This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things

Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture

Whitney Phillips

Introduction

Project Origins

I first encountered trolling in the summer of 2007, after my then eighteen-year-old brother recommended I spend some time on 4chan's /b/ board, one of the Internet's most infamous and active trolling hotspots. "You should check it out," he kept insisting. "You'll like it." Eventually I caved (how bad could it be?), and one fateful afternoon decided to see what all of the fuss was about. I parked myself in front of the computer, found my way to 4chan's front page, and as my brother had instructed, clicked on the /b/-Random board. After ten minutes of scrolling through the seemingly infinite stream of nameless, faceless posts—nearly everything I saw was attributed to "Anonymous"—I was ready for a break. A break, a shower, and a nap. There was so much porn and gore, so much offensive, antagonistic humor, and so much general foulness I could hardly process what I was seeing. Nor could I understand why my brother, a smart, thoughtful, and generally easygoing kid, would find this space so amusing. Because what was even happening? What language were these posters speaking? And what, exactly, was a Pedobear?

So one night I asked him, along with several of his friends who also frequented the site, a few basic questions. What kinds of people spent time on /b/? ("Trolls and the trolls who troll them.") What do you mean by "troll?" ("A troll is a person who likes to disrupt stupid conversations on the Internet. They have two basic rules: nothing should be taken seriously, and if it exists, there is porn of it.") Are trolls made, or are they born? ("Yes.") What is the appeal of trolling? ("Lulz.") And . . . what is that? ("Amusement derived from another person's anger. Also the only reason to do anything.") The boys then began recounting their own trolling exploits, which they gleefully peppered with the same sharp, disorienting

language I'd encountered online. "Who *are* you people," I remember asking, which only made them laugh harder.

Needless to say, I was intrigued. I was also completely at a loss, and began writing my way into an explanation. One short project turned into another, which turned into another, which evolved into full-blown ethnographic research drawing from dozens of formal interviews and thousands of hours of participant observation. Ultimately, I decided to write an entire PhD dissertation on the subject, which I deposited with the University of Oregon in 2012. This book is an enhanced, expanded, and heavily revised version of that initial study.

Before transitioning to the theoretical fruit of those labors, I would like to take a moment to clarify a few basic points. First, when I talk about trolls and trolling behaviors in this study, I do so with a very specific definition in mind: that of the self-identifying, subcultural troll. Chapter 1 addresses this point in much greater detail, but given the ubiquity of the word on the contemporary Internet, it is worth noting at the very outset that I will not be focusing on online aggression generally, cyberbullying specifically, or antagonistic online commentary—all of which are sometimes described as trolling. There is much to say about these behaviors (and the definitional fuzziness they engender), but that is not my focus here. My focus here is trolls who actively and enthusiastically identify as trolls, and who partake in highly stylized subcultural practices.

The geographic scope of my project is also worth mentioning. Although sizable trolling populations exist in the United Kingdom, Australia, Germany, and Finland (interestingly, organized subcultural trolling is most popular in historically Anglo and Nordic regions), I have—with the exception of my analysis of Facebook memorial page trolling, which as I'll soon explain evolved into a global phenomenon—chosen to restrict my analysis to U.S.-based trolling behaviors. This is not to say that American trolls are the only trolls worth studying; there is much work to be done on and with trolling populations outside the United States, particularly those in non-English-speaking countries. Given that trolling in the subcultural sense is steeped in American popular culture and reached critical mass on U.S.-based forums, however, the United States was an obvious place to start.

A third and final point of orientation—one that will go without saying for anyone familiar with trolling subculture—is that trolling can be nasty, outrageous business. That is, in fact, the entire exercise: to disrupt and upset as many people as possible, using whatever linguistic or behavioral tools are available. As this is a study of trolls and their linguistic and behavioral tools, readers can therefore expect to encounter a fair amount

of NSFW (not safe for work) content, including expletives, sexual and scatological references, and accounts of shocking or otherwise threatening behaviors.

This is a fine line to walk. Although a certain amount of offensive content is necessary to the coherence and in fact the accuracy of this study (it would not be possible to write a PG-rated history of trolling), I am simultaneously reluctant to uncritically replicate trolls' racist, sexist, homophobic, and ablest output. Participatory media scholar Ryan Milner echoes similar concerns in his analysis of racism and misogyny in the troll space. "Even if it's done in the service of critical assessment," Milner writes, "reproducing these discourses continues their circulation, and therefore may continue to normalize their antagonisms and marginalizations."[1] In the attempt to minimize this outcome, I have chosen to print examples of problematic language and behavior only when its use provides foundational knowledge about the troll space, or when it helps illustrate a larger point. I recognize that even then, I will be further publicizing what is often quite repugnant content. Ultimately, however, I believe that an unflinching look at trolling subculture will yield better and more robust theoretical insights, not just about trolls, but about the cultural conditions out of which trolling emerges.

Jenkem: The Hot New Drug for America's Teens

Keeping those basic points in mind, I will now turn to some legendary trolling lore, which in addition to introducing readers to the spirit of trolling humor, provides a textbook example of the surprising relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture. This particular story is known simply as Jenkem.

