclists.

## The cultural construction of cyclists

We saw in the previous section that cycling has been constructed as a model of virtuous citizenship, analogous to - and sometimes linked with - notions of the active netizen. Yet despite this acceptance of cycling as potentially rich in social and ecological moral worth, Green et al note that its *'practice* incurs disapproval of inappropriate road use, echoing

a normative assumption of car driving' (2012: 279, original emphasis). The sociological literature indicates a strongly marked difference between cycling as an ideal (albeit one freighted with risk, see Horton, 2006; Aldred 2012) and the cyclist as the embodiment of social distastes. The section therefore discusses the ways that cycling has been described as a stigmatised activity, before considering how cyclists themselves engage in practices of judgment and repudiation. Finally, I discuss the early contributions to Bike Blog as an example of a 'safe space' where condemnation could be temporarily suspended.

Aldred (forthcoming) notes a strong disjuncture between the virtuous policy representation of cycling and the 'stigmatised' construction of cyclists within the popular imagination. Although cycling in most of its developed-world forms is a largely white, male and middle-class activity, this status is threatened since 'a stigmatised identity ... might have the power to 'spoil' the higher status identity' (8). Similarly, Horton (2006: 145), argues that 'Cycling, and most especially urban utility cycling, has become a polluted and polluting practice and 'the cyclist' a polluted and polluting identity.' Cycling is spatially marginalised and the cyclist symbolically marginal, so that cyclists 'are experienced as threatening and unsettling, and are demonised ... within the mass media', through being described as strange, criminal or deviant. Chris Rissel and his co-authors' (2010) study of the representation of cycling in Sydney and Melbourne newspapers shows a similarly low level of positive framing of cyclists, and the expression of 'powerfully negative' sentiments on opinion pages and blogs.

However, all the authors above note that a critical perspective on cyclists is also common to cyclists themselves. Indeed, Aldred (forthcoming) is overwhelmingly concerned with how cyclists other, blame and shame one another, and she argues that 'there are two conflicting stigmatised images of 'the cyclist'; one cast as incompetent and one as too competent'. Jones et al similarly argue that one of the more pressing policy issues is to appeal to a 'fundamentalist tendency within the world of cycling advocacy' (2012: 1422). In the clearest expression of this approach, David Skinner and Paul Rosen (2006: 92), argue that 'the identity of people who commute by bicycle tends to involve them setting themselves apart from other cyclists'. They note that an 'insistence on discussing the 'hell' of 'other' cyclists' is common to all their interviewees, even those amongst them who are cycle-commuting advocates (2006: 95).

Though the depth of hostility expressed towards fellow cyclists may come as a surprise, the fact that cycling is a diverse practice involving a wide range of opinions and value-hierarchies should not. The very notion of a 'cyclist' identity is problematic since adult cyclists tend to be travel omnivores: most will hold a driving licence and use public transport and all will be pedestrians. Perhaps precisely because of this complexity, at the moment of its appearance on 15 June 2009, Bike Blog appeared to offer a 'purified' space

within which a community could be imagined, a 'temporary autonomous zone' where, for a while at least an enhanced sense of cycling solidarity could be expressed and enjoyed. Although a key feature of many forms of cycling advocacy has been the insistence on the desirability of cyclists being present within car-dominated space, Bike Blog's initial appeal was more to the notion that a separate space for online discussion would increase understanding of cycling, overcome difference and pave the way for a more rational cycling future. In part, too, there was a sense that Bike Blog represented a withdrawal from the face-to-face conflicts of 'real' cycling (Horton, 2006: 125). In calling for potential contributors to write about what 'thrills and enrages' them about cycling, the article positioned the blog as follows:

*Cycling coverage tends to veer towards earnest discussions of gear ratios and carbon fibre gizmos, something we want to avoid. We also hope to steer clear of endless debates about red lights and/or belligerent car drivers. Cycling, in the main, is enjoyable, not a source of conflict*

*We want this blog to be for everyone who cycles, however frequently they use a bike and wherever they go on it (Walker, 2009).*

Had Bike Blog actually avoided these issues (not least sport cycling, which tends to attract large numbers of posts), then it would have been short lived. But the editorial points towards the direction that the site would subsequently take: it frames cycling in terms of pleasure, everydayness and as an expressive lifestyle activity. In response, the 105 comments were entirely supportive. Although a variety of problems were raised, they were either environmental or external to the cycling community ('white van man' or, as we shall see in the next section, 'Clarkson'). Gledhowian (16 June) was typical:

*This is fabulous - well done Guardian! I'd like to see a critical mass pressure group developing from this which pushes the government into making changes to transport policy whereby cycling becomes a recognised and funded alternative to the horrible motor car. Not much to ask? For the sense of freedom it engenders, for the fitness it develops and for the positive mental outlook it breeds what can beat cycling?*

*Let's do it*

As we saw earlier, however, claims that the internet acts as a virtual public *sphere* and exemplar of polite, rational discourse, typically overstate the extent to which this is the case. Instead Bike Blog very quickly came to offer a public *space* for anti-cyclist sentiment

and the articulation of divergent cycling dispositions from cyclists themselves. This should come as little surprise since, as Manuela Neurauter-Kessels (2011: 191) notes, disrespectful and aggressive behaviour is a persistent feature of much CMC and prevalent among the anonymous users of online newspaper comments. Moreover, because of the heterogeneity of cycling itself, there is no single privileged position from which cycling advocates can pronounce, nor a singular view of cycling that they espouse. Indeed, only eight days after its launch, one contributor, *scavenger*, could write: (23 June 2009) 'Here's a challenge to the Bike Blog folks: Find a topic for discussion that doesn't result in the usual offtopic flamewar between different types of road user. I suspect it is impossible'. We turn to this impossibility now.

## Trolls, Haters and Flamers

In the previous section, we saw how Bike Blog was initially treated as a public sphere within which an online community could debate, in rational manner, the pleasures and practices of cycling and the problems of automobility. However, in the following sections I argue that the meanings and values of the blog have been shaped both through the actions of dissenting voices ('trolls', 'flamers' and 'haters', but also those challenging the claims to virtue made by cyclists) and through the games of taste and practices of 'responsibilization' played out by cyclist bloggers themselves.

To do this, I have adopted Pierre Bourdieu's notion of a cultural 'field' to think about the Bike Blog. For Bourdieu, a field is a relatively durable and consistent set of cultural practices governed by its own internal laws, a 'particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws' (1993: 162–3). Fields possess their own autonomous codes of conduct and modes of behaviour and their own forms of reward (in this case not monetary reward, but symbolic recognition in the form of the acknowledgement of one's peers) so that they become 'self-regulating, self-validating and self-perpetuating' (Ferguson, 2001: 5). Although this article does not have the scope to cover the international range of blogs which would constitute the field [\[3\]](#), the idea draws our attention to how a field involves both the internal dispositions of a cultural activity, and its external relations with related cultural fields. In the case of Bike Blog, for example, it explores how the deployment of what O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) call 'problematic messages' constitute and maintain the practice.

A central form of such problematic communication is what Bike Bloggers characterise as overt trolling: the contribution of clearly pro-car and/or anti-cyclist posts to the virtuous

space of the Bike Blog. In an intertextual and convergent medium such as a newspaper have-your-say column, 'trolls' also exist outside the Bike Blog and construct the cycle trolling discourse in other media. Any 'conversation' typically takes place across media, and the troll or hater may not always be a contributor to Bike Blog. The *Guardian* articles to which the comments respond, for example, are frequently versions of such flamebait, highlighting broader cultural hostility to cyclists and encouraging righteous indignation from the majority online pro-cycling community and gestures of approval from mischievous or anti-cyclist posters.

Indeed, a prominent way in which the cycle blogging field is constructed is through its relationship with 'cycle haters' in the media. In the UK, a shorthand for this hostility is given by reference to the BBCs' *Top Gear*, and its chief presenter, Jeremy Clarkson. *Top Gear* is a 'slippery candidate for investigation' (Bonner, 2011: 44): its use of comedy, fantasy and pleasurable failure mean that it is far from straightforward propaganda for a car-centred lifestyle (as many contributors to Bike Blog admit). Nonetheless, Clarkson's more strident work for the tabloid press, and the very success of the programme in adopting an approach to environmentalism which shifts between the 'irreverent' and the actively antagonistic, means that it operates as a touchstone for Bike Blog. As Frances Bonner notes, 'The days of taking pleasure in cars may be numbered, but there is an element of defiance and denial surrounding public discourse on the topic. *Top Gear* is a significant site for this defiance' (Bonner, 2011: 42)

'Clarkson' and 'Top Gear' are therefore ways of performing trolling (for example, *Gfewster* 15 September 2009 quoted Clarkson in posting, 'You are guests on the road. Get used to it') and of labelling trolls on Bike Blog. In response to a poster's call for bicycles to have number plates, *StOckwell* (24 August 2011) responds, 'I'll remember you next time some moron in a car tries to kill me and then tells me it's my fault because you ride like a dick. Or are you a Clarkson fan trolling?' Or for *cuddyduck* (10 June, 2011), 'The button you seek is most likely on *The Times* motoring blog page, found by hovering your mouse over a jpg of a gurning Jeremy Clarkson ... Where's the 'idiot lying trolls' button?' For other commenters, it was important to establish a blogging position distinct from the Clarkson persona. Thus *WattaPalaver* (19 November 2009) argues that 'despite some rude remarks made about me, recommending I go off and watch Clarkson videos, I am not anti-cycling. I am anti stupid road users'. And others drew a distinction between haters and trolls. Thus *contractor000* (9 November 2012) argued against the accusation that 'this *Shufflecarrot* is a troll. Just an interestingly transparent example of conservative instincts in every possible example... In fact, *Shufflecarrot* may be Jeremy Clarkson's cousin.'

Bloggers saw that, within the media field, imitating the comic reactionary Clarkson persona was a means of trying to establish legitimacy by taking sceptical or denying positions about the environment and cycling. Thus, when the British TV chef James Martin claimed to have chased some weekend cyclists off the road in his car, he was represented as a failed Clarkson:

**LordLucan (15 September 2009)**

*'Personally I don't think that Clarkson crosses the line in the same way that this fool does'. Similarly, Ikearse (16 September 2009) observed that 'Using the 'Clarkson' get out clause doesn't work because Jeremy Clarkson is a) funny and b) hasn't actually openly admitted to an act of violence against the person'.*

While *Top Gear* is therefore held to be a relatively successful example of a cultural politics of defiance and denial, and its imitators on the blog and in other media as failed examples of this, the two are linked by a common position on taste and consumption that is distinct from the bike bloggers and serves to constitute the field through being its other. As Bourdieu argues, whereas the 'old' middle classes based their consumption practices on a morality of modesty and restraint, the new middle classes urge a morality of pleasure as duty. 'This doctrine makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to 'have fun'' (1984: 367). Here, 'having fun' is represented as a knowledgeable but wilfully unreflexive practice, at odds with the virtuous restraint of cyclists. Thus a one-time contributor, *Euan888* (1 June 2010) was quickly named as a troll (and confessed to trolling) when he imitated the hedonistic language of consuming, spending and enjoying in response to a feature on how the new Transport Minister was going to end what the tabloid press called the 'war on motorists':

*SUPERB! At last a minister who talks sense. Personally I would go one further and ban cyclists from all city centres ... Then, we need the new Govt. to ban the use of average speed cameras as they actually increase the chances of a crash as everyone drives with one eye on their speedo and the other on the hot female in the car beside them... Let's put the 'Great' back into Britain!*

A challenge to the claims to moral mobility made by Bike Blog therefore came from posters who either adopted, or who were censured for adopting, an unreflexive position on lifestyle-as-fun. This position could be dismissed as unethical and as a source of disgust (for example, *Cree* (5 January 2013): 'Lot of trolling on this page, for me cars and their drivers are a bunch of filthy immoral fat scum. The Jeremy Clarkson body coming to a driver near you ha ha fat boys'). Trading on the idea that unrestrained automobility exists at

the lowest level of a mobility hierarchy, the dismissal of such posts and posters represents precisely the profit in distinction identified by Bourdieu 'which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be' (1984: 224).

But if such trolls and haters maintain the boundaries of the community through creating a sense of virtuous entitlement amongst the in-group, a much more insistent (and common) form of attack presents cyclists themselves as unreflexive hedonistic consumers and 'matter out of place'. In this form of online disrespect, far from being at the apex of a moral hierarchy, cyclists are those travellers least concerned with the diverse ecology of the road. Three examples give a flavour of this aggression:

**BallaBoy (23 June 2009)**

*Is that before or after you run a red light, head the wrong way up a one way street, steam through a zebra crossing, mount the pavement and shout at pedestrians for exercising their priority in crossing the street?*

*As a frequent London pedestrian, I can assure you that the lycra clad half wits marauding around the capital on two wheels are a far greater hazard to my health and safety than anyone in a car.*

**Bourbons3 (19 November 2009)**

*I agree with the principle of cycling ... but I can't stand cyclists. It just seems to attract people who, as soon as they got on a bike, get some power complex. If they're not shouting at pedestrians to get out of their way, they're running through red lights, which also puts people crossing at risk.*

*So that leaves me with the conclusion that cycling is good, but cyclists are bad.*

**Carlill (09 November 2012)**

*Cycling's problem is that there is a pervading sense of self-righteousness that clings to the 'movement' ... And I say this as someone who doesn't own a car and despises the Clarkson 'I should be allowed to go as fast as I want whenever I want' brigade.*

The terms used not only resonate with the observation that the cyclist is a strange and marginal figure, but also ironically recast vélomobility as sharing automobility's worst characteristics, while privileging pedestrianism as the apex of the moral mobilities

hierarchy. This echoes Jones *et al*'s (2012: 1420) analysis of urban mobilities, in which respondents who value walking in the city most highly are described as 'pedestrian prioritisers'. Pedestrian prioritisers are almost all drivers, but desire changes, both to motoring, though the imposition of further restrictions, and to cycling through the creation of segregated cycle tracks.

As the tone of the posts above indicates, many contributors do not participate in Bike Blog in a Habermasian spirit of rational exchange, but with the intention of assigning to cyclists an identity that is 'immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting, even disposable' (Skeggs, 2005: 977). The virtuous pedestrian persona might well be adopted as a mask for the expression of broader anti-cyclist feeling (and bloggers are well aware of the potential for impersonation on the Bike Blog, so for example, *Hithlum*, (09 November 2012) responded to *marcolo*'s claim that he was regularly threatened by cyclists: 'Make believe stories where everyone of a group is evil and vile and the teller is an angelic martyr tend to be pure ..... well I am smelling and you are shovelling great mounds of it' [4]) but the ascription of hedonism, excessive or inappropriate consumption and unrestrained speed to cyclists is a wounding invasion of a space which seeks to celebrate cycling's progressive potentials. As Bourdieu notes, within the dominant class, opposing forms of habitus correspond to particular material conditions and configurations of cultural capital: an 'aristocratic asceticism' or disposition for austerity and purity stands in opposition to a hedonistic taste for luxury and ostentation. While for the most part, bike bloggers claim this aristocratic asceticism for themselves and their practice, 'pedestrian prioritiser' posters, whether they are trolling or flaming, attempt to reverse this symbolic distinction. As we shall see in the next section, the effect of this is to generate new games of distinction as posters attempt to reclaim the profits accruing from austerity.

## Defensive and reflexive responses

While the adoption of a blanket anti-cycling position may therefore make the troll easy to name and counter, other critical positions are more ambivalent. By problematizing Bike Bloggers' claims to good citizenship and netizenship, trolls and flammers contribute to the fragmentation of any imagined Bike Blog community. This section discusses reflexive responses to these attacks. First, I show that hostility from anti-cyclists is both constricting and generative. It constricts because the 'memes' of bike trolling established in the previous section—red light jumping, pavement riding, cyclists as metropolitan hipsters and objects of disgust—take up space and drown out 'good sense'. But, equally, such tropes provide opportunities to write, points of departure and the chance to clarify and codify counter-arguments. Second, I suggest that, for some Bike Bloggers at least, responding

to the negative consensus involves a form of 'responsibilization' where, rather than Bike Blog being a utopian and inviolable space, it becomes one in which posters play out their moral authority through the enactment of increasingly intellectualized and professionalized positions on cycling. These positions can be sharply divergent, however, and a particular fault line is the difference between social or community responsibility, and a more individualized notion of private responsibility.

