PANEL: KARMA POLICING: RE-IMAGINING WHAT WE CAN (AND CAN'T) POST ON THE INTERNET.

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Abstract

Popular discourse and culture on the internet of 2014-2015 is well-removed from that envisioned by the pioneers, idealists, and many scholars of the medium in its formative years. Far from the "early days of a better nation," a phrase of Alasdair Gray's engraved upon the Scottish Parliament Building and often deployed in public discourse on social media during the 2014 campaign for Scottish independence, this past year has seen attention drawn to some of the worst of online behavior, from videos of beheadings, to rape and death threats, to the aggressive vitriol of what some regard as a backlash by young white men against the increased visibility of women, people of color, and those identifying with one or more non-hegemonic identities. Whatever today's internet may be, it is not Barlow's (1996) independent republic of cyberspace or Rheingold's (1993) "virtual community" of the WELL, a homogeneous assemblage of white male late-Baby Boomer software engineers of libertarian bent. With global reach and diversity have come challenges to discourse traditions, cultures, and social identities engaging with each other over new platforms which enable and favor some discourses while challenging or suppressing others. Clashes are perhaps inevitable. However, the technologies and socio-technical practices which have given rise to conflict may also be used to address imbalances of power, to create if not the libertarian republics of 1990s imagining, then creative counterpublics of peer production in which official and dominant narratives are refuted, repurposed, or simply ignored.

Presenter One describes GamerGate as a systemic problem enabled by the ubiquity of the internet in everyday life; argues for a proactive counter-insurgency strategy rather than the passive 'don't feed the trolls' conventional wisdom written into the terms of

service (TOS) documents of many online platforms; and suggests the implementation of a modified Bayesian filtering technique that has been successful in regard to reducing email spam to combat online harassment and trolling. Interrogating the February 2015 memes of "Left Shark," "Llama Drama," and "The Dress," Presenter Two argues that collaborative meme-making can build solidarity and community, while countering anti-meme discourse and the "serious business" of the internet, by invoking collective whimsy and humor. Presenter Three takes on dominant ideologies around gender, embodiment, age, aesthetics, sexuality, body policing, and more by investigating the #over40 and #over50 women posting on Tumblr and Instagram arguing for a complicated notion of resistance through self image re/crafting of fitness, motherhood, and lifestyle among women over 25. Presenter four explores the rhetorical genre of the satirical review on Amazon.com as feminist resistance, and argues for the disruptive and counter-narrative affordances of social media comments contrasted with the conventional wisdom of the comments as a cesspool of abuse and trolling.

Together, this panel presents a range of imagined alternatives to polarized and bitter online discourse, from perspectives of media and cultural studies, political philosophy, counterinsurgency theory, science and technology studies, and rhetorical genre theory. Problems of contemporary internet discourse - both textual and visual - and imagined alternatives are situated not only historically and theoretically but are also grounded in close analysis of technological affordances and constraints of media and platforms.

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Presenter One: Napalm on Trolls: Counter-Insurgency Strategies for Internet Harassment

Harassment of women online is a longstanding problem, rising to a fever pitch with the GamerGate shambles in autumn of 2014. Online harassment ranges from persistent, detailed, and graphic death threats against specific women[1] to increased levels of ordinary "trash-talk" in online gaming[2]. Despite the scope of the problem, and the consequences of violence against women for the victims and the communities that have been targeted, there has not been an effective response. Law enforcement agencies, their hands bound by jurisdictional and evidentiary standards, are unable to punish harassers or protect their targets. Proposals to strengthen community norms or "don't feed the trolls" fail to address how deeply embedded the internet is in the conduct of daily life, or harassers who simply don't care about community norms.[3] Organized and systemic harassment demands an organized and systemic response. I propose

incorporating a Bayesian filter for detecting harassing messages into common online platforms, and explore how and why said filter may work to decrease harassment.