The term "Jenkem" first appeared in 1998, in a *New York Times* article chronicling the struggles of AIDS-ravaged Zambia.[2] According to journalist Suzanne Daley, children in this area are so poor and so desperate that in the pursuit of a cheap high, they've (allegedly) taken to huffing bottles filled with fermented urine and fecal matter, known locally as Jenkem. A year later, the BBC picked up on the "recreational raw sewage" story and cited the *New York Times* article as evidence.[3] Eventually Jenkem dislodged itself from its original context and began appearing on a number of shock forums, online spaces where anonymous or pseudonymous participants post the most offensive content possible, often as a punchline or "grossest of the gross" conversation stopper (or starter, depending on the audience). The story reappeared in 2007, when Pickwick, a user of a forum called

Totse, uploaded a series of images chronicling his attempt to "try" Jenkem, including a picture of a half-full jug of waste labeled with the words "Jenkem," "Pickwick," and "Totse," as well as Pickwick appearing to huff its contents.

The subsequent Totse thread eventually made its way to 4chan's /b/ board, a space already infamous for its aggressive, anonymous user base. From there, Totse's narrative and images quickly began generating multiple iterations, including one copypasta post (text posed numerous times by numerous posters) imploring users to copy and paste the provided letter template, which would then be mailed to the principals of participants' local high school(s). As that copypasta explained:

Step 1: email this to school principal

I am writing you anonymously because I do not want my child to get in any trouble, but I need to alert you to something your students are doing that is potentially very dangerous. Yesterday afternoon I came home early to find my son and his friends getting high on something called "jenkem" which they say they heard about at school. This "jenkem" is the most disgusting thing I've ever heard of. They urinate and defecate in plastic bottles and leave them to ferment in the sun, then inhale the resulting gas. I know it sounds unreal but when I came home I found my son and his friends laying on the grass in the backyard and they were acting very strangely. There was a horrible, putrid smell in the air. I can't believe my son would do something like this. I looked it up on the internet and apparently this was something invented by African children that wound up online and now kids all over the world are doing it. My son says most of his friends at school have tried it.

This seems to be a new thing and I can't find any information about the health effects of jenkem—I think it is the methane and ammonia content that provides the desired high, but I don't really know. Both of those are very harmful chemicals. All sorts of diseases are spread through fecal matter. I imagine it could lead to some very serious health problems at your school. My wife and I are utterly shocked and talking about private school. We have spoken to our son about this and he says he won't do it anymore, but because it is on the internet kids all over the country are trying jenkem and they need to be educated about the health risks. It is only a matter of time before somebody dies from methane poisoning or this leads to a hepatitis outbreak. I don't know exactly what you could do about this as jenkem is legal but I needed to inform you of what some of your students are doing.

Step 2: ???

Step 3: PROFIT[4]

According to the "Jenkem" entry on Encyclopedia Dramatica, the unofficial archive of trolling incidents and images, this particular copypasta

appeared on the /b/ board on September 17, 2007.[5] A week later, the Collier County Sheriff Department in Florida circulated a now-infamous internal memo featuring precisely the images and even some of the language that Pickwick posted onto Totse, and which had subsequently been cross-posted onto /b/ and Encyclopedia Dramatica. As soon as Pickwick got wind of these developments, he distanced himself from his actions, deleting the original post and asserting in no uncertain terms that it was just a hoax—his "Jenkem" was a slurry of flour, water, beer, and Nutella. "I never inhaled any poop gas and got high off it," he insisted in a September 24 Fox News article. "I have deleted my pictures, hopefully no weirdo saved them to his computer. I just don't want people to ever recognize me as the kid who huffed poop gas."[6]

Despite Pickwick's confession and the fact that there was absolutely no evidence of pervasive (or any) Jenkem abuse in the United States, the media ran with the story. In November 2007, a local Fox affiliate in Florida (Fox 30) aired a news segment, as did a CBS affiliate out of Fort Meyers (WINK), both of which cited the Collier County Information Bulletin. Although Fox 30 was unable to find anyone who had ever even heard of the drug, Fox reporter Jack Miller implored parents to remain vigilant against the dangers posed by this so-called Human Waste Drug. Or as the kids were calling it, "butt hash."[7] Similarly, the WINK team was unable to confirm any actual cases of Jenkem abuse ("Human feces?" squealed one teenager during an interview. "Okay, I'm sorry, that's . . . gross."). Despite the lack of evidence, WINK reporter Trey Radel concluded that the story was "disgusting," and had sent "shockwaves" through the newsroom.[8]

Fox 30 and WINK weren't the only outlets to take the bait. In the same article describing Pickwick's hoax, the unnamed Fox News writer expressed concern over Jenkem's negative health effects, the availability of raw ingredients, and the legality of possessing said ingredients, which a DEA agent explained couldn't be regulated by the government "because it's feces and urine."[9] KXAN News in Austin, Texas, suggested that parents take note of any "funky smell or odor" coming from their children,[10] and Kelli Cheatham of WSBT in Indiana advocated smelling kids' breath before letting them go to bed.[11] Users of both Totse and 4chan were delighted by these developments, and the great Jenkem scare of 2007 entered the pantheon of successful trolling pranks.