Setting up anti-cyclist 'noise' is a key way in which posters begin a conversation and position themselves at the centre of the imagined community. As Honeycutt (2005) points out, an important feature of netiquette is a poster's ability to digest and synthesize a great deal of information economically. To do so is both a form of politeness and a demonstration of mastery over the conversation. So, for example *Bablkubrox* (23 December 2009) writes:

*I think that what this blog requires is a regular monthly article 'Is Red-Light Jumping Mostly the Fault of Helmetless Fixed-Gear Brompton [5] Riders?' so that everyone can vent their spleen, and the resulting 500-odd posts then be sealed, autoclaved at a high temperature and collected for disposal.*

In other cases, however, this shorthand dismissal of flame tropes could itself be misrecognised, and named, as trolling. The extended exchange below (28 November 2012) is typical of such attempts to name the meme and to thereby quarantine it.

**Jimson Weed**

*Can I be the first to say that cyclists don't pay any road tax? Thanks, carry on.*

**Tresorf**

*You can be the first person to say that cyclists don't pay any 'road tax'. Can I have the pleasure of being the first person to mention that 'road tax' doesn't exist (you pay VED, a motor vehicle tax based on the vehicles potential emissions) and that cyclists pay for their proportion of road use (their road use impact having orders of magnitude less impact than a car incidentally) through the same general taxation as everyone else (income tax, VAT etc)? ... Sorted? Right, carry on.*

**PhineasPPhagbrake**

*@tresorf - I think Jimson is just trying to beat the trolls to it, but really it only encourages them.*

**Tresorf**

@JimsonWeed - oh right. sorry about that :) A premature rant on my part :-)

**Tresorf**

@PhineasPPhagbrake - poe's law

**JimsonWeed**

@tresorf - no problem - quite understandable that you thought my post was genuine given the level of anti-cycling crap one usually sees on here :)

**Mmmmf**

@tresorf - Thanks anyway. I'll keep your post as a handy cut'n'paste for the next time.

**Luke Ts**

Shall I mention helmets or red lights, too, to get that out of the way?

The response from *tresorf*, above, gives some sense of how trolling is reflexively managed on Bike Blog. Cycling is widely depicted as a high-risk activity and, as we have seen, the cyclist is a polluted and polluting identity. On-line at least, posters are required to respond to persistent anti-cyclist accusations by 'responsibilising' themselves through the sort of expert knowledge that *tresorf* (mistakenly) deploys. Like other subjects occupying risk-defined identities, pro-cyclist bloggers 'are instructed to become prudent subjects who must 'practice individual responsibility' by asking questions, making complaints and legally exercising safety rights' (Gray, 2009: 327, see also Littler, 2011). Such online responsibilisation corresponds closely to the discourse of moral mobility noted by Green *et al*, who point out that not only does cycling's claims to moral worth rest on its environmental credentials, but also on a model of health and physical independence involving, 'the enactment of a particular *style*: that of prudential and knowing agency'(2012: 280, original emphasis). While flammers may charge cyclists with being inattentive citizens (both on the road and to the needs of others), to be responsible is to insist on the mindfulness of cycling (Parkin, 2004: 372). Moreover, demonstrating expert online knowledge of issues such as safety and taxation, complements the assertiveness that is particularly prized when cycling in the city.

In his work on tourism, Ian Munt (1994) notes how different middle-class fractions wage intense classificatory struggles with one another over lifestyle, and three of these struggles have particular relevance to Bike Bloggers' attempts to reclaim their practice as one of

'aristocratic asceticism'. Firstly, responsible cycling involves practices of *intellectualisation*. One means towards this is the ability to access and organise academic work on a topic, marshalling the resources of others to verify arguments. So, for example, when the issue of the desirability of wearing a helmet appears, *sboy* (10 November 2012) gives a link to the pdf of a medical report, 'Trends in Serious Head Injuries Among English Cyclists and Pedestrians'. Similarly, cycling provides opportunities to study and learn. When *Darkstar2* (21 August 2012) asked 'What's a bidon, and do I need one?', an immediate response from *yesnomaybe* was 'Ridiculous name for a water bottle. Origin, French. Pretentious, but then this is the *Guardian*. Right, I'm off for a ride on my vélo.' To which *StOckwell* responds:

*Hardly pretentious - many things to do with cycle sport, not to mention the automotive industry which developed from the bicycle industry, are regularly referred to in French. Or perhaps you don't hold with derailleurs on your bike or a carburettor in your Limousine and a chauffeur to drive it, if you need one after getting it out of the garage.*

Second are issues of *professionalisation*. In common with Munt's observations that travel offers new forms of work, a number of Bike Blog topics and posts deal with the opportunities for employment within a renewed, but niche, cycling industry. However, for the most part cycling continues to be an expressive leisure activity, and professionalisation therefore takes the form of committing cyclists to ethical codes of conduct. Discussions regularly take place on the carbon footprint of cycling and, as here, on the ethics of cycling consumption (to which a number of posters reflexively responded, suggesting that such ethical consumption was out of the price range of 'ordinary' cyclists)

**Mroli (20 October 2009)**

*@mojoangel - agree that you are pushed to find stuff that is not manufactured in asia (apart from truly high end cycle wear). Someone mentioned clean clothes earlier - have a quick look here: <http://www.cleanclothes.org/campaigns/lidl> and aldi are singled out as being pretty bad. At the Cycle Show, we talked to the guys at Endura (mid-range cycling brand) and they were pretty clear on their working practices and that they were 'ethical'.*

Finally, Munt notes that new middle class tourists play out hegemonic spatial struggles. In the case of Bike Blog this takes the form of expert knowledge about or experience of, those predominantly North European cities (Berlin, Amsterdam and Copenhagen, as well as Portland in the USA) in which cycling is constructed as a normative activity. While trolls are regularly denigrated as an amalgam of 'American' and 'Little Englander' characteristics, knowledge or experience of 'copenhagenization' indicates membership of a denationalised

imagined cycling community.

### **Lostindenmark**

*(quotes) 'In Copenhagen, 37 percent of commuters now use bikes to get to school or work'.*

*you speak of this as if it's a growing phenomenon: it isn't. cycling is just what you do in Copenhagen: i lived there for 20 years ... If we had cycle paths - and car drivers! - like the Danes, we'd all be on bikes.*

Although the examples above are clearly moves within a classificatory struggle, they tend to be successful, in so far as other posters typically recommend them, or respond positively to them, and this is because they effectively carry out 'cultural intermediary' work in re-establishing a sense of the cycling community as one that is global, rich in cultural capital, continually-self-improving and mindful of others. The economic capital needed for what is an often expensive lifestyle is often disavowed, but in the example below, what is initially expressed as the class problem of cycling ('yuppie bourgeois niche crap') is reclaimed (if within a metropolitan milieu) as an example of responsabilized cycling's ability to include class others:

### **Line L51 (16 November 2012)**

*- I thought this article was about cobbling together bits and pieces from skips, junkyards etc. to construct a viable bicycle not this yuppie bourgeois niche crap.*

### **Monchberter**

*-The upswing in interest in bikes is almost wholly a yuppie bourgeois thing. Less well-off people were already riding bikes or refuse to as cars still remain a strong success / wealth indicator for certain groups and bikes indicate low status.*

### **Misterbaxter**

*- @Monchberter - that's not really true. I live in an inner city area and I am involved with a youth project there; I see loads of kids on single speeds who are not at all from 'yuppie bourgeois' backgrounds.*

**Monchberter**

*@misterbaxter - Good! I was making a sweeping generalisation however but all the press surrounding the upswing in interest seems to mostly focus on 'respectable' people cycling. Would like to see more coverage and publicity of examples such as you mention.*

Other forms of responsabilisation discourse, however, are less warmly received. We saw earlier the problems associated with a 'cycling survivalist' identity (Green, 2012: 287) which *overstates* the need for a cyclist to take responsibility for their own safety, just as Aldred's respondents contend that one can be *too much* of a cyclist. 'Being a cyclist', she notes, 'Involves not just managing a stigmatised identity, but managing other *people's identities*' (forthcoming: original emphasis), the identities of those who are felt to 'give cyclists a bad name'. The post below plays on this idea of an excessive practice of self-responsibilisation, while also, through its use of high-end cycling brand Rapha, invoking the damning notion of 'all-the-gear-but-no-idea':

**2hard2guess.**

*(Quotes another poster) 'Then someone flung open their car door into my path.'*

*- Which shows that your accidents are due to your not even knowing the basics of safe cycling. No-one has ever opened a car door into MY path because I make sure my 'path' is at least a car door away from the car. Before lecturing people about your supposed expertise on cycling you should first read a book or two.*

**Averyonnaise**

*@2hard2guess - Loving your empathy for a fellow cyclist, I can picture you now dressed head to toe in Rapha (plus cap) sneering at inferior group sets whilst studying your cadence from this morning's 5k commute.*

This section has shown how trolling and flaming construct the dominant values of Bike Blog through providing a set of negative conventions which must be addressed. Nonetheless, even such conventions might be traded upon to establish a poster's virtue, and their prestigious position within a micro-hierarchy [6]. I have suggested that while some forms of responsabilisation strategy in the face of trolling can be relatively unsuccessful, for other posters there is a premium placed on a reflexive attitude towards cycling as an outward-facing activity in which one must adopt *both* 'a learning approach to life' (Featherstone, 1991: 91) *and* a mindful disposition towards others.

## Conclusion

One of Pierre Bourdieu's most potent metaphors is the 'dream of social flying' (1984: 370). For Bourdieu the fraction of the new petite bourgeoisie which he calls 'new cultural intermediaries' is engaged in 'a desperate effort to defy the gravity of the social field' through their display of cultural goods, qualifications and embodied practices. It is no accident that cycling has experienced a renaissance amongst 'new' middle class citizens, for whom it offers just such a dream of flying, whether it be in the embodied form of self-propelled and prudent agency or in the more symbolic form of belonging to overlapping communities of 'active' sports people and 'activist' citizens expressing their concern for a speeded-up and vulnerable planet.

Despite this move towards the mainstream, and evidence that cycling is becoming increasingly prominent within a 'new moral economy of transport', the article has shown that cycling continues to be a peripheral activity, and the cyclist an often reviled figure. Though the web has permitted an increase in the advocacy of cycling as a lifestyle choice and ecological responsibility, this has been accompanied by an increase in more negative estimations of cycling and cyclists. In a relatively short-lived medium such as the online comments page of a newspaper, trolls, flammers and haters need to be both vigilant and persistent to set the agenda on cycling. But I have shown that cycling's claims to virtue make it particularly vulnerable to counter-claims from posters who either are, or who pose as, more vulnerable and disenfranchised mobile citizens. This heightened traffic corresponds to Horton's observation that greater seriousness about cycling futures is likely to be accompanied by ever greater depictions of cycling as risky, and cyclists as matter out of place (2006: 146).

The article has shown that contributors to Bike Blog respond to these online threats in various ways. Hostility to cycling certainly leads to a defensive response as pro-cycling posters are forced into addressing what are represented as the central truths of cycling—its reckless hedonism, consumerist modal enthusiasm and inattentiveness to others—precisely the aggressive, boorish machismo that pro-cycling posters ascribe to the 'Clarkson' persona of unreconstructed 'petrolheads'. But beyond this defensiveness lie responsabilising strategies of knowing, subscribing to codes of online and offline behaviour and connecting with local and global others. Responsibilisation is, rightly, often seen as a neoliberal strategy, by which people take charge of their own subjection, and there are clearly aspects of this in the way that cycling is often referred to on Bike Blog in health terms. Moreover, showing oneself to be a knowledgeable, responsible cyclist undoubtedly involves making gains within the micro-hierarchy of Bike Blog, and therefore corresponds to Bourdieu's notion of a field as a site of position-taking and profit-making. But I have

shown, also, that responsabilisation can take the form of responsibility to the imagined community of cyclists, to the diverse ecology of road users and to an understanding of those who are left out, or left cold, by vélomobility. While 'trolls' represent the impossibility of idealised discourse about transport futures on the internet, some posters continue to imagine a form of social flying that is not only about individual profits in distinction, but also about making connections across social divisions and reversing the social atomisation and privatised city living of the regime of automobility.

## Biographical note:

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## Notes

[1]. The Guardian's post moderation rules meant that some of the more norm-contravening posts had been removed. Unlike some other UK news sites, Guardian Online indicates where a post has been deleted.

[2]. Tepper looked at the Usenet group, alt.folklore.urban (AFU), focusing on the way that veterans would entice new users into the group by posting deliberate misconceptions. Unlike common understandings of the term today, these trolls were both gently humorous and rich in legitimate forms of social and cultural. As Tepper approvingly notes: 'the two most notorious trollers in AFU ... are also two of the most consistent posters of serious research.' (1997: 43)

[3]. Interested readers might look at the most followed – largely US – blogs: bikeportland.org, bikesnobnyc, fatcyclist.com and copenhagenize.com. For a sense of the hostility engendered by cycling see twitter.com/cyclehatred.

[4]. Alongside the quotidian symbolic violence of online conflict, claims of physical violence between road users are surprisingly common on Bike Blog. See Honeycutt (2005) for a discussion of violence in the online realm.

[5]. Brompton is a manufacturer of high-end folding bikes, and the UK's biggest bike producer.

[6]. This article doesn't have space to consider the rhetorical forms in which posters generate recommendations, and thereby in-blog prestige, but it should be noted that both humour and the detailed demolition of other posts ('fisking') are typically highly rated on Bike Blog.

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-165 Obama Trolling: Memes, Salutes and an Agonistic Politics in the 2012 Presidential Election

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### **Abstract:**

During the 2012 presidential campaign an explosion of photo-shopped images circulated that depicted President Obama as unpatriotic. The ‘crotch salute’, ‘left-hand salute’, and ‘Veterans Day non-salute’ serve as case studies for understanding the role of trolling in the public sphere and Internet politics in an era of social networks and circulation. This paper tracks the cultural practices and logics of ‘sharing’ political memes and conceptualises memes as part of an agonistic public sphere and media ecology. Obama trolling is facilitated through the techno-cultural affordances of memes, which can only become public because of their mimetic form and sterilised partial anonymity. The paper seeks to conceptualise trolling as a broader cultural practice, which can be considered political. Normative assumptions about these memes would portray this trafficking as destructive to deliberative democracy but when understood as a generative cultural practice, trolling becomes central to articulating political emotions in social networks. Photo-shopped Obama salutes, in addition to Big Bird, binder, and bayonet memes, express not only political identities but also larger cultural values within networked popular culture.

If the 2008 American Presidential election is known for being the first modern Internet campaign, then perhaps the 2012 American election should be known as the first real social media campaign. While social networking was a major part of the 2008 campaign, with users enacting socio-technical linkages primarily between Youtube and Facebook walls (Robertson, 2010); the increasing pervasiveness of mimetic communication melded with social networking has once again impacted the political landscape. From 'Big Bird' to 'binders full of women' (and the made-for-meme Obama 'Bayonets' line) memes riff in real-time on contemporary politics. What is different about 2012 is the intersection between the technology, the architectural affordances of social networking platforms, and the penetration of a larger trolling culture. Trolling is colloquially understood as a negative behaviour, particularly amongst traditional media, that desires to bully and vilify unsuspecting netizens, all in the name of 'doing it for the lulz'. The recent outing of infamous Reddit troll Violentacrez and the tragic suicide of Amanda Todd show the topicality of this hot button issue (Phillips, 2012), drawing increased scrutiny to the ethics of specific trolls. This paper seeks to expand the definition of trolling as a much broader cultural practice. We track the cultural practices and logics of 'sharing' political memes and conceptualise memes and trolling as part of an agonistic public sphere and media ecology. Memes are a site for understanding audiences, media flows and the circulation of popular culture and politics. Memes act constitutively and work to make salient disparate media narratives and information within a networked culture. For example, expressions about the alleged Manti Te'o hoax could be read (correctly or incorrectly) through the meme #te'oiing, which acts not just as a response of attitudes and feelings but also as a conglomeration of media channels and information. Audiences, through memes, play an active role in re-mixing, re-articulating, and digesting popular culture. While circulating audience articulations of popular culture, memes also form a kind of distribution channel, which serves as a purveyor of political sentiments, values and ideas within the 2012 Presidential campaign.