This work combines and extends theories of online technopolitics and counter-insurgency warfare. Technopolitics in generals notes that political values are embedded in system design, that technological affordances channel human action, and that political and technological critique must be done in parallel.[4] For computer networks, the creation of a problem and a community are historically synonymous, with the paradigmatic example being the rise and decline of spam; unsolicited commercial messages[5]. Counter-insurgency (COIN) is a set of military strategies for fighting guerrillas, most recently associated with General Petraeus and the US occupation of Iraq, which focuses on protection of the population and political legitimacy as key objectives.[6]

Together, these frameworks draw attention to strategy, terrain, and tactics. The strategic objective is significantly reducing online harassment, one consonant with the first principle of COIN: that security of the population is key and a perquisite to other objectives (i.e. "smashing the patriarchy"). Terrain means analyzing the affordances and encoded political values of online platforms seriously. The online communication consider in this piece takes place via privately owned-and-operated platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and Youtube, which have design commitments to making it easy to join and post content, and relatively lax or under-utilized systems of content moderation. In short, these platforms make it easy to send harassing messages and difficult to maintain a persistent digital identity in the face of harassment. Terrain, moreso than political or social factors, is a significant explanation for the success of insurgent groups as analyzed across 20th century conflicts.[7] The online terrain of platforms, as compared to the physical terrain of Earth, is amenable to changes in affordances by the development team. Finally, a tactical lens focuses on the kinds of actions that are possible and successful. In analogy with the advice of John Paul Vann, America's most successful practitioner of counter-insurgency warfare, against indiscriminate aerial bombardment during the Vietnam War, "This is a political war and it call for discrimination in killing."[8] I propose that we need automated tactics. To be effective, a defensive tactic must require less cognitive and emotional work than sending a harassing message.

The test I am proposing is a modification of Bayesian filtering techniques, which have worked extremely well in countering spam email. In general, Bayesian filters compare the frequency of words in a message to determine the probability that a message fits into one or more categories (e.g. spam, harassment, purposeful communication). The filter would assess that the message is harassing, notify the sender if they wish to proceed (in test cases notifying the sender can reduce harassment by ~90%)[9], notify the recipient of a harassing message, and if both the filter and a human agree that the message is harassment (the recipient if they choose to the view the message, a moderator if not), the sender is automatically banned, with increasing duration for multiple infractions. As per usual practices, the filter 'learns' from human judgment of harassment, and is applied evenly to messages in all directions. The human-in-the-loop prevents over-zealous machine banning, while fair application makes this politically

acceptable. Those who care to live glass houses of safe speech will not be able to throw stones. New accounts, which may be sock-puppets, will be under the tightest restrictions. Those who do throw stones will suffer immediate consequences for their actions, breaking the motivational loop that sustains this form of behavior.[10]

Users can force their services to change. Today, no self-respecting email service lacks a spam filter. Platforms interested the long-term engagement with their userbase should strongly consider building anti-harassment systems into their services, as Twitter suggested in early February 2015.[11] The goal of this research is to explain more clearly what online harassment is, and how it may be tactically countered, along with a prototype filter.

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Presenter Two: The Left Shark, White Llama, Blue Dress Sutra: In Defense of Silly Memes

The origin of Zen Buddhism is traditionally ascribed to the event described in the Flower Sermon (拈花微笑, literally "pick up flower, subtle smile"): towards the end of his life the Buddha called together his disciples and held up a single lotus flower. The learned group debated the meanings and implications of the flower and the gesture, but one, Mahākāśyapa, simply smiled. Recognizing true wisdom in that disciple, the Buddha named him his spiritual heir (Welter 2000).

In The Agricola, the Roman historian Tacitus grapples with the proper response of the honorable citizen to a media environment in which narratives counter to, or even aloof from, that of the official, are impermissible. Ultimately, the general Agricola's abstinence from either support or criticism of imperial propaganda ends in an untimely and perhaps suspicious death. (Tacitus and Mattingly 2010).

February 2015 was a good month for internet memes; it was also a good month for their castigation as not merely trivial distractions but as a sign of moral and ideological rot from perspectives on both the Right and Left of American discourse. This paper analyzes the rhetorical and affective content of a range of anti-meme posts on social media in the last week of February 2015 and challenges them with a counter-framing of memes as giving rise to an alternative public discourse to corporate and governmental media narratives, one which replaces a focus on anger and othering with values of solidarity and positivity more often mobilized to criticize the current diverse media environment from a perspective of the era of monolithic broadcast television. Memes and their critique are situated in traditions of critical media studies and political philosophy which grapple with questions of the proper roles of popular and official discourses.