In addition to exemplifying trolls' proclivity for gross-out bodily humor, the Jenkem story also showcases trolls' facility with what they call "media fuckery," essentially the ability to turn the media against itself. Trolls accomplish this goal by either amplifying or outright inventing a news

item too sensational for media outlets to pass up. By reporting on the story (or nonstory, as the case may be), media outlets give the trolls what they want, namely, exposure and laughs, and participating media get what they want, namely, a story and eyeballs to commodify through advertisements. In this way, each camp ends up benefiting the other, a point of symbiosis I develop in subsequent chapters.

Regarding the Jenkem story, the trolls' approach was two-pronged. First, in order to lend legitimacy to their account, participating trolls chose a "drug" that was Google search–indexed, thus meeting the criterion of online verifiability. So, even if initially dubious, school administrators and/ or law enforcement could quickly and easily confirm that Jenkem was indeed an African street drug. Or at least, that Jenkem had been reported as being an African street drug, by the *New York Times* and BBC no less. Second, by seeding the story with respectable members of the community, trolls engineered a second layer of plausibility—despite the fact that there was no hard evidence suggesting that Jenkem was indeed the hot new drug for America's teens. Under these conditions, how could the local news say no to butt hash?

Given its silly, scatological undertones, some might be tempted to dismiss the Jenkem story as a meaningless prank, and participating trolls' behaviors as aimless and immature. But this position would overlook the fact that the trolls knew exactly how to manipulate the news cycle, and in the process forwarded an implicit critique of the ways in which media research and report the news. Specifically, many outlets are so eager to present the latest, weirdest, and most sensational story that producers often fail to conduct even the most cursory background research—or worse, they do conduct the appropriate background research, but choose to run misleading segments anyway. Journalists have deadlines to meet, after all, and are working under increasing pressure to maintain their audience in an oversaturated market. Trolls' successful manipulation of the news cycle drives this point home, thereby challenging the assumption that the Jenkem story can or should be dismissed as inconsequential mischief.

The Political Significance of Trolling?

Just as it would be a mistake to dismiss participating trolls' behaviors as politically meaningless, the impulse to posit clear political meaning is similarly misguided, both in relation to the Jenkem story and trolling generally. First of all, there is far too much variation within the behavioral

category of trolling (even within the same raiding party) to affix any singular, unified purpose to constituent trolls' actions. Furthermore, the assertion that a given act of trolling is inherently political, or even politically motivated, suggests that a specific argument or politics is the trolls' intended outcome. Given trolls' anonymity, this assumption simply isn't verifiable. Of course this doesn't mean that specific instances of trolling can't be political, or that individual trolls can't be politically motivated. It just means that outside observers can't be sure if and when it happens.

Whether or not trolls deliberately forward political or cultural critiques, however, political or cultural critiques can be extrapolated from the trolls' behaviors. Take the Jenkem story. Participating trolls may or may not have been looking to expose sloppy journalistic standards; regardless, sloppy journalistic standards were exposed. An argument was made, in other words, regardless of what participating trolls intended to accomplish. I build upon this basic argument—that trolls' behaviors provide an implicit, and sometimes outright explicit, critique of existing media and cultural systems—in later chapters. For now, it's enough to say that there is much more to trolling than simple shenanigans, even if the behaviors complicate (or even outright defy) traditional notions of political action.

In addition to challenging overly simplistic explanations of trolling behaviors, trolls' ability to generate meaningful discourse provides a preemptive answer to the question "Why study trolls?" First, trolls' various and sundry transgressions—against specific individuals, organizations, local, state, and national governments, and civil society generally—call attention to dominant cultural mores, a process that echoes anthropologist Mary Douglas's exploration of the related concepts of dirt and taboo. According to Douglas, dirt is best understood as matter out of place, and is intelligible only in relation to existing systems of cleanliness: you can't talk or even think about dirt unless you've already internalized some sense of what qualifies as clean. Similarly, cultural aberration is only intelligible in the context of an existing social system. Thus by examining that which is regarded as transgressive within a particular culture or community, one is able to reconstruct the values out of which problematic behaviors emerge.[12] Trolls' behaviors, which are widely condemned as being bad, obscene, and wildly transgressive, therefore allow one to reconstruct what the dominant culture regards as good, appropriate, and normal.

Of course, the demarcation between "good" and "bad" (to say nothing of "normal" and "abnormal") is never so straightforward in practice. Trolls provide a striking example, and through their more outrageous behaviors call attention to the various points of overlap between negative and

positive, transgressive and acceptable, even cruel and just behavior. Put simply, the more carefully one examines trolling, the more one struggles to differentiate this ostensibly abnormal, deviant pursuit from pursuits that are (or at least appear to be) so natural, necessary, and downright normal that most people assume things couldn't be otherwise.

This study will explore these moments of slippage, and in the process will challenge the seemingly clear-cut distinction between those who troll and those who do not. My first argumentative plank is that, within the postmillennial digital media landscape of the United States, trolls reveal the thin and at times nonexistent line between trolling and sensationalist corporate media. The primary difference is that, for trolls, exploitation is a leisure activity. For corporate media, it's a business strategy. Because they don't have to take censors or advertisers into account, trolls' behaviors are often more conspicuously offensive, and more conspicuously exploitative. But often not by much. And unlike the media outlets that run sensationalist, racist, and exploitative content, trolling behaviors aren't rewarded with a paycheck.