During the 2012 presidential campaign an explosion of photoshopped images circulated that depicted President Obama as unpatriotic. Normative assumptions about these political Obama memes might portray this trafficking as destructive to deliberative democracy but when understood as a generative cultural practice, trolling becomes central to articulating political emotions in social networks. A brief history of trolling and hoaxing in political communication, as well as pertinent literature within communication and media studies, is offered to contextualise and define trolling as a broader cultural practice. The 'crotch salute', 'left-hand salute', and 'Veterans Day non-salute' serve as case studies for understanding the role of trolling in the public sphere and Internet politics in an era of social networks and circulation. Obama trolling is understood as generative—as a practice that facilitates, through the technological affordances of memes, the exposition of emotions that otherwise would not be expressed within the public sphere. Refraining from denigrating trolling as merely the fringe actions of select groups of trolls might make it possible to see trolling's centrality to the way that we actually communicate online (with

all its messiness, complexity, oftentimes irrationality and emotions). This agonistic politics of inane memes, deception, and affective play is important for understanding discursive political identities and broader cultural values within networked popular culture.

## Trolling in a Political Campaign Context

The networked nature of Internet communication and the compression of time and space that the network affords speed up communicative processes and reduce ‘cultural latency’ (Yakob, 2009) or ‘cultural lag’. Lag is a term colloquially used in computer science to describe a computer with impaired functionality that fails to keep up with the transmission of inputs. Historically, information and political messages could only be spread and disseminated as quickly as the horse could carry a messenger, and even with the telegraph we still had the limitations of a sender/receiver model. Social networking delivers messages instantaneously to an entire network, effectively reducing cultural lag to close to zero. This sets social networking apart from even mass broadcasting mediums like radio and television. The lack of cultural lag changes the nature of digitised politics (and by extension all of politics), which must be attune to the ever-changing slipperiness of the networked cultural landscape. In the presidential debates, for example, the circulation of memes happened before the traditional media framing of the debates within ‘spin alley’ as audiences engaged in a participatory politics.

The lack of cultural lag also required a mode of transmission (delivery channel or medium) that could succinctly express messages and values (most often affective), while connecting and compiling other fragments of modern mediated life in movies, television, etc. More simply stated, politics needed memes to keep up with the pace of digital culture—the pace of digital political campaigning. This is why an understanding of the interconnectedness of ‘feeds’ and political messages on social networking platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, or reddit is important. This is not to say that technological innovations or affordances are deterministic but they can play a role in shaping some cultural production (Baym and boyd, 2012). Despite the best efforts by designers to formalise and sanitise digital sociality into a rational system, the Internet remains a mercurial space of constant adaptation.

Political campaigning has always been inextricably bound up with dubious behaviour and deceit. This brief history, which is by no means meant to be exhaustive, wants to track recent iterations of political trolling that correspond with advances in technology and communication platforms. Much work has been done to point out the chicanery involved in the Watergate break-ins and classic political advertisements such as Lyndon

Johnson's 'Daisy Girl' and John Kerry's 'swiftboating' by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. Political campaigns have always tried to use new mediated technologies to gain a competitive advantage over other parties and candidates. These new spaces of political communication are often susceptible to hoaxes and misinformation (McLeod, 2011). Cultural norms regarding digital technology and campaigns are still in flux and being negotiated. For the purposes of this paper we are mostly concerned with the more recent relationship between the Internet as a technological infrastructure and shifts in political communication.

If we begin with direct mailing in the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's (Godwin, 1988), we start to see the importance of distribution and modes of communication in politics. Political flyers and pamphleteering have always been an essential part of political campaigns but direct mailings using personal and professional information for demographic targeting took things to a new level (performed in conjunction with think tanks and policy briefs, see George, 1997). Political direct mailings mimicked business-marketing tactics and strategies because they understood the influence of sending seemingly personalised, tailored messages to consumers. But these weren't consumers buying something, they were political consumers amidst political campaigns and mailings were often used to spread misinformation about candidates. There is a materiality to direct mailings that is important and different from televised political advertisements. It can actually be held, goes in the home, and can be passed around amongst neighbours and proximal social networks. The mailing leaves a physical marker, a remnant of the message or narrative that is trying to be expressed. Email is a medium that combines direct mail messaging with digitality.

One of the more classic examples of a coordinated campaign that used a combination of direct mail, flyers, push polls and email to trash a candidate was the Lee Atwateresque dismantling of John McCain in the South Carolina Republican Presidential primary of 2000. Nancy Snow, now a political scientist at Cal State Fullerton, who volunteered for the McCain campaign in her hometown of Greenville, South Carolina, is quoted as saying, 'We were starting to get wind that this was going to be a very different campaign. There was this sense that everything was turning negative. People were walking into the office with copies of this particular e-mail and asking us about it...it was so revolting' (Gooding, 2004: 2). The email composed by Richard Hand, professor of the Bible at fundamentalist Christian Bob Jones University, and orchestrated by Karl Rove alleged that 'McCain chose to sire children without marriage'. This racist smear campaign was conducted through flyers left on cars, extensive push-polling, and email, that claimed Cindy McCain was a drug addict.

Despite the importance of email in modern campaigning, very little research has been conducted on the content and form of political emails (Duffy, Page and Young, 2012; Gewirtz, 2007). Certainly researchers have not taken seriously ‘fake’ emails that spread during and after political campaigns. Emails are obviously different from direct mail because they can more easily and quickly be forwarded. Digitality augments the circulation of messages. With every technological advancement and new distribution channel comes a concomitant innovation in political communication. Emails begin to be forwarded to entire social networks and then effortlessly re-forwarded in methods that continue the message’s circulation. This practice might resemble or be linked historically to chain-mail. Chain-mail, however, took much more work and effort to re-send whereas an email only needs the click of a button. Political emails have also become more vehicles for storytelling and the formation of narratives than of propagating facts and statistics. Consider this condensed (and debunked) variation of the ‘death panels’ emails that first spread during the debates on ‘Obamacare’:

*I had one of the most troubling, most disturbing conversations ever with Julie’s sister-in-law, Dr. Suzanne Allen, head of emergency services at the Johnson City Medical Center in Tennessee.*

*We were discussing the ‘future’ and I asked her had she seen any affects of Obama Care in her work?*

*Oh, yes. We are seeing cutbacks throughout the services we provide. For example, we are now having to deal with patients who would normally receive dialysis can no longer be accepted. In the past, there was always automatic approval under Medicare for anyone who needed dialysis — not anymore.’ So, what will be their outcome? ‘They will die soon without dialysis, she stated’ (Blackburn, 2012).*

Notice how the email replicates an interpersonal conversation while still relying on the expertise of the fictitious doctor. While the employment of the doctor grounds the story and its plausibility, the doctor’s purpose is not to rationally inform the public but to warn the public of the emotional threat of death. Many of these emails will falsely attribute a source, such as the Associated Press, to garner enough journalistic authority to be plausible (Burroughs and Burroughs, 2012). This mimicry of journalistic conventions flouts Grice’s Maxims (Secor and Walsh, 2004) and provides just enough legitimacy for the deception to be swallowed and then forwarded along. Forwarded emails have continued to be such a force that even Republican candidates and elected officials have been caught considering them to be factual (Reeve, 2012).

As stated above, these emails are most often forwarded within conservative social networks but this is not exactly the case. When a person forwards an email to a mailing list they are blindly sending the message without any built-in feedback loop. Someone might on a very rare occasion respond with a personal email back to the sender but there is no inherent reciprocal relationship embedded within email. I have personally gone for many years (and probably will go for many more) receiving forwards from an aunt who just assumes that I subscribe to the same political ideology that she does. I won't take the time or risk the social capital to tell her to cease and desist with the emails. In an age of social networking, these feedback loops are now more visible.

Another point to emphasise is the role of blogs in forming metonymic chains that influence political campaigns (Burroughs, 2007). In the 2006 Democratic Senate primary for the state of Connecticut, Ned Lamont beat an incumbent sitting Senator Joe Lieberman. This was partly the result of constructing a transgressive narrative surrounding the now infamous 'kiss' between Lieberman and then-President Bush. That image of 'the kiss', working metonymically and forming a metonymic chain, articulated everything that progressives saw wrong in Lieberman. In the Virginia Senate race of the same year, progressives for years had tried to make the label of racist stick to Senator George Allen to no avail. However, the capture and subsequent posting to YouTube of Senator Allen calling a campaign worker for the Jim Webb campaign 'macaca' brought that narrative together. These examples indicate the political power of the Internet to boil down grand narrative into discernible mimetic bites.

Trolling can be traced back to the beginnings of the Internet on Usenet boards (long before 4Chan and /b/ boards), but memes have a political history that Henry Jenkins (2008) begins to identify during the 2004 campaign. Jenkins explains:

*Average citizens were exploiting their expanded capacity to manipulate and circulate images to create the grassroots equivalent of editorial cartoons. These images often got passed along via e-mail or posted on blogs as a way of enlivening political debates. Like classic editorial cartoons, they paint in broad strokes, trying to forge powerful images or complex sets of associations that encapsulate more complex ideas. In many cases, they aim lower than what we would expect from an established publication and so they are a much blunter measure of how popular consciousness is working through shifts in the political landscape.*

This interrogation of popular consciousness as a means of surveying the political landscape has only intensified since the 2004 election with the rise of social networking and more tools at the disposal of citizens in a participatory culture. Henry Jenkins' (2006) book *Convergence Culture* outlines these shifts in technology and popular engagement as a part of 'photoshop for democracy'. The 2008 Obama/Joker face image shows the potency and intensification of these mimetic images in political communication. While the origins of the image with the tagline of 'Socialism' are somewhat disputed (Jenkins, 2013; Mizsei-Ward, 2012), perhaps originating on 4Chan, what is important for our study is the emergence of memes in political culture.

Campaigns became increasingly cognizant of the ability memes have to influence political discourse as a broader swathe of the public engaged with this inter-animation of politics and memes through Obama/Joker. Kellner (2009) describes the 2008 election as the fusing of politics with spectacle and entertainment. While Kellner acknowledges the role of YouTube videos like 'Obama Girl' and 'Yes We Can', he still rightfully gives primacy to the role of traditional media in the campaign. What has changed is the increased visibility and presence of social networks in 2012 as opposed to 2008 and the 'personalization of politics' and political identities through social media (Bennett, 2012) and the circulation of memes. Memes can also serve to heighten spectacle, as 2012 became a socially networked battleground for competing political discourses. Not only has the knowledge of memes expanded but public participation in this form of pleasurable 'everyday creativity' has proliferated as well. Hillary Clinton was even the subject of a widely popular and short-lived Tumblr 'Texts from Hillary' in 2012, which culminated in Hillary herself participating with a submission (the co-creators Stacy Lambe and Adam Smith graciously concluded that nothing could top a meme sent from 'Secretary Hillz').

David Gauntlett (2011) doesn't specifically cite memes in his book *Making is Connecting* but they would fit under his theme of 'making is connecting', since memes, especially those meant for trolling, are a creative craft.

*'Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy' (Gauntlett, 2011: 76).*

The tools for generating memes are ubiquitous and the technology for embedding and sharing memes has been stripped of any need for specialised knowledge of Internet code. As more people can act creatively, more people use memes as a medium for connecting. Many websites even offer templates for creating and sharing your own personalised meme.

The Obama/Joker image, however, signals the beginning of a wider ‘language of memes’ and ‘visual vernacular’ (Stryker, 2011) within the realm of politics.

## Method

Doing Internet-based research on slippery cultural phenomenon such as memes can, at times, feel like aiming at a moving target (Coleman, 2010). Using the 2012 campaign as the parameters for the field of study has helped to narrow and focus the study. The timeframe for the study covered the years 2010–2012 and in-depth participant observation was performed from December 2011 to December 2012. Roughly 600 hours of participant observation was conducted following and participating in discussions on memes surrounding the Presidential campaigns across a variety of platforms. Without participating in digital spaces an ethnographer cannot gain the perspective requisite to become thoroughly embedded within the living fieldwork. Mediated technology requires that the researcher be a participant in online spaces. In order to tease out the nuances indispensable for a Geertzian (1973) ‘thick description’ the researcher can no longer passively consume at a distance.

Participant observation for the purposes of this study is divided into two differing levels of engagement—active participation and lurking. This was done in order to grasp a wider range of audience and public participation where clicks, likes, and sharing count as collapsing modes of consumption and production. Lurking in online spaces must be a part of how we view engagement. The application of mediated ethnography aims at deepening our knowledge of how media is used in everyday practice (Gillespie, 1995). In addition to participant observation, a thematic or genre analysis (Wall, 2005) was performed on thousands of collected Facebook postings. Theoretical sampling was employed (Altheide, 1996) and exemplary threads related specifically to the photoshopped and decontextualised Obama memes were drawn from for interpretive and ethnographic analysis.

This participant observation was based on public behaviour and specific individuals were not identified; accordingly, specific permissions were not obtained. Key informants, however, were told the purposes of ethnographic interviews and informally gave their permission. All names have been altered.

## The Articulation of Circulation

Stuart Hall (1973), in his account of how mediated messages from television are encoded and decoded, offers a four-stage theory of communication that includes distinct moments of production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. Each stage in this model, which complicates linear sender/message/receiver models in mass communication theory, is a distinct, 'relatively autonomous' process sustained as a "complex structure of dominance", sustained through the articulation of connected practices' or linkages. Each stage in the process is influential in reception and transferring of meaning, which complicates communication and is not reducible to the crude arithmetic of the sender-receiver model. Circulation, however, as a distinct separate moment within Hall's stages of communication, might not receive as much attention as processes of production, distribution or consumption. When applied to our current moment of social networking sites and Internet culture, circulation becomes a seminal moment in encoding/decoding messages and content in digital spaces. The process of circulation within social networks operates primarily at the connotative level as we make value judgments and consume based upon polysemic readings of content within the flow of our respective social networks (Burroughs, 2009).

Social networking sites are the means through which we inhabit and enter the Internet as we increasingly experience the flow of the Internet and popular culture through social networking. Just as Hoggart (1971) identifies the home as a site for understanding how people become enmeshed with particular types of sociality (predominantly different classes for Hoggart), we might locate social networking as projecting differing 'fields of value' and socialising in the same manner as the home. Social networks are sites of deep cultural struggle and meaning making for users. Messages are perceptible to the entirety of a social network, which increases the visibility and vulnerability of users. The spreading of content is always a potentially political action and is not some smooth network logic where information freely flows where it 'should'.

A theory of articulation is applied to users articulating themselves through social networks but also to the technological affordances of platforms themselves. While memes are commonly defined as 'a popular term for describing the rapid uptake and spread of a particular idea presented as a written text, image, language 'move,' or some other unit of cultural 'stuff'" (Knobel and Lankshear, 2007: 202), there needs to be a recognition that memes operate in conjunction with social networks and the infrastructure of the Internet. These affordances are discursive technologies of struggle as they become intertwined with the 'lived experience' of politics. These technologies are an integral part of how we experience popular and mediated culture. Circulation is identified as an important moment

for digital encoding/decoding, the spreading of content, and as a site of articulation. Three different Obama memes are offered that represent distinct ways that Obama trolling operated during the 2012 campaign. First an analytic distinction needs to be made between trolls and trolling. The behaviour of self-identifying trolls differs from trolling as a larger cultural practice. When someone is sharing an Obama meme they are not necessarily performing the action for ‘lulz’, however, facilitating the circulation of an Obama meme is participating in this general cultural practice of Obama trolling. As Jean Burgess (2008) explains in relation to the (in)famous memes ‘Chocolate Rain’ and ‘Guitar’:

These ideas are propagated by being taken up and used in new works, in new ways, and therefore are transformed on each iteration—a ‘copy the instructions’, rather than ‘copy the product’ model of replication and variation; and this process takes place within and with reference to particular social networks or subcultures (8).