Shifman (2014, 8) regards memes as "socially constructed public discourses." Couldry (2012), drawing on a media studies tradition stretching from Carey (2008) to McLuhan (1967) interpreting the role of media in creating spectacle and ritual, often in the service of reinforcing national identity (Anderson 2004). Shifman's work, however, suggests a crucial difference in the role of social media as opposed to broadcast media: the ability of "public discourses" to arise from, rather than being an echo of, discourses initiated by a unitary power source, be it corporate or state. These social-media discourses can imply a rejection of the preferred discourses of the powerful: the 2015 Super Bowl, while a traditional example of media ritual created and framed by powerful organizations, was subverted by the popularity of the "Left Shark" meme, which celebrated a genuine moment of awkwardness in the midst of heavily-produced and –scripted spectacle. Alternatively, they may begin as minor and local media ephemera which capture the imaginations of a global collective of social media users, who remix and reimagine the source material for peer-to-peer experiences of shared community building, as with the "Llama Drama" meme. Or, apparently most threatening to a particular mindset studied in this work, utterly unconnected to agendas advanced by corporate and state interests ("The Dress.").

This threefold typology of the relationship of memes to official discourses (countering, remixing, and ignoring) is situated within pre-internet manifestations of popular culture and their critiques, particularly those occurring in conditions of substantial differentials in power between the "public" in which they circulate and the dominant institutions of society: here, particularly Jewish humor in the mid-20th Century United States and folk

humor and *samizdat* (self-published) literature in the Soviet Union, though examples from other relatively disempowered groups are extensive. These examples are chosen to reflect a divergence of media strategies parallel to contemporary conditions involving social media: use of the dominant group's media to advance, both covertly and overtly, alternative messages (countering and remixing) as well as the development of alternative and oppositional channels (countering and ignoring).

Having established the "content, form, and stance" (Shifman 2014, 40) of the three memes at issue, this work performs a discourse analysis (Gee 2014) of public critical or antagonistic comments upon or in response to the memes. From a broad corpus of comments, key themes and phrases are articulated and assembled into a composite counter-narrative. This counter-narrative is then situated within a history of critiques of popular use of emerging communications technologies and associated moral panics. Finally, a counter-counter narrative, an apologia for the meme is asserted: one in which the countering, remixing, and ignoring of the preferred narratives of the powerful is valorized as the expression of a robust "private sphere" (Papacharissi 2010) founded upon shared delight rather than divisive antagonisms. Here, Tacitus's question is resolved by the Buddha's flower: when beauty transcends doctrine and dominant narratives are set aside, a private sphere of democratic solidarity may - just might - flourish.

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Presenter Three: **FITNESS, FATNESS AND PHOTOGRAPHABILITY OF WOMEN'S BODIES AFTER 40 AND 50**

The ubiquity of social media and photography (Hand, 2013) and the historical tradition of overburdening (Schilling, 1993) women's bodies means that by observing what is considered photographable (Bourdieu, 1996) and sharable about them allows us access to dominant ideologies about gender, embodiment, age, aesthetics, sexuality and much more. This paper explores the social imaginaries women themselves construe of women over 40 and 50 on image-heavy social media platforms tumblr.com and Instagram.

Theoretical background

The contemporary visual economy has been labeled "profoundly ageist, (dis)ablist and heteronormative" (Gill, 2009: 139) and a connection has been made between it and women's feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction (McRobbie, 2009). Women have traditionally been seen as more embodied than men, thus the discourses that equate slenderness and youth with beauty and fitness with moral character, have particularly strong implications to whether women are accorded 'embodied subjecthood' (Gill, 2008: 44) or not.

To understand the relations between the social imaginaries of appropriate feminine self-presentation and the coded structure of social media patforms (van Dijck, 2013) I will look at womens selfie-practices on tumblr.com - a blogging and social media platform founded in 2007 and sold to Yahoo in May 2013 for 1.1. Billion USD; and Instagram – a mobile social media platform founded in 2010 and sold to Facebook for $1 billion in

2012. Both of these have seen a significant recent growth in users (tumblr 120%, Instagram 64% in the past six months in November 2014, Global Web Index, 2014).

Results and Discussion

For a previous research project with people who post sexy selfies, I interviewed an over-50 female blogger and self-shooter about the role photographic and textual self-expression and social media interactions have had in her embodied subjecthood. This sparked an interest in better understanding how the coded structures of different social media platforms enable and reject particular forms of subjecthood.