Trolls also fit very comfortably within the contemporary, hypernetworked digital media landscape. Not only do they put Internet technologies to expert and highly creative use, their behaviors are often in direct (if surprising) alignment with social media marketers and other corporate interests. Furthermore they are quite skilled at navigating and in fact harnessing the energies created when politics, history, and digital media collide. In short, rather than functioning as a counterpoint to "correct" online behavior, trolls are in many ways the grimacing poster children for the socially networked world.

That's not the only overlap between trolling and the mainstream. In addition to parroting digital and terrestrial media tropes, trolls are engaged in a grotesque pantomime of dominant cultural tropes. Not only does the act of trolling replicate gendered notions of dominance and success—most conspicuously expressed through the "adversary method," Western philosophy's dominant rhetorical paradigm[13]—it also exhibits a profound sense of entitlement, one spurred by expansionist and colonialist ideologies. Further, trolling embodies precisely the values that are said to make America the greatest and most powerful nation on earth, with particular emphasis placed on the pursuit of life, liberty, and of course the freedom of expression.

Again, this is not to suggest that trolls deliberately forward such an argument. Nor is it to suggest that trolls would necessarily agree with my conclusions. Rather than hinging on trolls' "true" motivations, or more

problematically on their approval, my argument hinges on what trolls' behaviors unearth. And what trolls' behaviors unearth places them in unexpected mythological company.

Trolls as Tricksters

In *Trickster Makes This World: How Disruptive Imagination Creates Culture*, Lewis Hyde examines the trickster archetype, focusing specifically on the stories of Hermes, Coyote, and Krishna.[14] A boundary-crosser, trickster is both culture-hero and culture-villain. He—and trickster is almost always gendered male—invents lies to preserve the truth. He is amoral, driven by appetite, and shameless; he's held captive by desire and is wildly self-indulgent. He is drawn to dirt, both figurative and literal. He fears nothing and no one. He is creative, playful, and mischievous. Trickster also has the uncanny ability to "see into the heart of things," making him somewhat prophetic. But not prophetic in the traditional sense, as trickster spends very little time actively reflecting on his own behavior and almost never editorializes. And yet, trickster *reveals*.[15]

As evidence of trickster's latent (if unwitting) perspicacity, Hyde tells a story about the Indian god Krishna. A particularly mischievous young god, Krishna is quick to develop an interest in the village maidens. One night, he takes a walk into the woods and begins playing a magical flute. All the women who hear Krishna's song are mesmerized and follow its call into the forest, where they begin to dance. Krishna then multiplies himself by sixteen thousand and has sex with each woman. Having had his way with his still-bewitched conquests (the sexually assaultive nature of which is apparently par for the culture-hero course), Krishna disappears with the sunrise.[16]

According to Hyde, this moment captures the "negating strain" inherent in trickster's behavior. He rejects laws of propriety, but doesn't attempt to replace these laws with some other set. As Hyde maintains, "[trickster] is not the declarative speaker of traditional prophecy, but an erasing angel who cancels what humans have so carefully built, then cancels himself."[17] In this way, trickster's behavior demands polysemy—he doesn't tell the audience what to make of his actions. He acts, he leaves, and suddenly there is nothing. Suddenly it's the audience's job to figure things out, to "spin out endlessly their sense of what has happened."[18]

As Gabriella Coleman has noted, there is a great deal of behavioral overlap between trolls and mythological trickster.[19] Of course, this is not to say that trolls *are* tricksters, at least not in the culture-hero, mythological

sense. First, and most obviously, trickster is a character created by humans to help explain and order the universe, while trolls are all too real, perhaps obscured by the mask of trolling but people nonetheless. Moreover, however crude or amoral trickster might appear, the trickster tale genre presumes moral order, making trickster a pawn in a very specific cultural ethos. Trolls on the other hand actively embrace amorality, and are, or at least profess to be, pawns in the service of nothing but their own amusement.

These practical differences aside, trolls harness similar means as trickster, resulting in similar ends. Specifically, trolls are agents of *cultural digestion*; they scavenge the landscape for scraps of usable content, make a meal of the most pungent bits, then hurl their waste onto an unsuspecting populace—after which they disappear, their Cheshire cat grins trailing after them like puffs of smoke. They may not know it, they may not intend to, but deliberately or not, these grotesque displays reveal a great deal about the surrounding cultural terrain. What they reveal isn't always pleasant. In fact it is often quite upsetting, sometimes because the trolls' behaviors are upsetting, sometimes because what their behaviors reveal is upsetting, and sometimes both.

The ultimate takeaway point of this analysis is that, while trolling behaviors might fall on the extreme end of the cultural spectrum, the most exceptional thing about trolling is that *it's not very exceptional*. It's built from the same stuff as mainstream behaviors; the difference is that trolling is condemned, while ostensibly "normal" behaviors are accepted as a given, if not actively celebrated.

This idea, that trolling behaviors are similar in form and function to "normal" behaviors, is hardly a popular or immediately obvious position. Much more popular, and infinitely more obvious, is the assertion that trolls are why we can't have nice things online, a nod to a well-known image macro featuring a hissing gray cat. (Image macros, also known simply as "macros," are images captioned with lines of text. Typically, one line of text is placed at the top of the image and another line is placed along the bottom, though the format can vary depending on the image and message conveyed) (figure 0.1).