This ‘copy the instructions’ as opposed to the ‘copy the product’ model of replication leaves the insider knowledge of trolls open-ended and susceptible to becoming mainstream. There is a cultural lexicon, which subcultures of trolls share—a state of constantly being ‘in the know’. For trolls, ‘memes only make sense in relation to other memes. Users are expected to keep track of these shifting subcultural strands, making recognition and replication of specific memes and meme-families tantamount to keeping up with the Jones’ (or more appropriately to 4chan, with the Doe’s)’ (Phillips, 2012). However, the tools for the dissemination and re-appropriation of memes have become ubiquitous. Anyone can make a meme and embedding links no longer requires specialised knowledge of computer code (Shifman, 2013). No one group of trolls controls the circulation of memes, but as we consciously share and spread memes we are all a part of trolling. Trolls may not be political but trolling can be.

A theory of articulation and social networking also challenges the prevalent ‘viral’ metaphor that permeates our contemporary discussions on circulation in digital media environments. Marketers and Internet advertisers often tout having the latest formula or method for insuring the latest viral media hit but the labelling of something as ‘viral’ is discursive and creates a false unity. If digital articulations are comprised of non-necessary correspondences that can produce new meanings with every enactment then there isn’t a necessary, predictive formula. This corresponds with Jenkins’ (2013) most recent theory he calls ‘spreadability’. For Jenkins, people find value in a particular piece of content and then choose to spread that within a social network and not as a result of some innate, latent characteristic of content that infiltrates the inner-state of the psychologised self.

Spreadability relies on open-ended participation as diversely motivated but deeply engaged audiences retrofit content to the contours of different niche communities. While the structure of the technology and the affordances of the platforms play a significant role in how content spreads, there is not a determinant panacea that automatically results in something going 'viral'. While Jenkins is invested in constructing the active audience members' agency, we can also think of the technological affordances themselves as integral to a theory of articulation and social media (Brock, 2012). We can keep the label 'meme' while understanding its constitution as inherently socio-technical.

## The Non Left-handed Obama Crotch Salute

*'One picture speaks a thousand words on the hatred Obama has for the American Republic.'* (Rambo, 2012)

*'First, no salute. Then, the groin salute. Now, the left-handed insult and with the first lady too?! Founding fathers are face-palming themselves in their graves.'* (NoMamsir, 2012)

Obama trolling has its own history that parallels the aforementioned (abbreviated) history of the intersection between political communication and the Internet. It is important to note that this is just a tiny sampling of the explosion of political memes during 2012. It should also be noted that conservative-oriented memes differ slightly from more popular (or 'progressive') mimetic texts in their circulation. You won't see these memes being represented on national meme repositories like Tumblr and Reddit (it will be interesting to see if this trend continues or if memes ultimately prove politically neutral) as routinely as their counterpoints but they do travel within complex social networks. Republicans have been slower adopters of new mediated technologies such as blogs (Burroughs, 2007), which can be attributed to being the party in power during the rise of the blogosphere as an oppositional force but conservatives are at the forefront of mimetic politics. The recent gun control controversy has produced another significant amount of meme generation (as has the 'Pray for Boston' tragedy memes), suggesting that this practice is not isolated solely to the Presidential campaign.

David Frum (2012) draws attention to the depth of conservative media and social networks. He refers to a quip that anchor/personality Greg Gutfeld makes on Fox News about President Obama being out of the closet and 'officially gay for class warfare'. This odd

comment only makes sense when we contextualize his on-air joke with the layers of intertextual conservative linkages.

It's very important to understand that for Fox viewers, Fox is only the most visible part of a vast alternative reality. Fox's coverage of the news cannot be properly understood in isolation, but only in conjunction with the rest of that system—and especially the chain emails that do so much to shape the worldview of Fox viewers.

Fox News as well as conservative talk radio and prominent conservative bloggers are connected all the way down to informal, anonymized emails. Memes are the latest iteration of this deep, affective political play as emails become repurposed as memes. In this Gutfeld example what we don't see is an email that compares President Obama to Elton John and implies that Obama may be having an extramarital relationship with either Kal Penn or Reggie Love.

*It's quite clear that in the years ahead Barack Obama will replace Elton John as the reigning, party queen, gay icon. After he leaves the White House and exiles himself in Hawaii come 2013, supposedly to focus on building his presidential library in Honolulu (but, I think, in no small part to scope out the hotties in their board shorts), I bet Barack Obama will nurse his wounds and discover his inner fabulous...Draped in colorful muumuus, with a retinue of hunky shirtless Secret Service studs around him, Barack Obama will find himself in a new kind of paradise no doubt.*

While we may want to write off these emails and their penetration into social networks by memes as fictitious, destructive, and misleading, there remains an emotional basis for these messages that is not easily mitigated with more logic-based appeals. There is a deep emotional fear of changing norms and gay culture being articulated.

Ben Adler (2012) points out that a debunked email about Obama's passport and college transcripts received 151,000 results from a Google search. Similar to the meme-based lexicon of trolls, conservatives have their own cultural lexicon that is often hidden and comes from earned insider knowledge when one is privy to these circulating texts, which Adler lambasts as 'crazy conspiracy theory'. There is a process of 'surfacing' whereby this knowledge and cultural lexicon become mainstreamed through memes, it enters one's own social network. While there certainly is a 'shadow conversation' taking place outside the purview of the general public, memes provide an opportunity for creating a new space

with the potentiality of voice and visibility within a public. As was the case with Obama salutes, this socially networked mimetic space is not necessarily transformative and often contributes to reinforcing pre-existing worldviews and value systems. As I mentioned earlier, this can be titled ‘false consensus bias’ where the reader or receiver assume that everyone in their social network thinks and values the same things they do. But throughout my observations I was consistently surprised to see this bias rub against alternative viewpoints in social networks. This rubbing was often met with great surprise by the poster of the meme.

The Obama salutes don’t begin as memes shared amongst social networks but originate as emails. In as early as 2009 an email circulated that questioned why the President of the United States wasn’t saluting on Veterans Day during a ceremony in Arlington National Cemetery (one variation placed the picture at Ft. Hood). This became known as the Veterans Day non-salute and while the photo was not photoshopped it was de-contextualized. Thanks to C-SPAN video coverage of the event it is clear that the picture was taken during the playing of ‘Hail to the Chief’ where it would be inappropriate for the President to salute himself. It was also a Memorial Day observance from May 2009 and not November 2009 like the email claims (the colour of the ties gives it away). The email would re-circulate again in 2010 but this time with the subject line ‘The Crotch Salute Returns’, owing to the placement of the President’s hands folded over in the front of his body. All of this information is easily accessible on multiple non-partisan websites dedicated to debunking falsehoods on the Internet. Some of these websites include the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s FactCheck.org, urbanlegends and Snopes.com. Despite this information being a click away these salutes continue to be circulated and debated.

When confronted with whether or not these pictures are factually accurate there are a myriad of responses that most predominantly include ignoring the poster or cutting straight to the emotion the picture holds (there is also the counter with emotional statistics like ‘80% of the military hate Obama’, Susan Lee 2012). Whether the memes are factually accurate or not is deemed less important than if they are emotionally true. ‘You are all absolutely correct. Forget all the photos, real or not. Let’s look at our economy, wasted money, quadrupled gas prices, lack of security for our country, and the list goes on and on. If Obama was a Republican I would STILL not be voting for him. He truly scares me’ (NatalieLockwood, 2012). Clearly the basic emotion of fear is being exhibited with no care about the veracity of the memes. The Veterans Day non-salute is the first in a mimetic chain that interlocks the individual memes. When the non-salute is repurposed as ‘the crotch salute returns’, this is an intertextual reference to an actual photo taken in 2007 of then Senator and candidate Obama not holding his hand to his heart during the playing of the ‘Star Spangled Banner’. Obama’s hands are again resting in front of him. The accompanying text with the photo erroneously claims that Obama ‘refused’ to put his hand over his heart during the pledge of allegiance.

This fuels a subset of memes devoted to whenever Obama salutes or bows to any foreign dignitary, especially to the Saudi King. In 2009, the Veterans Day non-salute was juxtaposed with a picture of Obama holding his hand over his heart during the playing of the Russian national anthem (thanks to the event being recorded we know that Obama was holding his hand over his heart during the playing of the U.S. national anthem and not the Russian). Comments surrounding these posts repeated claims of Obama being unpatriotic, not American, different, not one of us, and even alien. Certainly there is an emotional need to distance Obama from being a true American and 'one of us' through othering and dehumanisation, oftentimes with racialised overtones.

The 'Left-Handed Salute' is a late 2009 photoshopped picture of Obama side by side with the First Lady Michelle Obama both saluting with the left hand. Unfortunately the hoaxer forgot about a US Marine in the background whose decorations are on the wrong side of his uniform and which side the First Lady typically parts her hair. The original photograph was taken in 2009 at the White House in observance of the September 11th attacks. This same kind of hoax was perpetrated against then Senate majority leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota. A rational response that enforces deliberative democracy fails to recognise that this isn't about validity or true and false but how 'power is constitutive of social relations' (Wenman, 2003).

Internet 'feeds' on Twitter and Facebook instill a temporal, linear logic to the flow of information and sociality. Hall (1973) suggests that the negotiated code of communication 'contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule.' I liken this to the feeds of Twitter and Facebook pages, particularly the Facebook wall. Facebook, through the addition of Timeline to the Facebook profile, institutes a temporal logic that structures communication patterns and sociality. Within these social networking logics, at the situational level, there is a creative public making their own ground rules and then flouting some of those rules through trolling.

The feed is a hybrid state between the interpersonal and mass. It is comprised of the interpersonal sharing of messages that is distinct and unique for the individual consumer but also is a new form of mass mediated communication as the feed is a manifestation of broader societal culture. The linearity of the feed keeps the flow of information moving and heightens the audience's need to keep up with the artificially sped up pace of the feed. This architecture favours a platform where emotions are expressed through images rather than a more deliberative space. Audiences still engage with the flow at different levels, some are more passive consumers of the aggregated content and mimetic communication,

while others in the prosumer mold (Bruns, 2008) are actively engaged in a participatory flow where they are contributors to social networks. The intertextuality of memes, much like television, constructs an 'ironic knowingness' (Caughie, 1990) where the audience is positioned as a dominant spectator capable of mastering popular intertextuality. Social networking sites no longer constitute simply third spaces but rather Facebook and memes, as an agonistic public, are the method through which we enter the Internet and inhabit our politics. Memes and social media can be thought of as political second screens.

## Discussion

Circulation and consumption within social media are collapsing, interconnected processes. When someone decides to continue the circulation of an image, idea, or Obama meme, by liking or sharing on Facebook they are engaged in an action of articulation that can be highly political. When sharing these salutes users would regularly add their own message to the content that re-purposes and rearticulates the content within the communicative circuit. Often these emotions can only become public because of their mimetic form and sterilised partial anonymity. You can post or share a meme while still maintaining some distance to the idea being expressed, something you couldn't do if you were to post the message as your own voice.

*'Sorry if this offends anyone or starts a political riot on here.. but man this crap just turns my stomach. Get off the effing phone and salute the men who protect our country. Why a disrespectful butt!!'* (Brazir Cobb, 2012)

Memes allow political messaging to take the form of just doing it for the 'lulz'. This is why we can label this practice 'Obama Trolling' because despite an underlying political value being articulated the sharing of a meme affords the user proper distance from the actual content of the message. We can associate ourselves with the meme while maintaining plausible deniability. We can be trolling without being trolls.

Having shared many pro-Obama materials within my social network of many conservatives and libertarians I have become aware of how these messages expose contradictions and antagonisms within my own personal social network that I had never anticipated. Social networks are not static entities but dynamic enablers of sociality, yet, constituted through these antagonisms or contradictions all the way down. My participant observation led me to see that people started to self-censor as they became aware that divergent viewpoints

existed in their social network. Forwarded email and even blog postings don't construct an interpersonal awareness at the same level as social networks. Repeatedly users publicly declared that they were going to return their use of Facebook back to what it was 'properly' intended for—the posting of family pictures and updates. Often this distancing from politics only lasted for a couple of days, sometimes only a couple of hours. I was surprised to feel a great degree of social anxiety about my postings and the compulsion to self-censor. I was paranoid that my friend count was steadily declining due to un-friending and worried that my regular postings weren't generating as many likes or comments as before. While at first appearing antithetical, memes and trolling can promote the possibility of dialogue—a dialogue that unearths deeply seeded emotions. Rather than worrying about censoring a Navy SEAL meme that is critical of Obama's handling of Benghazi and removing it from Facebook (Hawkins, 2012), we should trust that unlike the closed system of email an agonistic politics within social networks can be healthy.

When Republican Representative Todd Akin stated in the midst of a competitive campaign for the Missouri Senate his belief in 'legitimate rape' he ignited a public outcry. While this was a horrible thing to have said, the conflict did serve to bring these beliefs long held by a portion of the conservative population into the public arena where they were shot down. However, without the Tea Party faction of the Republican Party backing a candidate like Akin we could not, as a broader society, have processed those beliefs. The sharing of memes, on a small scale, performs this same function. There is a long-standing debate between those who take a more Habermasian approach and conceptualize the public sphere as a rational space for deliberative democracy as opposed to those who prefer an agonistic public sphere (Mouffe, 1999). What is lacking in the deliberative democracy model, especially when applied to online spaces, is an acknowledgement of trolling as a part of the everyday life of the Internet. Mimetic political communication spread through social networks provides a shared symbolic world that can potentially transform 'antagonism into constructive agonism' (Wenman, 2003). Much lamenting about misinformation comes from viewing the public sphere only from a rational lens, whereas a focus on an agonistic politics could see this misinformation as an articulation of an otherwise neglected social or political value or identity. Ryan (2012) finds that online experiments that evoke the emotion of anger in participants actually increase their proclivity to seek out more political information. The question we should be focusing on is not whether or not those sharing memes were dupes and victims of a false misinformation campaign, rather the important question is what are the underlying emotions being articulated through the techno-cultural practice of Obama Trolling. Our social networks are agonistic spaces and produce an agonistic, constitutive, and generative politics we should embrace.

## Biographical note

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issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

## FCJ-166 'Change name to No One. Like people's status' Facebook Trolling and Managing Online Personas

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### Abstract:

In this article I focus on both the actual operations and actions of trolling and how trolls are or are not defined by Facebook's various discourse networks from FAQs to Risk Factor documents and surrounding newspaper articles. The empirical cases are discussed in the context of affect theory and Gabriel Tarde's social theory which has been recently adapted to the analysis of network culture by Tony Sampson. These theoretical thresholds are used to address the operations of human and non-human actors involved in Facebook user participation, which Facebook trolling is part of.

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Whitney Phillips (2012: 3) has recently argued that in order to understand trolls and trolling we should focus on 'what trolls do' and how the behaviour of trolls 'fit[s] in and emerge[s] alongside dominant ideologies.' [1] For Phillips dominant ideologies are connected to the 'corporate media logic.' Her point is that social media platforms are not objective or 'neutral', but function according to certain cultural and economic logic and reproduce that logic through the platforms at various levels. [2]

The premise, which I will build on in this article, is that the logic of a social media platform can be explored through the troll. In the following I will discuss how trolls and trolling operate alongside Facebook's politics and practices of user participation and user agency. I provide a material "close reading" of two particular types of trolls and trolling within Facebook – the RIP troll and the doppelgänger troll. Empirically, the article focuses on both the actual operations and actions of these types of trolling and how trolls are or are not defined by Facebook's various discourse networks.