To explore this topic further, I analyzed images, captions and tags of 20 women over 40 and 50 who post selfies on tumblr or Instagram and tag them with #over50, #over40 and the like. Considering my previous work has found that safe and enabling spaces for embodied subjecthood are possible on NSFW tumblr, I am now questioning the (style of) visibility of mature women on Instagram and tumblr.

Not all images on tumblr and Instagram are publicly available, and not all of them are tagged. Tagging makes one's content searchable and enters it into the attention economy (Goldhaber, 1997) that may bring with it like-minded peers, new friends, hateful trolls, popularity, economic gain, community, all, or none of the above. I suggest that because of this tagged content reflects dominant normative ideologies more closely than non tagged content.

The women whose accounts I analyzed for this paper all tag at least some of their content with specifically age-related tag words. I have no way of assessing what portion of all women over 40 on Instagram and tumblr they represent, but it can be said, that they are doubly visible (searchable content and visible as embodied women on social media). In the limited sample of these visible women, it seems that both on tumblr and on Instagram, age-specific tags are used alongside fitness (weight loss, nutrition) and/or motherhood, with there being more of it (and more of fitness content overall) on Instagram. Additionally, while narrating captions are technically possible and used on Instagram, the women included in this research seemed often to just rely on tags when captioning their images.

In comparison, the three over-40 women and one over-50 woman whose NSFW tumblr blogs I followed in a previous research project never used age-related tag words although they addressed issues of body-image, sexuality and age in their interviews. Both motherhood and fitness have been interpreted as morally and socially successful statuses in previous research (Featherstone, 2010; Dworkin & Wachs, 2004). Considering that age is revealed in images of women who focus on these, I argue that women have to 'earn' the right to exhibit bodies that diverge from the restricting norms of the Western visual economy. Sexy selfies make a woman vulnerable - if revealing one's age alongside them is avoided, it could be claimed that revealing one's age (past 25) on social media would increase one's vulnerability as well. Looking at the discursive tools used in images marked as mature both on tumblr and Instagram, they come across as trying to explain or apologize for their existence.

As these women posted plenty of images that were not tagged with age-specific tag-words, it is significant that it was the mid-exercise images (holding a difficult yoga pose,

lifting weights); beach-bikini images; dressed-to-kill images and face-selfies with a lot of make-up that had indications of age attached to them. Together with the comments - "OMG 50?! Gorgeous!" - I suggest they speak of the "looking good for 40/50" social imaginary rather than the "I'm 40/50 and I think I look good" one.

A discourse of success, pride and hard work is present in the way age-specific tag words are combined with image content and other tags. Most captions – for example *"#awesome #weekend #fitness #insanity #inshape #love #workingout #over50 #healthylife #beachbody #dedication #strength #determined #foreveryoung"* - come across as celebratory or even bragging. The hard emotional and physical work that goes into reclaiming or maintaining a very fit body after 40 is offered as evidence of strength, the necessity of which is never questioned.

Conclusion

Based on content explicitly tagged as #over40 and #over50, women on both Instagram and tumblr seem to follow the same logic of having to excuse or earn the right to make their bodies visible. We can question whether the wide spread of sharing bodies among women of any age are a result of the normative architectures of the social media platforms (van Dijck, 2013) and my previous research with sexy self-shooters on tumblr indicates the possibility of spaces safe for non-normative expression, it appears that the social imaginary of women over 40 is equally restricted within the tagged spaces of both platforms.

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Presenter Four: Do Read the Comments! Re-imagining the comment genre as feminist resistance