The analogy between "arguecat," as the macro is called, and trolling is apt. Like a spiteful housecat whose sole interest seems to be property damage, trolls take perverse joy in ruining complete strangers' days. They will do and say absolutely anything to accomplish this objective, and in the service of these nefarious ends deliberately target the most vulnerable—or as the trolls would say, exploitable—targets. Consequently, and understandably, trolls are widely regarded as the primary obstacle to a kinder, gentler, and more equitable Internet.

Figure 0.1
Arguecat. First encountered on 4chan/b/ in July 2008. Re-accessed for download on February 27, 2012. Threads since deleted. Original creator(s) and date(s) of creation unknown.

This book complicates the idea that trolls, and trolls alone, are why we can't have nice things online. Instead, it argues that trolls are born of and embedded within dominant institutions and tropes, which are every bit as damaging as the trolls' most disruptive behaviors. Ultimately, then, *this* is why we can't have nice things, and is the point to which the title gestures: the fact that online trolling is par for the mainstream cultural course.

Chapter Overview

This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things is divided into three parts and is organized into loose chronological order. The first part, which addresses the subcultural origin period from about 2003 to 2007, provides an overview of the troll space and introduces the reader to the book's major themes and concepts. Chapter 1 presents a historical overview of the term

troll, and describes the slow and uneven process by which trolling took on subcultural connotations. Chapter 2 provides a working definition of *lulz*, perhaps the most critical concept within the subcultural troll space. Chapter 3 discusses my research methods and various methodological complications.

Part II focuses on the "golden years" of 2008–2011, during which time trolling subculture crystallized, and examines trolls' grotesque pantomime of mainstream behaviors and attitudes. Chapter 4 focuses on 4chan's /b/ board and chronicles the emergence of Anonymous, a nebulous trolling collective that would in later years evolve into a progressive "hactivist" powerhouse. The chapter also considers the ways in which early media representations of and subsequent reactions to trolling on /b/ helped create and sustain an increasingly influential subculture. Chapter 5, an ethnographic study of Facebook memorial page trolls (RIP trolls for short), interrogates the rhetorical and behavioral similarities between trolls' behaviors and sensationalist, mass-mediated disaster coverage. Through a close analysis of the 2008 U.S. presidential election and 2009 Obama as socialist Joker poster controversy, chapter 6 maps the overlap between trolls' unapologetically racist humor and "legitimate" corporate punditry. While conceding that racist trolling behaviors are unquestionably problematic, the chapter argues that corporate-backed racism is just as bad, if not worse. Building upon the previous three chapters, chapter 7 surveys the larger cultural logics out of which trolling emerges and argues that, of all the reactions one could have to the pervasiveness of trolling (dismay, concern, frustration, disgust), surprise should not be one of them.

The third and final part, which covers the subcultural transition period from 2012 to 2015, analyzes the ways in which trolling subculture has changed since first coalescing in the early to mid-2000s. Chapter 8 discusses several interpenetrating political, economic, and cultural factors undergirding recent shifts within the troll space, in the process providing a compelling, real-time example of trolls' cultural digestiveness. Chapter 9 considers the implications of the expanding definition of troll, assesses the (potentially) positive applications of trolling rhetoric, and offers a final reminder of the importance of "spinning endlessly" one's sense of what trolls are and why they matter.

Taken together, these chapters challenge the assumption that a fundamental difference exists between trolling and mainstream culture, an argument that is as much a critique of dominant institutions as it is of the trolls who operate within them. This book is not just about trolls, in other words. It's also about a culture in which trolls thrive.

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6 Race and the No-Spin Zone: The Thin Line between Trolling and Corporate Punditry

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, there are two basic categories of racist expression: overt racism and inferential racism. Overt racism is just that—unapologetically, unequivocally bigoted. Inferential racism, on the other hand, is a subtler, though arguably more insidious, form of racist expression. It is the kind of racism that doesn't explicitly declare itself as such, yet still forwards damaging racial stereotypes—stereotypes that are made all the more damaging by the casualness with which they are forwarded, and by the speaker's unquestioned assumption that their statements couldn't possibly be racist because they are, at least according to the speaker, *true*.[1]

The following analysis focuses on the overlap between trolls' overtly racist expression and mainstream media's inferentially racist expression, with particular attention paid to the 2008 U.S. presidential election, the 2009 Obama as socialist Joker poster controversy, and Fox News' engagement with 2009's Birther movement. In so doing, the chapter provides yet another example of the breakdown between trolling and the mainstream. As I argue, trolls gleefully exploit racial tensions wherever they go, and they engage in language and behavior that is so outrageously offensive it almost defies categorization. That said, the conversation doesn't, and shouldn't, end with a simple condemnation of trolls. Just as one should place trolls' exploitative behaviors in the context of corporate exploitation, one should also consider the ways in which trolls' racist behaviors reflect and are reflected by mainstream prejudice.

The Everyday Racism of Trolling

Although the trolling collective precludes analyses of constituent anonymous members—for the very basic reason that constituent anonymous members cannot be differentiated or identified—it essentially functions as

a self-contained upvoting system (on websites that utilize upvoting systems, users express interest in a particular piece of content by clicking any number of on-site approval indicators; content with the most likes/votes/clicks floats to the top of a given thread or post, providing a real-time snapshot of the most popular stories, comments, or content). Harkening to Henry Jenkins's claim that if content doesn't spread it's dead, what resonates with the group will "live on" through reposts, remixes, and conspicuous group engagement, and what doesn't resonate with the group quietly fades away.[2] Thus by examining the types of content most frequently engaged by the so-called trolling hivemind, it is possible to posit a very basic profile of what the collective finds interesting, amusing, and worth engaging.