The point is that trolls may be aberrant to regular Facebook users to the extent that their behaviour departs from the norm but not anomalous since they belong to Facebook in their own particular ways. For example a simple and widely spread meme suggests that one way to troll on Facebook would simply be by changing the user name to "No One" and then liking other peoples statuses. If one appears as "No One", then it is "No One" who likes your Facebook status or "No One" who recommends a link. In this example the troll is undertaking basic Facebook actions but also exploiting Facebook's real name policy and using anonymity as their advantage. The troll is furthermore exploiting platform's functions for social interaction to build a Facebook specific trolling performance. In short trolls' behaviour emerges from the same logic Facebook use to manage online personas.



Figure 1. Image Source: <http://www.rottenecards.com/card/52216/to-do-list-1-change-facebook>

By paying attention to Facebook trolls and trolling we are able to better grasp the logic and conditions of what is at stake when we are using social media sites. Trolls and trolling are discussed here especially in the context of affect theory and a specific reading of Gabriel Tarde's (1903; 2012) social theory, which has recently been adapted to studies of network culture by Tony Sampson (2012). These theoretical thresholds are used to address the operations of human and non-human actors involved in the scheme of user participation that Facebook trolling also represents. Furthermore a specific emphasis is given to the Tardean inspired idea of affective construction of the social, and examining different powers that are mobilized when trolls and trolling potentially occurs.

## Whoever

Let me begin with a simple question: how does Facebook define trolls? First off querying the words "troll" or "trolling" in Facebook Help Center does not give any results. Neither does trolls or trolling exist in Facebook's rules, regulations or instructions. In fact Facebook does not seem to officially recognise trolls or trolling at all. Despite the lack of any official recognition by Facebook regarding trolls and trolling practices various scholars have analysed or at least noted that such practices take place on the platform (see Phillips, 2011; Paasonen, 2011; Paasonen, Forthcoming). [\[3\]](#)

To get deeper into this problematic let me introduce two examples that have been identified as Facebook trolling by different publics. First the so called Facebook RIP trolling cases, identified by the press and researchers alike, targeting recently deceased Facebook users have recently gained popular attention (see Morris, 2011; Phillips, 2011). One of the most famous cases took place in the UK where a RIP troll was hunted down and arrested by police, named in public, jailed for 18 weeks and banned from social media use for a period of five years. What did the troll actually do? As Morris (2011) explains in his newspaper story the troll for example 'defaced pictures of her [the deceased], adding crosses over her eyes and stitches over her forehead. One caption underneath a picture of flowers at the crash site read: "Used car for sale, one useless owner." In another event the troll created a fake tribute page for the deceased, sent harassing content to the official memorial pages and posted pictures that were found offensive and desecrated the memory of the deceased (Morris, 2011). [\[4\]](#)

Trolling, however, does not always need to be so extreme. A more mundane and playful way of trolling is demonstrated in the second example found from an imgur.com thread that goes by the name 'facebook trolling at its best.' It presents a simple doppelgänger troll. The troll looks for people with the same name from Facebook. Then he replicates their profile picture, makes it his own and sends a friend request to the person whose picture he is imitating. [5]



Figure 2. The doppelgänger troll operates with his or her real name and real account but the image is a replication of an image of another person. A screenshot of an image at <http://imgur.com/gallery/y5S2S>

These cases can be approached from at least two angles. Firstly trolling here resembles the operations of impression management (see Goffman, 1990). It is a way to present the self in network culture through expressions that one gives and is given off (Papacharissi, 2002: 644). Secondly trolling is also a public performance. As the case of RIP trolling points out trolling targets the impressions of the others and the self-identity of the troll may be anonymous or a mere vehicle that is used to produce different affective relations.

Evidently, these two angles are intertwined. Susanna Paasonen (Forthcoming) notes that trolling is ‘behaviour that can be best defined as intentional provocation of other users, as by posing opinions and views that one does not actually hold, or by pretending simplicity or literalness.’ Trolling is about addressing particular publics and user groups. Trolling presupposes a public and tries to conjure it into being through different actions (see Warner, 2002: 51). Here impression management connects to social engineering. For example Judith Donath’s (1999) early definition of trolling points towards this direction. Donath (1999: 43) sees online trolling in particular as a game of playing with other users and issues of trust, conventions and identities:

*Trolling is a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players. The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns [...] A troll can disrupt the discussion on a newsgroup, disseminate bad advice, and damage the feeling of trust in the newsgroup community. Furthermore, in a group that has become sensitized to trolling – where the rate of deception is high – many honestly naïve questions may be quickly rejected as trollings.*

Trolling-through-deception is just one means and method through which trolling occurs. Also Donath implies that trolling is dependable not only about how the self is represented online but also about different conditions where it takes place. As Michael Warner (2002: 75) points out publics do not self-organise arbitrarily around discourses but their participants are selected through pre-existing channels and forms of circulation such as ‘shared social space’, ‘topical concerns’ or ‘intergeneric references.’

RIP trolls provoke their publics by breaking the cultural norms of dealing with the deceased. Furthermore RIP trolls operate in a social space of a Facebook memorial pages where the grievors are already gathered to remember the deceased. In these spaces trolls may appear like regular users or even be regular users but in some way their behaviour does not fit perfectly with the norms (which can be explicit or implicit) of the platform where the participation takes place. Thus trolling is not so much about who you are but who you become. It is an identity or position one adopts.

In the case of the doppelgänger troll the adaptation of particular identity in order to provoke responses is more obvious. The troll impersonates the target of trolling by mimicking their profile picture and starts harassing them with friend requests. Such identity performance is not, in fact, missing from Facebook’s vocabulary, but rather described as a direct violation of their terms of service. According to Facebook Rules and Regulations

(Facebook c) a Facebook user account should always be a portrayal of the terrestrial self; only one personal user account is allowed, the user must appear with their own name, the user is not allowed to misrepresent their identity or appear as another user. Facebook has the right to stop providing all or part of Facebook to any user account that violates Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities or otherwise creates risk or possible legal exposure for them (Facebook c).

Thus trolls and trolling are not only missing from Facebook's vocabulary but they and their actions such as using fake names, generating fake Facebook profiles bring us to the limits of Facebook user participation and user engagement. The actions described in RIP trolling and doppelgänger trolling for example are actions that allow Facebook to disable user accounts. [\[6\]](#)

Whether or not a violation against the terms of service the self-identity of trolls remains vague. This vagueness is a part of who trolls are (see also Phillips, 2012: 4). Thus to ask about the identity of trolls is largely irrelevant; identity becomes the material through which trolling practices operate. 'Trolls are people who act like trolls, and talk like trolls, and troll like trolls because they've chosen to adopt that identity' (Phillips, 2012: 12). Consequently 'Change name to No One. Like peoples status,' the meme described in the introduction of this article, is not a harmless joke but in fact points directly to the violation of Facebook's foundations of social media;

*We believe that using your real name, connecting to your real friends, and sharing your genuine interests online create more engaging and meaningful experiences. Representing yourself with your authentic identity online encourages you to behave with the same norms that foster trust and respect in your daily life offline. Authentic identity is core to the Facebook experience, and we believe that it is central to the future of the web. Our terms of service require you to use your real name and we encourage you to be your true self online, enabling us and Platform developers to provide you with more personalized experiences. (Facebook d: 2.)*

While one could easily argue that in social media our identity is always managed and performed rather than represents any "real" or "actual" identity, trolls and trolling highlight just how fictitious and performative online identities can be. Trolls are the negation of the demand for authentic identity. Trolls do not have any or they make it irrelevant. In fact who are trolls is a question that cannot be answered with terrestrial identity. Anyone can become a troll by simply trolling. For the same reason, Facebook cannot and will not define trolls. Trolls are whoever.

While the trolls, in their whoeverness, are excluded from the platform I intend to show in the following pages that “the whoever” has a particular role for Facebook. However, instead of focusing only on trolls I will explore how the logic of troll is corresponded with the logic of Facebook. In specific I will explore the questions of affect, data and identity, which for me are the key terms in defining this relation.

## Affect and Algorithm

According to *The Guardian* the US military is developing an ‘online persona management service’ to ‘secretly manipulate social media sites by using fake online personas to influence internet conversations and spread pro-American propaganda’ (Fielding and Cobain, 2011). While this service may or may not exist it is clear that Facebook would be a very powerful platform for such affective content to spread, amplify and become contagious. Consider the RIP trolls. They mobilize negative affects and presumably want people to respond to their posts. Facebook does not only offer multiple ways to spread those messages from status updates to posted photos but also offers many options to display the responses in different forms from liking to commenting, sharing and even reporting the post as a spam. Consequently while “one user account” and “real name” policies might suggest otherwise, I argue that “online persona management” for Facebook is not as much about controlling individuals as controlling the things that spread and become affective on their site.

To discuss this affective dimension of Facebook I will refer to a very specific idea of affectivity developed by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde circa 1900 and modelled to our current network culture by Tony Sampson (2012). ‘Everything is a society,’ is a catchphrase Tarde (2012: 28) is perhaps most well-known for. With this assertion Tarde wants to remove social from ‘the specific domain of human symbolic order’ and move the focus towards a more radical level of relations. ‘The social relationalities established in Tardean assemblages therefore make no distinctions between individual persons, animals, insects, bacteria, atoms, cells, or larger societies of events likes markets, nations, and cities,’ as Sampson (2012: 7) puts it. What Tarde helps us to do here with his idea of heterogeneous relationalities is to show how Facebook builds an architecture that is highly affective.

Indeed, Tarde’s assertion that everything is a society and anything can from a social relationship comes in handy in the age of network culture and social media in particular since it can be used to explain the interplay of human and non-human operators in the

forming of mediated social relationships. [7] The point of convergence in our current social media landscape and Tarde's thought deals with subjectivity. Tarde grounds his thought in the semi-conscious nature of human subjects that 'sleepwalk through everyday life mesmerized and contaminated by the fascinations of their social environment.' (Sampson, 2012: 13). With states that indicate a half-awake consciousness, like hypnosis or somnambulism Tarde (1903: 77) wants to describe how social relations and social subjectivities are constituted in relation to other people, the surrounding environment and other objects. The subjectivity of a somnambulist is a subjectivity of the whoever. The half-wake state indicates a condition where the subject is receptive for suggestions and acts according to them. It is not an intentional rational subject—at least not entirely. Instead it is a subjectivity that 'is open to the magnetizing, mesmerizing and contaminating affects of the others' that take place in relational encounters (Sampson, 2012: 29).

According to Sampson (2012: 5) there are two different contagious forces of relational encounters: molar and molecular. [8] Molar is the category for well-defined forces, wholes that can be governed and are often manifested in analogical thinking. One defines a molar identity in comparison with others. In Facebook molar identity is the user profile that is expressed through indicators such as sex, a workplace or any other pre-given category. Molecular forces then again are the forces of affect. They are pre-cognitive, accidental, attractive uncategorized forces that make us act. On Facebook, molar entities such as status updates, photos or friendship requests have their molecular counterpart in the affects they create. When affected we click the link, like the photo and become friends. The idea of affectivity is here examined in the vein of Brian Massumi (2002) who separates affects from emotions and describes them as intensities. In his thinking affects are elements necessary for becoming-active (Massumi, 2002: 32). Preceding emotions, affects as Andrew Murphie (2010) explains, group together, move each other, transform and translate, 'under or beyond meaning, beyond semantic or simply fixed systems, or cognitions, even emotions.'

To rephrase, sociality emerges according to molar and molecular categories. It emerges in contact to other people and other identities but these encounters are not only rational but also affective. Now Sampson (2012: 6) poses an interesting question of 'how much of the accidentality of the molecular can come under the organizational control of the molar order?' This for me is a question that can be asked in the very specific context of Facebook as a platform that tries to capture both of these sides.

While molar categories are more evident in Facebook's case, as for example categories through which the user profile is constructed, they also, and perhaps even more significantly, try to build architectures that produce molecular forces. When the user

submits information to the molar categories they simultaneously give material for Facebook to build molecular, affective relations through this material. For example, when a user posts an update of a new job it does not only place them to a new molar category but the post becomes visible in a News Feed and may or may not affect user's friends. Thus what I am describing here is a reciprocal process where encounters of molar forces release molecular forces and molecular forces invite people to encounter molar categories.

One way to analyze Facebook's system of algorithmic management of molar and molecular forces is to look at the functions such as 'top stories' to 'friendship requests' or 'sponsored stories' to 'likes' and 'recommendations' (See Bucher, 2013; 2012b). We can begin with Taina Bucher's (2013: 2) work on 'algorithmic friendship.' Bucher's claim is that Facebook user-to-user relations are thoroughly programmed and controlled by the platform. Algorithms search and suggest Facebook friends from different parts of a user's life. A user needs only to click a friendship request to connect and establish a social relation (Bucher, 2013: 7–8).

Similarly the content posted in user-to-user communication goes through algorithmic control. One of Facebook's algorithms is the so called EdgeRank algorithm. It operates behind the News Feed stream and is programmed to classify what information is relevant and interesting to users and what is not. To upkeep the page and to ensure that it remains visible to other users one must constantly update the page and connect with other users and pages preferably 24 hours a day since other users may be geographically spread in different areas and time zones. Still not everything is in the hands of the user. As Bucher (2012b) maintains Facebook nowadays limits posts visibility, values information, classifies it and distributes it only to selected Facebook users. Bucher (2012b: 1167) explains how Facebook's EdgeRank algorithm works according to three factors or edges: weight, affinity and time decay. By manipulating her own News Feed, Bucher (2012b: 1172) shows that while many of EdgeRank's features are secret we can identify some of its functions and factors. Affinity score measures how connected a particular user is to the edge. These connections are apparently measured according to for example how close friends users are, which communication means (Facebook Chat, Messages) they use etc. Weight score depends on the form of interaction to the edge. Comments are worth more than likes and increase the score for the edge. Time decay means Facebook's evaluation of how long the post is interesting. (Bucher 2012b.) While the exact information about how the algorithm works is impossible to gain, we can at least say that the affectivity of the content can be determined according to factors like weight, time decay and affinity.

Following this train of thought everyone in Facebook is a potential spreader of affective material. Interestingly then the whoever is again an agent or actor in Facebook but in a

very different manner. This time “the whoever” has become meaningful for Facebook. In fact the whoever grounds Facebook’s idea of sociality, at least technologically. Whoever spreads the affect and anyone can be affected. From the view of algorithmic control and affectivity Facebook is not interested in why people become affected. The only relevant history for Facebook is the user’s browsing history, to put this provocatively. To rephrase, Facebook’s algorithmic control is not interested in individuals as such but renders users to intermediaries of affects. Individuals become a means of spreading affects. The social emerges in this relation. It does not begin from person or individuals and their motivations but from a capability of affect and to be affected.

## Trolls

If trolls are whoever and they aim at spreading affects, then they hardly are anomalous for Facebook. They are not oppositional to its model of user participation but almost like its perverted mirror image (see Raley 2009: 12). They are social in the Tardean extended sense of the word operating in the context of community and the technological conditions of a given platform. In fact, trolls emerge alongside what José van Dijck (2011) calls as culture of connectivity. This is a culture profoundly built around algorithms that brand ‘a particular form of online sociality and make it profitable in online markets – serving a global market of social networking and user-generated content’ (Dijck, 2011: 4).

Not only users but also algorithms manage and curate the content we see on Facebook. While we know something about these algorithms most of their functions are hidden due to things like the mathematical complexity of corporate secrecy. Accordingly Tarleton Gillespie (2011) has recently noted that ‘there is an important tension emerging between what we expect these algorithms to be, and what they in fact are.’ In fact he suggests (Gillespie, forthcoming) that ‘[a]lgorithms need not be software: in the broadest sense, they are encoded procedures for transforming input data into a desired output, based on specified calculations.’ Janez Strehovec (2012: 80) goes even a step further and argues that logic of smart corporate algorithms organizing and managing content through software corresponds with ‘algorithmic problem-solving thinking and related organized functioning’ by users themselves. What we are seeing here is an intermingling of the processes of actual algorithms and the different processes which we conceptualize as algorithmic.