Conventional wisdom advises social media denizens to avoid the comments sections of social media platforms that are often sites of abject abuse, logical fallacies, trolling, and spam. In her May 2014 article in Wired magazine, "Curbing Online Abuse Isn't Impossible. Here's Where We Start," Laura Hudson explains that too often abusive comments are considered part and parcel of being online. Problematically, she describes, "online" is now a generally persistent state, with many people regularly socializing, dating, communicating, generating commerce, working, and *being* online. While some research demonstrates that most online abuse is directed at women, fully 70% of online users experience harassment (Pew, 2014). The ugliness of the comments section appears to be common knowledge and the subject of popular imagination. The poor quality of YouTube commenters specifically are the subject of the popular online comic XKCD #202 "YouTube," drawn by Randall Munroe, where Munroe captions " The Internet has always had loud dumb people, but I've never seen anything quite as bad as the people who comment on YouTube videos" (Munroe, 2006). Comments are not always the location of terrible behavior; rather they can also be the site of humorous audience engagement, e.g. spontaneous GIF partiers where commenters swap reaction GIFs in response to a post. They can also be the site of viral innovations, such as when memes are created to respond to specific comments and commenters. A number of Amazon reviews have achieved viral and meme status, such as in December, 2009 when writer and cultural critic Cory Doctorow posted on the technology culture blog Boing Boing, "Just look at this awesome banana slicer. Just look at it," and then linked the post to the Amazon.com listing for the Hutzler 571 Banana Slicer, a plastic kitchen tool advertised as able to uniformly slice bananas. What followed were hundreds of people posting satirical reviews exaggerating the practicality and innovation of the banana slicer, and then many other users sharing the satirical reviews across social media platforms. While entertaining to the many who wrote and/or shared these reviews, the collaborative satirical meme-ing of the banana slicer functions as community building and collective identity construction for the Boing Boing audience by replicating some aspects of the review genre, such as commenting on the ease of use and reliability of the banana slicer in the Amazon reviews, and pairing them with the technology culture sensibilities of the Boing Boing community (Shifman, 2014).

In late February 2015, social media platforms dissolved in intense debate of the color (gold/white; or blue/black) of "The Dress," and the Amazon listing for the "Roman Women's Lace Detail Bodycon Dress Royal Blue" accumulated a large number of humorous reviews that acted as both satire of social systems and identity-building of social media savvy users, e.g. the review by user "Angela" posted on February 27, 2015 titled "Perfect Outfit For a Life of Crime," where "Angela" writes, "Robbed a bank in this dress. Nobody could agree on a proper description of me. Sketch artist's head exploded. Got away. Fantastic." Here, Angela signals her familiarity with the review genre by making a reference to the functionality of the dress in her title, suggesting it is "perfect" for crime. She also comments on her overall experience with the product in the body of her review, calling it "[f]antastic." Angela nods to the virality of the dress and its meme status when she writes in her review that the "[s]ketch artist's head exploded."

While the creation of satirical memes can be amusing, as well as a site of humor and communal identity building, satire can also serve the social functions of critique and

resistance. Jacqueline Jones Royster and Gesa Kirsch argue that social media platforms offer unique opportunities for acts of feminist resistance when they enable the production of innovative multimodal compositions that not only rethink and repurpose genres but also "invite democracy quote boldly into the public sphere" (66-67). Several product listings on Amazon unite features of viral meme-ing, community building, identity building, insider-signaling, and feminist resistance. The listing for the Avery Durable View Binder with 2" Slant Ring became a site of transmedial and multimodal feminist composing for those reacting to U.S. presidential candidate Mitt Romey's description of his "binders full of women," a reference to the number of female job candidates submitted to Romney during his tenure as the governor of Massachusetts. A review by "PenName220" titled "One Missing Bit of Information You Might Want to Know," makes a feminist argument while fulfilling the evaluative requirements of the review genre by writing, "[w]hile this is a lovely, multi-purpose binder, IT DOES NOT COME WITH WOMEN. Presumably one is expected to find women on one's own, or contact women's groups who are supposedly eager to help stock your empty binder with women."

The listing for BIC Cristal For Her Ball Pen, 1.0mm also received the satirical meme treatment resulting in transmedial and multimodal feminist resistance. Reviewer "Courtney," in a review titled "Great fit, but I have a question…," writes "I see this comes in a sleek design. But as a "full figured" woman, do these pens come in "curvy and carefree?" While Amazon.com does have a question and answer section, and this question may have been posted there where satirical questions and answers are shared on this listing, Courtney does post her review in the form of a question. Questions and points of YMMV (your mileage may vary), as in this might work for you but it did not work for me, do appear in the Amazon review genre. In this case, Courtney's question is an expected YMMV in the review genre, but the writer also uses this 'question' to comment on the postfeminist consumer culture that BIC is attempting to tap into with their product by suggesting cutesy names for plus sizes.

Based on these examples, and others collected but not described here, the online comments section affords resistance possibilities by leveraging meme-ability, virality, rhetorical genre theory, and multimodality in community and identity building efforts. Employed this way, comments can unify audiences behind a cause, disrupt stereotypical online cruelty with strategically-deployed satire and whimsy, and interrupt hegemonic narratives with counter-narratives of resistance.

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