In the trolls' case, and as evidenced by the preponderance of explicitly racist humor within the troll space, it is clear that trolls enjoy racist expression. This is not to say that trolls are themselves racist. That particular point is unverifiable, and therefore moot. What is verifiable is the observable fact that trolls revel in explicitly and unapologetically racist language. Not only do trolls relish the opportunity to use race as trollbait within civilian (i.e., nontrolling) populations, they also deploy racist content in the presence of other trolls, as a form of racist one-upmanship.

Trolls' engagement with "nigger," particularly on 4chan's /b/ board, provides a striking example of this impulse. Save for a brief reprieve in 2011, during which time 4chan implemented a word filter that replaced all instances of the word with the still-offensive "roody-poo," this most toxic of epithets has appeared on the /b/ board with such frequency for so many years that its use has taken on an absurd, almost Dadaist feel. Trolls on /b/ use it as a pronoun. They use it as a verb. They use it as an adjective, as a conjunction, and as a standard one-word response to yes/no questions. In many ways, trolls treat the word like a floating, meaningless signifier.

On the other hand, trolls are fully aware that this word is the furthest thing from a floating, meaningless signifier. In fact, they depend on its political significance, just as they depend on the political significance of all the epithets they employ. Echoing Judith Butler's analysis of hate speech, which posits that racial epithets always already gesture toward their own history regardless of what a person *means* when he or she uses hateful language,[3] trolls need their language to contain a kernel of hate. From the trolls' perspective, this is a purely practical point. If the epithets in question weren't politically contentious, they would be useless as trollbait.

Although trolls are aware of and in fact are dependent upon the power of racist language, they are often outright dismissive of their role in replicating racist ideologies (the same racist ideologies, it must be noted, they gleefully and unapologetically seek to exploit). In this way, trolls are imbricated in what anthropologist Jane Hill describes as the everyday language of white racism, which adheres to the following line of reasoning:

> I am a good and normal mainstream sort of White person. I am not a racist, because racists are bad and marginal people. Therefore, if you understood my words to be racist, you must be mistaken. I may have used language that would be racist in the mouth of a racist person, but if I did so, I was joking. If you understood my meaning to be racist, not only do you insult me, but you lack a sense of humor, and you are oversensitive.[4]

Trolls forward a similar line of reasoning. Racist language might flow through them, but according to many of the trolls I've interviewed, they aren't being racist. They're *trolling*, which to them is a different thing entirely. In this way, and echoing Hill's analysis of perpetrators of everyday white racism,[5] trolls frame themselves as sole authority over what their words mean. What's more, the fact that the target failed to realize and/or simply accept that the troll was "just trolling" only justifies the attack. If the target hadn't been so oversensitive about "harmless" words (words trolls use because they do indeed cause harm), he or she wouldn't have been trolled; therefore, it is the target's fault.

Of course, trolls don't have a monopoly on racist expression. As the following analysis of 2009's Obama as socialist Joker controversy shows, trolls' racist output is often surprisingly similar to, if not outright indistinguishable from, content unapologetically disseminated by mainstream media outlets. The question is, which is worse? Racist statements forwarded as "truth," which have institutional, corporate backing, or racist statements forwarded by people whose stated goal is to be as racist and upsetting as possible? It is my basic contention that, while both forms of racist expression are unquestionably ugly, at least trolls advertise. The same cannot be said for mainstream media outlets, whose racism is often buried deep within the lede.

Obama as Socialist Joker

On August 3, 2009, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that a mysterious poster had begun appearing on Los Angeles freeways and on-ramps.[6] Sectioned into four discrete cells, the poster recalls an Andy Warhol print and features

a photoshopped image of Barack Obama as Heath Ledger's Joker (figure 6.1). His mouth a ghastly, blood-stained grimace, Obama's skin is whitewashed and his eyes black-rimmed; the word "socialism" cuts across his chest, suggesting that whatever this poster is trying to say, it isn't a compliment.

Despite the fact that the Obama as socialist Joker story had been quietly circling the web for several months,[7] the blogosphere descended upon the *Los Angeles Times* article. Suddenly, everyone was scrambling for answers. Who was responsible for the poster? Why hadn't the artist come forward? Was he or she afraid to be outed as a secret Republican? Was he or she lying low in order to shield him- or herself from the wrath of an Obama-worshipping art world?[8] Or was it something else, something more sinister?
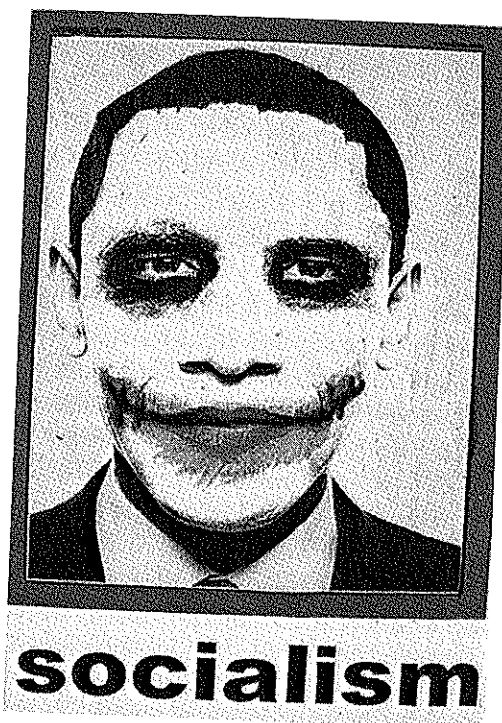
Figure 6.1

The Obama as socialist Joker poster. Accessed via 4chan/b/ on August 4, 2009. Original creator(s) and date(s) of creation unknown.