For me this is an important notion because it highlights the two sides of the culture of connectivity that is more or less defined as algorithmic; on the one hand we have the programmed algorithms and on the other we have an algorithmic logic of using

social media. I am not making a claim that people have always been algorithmic in their behaviours but rather I am following Friedrich Kittler (1999: 203) who argues that the technologies and devices we use also influence the ways in which we think and operate. [9] Thus, if we are constantly immersed within the particular algorithmic logic of Facebook, we also adapt to that logic in different ways. To discuss the culture of connectivity from both of these perspectives is a practical choice because first it helps us to understand how actual algorithms make certain content spread through Facebook instead of other social media platforms, and second it illustrates how users have different methods to exploit this knowledge in order to build affective contagions specific to the Facebook platform.

Consequently I argue that programming the actual algorithms is the logic of Facebook and using processes that resemble algorithmic operations is the logic of trolls. Hence whoever can become a troll on Facebook only by exploiting how it operates, how things spread, how affects are produced, what the real user policy indicates. 'To play the game means to play the code of the game. To win means to know the system. And thus to interpret a game means to interpret its algorithm,' as Alexander Galloway (2006: 90–91) maintains. While Galloway talks directly about video games the argument extends to acting in network culture in general and trolling Facebook (as a particular cultural site) in particular (see also Strehovec, 2012: 80).

Playing with the culture of connectivity can be ugly. RIP trolls point this out explicitly by manipulating the platform and exploiting user suggestibility. How this takes place has been analyzed by Phillips (2011) for example who examines the case of Chelsea King, a 17 year old American teenager who was murdered in 2010, and whose Facebook memorial pages were attacked by RIP trolls. Offensive wall posts were written on Facebook pages made to respect the memory of Chelsea King resulting in the deletion of these comments but also to furious responses from other users commenting that the trolls were being 'sick', 'horrible' and 'disrespectful.' In addition, pages such as 'I Bet This Pickle Can Get more Fans than Chelsea King' were created by trolls, which for example featured 'a picture of scowling, underwear-clad cartoon pickle gripping a crudely-PhotoShopped cutout of Chelsea's head.' This page got likes from both the people who took part in trolling but also people who were defending the integrity of Chelsea's memory (Phillips, 2011).

It is possible to analyse the algorithmic logic of RIP trolling by dividing it further into six dimensions that Gillespie (Forthcoming) finds behind algorithms that have public relevance:

- Patterns of inclusion: the choices behind what makes it into an index in the first place, what is excluded, and how data is made algorithm ready

- Cycles of anticipation: the implications of algorithm providers' attempts to thoroughly know and predict their users, and how the conclusions they draw can matter
- The evaluation of relevance: the criteria by which algorithms determine what is relevant, how those criteria are obscured from us, and how they enact political choices about appropriate and legitimate knowledge
- The promise of algorithmic objectivity: the way the technical character of the algorithm is positioned as an assurance of impartiality, and how that claim is maintained in the face of controversy
- Entanglement with practice: how users reshape their practices to suit the algorithms they depend on, and how they can turn algorithms into terrains for political contest, sometimes even to interrogate the politics of the algorithm itself
- The production of calculated publics: how the algorithmic presentation of publics back to themselves shape a public's sense of itself, and who is best positioned to benefit from that knowledge.

To begin with, in using a bottom-up approach trolls produce calculated publics. In fact trolls cannot be without a public since the public affirms their being (Paasonen, 2011; 69; Paasonen, Forthcoming). Trolls live for their publics but even more importantly they make calculations or predictions of the nature of the public. For example in the case of memorial pages trolls operate on the presumption that the public of Facebook memorial pages consists either of people who know the deceased or people who want to commemorate the deceased. By entering to these pages they exploit the presumed emotional tie that connects the public together. When the trolling begins the public of the memorial page is potentially captured under the troll's influence but nothing stops the affective contagion from spreading. Take for example the Chelsea King case: the message about the troll's actions started to spread and attract a new audience ranging from Facebook users to journalists and other actors such as law enforcement officials. Hence in sending disturbing posts to existing memorial pages, trolls do not only structure interactions with other members but also produce new publics (see Gillespie, Forthcoming: 22).

Moreover trolls are entangled with the operations of the social media platform. Trolls make our suggestibility by the platform and its users visible by sharing wrong things, misusing the platform, posting inappropriate content. Trolls are also able to react. When they appear on memorial pages, admins can for example restrict who can comment on posts. In response trolls can create their own pages such as "I Bet This Pickle Can Get more Fans than Chelsea King" or simply create fake RIP pages where the trolling may continue. On a general level trolls are entangled with the possibilities the platform has built for user participation. Anything can be used for trolling. Trolling is a tactical use of the platform and user engagement.

According to Gillespie (Forthcoming) algorithms are ‘also stabilizers of trust, practical and symbolic assurances that their evaluations are fair and accurate, free from subjectivity, error, or attempted influence.’ Now trolls are not stabilisers but yet they exploit the promise of algorithmic objectivity. ‘The troll attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns.’ (Donath, 1999: 43) Trolls play the game of trust important to relationships in social networks in general (Dwyer, Starr and Passerini, 2007).

For trolls the evaluation of relevance is based on cycles of anticipation. Trolls rely on sociality that is the affectation and suggestibility of users, and Facebook’s inbuilt technologies to exploit these capabilities. Indeed, they are very good at using Facebook’s infrastructure for spreading affect and generating affective responses. By targeting for example Facebook memorial pages created by the family of the deceased they are more likely to get affective responses than if they built their own pages. Furthermore trolls do not only provide content to users but they also invite users to participate in this affective cycle. A comment by a troll generates new comments, these comments in turn generate new responses. Every interaction increases a troll’s knowledge of what is relevant in order to increase affective responses and thus potentially changes their method of trolling. Trolls do not need big data for their working apparatus. With small fractions or patterns of behaviour they are able to create a working apparatus that exploits the social network and its users. For example weight, affinity and time decay are not only edges for the EdgeRank algorithm but also edges that troll’s use. Contrary to the EdgeRank algorithm, the troll needs no mathematical formula to calculate the functions of their actions. The troll needs only to be aware of two things: that affects are what spread in social media and that people are suggestible. [10] The responses to troll’s affective trickery determine how well the released affect has worked and how well it keeps on spreading.

## Identity

‘Going to war against the trolls is a battle society must fight,’ psychologist Michael Carr-Gregg (2012) declared recently. While for Carr-Gregg the reasons to fight against trolls are related to the individual and psychological effects of ‘cyber bullying’, for social media companies trolls pose a different threat. To understand trolls as a threat means to understand how user engagement is turned into profit in a very concrete manner.

A significant amount of Facebook’s revenue is based on advertising. By accruing data from users and their participation Facebook is able to target advertisements for particular demographic groups (See Andrejevic, 2009; van Dijck, 2009). According to

John Cheney-Lippold (2011: 167–168) marketers try to understand user’s intentions, and consumer trends by identifying consumer audiences and collecting behavioural data. For identifying purposes the Facebook user profile is handy since it offers preselected identity clusters which can be used to place individuals within larger clusters. [1] For example when a user creates a Facebook profile they need to choose different markers of identity such as age, gender, nationality and also seemingly more arbitrary categories such as job history, medical history and relationship status. By making these selections the user voluntarily makes themselves a part of a certain identity cluster that can be used for targeted advertising. Instructions for Facebook advertisers make this particularly visible: Ads can be targeted to identity categories such as ‘location, age, gender.’ Moreover categories of ‘precise interests’ and ‘broad interests’ can be used to get a more specific audience. Broad interests refer to the general interests and lifestyle of the user, precise interests refer to people who have expressed specific interest in a certain topic. (Facebook b.)

Cheney-Lippold calls this construction ‘a new algorithmic identity’ but following Sampson’s division of molar and molecular it could also be called a molar identity. It is an identity that is fixed and built in comparison to other identities.

By participating in the different actions in Facebook, users also contribute to the building of another kind of identity; a molecular identity. This identity is ephemeral and fluctuating. This category is composed of the behavioural patterns that emerge when people use Facebook and this behavioural data can be used to supplement the molar identity categories. It is based on clicks, shares and recommendations that form an infrastructured sociality that can be tracked and traced (see Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013). It can be based on deep inside data such as erased status updates, and things that are visible only for Facebook (see Das and Kramer, 2013). In short, this molecular identity emerges when users are affected and their participation is driven by affects and affectation. The more things there are to attract the user, the more affects it creates, and the more these affects spread and multiply, the more information of users and their actions is extracted and evaluated. Consider for example the mere communication media forms inside the Facebook platform: the chat, the wall post, the comment, the message, the news feed, the ticker. The more engaged the users are the more they participate in liking, recommending, commenting and chatting the more information they unnoticeably produce for the social media site. Affective relation produces quantitative results.

We have here two different categories of user data. The first is the data from the molar identity which users willingly submit to Facebook and the second is the molecular data that is produced in affective encounters with the platform. By tracing the molar and molecular Facebook is able to give its users a particular identity: molar, molecular or both. This identity is developed through algorithmic processes, which as Cheney-Lippold (2011:

168) notes parse commonalities between data and identity and label patterns within that data. This Facebook identity needs not to be connected to user's terrestrial identity or actual intentions. Rather it is based on specific data that is collected and parsed through Facebook's infrastructure; it is an affective identity which is determined by Facebook infrastructure and the given identity markers (such as gender, age and so on (Galloway, 2012: 137)). In other words, this means that algorithms are, with fluctuating results, able to automatically decide based on for example consumer history, what the identity of a particular user is. User's actions build on an identity that is marketable, traceable and most importantly Facebook specific. This is the identity that can be sold to marketers for targeted marketing or other purposes.

This is also the reason why Facebook has no place for trolls: Facebook's business success is connected to the ways it can produce valid data but trolls and the data they produce both directly and indirectly, through molar and molecular categories, are invalid for Facebook. In effect, trolling other users is always also indirect trolling of Facebook's algorithms. 'Algorithms are fragile accomplishments' as Gillespie (Forthcoming) puts it. When trolls deliberately like wrong things in the interface, when they comment on wrong things and gain attention and interactions what happens is that the 'weight' of a particular edge is increased and the visibility of that object in other users' news feeds also increases. The affectivity of the platform corresponds with the affectivity of the algorithm. Trolls and their actions are too edgy for the EdgeRank algorithm. Trolls interaction leads to an increased amount of "wrong" or "bad" data. To be clear this is not bad in a moral sense but in a practical sense since it skews the clutters of information. If Facebook cannot deliver valid and trustworthy information to marketers and advisers they lose them and simultaneously their stock market value decreases (Facebook d).

Finally trolling as social engineering of relationships may end up destroying established forms of Facebook sociality. Open groups are transformed into closed groups, commenting becomes disallowed, new friendship requests are ignored. The functions built for good connectivity are used to spread bad content, bad relations, and unwanted users (van Dijck, 2012: 8). It is no wonder that trolls are excluded from Facebook and their accounts become disabled when been caught. Trolls are not only whoever but they are also 'whatever' (Galloway, 2012: 141–143). They do not fit in Facebook's user engagement scheme or to Facebook identity categories of data mining. They belong to Facebook but do not fit in with it.

## Online Persona Management

Analyzing trolling points out how Facebook builds on a particular model of user participation. This user participation does not involve total freedom for the users to produce any content what-so-ever or behave in any chosen manner. On the contrary user participation takes place within different predefined limits. One of them, as argued, is the condition set to collect representable data from a specific user groups. This user participation is conducted through technologies of what could be called Facebook's online persona management, a set of control mechanisms external and internal, centralised and decentralised that turn the whoever into identified and/or profitable users.

Facebook manages online personas in three interconnected ways. First Facebook has very strict norms and rules under which the identity performances can take place and ways to punish users from misbehaviour; as pointed out Facebook regulates the number of user accounts and for example bans inappropriate users. [2] Second norms and rules are accompanied with the socio-technical platform enabling some actions and disabling others. Third Facebook manages personas on the human level of everyday interaction giving emphasis on self-regulation, personal responsibility and individual choice (Guins, 2009: 7). Proper ways for user participation are built through algorithmic control coded to the platform. The ways to act are given for the users and emphasised by the interface. The impressions of the self are built according to the possibilities provided by the platform.

Obviously, as pointed out in this article, this online persona management is exploited by the trolls in numerous ways from manipulating one's own identity to stealing others. In their very nature of whoeverness and whateverness trolls are both the amplification and the corruption of Facebook's mission statement (Facebook a) 'to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected.' They are a product of social media technologies of user participation and user engagement. No one participates more than a troll, no one is more engaged in the technology itself, technology that allows the troll to build an audience and to spread the message across the platform and shake the somnolent being of likers, friends and followers with affects that run through them and are emphasised by them. Trolls' own online persona management is guided through tools that are both social and technical. They take advantage of user suggestibility and affect virality. They exploit the functions of the platform. Their methods as such do not differ from any other methods of user participation; they use the same functions that are built and coded to emphasise this relation of engagement. Indeed one of the implications of this article is that the algorithmic logic of Facebook is also a code of conduct for trolls.

Could this becoming a whoever, then, or ‘whatever’ as Galloway (2012: 140–143) has recently suggested, be a tactical position that resists the system of predication; that being and becoming is defined through for example identity categories in social media. Is trolling such a tactical position adapted by social media users?

Firstly on an abstract level trolls may be whoever and whatever, but as daily users they are as suggestible and half-awake, responsive for affectation, as other users operating within the platform. The banality is that they are incapable of entirely escaping the system of predication since they participate in it. Their personas become managed, one way or the other. In addition, while trolling may be harmful for the platform, the platform seldom is its main target. Trolls use or even exploit the platform but their actual investments as for example RIP Trolling points out relate to sociality in a more casual and straightforward manner. Trolling may be oppositional but it hardly is revolutionary.

Secondly if Facebook can keep trolling at the current level and restrict, for example, the use of double or fake user accounts then one could suggest that the effects of trolling to Facebook data are somewhat minor. It causes only minor statistical anomalies. To be sure with this claim I do not want to water down too much the argument that trolls are a threat to Facebook because they create bad data and corrupt its statistics, but to point towards the more general impression management possible through online personas. In fact Facebook’s war against trolls from this angle is more about maintaining the illusion for investors and business partners that Facebook user data is 100% valid and that every single thing users do generates useful data. Facebook’s online persona management is about keeping up appearances, the illusion of participatory culture that anything we do has a monetary value.

## Biographical note

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## Notes

[1] According to Phillips (2012: 3) we do not know who trolls are. We can merely make some conclusions on the 'terrestrial identity' of trolls based on their online choices including 'the ability to go online at all' but 'precise demographics are impossible to verify.' This is a challenge for digital ethnography in general; one cannot be sure about the validity of answers or even the identity of the respondents if they remain anonymous and are interviewed online.

[2] Ideologies, as pointed out by Wendy Chun (2004: 44) and Alexander Galloway (2012: 69–70), are often inscribed deeply in the operations of the software and digital materiality of the platforms in general.

[3] This observation is liable to change since Facebook is known to update and change their service constantly. While writing this Facebook does not have any references to 'trolls' or 'trolling'.

[4] Trolling in my approach merges with a related concept of flaming used to describe behaviour that insults, provokes or rebukes other users (see Herring et al., 2002). News media in particular seems to mix trolling with flaming and online bullying. While some authors differentiate them conceptually (the former aiming for the lulz and the latter to cause emotional disturbance) for me they work on the same level of exploited intensities and affects that spread around the platform and alter the social order.

[5] This is illustrated in an imgur.com thread called 'facebook trolling at its best.' <http://imgur.com/gallery/y5S2S>

[6] In short Facebook has the right to stop providing all or part of Facebook to any user account that violates Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities or otherwise creates risk or possible legal exposure for them (Facebook c). A list of violations that can result into disabling one's user account can be found from the Facebook Help Center (2012) and they include:

- Continued prohibited behaviour after receiving a warning or multiple warnings from Facebook

- Unsolicited contact with others for the purpose of harassment, advertising, promoting, dating, or other inappropriate conduct
- Use of a fake name
- Impersonation of a person or entity, or other misrepresentation of identity
- Posted content that violates Facebook's Statement of Rights and Responsibilities (this includes any obscene, pornographic, or sexually explicit photos, as well as any photos that depict graphic violence. We also remove content, photo or written, that threatens, intimidates, harasses, or brings unwanted attention or embarrassment to an individual or group of people) Moreover these violations concern issues such as safety, privacy, content shared, account security or other people's rights. (Facebook c.)

[7] Tarde made his notions in a situation where simultaneously new media technologies (telegraph, telephone, cinema) were introduced and also the conceptions of psyche and subjectivity were changing. As such the situation bears a resemblance to ours.

[8] While I rely here on Sampson's interpretation of molar and molecular it should be pointed out that they are categories used also by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1984). For Deleuze and Guattari these concepts serve a very similar purpose. Without going into a depth of their interpretation one could say that for them molar is a category for established structures and molecular describes operations on a pre-cognitive level where things interact to produce effects. (See Deleuze and Guattari, 1984: 279–281.)

[9] Kittler's work is focused on understanding how being human becomes negotiated in relation to different technologies. From this point of view the claim that human behaviour resembles algorithmic operations is more than a fashion statement. It is a way to describe how Facebook as contemporary technology potentially modulates our being.

[10] Or as Antonio Negri (2005: 209) puts it 'The postmodern multitude is an ensemble of singularities whose life-tool is the brain and whose productive force consists in co-operation. In other words, if the singularities that constitute the multitude are plural, the manner in which they enter into relations is co-operative.'

[11] In targeted marketing individual users are made parts of larger clusters according to preselected identity categories (Solove, 2001: 1406–1407).

[12] Facebook also has control applications such as the Facebook Immune System (Stein, Chen and Mangla, 2011), which is a security system that through algorithms calculates functions, processes data and tries to predict and prevent emerging threats occurring on the platform.

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## issue 22 2013: Trolls and the Negative Space of the Internet

### FCJ-167 Spraying, fishing, looking for trouble: The Chinese Internet and a critical perspective on the concept of trolling

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#### **Abstract:**

Internet research has dealt with trolls from many different perspectives, framing them as agents of disruption, nomadic hate breeders and lowbrow cynics spawned by the excessive freedoms of online interaction, or as legitimate and necessary actors in the ecology of online communities. Yet, the question remains: what is a troll, where it come from and where does it belong? Presenting the results of a brief troll-hunt on the Chinese Internet and discussing the features of troll-like figures in Chinese digital folklore, I argue in favour of a localised understanding of Internet cultures, presenting trolling as a culture-specific construct that has come to embody disparate kinds of online behaviour and to function as an umbrella term for different kinds of discourse about the Internet itself.

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*'There is always need for a certain degree of civilisation before it is possible to understand this kind of humor" Wang Xiaobo, Civilisation and Satire'*

## Introduction: Why trolls, why China?\*

As an interdisciplinary field, Internet research is in the challenging position of having to work out useful concepts and categories from precarious jargons, concepts and categories that are constantly tested against, and challenged by, the magmatic and unpredictable development of Internet cultures. From “netiquette” and “hacking” to “cyberspace” itself (The Economist, 1997), the fascinating vocabulary of Internet research constantly runs the risk of falling out of date and revealing the failure of academia to keep pace with the fast metamorphoses of online interaction. The ephemeral vernaculars of Internet cultures are often preserved by academic accounts in partial renditions of terms decoupled from their current usage, crystallised definitions that become charged with implicit value judgments (Merchant, 2002: 295), trigger lexical warfare around hot buzzwords (Ludlow, 2013), and reflect the difference between specific understandings of the Internet itself as a tool, a space, or a way of being (Markham, 2004: 358). Recently, the developments in research about networked participation and deliberation, Internet regulation and online community management seem to have found a common ground in discussions about trolls and trolling, an attention which is also curiously paired with a media-based moral panic about trolls, identified by some scholars as a not-so-hidden agenda of corporate and governmental pressures pushing towards and increased control over the Internet (Phillips, 2012). While interviews of self-proclaimed trolls pop up across popular media outlets, the word “trolling” itself – both in scholarly accounts and in the mass media – seems to have been essentialised through partial definitions and to function as an umbrella term for different phenomena. Moreover, great parts of trolling research are naturally based on the widespread, US-centric values of the golden age of Internet hype, perpetuating an online cultural imperialism of sorts (Lovink, 2009: 7). What does trolling signify for the Internet research of today, twenty years after the first documented appearance of “trolling” in the vernacular of Usenet mailing lists, a term meant to designate users who disrupt interactions with off-topic messages, jokes and deceptive identities? Is it a cohesive phenomenon across social networks, online communities and cultures? Why should scholars be interested in trolling, and how should they conduct research about it?

In his book *Networks Without a Cause*, media theorist Geert Lovink states his intention to “unearth aspects of everyday internet use that often remain unnoticed [...] user cultures that start to develop their own distinguished characteristics” and to follow the “relatively new ecology” in which new concepts and practices emerge from within user cultures (2012: 10). Following this broad characterisation of critical Internet research, I argue that looking for trolls on the Chinese Internet can work as a case against the essentialisation of online vernaculars and as a telling term of comparison better to understand what trolling means for the people who talk about it, without sticking to aging definitions or umbrella terms that bear little relation to contemporary Internet cultures. What matters most to

a critical Internet inquiry on trolling is not what trolling is, but the circumstances under which users accuse others of disruptive behaviour, identify themselves as disruptors, construct behavioural archetypes and comment on these very practices. In short, instead of assuming trolling as a culture or part of a larger Internet culture, it is much more productive to inquire into “the practices by which humans make themselves and others into subjects, objects, agents, patients or instruments [and the] other practices in which they comment on practices (and on commentative practices) themselves” (Hobart, 2000: 26).

These practices are inextricably linked to contexts and circumstances. China has a gigantic pool of Internet users, and research about different aspects of its national Internet confirms that during the last fifteen years the popularisation of ICTs has supported the emergence of a fairly peculiar Chinese Internet culture. Notwithstanding the common narrative of repression, China’s thriving online ecology of social networks and discussion boards provides an incredible wealth of interactions, phenomena, and events for researchers to engage with. David K. Herold describes the Chinese Internet as an ongoing online carnival (2011: 11); my intention is to get a glimpse of this carnival to better understand the practices of its deceptive jesters and nasty provocateurs.

In this paper, I inquire about the existence of trolls on the Chinese Internet in order to argue the more general point that the troll is a culturally-specific folkloric figure that, after its appearance as the scourge of Usenet communities, has come to represent a form of boredom-fuelled humour and aggressive satire typical of Internet-based interaction, and has been interpreted and appropriated with several different meanings by the users, the media and academia itself. A local Internet culture has developed in China as a sort of linguistic and infrastructural walled garden due to a rather bumpy “double juggernaut” ride of ICT popularisation and capitalist modernisation (Chu, 2012). China’s local Internet culture is disjointed from (but not entirely oblivious of) the US-centric Internet culture often regarded as global, and practices that would fit the general definition of trolling have been embodied in different figures defined by different terms, animating the carnival of digital folklore that mirrors social, political and cultural facets of contemporary China.

Instead of trying to stretch and fit a fixed definition of trolling to the peculiar Chinese online environment, I attempt to problematise the concept of trolling itself through the vernacular terms encountered during a brief exploration of Chinese digital folklore. As the accounts of trolling by Phillips (2011) and Shachaf and Hara (2010) document, trolling already means something sensibly different between, for example, Facebook and Wikipedia. In fact, since the Internet is a wholly built environment where platform design and policy deeply inform the actions of individuals and communities (Donath, 1999: 52), it is arguable that by the time academia produces an account of one phenomenon, the latter will adapt to

new environments, policies and cultural issues, mutating into something different. Hence, I argue that adopting old and culturally-specific concepts like ‘trolling’ to a different online environment like the Chinese Internet ignores key features of the local Internet cultures and results in poor understandings of larger issues regarding Chinese society (Yuan, 2013: 8). Moreover, persisting in the generalising usage of terms without delving into the diversified, everyday life practices of Internet users flattens out local vernacular ecologies and the shifting concerns and circumstances from which they emerge.

This paper summarises and reflects on the body of existing trolling research in order to question its usefulness when studying different Internet cultures. I gather insights from the observation of several Chinese social networking websites and online communities (Sina Weibo, Douban, Tencent QQ, Baidu Tieba) that I’ve been conducting in preparation for my doctoral research, as well as from personal communications with Chinese Internet users and friends. My goal is to suggest some hypothetical directions for future Chinese Internet research, as well as a general critique of the charm of essentialised metaphors enshrined in academic accounts of Internet culture. Instead of adopting generalised concepts and categories, Internet research should engage in what Foucault would call an archeological approach: questioning the totalities that history describes by making monuments out of documents or, in this case, mythical figures out of the trace of user practices (Foucault, 2002: 8).

## What is trolling, again?

Trolls are ambivalent entities in the ecology of Internet culture. The term comes from the online vernacular of the late 80s/early 90s and has been given different definitions by both the media and academia; in the meantime, the forms of trolling itself have changed, adapting to the developments of online environments and interactions (Phillips, 2011). In academic literature, trolls have been either framed negatively as agents of disruption, nomadic hate breeders and lowbrow cynics, or more positively as productive author positions of Internet-based interaction.

The folk etymology of the term “troll” is unclear as to whether the first usages referred to “trolling” as fishing technique or to the Scandinavian mythological creature. Netlingo, an online dictionary of Internet ephemera, defines trolling as an already shifted signifier, a word that originally meant “the act of posting a message in a newsgroup (and later in a blog) that is obviously exaggerating something on a particular topic, hoping to trick a newbie posting a follow-up article that points out the mistake,” and that today generally

means baiting or luring other users into argument: “Internet trolls are people who fish for other people’s confidence and, once found, exploit it” (*Netlingo*, 2013). This definition is quite wide in scope, and it is followed by a subdivision of trolls into different categories according to their degree of seriousness and motivation, showing that the line between trolling, spamming, flaming, flooding and other disruptive behaviours is unclear even to Internet users themselves (Shin, 2008: 2). Online sources of digital folklore provide a rough understanding of trolling, but their definitions are not consistent enough to allow for a solid grounding of the scholarly discussion of this practice to avoid the conflation of phenomena under the same, rather vague umbrella term.

Lately, the media (at least the American, British and Australian ones,) seem to have co-opted trolling as a placeholder term for a generalised spectrum of Internet abuse and cyber-bullying (Phillips, 2011), conflating flaming, spamming, flooding and straightforward online bashing into one monstrous figure. In news columns talking about victimised and bullied teenagers, trolling provides an evocative name for online behaviours that benefit some people and damage others. In turn, this attempt at engineering a moral panic about trolls through a rhetoric of Internet abuse has supported the development of academic analyses that adopt the term ‘troll’ to indicate a generalised criminal or psychologically troubled Internet user who needs to be stopped at all cost, persecuted through detailed anti-trolling penalties or other legal provisions and eventually re-educated through gamified online environments (Binns, 2012; Bishop, 2011, 2013). When it comes to China, not surprisingly, trolls are equated to the similarly undefined “Water Army” of paid posters employed in government propaganda or private enterprises’ turf wars. In keeping with a totalitarian, business-oriented image of China, it seems almost natural to find the exotic “Chinese trolls” in the booming, yet very little researched, business of paid spammers (Estes, 2011).

Academia has been interested in trolls and other figures of online interaction since the early nineties. One of the most quoted and concise definitions is given by Judith Donath, who defines trolling as “a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players” (1999: 40) and troll as a user who contributes to a discussion with deliberately erroneous, disturbing or challenging information, with the intention of provoking a strong reaction from other users (1999: 47). Yet, for the most part, research dealing with trolling draws on both vernacular definitions of online culture and on the media, and is characterised by a suspicious approach to online social environments, often treated as breeding grounds for inflammatory interactions (Kozinets, 2010: 23).

As a result, many of the early accounts that refer to the phenomenon of trolling do so from a psychological perspective on the effects of computer-mediated communication (Kiesler, 1984: 1130) or from a legal/managerial point of view, and frame it either as an immature and antisocial behaviour or as a sexist (Herring et al.), criminal (Bishop, 2012: 161), immoral (Shin, 2008), deliberate act of violence capable of disrupting discussion spaces and even entire online communities (Hardaker, 2010: 226). Most of the studies agree in identifying the origins of trolling in the anonymity, reduced accountability and lack of social cues that characterise online interaction (Donath, 1999; Hardaker, 2010: 215), and are based on similar assumptions about a radical difference between computer-based communication and face-to-face interaction: trolling happens because online interaction allows people to express themselves more strongly (Kiesler, 1984: 1130), with attenuated social cues and statuses, a dramaturgical weakness caused by the lack of the rich feedback mechanisms that mediate face-to-face communication.

Some studies stretch the argument to the point of linking trolling to psychiatric illness or personality disorders (Shachaf and Hara, 2010: 365) or straightforward criminality (Shin, 2008), relating the appearance of trolling to the de-individuation typical of mass interaction online and to the lack of a regulating authority. Ultimately, most research is interested in the potential damage that trolls can bring to a community, social network or other online platform and in the strategies needed to identify and counter them (O’Sullivan and Flanagin, 2003; Shachaf and Hara, 2010; Chen, 2011). Finally, most of the research concerned with trolling—just as most Internet research in general—has focused on North-American online communities and social networking websites catering to a mainly Western user pool: it is not surprising to read Whitney Phillips’ statement about trolling behaviours being “gendered male, raced as white, and marked by privilege. This demographic might not be literal, but it is symbolic—and more importantly, it is verifiable.” This demographic obviously refers to a North-American culture of trolling that, even if symbolic and verifiable, is so only in relation to a specific Internet culture and a local online environment. [\[1\]](#)

A more recent (although less prolific) trend in academic research about trolling focuses on its productive function in the ecology of online communities. As Merritt (2012) argues, it is in their own interest that researchers willing to understand online communication should approach new forms of interaction, although deemed anti-social and disruptive, recognizing their complex and purposeful role in mediating online behaviours and gate-keeping online communities. Only a few recent studies describe trolling as a cultural phenomenon deserving a proper understanding (Krappitz, 2012), a practice of fundamental skepticism employed by members of online communities to secure trust and construct truth in the confused battlegrounds of information (Phillips, 2011) or as a sort of ritual or mock impoliteness with the function of reinforcing affects, thrust and membership in an online community (Merritt, 2012).

In its long journey from Usenet mailing lists to Facebook pages, Wikipedia entries and propaganda spam, trolling has been depicted in different ways, becoming the focus for debates about media control, Internet regulation, community management and Internet culture research. The definition of the term itself has become contested between panicking admins, journalists, academics and self-proclaimed trolls. As I show through the following overview of some Chinese online practices, it is fruitful to problematise the concept of trolling itself and explore similar practices and alternative concepts that reveal much more about Internet user cultures as a dynamic reaction to localised circumstances.

## Machineguns, idiots and fishermen

The Chinese ambassador to the United Kingdom recently told a BBC journalist that despite the Western misperception about it, Chinese people are very open about the Internet, as the fact that China has the largest user population in the world clearly demonstrates (South China Morning Post, 2012). Leaving aside the discussion about the many different ways in which the Chinese government is or is not open about the Internet, it is undeniable that, clocking in at 591 million users in mid-2013 (CNNIC, 2013: 11), China has a huge online population. Through their interactions in an online environment partially separated from the “global” or “international” Internet culture that developed in an online environment dominated by US-centric paradigms (Lovink, 2009: 7), Chinese Internet users have developed, in a compressed fashion, an Internet culture that mirrors issues of their cultural-historical environment (Chu & Cheng, 2011).