One possibility the media didn't consider was the role trolls on 4chan's /b/ board played in the creation and amplification of the Obama as socialist Joker story. Understandably so—unless a person was already familiar with trolling culture, and therefore could recognize the image's memetic origins, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to decipher the source of the image. This near-universal oversight was unfortunate. Not only does the connection between the Obama as socialist Joker poster and trolls help explain the origins of the controversy, it also illustrates just how similar trollish output was to corporate media output during the summer of 2009. After all, this was the summer of the Tea Party (initially "Teabaggers"), the Birthers, and the Deathers. The Obama as socialist Joker poster fit right in.

The Joker Treatment

The first piece of the Obama as socialist Joker puzzle is trollish engagement with Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*.[9] Not only did the publicity surrounding Heath Ledger's death—the actor overdosed shortly after the film wrapped—imbue his Joker character with an acute, almost ironic morbidity, trolls on /b/ identified with his character's seemingly motiveless pursuit of chaos. They were so taken by Ledger's Joker, in fact, that they collectively adopted him as /b/'s unofficial mascot.

Further fueling the trolls' interest was the film's perceived memetic exploitability, which resulted in an explosion of Batman-related memes. In one meme family, stills of Batman and the Joker are stacked on top of each other—forming what are called "verticals"—and captioned with increasingly absurd invented dialogue, including one exchange in which Batman proclaims that he just "accidentally a [*sic*] whole Coca-Cola bottle" (a play on an earlier, unrelated meme) and asks the Joker if is this bad. Another popular meme offsets a particularly unflattering shot of Batman in full regalia with any number of bizarre captions, including the lamentation "This is why we can't have nice things."[10]

Trolls had the most fun with the film's first official advertisement, in which the Joker traces a bloody outline of the now-infamous catchphrase "Why so serious?" Echoing the trolling maxim that nothing should be taken seriously, "Why so serious?" quickly entered the trolling lexicon and inspired a slew of spin-offs (figure 6.2). Everyone from Sarah Palin to then-candidate Barack Obama was given the "Joker treatment," and jokerized images of cats, babies, and cartoon characters abounded. Depending on the context, the phrase "Why so serious?" was altered to read "Why

so curious?" (attached to jokerized images of Curious George), "Why so cereal?" (in reference to an infamous gaffe in which Al Gore mistook the word "cereal" for "serial"), "Why so basement?" (in homage to Josef Fritzl, the Austrian man who imprisoned and repeatedly raped his own daughter), and "Why so dead?" (a question often attached to images of Ledger himself).[11]

As early as the 2008 presidential election, and in response to Republican hysterics over Obama's alleged socialism, trolls began photoshopping the phrase "Why so socialist?" onto images of Obama, and sometime after that, "socialism" became the caption of choice. On August 29, 2008, an Encyclopedia Dramatica user uploaded an image that brought the two tropes
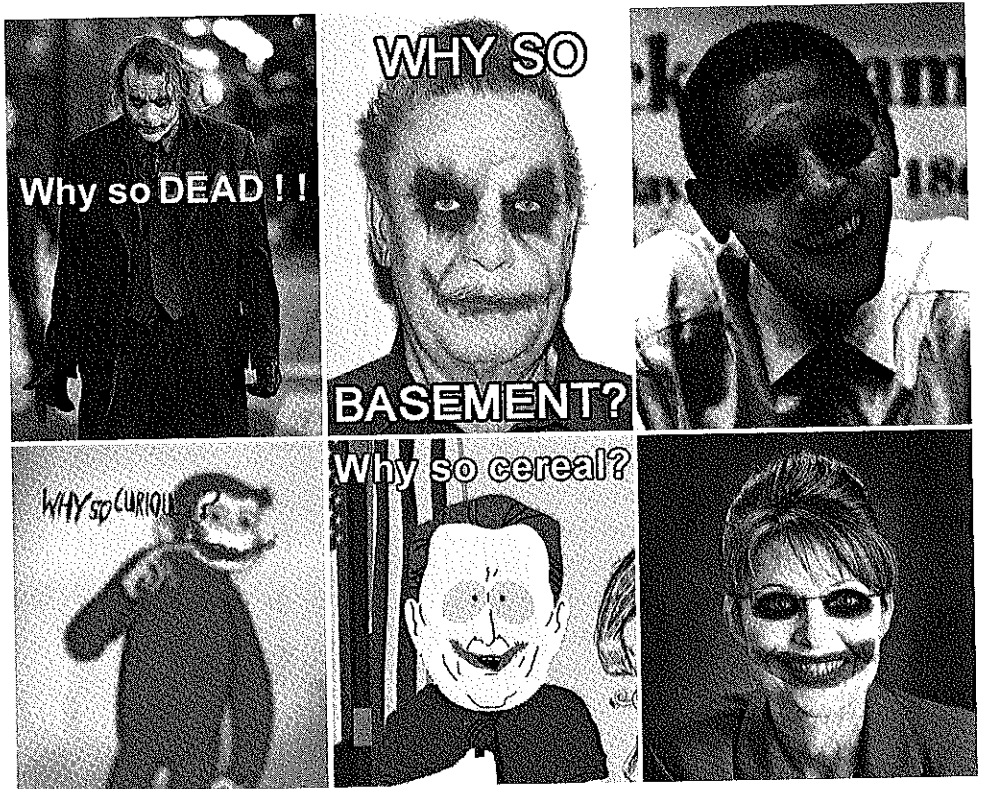