Despite the common narrative that stresses censorship as the cause for the secluded nature of the Chinese Internet, I argue that this disjointed development of a local Internet culture is mostly due to linguistic issues. In fact, except for YouTube, Twitter and few other popular platforms, the whole plethora of online communities, image boards and other sites that are commonly seen as breeding grounds of Internet culture (for example 4chan, Reddit or Tumblr) are normally accessible to Chinese users. However, the majority of Chinese Internet users tends to stick to their own language and talk about relevant news items and cultural products on online platforms that are embedded in their own everyday life such as national newspaper websites, video streaming platforms and message boards, often linked to local portals and search engines.

Considering China’s huge Internet user population, the recent development of social networks as well as the still thriving discussion boards (on both small, interest or practice-based scale and massive, portal-based scale like Tianya or Baidu Tieba), it seems almost

evident that some users will, at some point, troll or be trolled by other users. Yet, every time I tried to explain the concept of trolling to Chinese friends online and offline, I found myself in dire straits. Presenting practical examples from discussion boards and other online platforms that I would generally identify as trolling yielded different definitions: “this guy is just a spammer (*penzi*)!” or “he is looking for trouble (*zhao chou*)”, or “this post is fishing (*diao yu*)”, or “this one is an idiot (*nao can*)” – there was no direct Chinese translation for instances that I would definitely regard as trolling, and apparently no umbrella term in Chinese to cover the meanings that the word “troll” has taken in “Western” Internet culture, media discourse or academic debate. Conversely, when asked back, I found myself not being able to explain exactly what a troll was if not through specific, localised examples, that the Chinese counterparts would translate with several different terms.

Apparently, there was no popular term to define practices related to trolling in Chinese Internet culture. Yet satirical, ironic, humorous, aggressive and deceptive behaviour was clearly present online, and was referred to using a whole range of different, more or less vernacular terms. Some of these terms appear to have fallen into disuse, while others are currently used to define particular kinds of humorous, deceptive and aggressive protagonists in online interactions, even though none of these terms seems to have acquired the currency and the number of stratified interpretations that “troll” has received in Western media and academia. Thus, I present here a tentative and partial collection of the ways Chinese Internet users define the deceptive/humorous/aggressive behaviours of other users, effectively constructing peculiar identities in the carnival of online China.

## Hunting the wrong beast

Trolling happens on the Chinese Internet all the time. During preparatory surveys of Baidu Tieba boards conducted for my PhD research, I observed several instances of trolling behaviour. For example, a user of the World of Warcraft discussion board created a thread titled “Is anyone here this late? If so I’ll post some pics. – A 17 years old *diaosi* [loser]” in which she started posting cute pictures of herself. Even if the post appeared at 2:12 AM in the morning, asking about the presence of other users in one of Baidu Tieba’s most populated boards is evidently a form of irony aimed at other users to provoke responses. The pictures posted by this user were not accompanied by any text, and the first confused response “.....” appeared less than one minute later, prompting sub-discussions in which other users started straightforwardly questioning her gender (“Are you male or female?”, “LZ [original poster] is clearly a T [tomboy]”, “Surely a guy”, “I thought LZ was a girl”). Instead of attempting any dialogue (to one user asking “... and so what?”, she replied “nothing, just dropping some pictures to get famous”), she kept taunting other users with blurry or edited self-shots that didn’t give any precise clue about her gender. More replies

ensued, as other users started leaving their QQ [2] or phone numbers, asking for more details (post a picture in which they [the breasts] bounce“, ”show some cleavage!“) or commenting on her appearance (”this girl did not develop yet“, ”flat breast, I’ll give just five points“). LZ kept playing on her/his gender identity while adding little revealing details here and there: a picture of herself holding a wad of 100 Renminbi banknotes (”this is probably boasting... it’s all money I earned“), another picture showing a hint of cleavage (to which other users immediately replied – ”this is cleavage... is it?!... is it?!“, or her location (”I’m in Beijing, Chaoyang district“).

I followed this thread as it gathered more than twenty pages of responses in less than one hour, during which no conclusion was drawn regarding the gender of the LZ. As with most of the threads in the World of Warcraft Tieba board, this particular one had no relation whatsoever to the game to which the board was dedicated, and was instead a typical case in which the original poster kept putting her/his deceptive gender performance to the test with fellow board members willing to be lured into a game of deception for the sake of fun and the thrill of verification (Donath, 1999). On 4chan or similar message boards, this thread would have been included in a traditional “trap thread” joke cycle [3] and the original poster (OP) would have been identified as a troll pretty soon, with some of the classical formulas “OP is trolling everyone” “not getting trolled”, “good job in getting trolled by obvious troll” quickly filling entire pages of replies.

The first observation is that in Chinese internet culture there is no single word for trolling as a practice. Instead, the observation of this single case provides a wealth of other interesting terms peculiar to Chinese online vernacular. Some are words corresponding to English terms (“T” for “tomboy”), while others such as LZ (*louzhu*) mirror English acronyms (OP, original poster) while also adapting them to the local online environments (on Chinese bulletin boards posts are numbered as building floors from the top to the bottom of the page, so that the first poster is actually the “building owner”). Other terms, like *diaosi* (loser), *hunlianshu* (posting self-shots to become popular) or *xuanfu* (boasting wealth) all have a documented history and are consolidated terms for phenomena typical of the Chinese online environment, with no direct translation or correspondence with the vernacular vocabulary to which trolling belongs. In this sense, looking for trolls on the Chinese Internet can be a tentative entrée leading to much more revealing aspects of the local Internet culture.

## Korean Bangzi, Japanese Devils and Chinese Sprayers

Chinese Internet culture does indeed have a rich and fluctuating vernacular, so even if a corresponding word seems not to appear from preliminary and unsystematic observations, it makes sense to actively look for descriptions of trolling in sources of online ephemera—trolling might be less visible and fragmented in different forms of irony, sarcasm, confrontation and bored satire. The English Wikipedia entry “Troll (Internet)” points to the Chinese language one that explains the words *baimu* (white eyes), and *bailan* (childish), then condensed in *xiaobai* (little white), as the most appropriate translations of trolling, stating that the term propagated from Taiwan to indicate users that take advantage of anonymity and make statements without having to bear any consequences offline, a definition echoed in similar dictionaries and encyclopedias in mainland China (*Wikipedia* 2013, *Chazidian*, 2013).

Another term, *penzi* (sprayer), apparently more used in mainland Chinese Internet culture, seems to originate from a street slang term for any kind of gun and from the term used in first-person shooter games where it refers to any kind of machinegun. From there the term spread to message boards to indicate someone who “takes a look around and randomly curses people” without really caring about the content or rationally defending his position (*Baidu Baike*, 2013a). Looking at online usages, in online Chinese vernacular *penzi* seems to correspond most closely to the term troll: a random, unconcerned but nasty personal attack on other users, protected by anonymity—“If I pen you, you don’t know who I am, and I don’t commit any crime” (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013). According to discussions between Internet users, “there are different kinds of *penzi*, but most of them are post-80s” (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013), *pen ren* (trolling, literally “spraying people”) is defined as something done for the pleasure of it: *pen*-ning people apparently brings a sense of achievement“ (*Baidu Zhidao*, 2013). As the user posting the question “Why are there so many Chinese *penzi*?” on Baidu Zhidao (the Chinese equivalent of Yahoo! Answers) elegantly puts it, “I *pen* you, you *pen* me, everybody has fun“. Other users, answering his question, bring up other issues: “who stays on the Internet for more than three hours doesn’t get more than 2000 [yuan a month]. Who gets more than that, doesn’t have that much time to waste on such a virtual (*xuni*) thing“, “people that don’t have any quality (*suzhi*) just go on and troll troll troll“, “it is a kind of hollow, meaningless form of envy”.

*Pen ren*, defined as an activity of playful disruption of online interaction made possible by anonymity and unaccountability, is quite similar to the basic definition of trolling. Yet, at the same time, it is limited to aggressive comments made out of boredom and linked to specifically Chinese elements like *suzhi* (moral quality) and to typically Chinese views of the Internet as an abstract (*xuni*) and thus unimportant form of writing. Even the recurring

statements “there are too many envious people in our country, this is not to mean that in other countries there are less, only that we don’t see them”, “Chinese people are too many, too complicated, there’s all kind of people around” underlie the perception that sprayers are a typical Chinese phenomena—in a generic stereotyped and race-based definition *penzi* are typical of China just like Japanese are imperialist devils and Koreans are stupid: “Korean Retards, Japanese Devils, Chinese Sprayers”, as the user mentioned above concludes his question, legitimising the practice of spraying along widely shared national stereotypes. *Penzi* covers a partial meaning of trolling, that of unconcerned, gratuitous direct attacks on other posts and users on message boards, and the common definition seems to link it to immaturity, boredom, impoliteness and moral baseness unavoidable in such a huge online population, a definition that still remains deeply connected to Chinese cultural elements and a perceived uniqueness of Chinese users themselves.

## Literary fishing

Since, as illustrated before, China developed a partially separate Internet culture that is not entirely oblivious to the English-speaking one, there are many online discussions about the possible Chinese translations of trolling, where users propose words that approximate its meanings while also recognizing that “in Chinese there is still no word that corresponds entirely to ‘troll’” (Tianya, 2011). Looking at some of these discussions I noticed how, besides *penzi*, users also mention other terms like *naocan* (idiot, mentally damaged) and *zhao chou* (looking for trouble) or *diao yu* (fishing) (Douban, 2012). The latter struck me as particularly interesting because lately it seems to be growing in popularity, and because it approximates some other meanings of trolling.

Baidu Baike defines *diao yu tie* (fishing post) as a specific form of writing meant to attract other people’s attention and criticise the blind faith in commonly held opinions (*Baidu Baike*, 2013b). This practice is reportedly common in Chinese discussion boards about military technology and history and it eventually produced a whole genre of *diao yu wen* (fishing literature), fictive articles complete with data and pictures meant to fish for people through careful and scientific writing, which then utilise their conclusions to go against commonly held opinions or present extreme views, eliciting discussion on a topic of interest. Baidu Baike’s entry “*Diaoyu wen*” identifies this phenomenon as present on early Chinese discussion boards since 1998, and characterised by a form of satire or irony (*fanfeng*) (*Baidu Baike*, 2013c). The term *diaoyu wen* can be traced back to 2007 and indicates fake scientific or specialised texts meant to catch the attention of discussion board users and stimulate discussion—a literary and highly refined form of deceptive behaviour with a well-defined critical edge.

One of the most popular examples of fishing literature is the case of the High Speed Railway document that started circulating in September 2010: a fake academic article claiming that Professor Zhang Shimai from the Xi'an Global Environment Research Institute, affiliated with the Chinese Academy of Science, had conducted thorough and detailed research, concluding that the geology of Chinese soil did not suit the construction of high-speed railways. Claiming pseudoscientific evidence and predicting chained ecological disasters, the whole article was aimed at satirising (*egao*) the mass media's emphasis on Chinese technological achievements (*Baidu Baike*, 2013c).

Differently from the playful gender deception seen in the example from the World of Warcraft Tieba board, *diaoyu wen* employ carefully constructed deceptive texts, meant to target specific arguments or themes to stimulate constructive discussions through exaggerated claims or extreme positions. As the attention growing around these texts confirms, with Internet users requesting the "best fishing texts" of 2011–2012 (Guokr, 2012) and collecting them, *diaoyu wen* have become an online literary genre that has no direct correspondence in the so-called "global" Internet culture, unless one were to count general forms of urban legends and chain e-mails. Moreover, fishing literature often manages to troll not only Internet users who directly take the bait and engage in discussion, but the mainstream media itself, to the point of leading the Southern Metropolis Weekend to claim that the phenomenon of online fishing literature defies the credibility of online and offline media (Nddaily, 2011). In fact, the High Speed Railway document was repeatedly quoted by many Chinese media outlets right after the Wenzhou train crash of 23 July 2011, so that a piece of elaborate media satire was employed by the mass media themselves as an argument to attack the quality of the high-speed railway infrastructure (*Baidu Baike*, 2013c).

Given their refined argumentative construction, *diaoyu wen* might seem to be ideal targets for the widely publicised pushbacks against false information and rumours that are cyclically launched by the Chinese government's propaganda departments. However, confrontational simplifications pitting instances of playful irony or satirical forgeries against a monolithic governmental reaction run a double risk. The first is overstating the proportions of a specific phenomenon: *diaoyu wen* are just one particular form of writing shared via e-mail, blogs and microblogs along with countless other items of gossip, urban legends and general infotainment, often to the delight of thousands of users who find the time to read it and laugh about its ironic twists. The second risk is underestimating the adaptive strategies of the relevant authorities: as Morozov (2011: 118–119) brilliantly illustrates, the Chinese government's censorship and propaganda bureaus react in very effective ways in many instances of Internet incidents crossing the borders of official tolerance. Just as with the Chinese government's co-optation of trolling into the by now notorious "Fifty-Cent Army" of paid spammers working as public opinion spinners (*ibid.*,

130), it is to be expected that even *diaoyu wen* could be repurposed in an attempt to muddle the waters of online debate and rectify or nullify dangerous rumours if they grow too big or too viral.

## Conclusion: The value of local digital folklores

What is a troll? One of the constant complaints of trolling research is the difficult definition of the phenomenon itself, probably due to its wide range and the fluctuating nature of its practices: trolls have become similar to urban legends and the digital folklore that they contribute to debunk or disseminate. Even a general definition of trolling as a playful disruption of online interaction fails to account for all the different forms of humour, satire, confrontation and violence that are called trolling by different people in different online environments. Yet, people keep calling other people trolls, sprayers or fishers, and assign these terms a rich variety of meanings that range from spamming and posting stupid comments for fun to the aggressive disruption of communities, cyber-bullying and violent personal attacks or antisocial or criminal online behaviour. This suggests that the most fruitful way of understanding a phenomenon like trolling is not by asking “what is a troll” but opening up the discussion and looking at what people define as such when they engage in communal interaction, or at how do people define and lump together different degrees of interactional disruption in different user cultures and national Internets.

Moreover, as a figure of a culture-specific digital folklore, the troll does not survive translations. An into Chinese Internet culture has shown how the many facets of trolling correspond to different phenomena and entities in Chinese digital folklore, and how the choice of each term actually reflects cultural preoccupations and localised understandings, working as a part of the reciprocal construction of online identities. Minimising the intruder as a childish *xiaobai*, a solipsistic and unconcerned *penzi*, an idiotic *naocan* in search of trouble or praising him as the author of a successful *diaoyu wen* cannot be reconciled under a single term drawn from a different Internet culture. Trolling is not a unique genre of interaction, but has merely come to signify different forms of humour and disruptive behaviour used to experiment with identity, pass some time, have fun, reinforce a community through verification and fact-checking and criticising popular discourses.

What I would call trolling happens regularly on the massive social platforms of online China, yet it has not (yet) become a mythologised figure as in the Euro-American Internet culture and there is no generalised term to cover all implications that it takes. Instead, other terms that cover specific parts of a general idea of confrontational, disruptive

interaction reveal much more interesting and lively facets of the local Chinese Internet culture, as well as about the way in which Chinese users construct a local digital folklore, regulate online interaction, or even question established narratives and lure the media into information wars, resting on a common assumption of online interaction being unreliable, vacuous, humorous, and carnivalesque.

## Bibliographical Note

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## Notes

[1] This remark is not meant to question Phillips' conclusions about Facebook trolling in the U.S., but to highlight the culture-specific characteristics of trolls and the preoccupations of researchers. I found particularly interesting that many recent works about trolling emphasise its gendered character (Shachaf and Hara 2010, Phillips 2011).

[2] Tencent QQ is the instant messaging software most popular in Mainland China. A QQ account is not indexed through a username but through an arbitrary number assigned at the moment of registration.

[3] "Trap" is an American slang term for a very feminine transvestite.

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