Figure 6.2
Examples of "jokerized" portraits compiled by the author. Images accessed on Encyclopedia Dramatica on September 3, 2013. Image creator(s) and date(s) of creation unknown.

together—Obama made up to look like the Joker, with "socialism" scrawled across his chest.[12] In other words, Joker and socialism (and even Obama *as* socialist Joker) imagery was well established on /b/ by the time the Obama as socialist joker poster story first broke. But this is only half of the Obama as socialist Joker story.

Teabag Patriots

The trouble started the previous April, when right-wing bloggers introduced (or more accurately, reappropriated) the concept of "teabagging" in order to protest Obama's tax policy, the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) bailout of struggling financial institutions (signed under President Bush), and the Obama administration's overall economic agenda. The idea was simple: conservative voters were encouraged to send bags of tea, or photocopied images of tea bags, to their local representatives.[13] These online protests gave way to local protests, which ostensibly provided a forum to discuss economic issues but more often than not served as a sympathy circle for anti-Obama sentiment.

The movement peaked on April 15, 2009, when thousands of protesters participated in local "Tea Party Tax Day" demonstrations. By this point, the movement had lost track of its original message, and protesters, who were almost exclusively white and lower middle-class, descended into "if we disagree with X, then X equals Hitler" territory, a sentiment echoed by the staggering number of angry, violent, and often downright bizarre protest signs. "The American Taxpayers Are the Jews for Obama's Ovens," read one. "Barack Hussein Obama, the New Face of Hitler," read another. "Guns Tomorrow," read a third. In Florida, a six-year-old child waved a sign that promised "We Will Not Go Quietly into the Socialist Night," while a well-dressed businessman obscured his face with the message that Obama is a "SOCiALiST PIG." "Hang 'em high!" read another sign, which offered a list of "Traitors in Congress," including Nancy Pelosi, Harry Reid, Barney Frank, and Ted Kennedy.[14]

The Teabaggers (who around this time quietly rebranded as the Tea Party, perhaps because someone finally Googled the term "teabagging" and realized that it is slang for dipping one's testicles into another person's mouth) introduced this rhetoric into the public sphere; the Birthers, a contingent unconvinced of Obama's U.S. citizenship, brought it to critical mass. Lead by Orly Taitz, an Israeli lawyer-cum-dentist, and encouraged by right-wing political pundits like Rush Limbaugh, Lou Dobbs, and Glenn Beck, the Birthers argued that Obama was born outside the United States, and is therefore ineligible for the presidency. Obama had supplied a birth

certificate and is an American citizen, but that wasn't the point. The point was, that, to a Birther, Obama was Other, un-American, dangerous. Indeed, as Taitz explained in an interview with faux conservative Stephen Colbert, nothing would convince her of Obama's legitimacy—he'll always be questionable, because his father was from Africa.[15]

Given that Taitz is a lawyer-dentist, it is highly doubtful that she'd never encountered the term "natural-born citizen." But regardless of what Taitz did or did not know about the law she practiced, her statement revealed the inescapable subtext of the Birther movement. It was angry. It was xenophobic. But it was smart enough to keep its racism inferential. Instead of directly addressing the president's race, protesters deployed more TV-friendly allegations, most notably challenges to his citizenship and associations with Hitler and socialism. Because unlike other epithets, you can still say "Hitler" and "socialist" in public.

These not-so-subtle dog whistles were particularly loud during the summer's series of town hall meetings. Designed to provide a public forum for Obama's proposed health care plan, the meetings became a breeding ground for further dissent. As Paul Krugman wryly noted, however, and as illustrated by their oft-shouted invective to "keep your goddamn government hands off my Medicare"[16] (which, for the record, is a government program), the vast majority of these protestors seemed uninterested in having a substantive, issue-driven debate. So what were the protestors actually protesting? According to Krugman, the angry mob was less concerned with what Obama was doing and more concerned with who Obama is.[17] Simply put, he's not like us—the "us," here, carrying profound racial and socioeconomic implications.

While many of these town hall meetings were subject to a fair amount of Astroturf—that is, manufactured and often corporate-backed anger (as opposed to legitimate grassroots activity)[18]—the Tea Party and Birther movements represented a very real sense of outrage and helplessness. They even courted a new contingent—the "Deathers," those who swore that Obama was planning to create so-called death panels designed to exterminate every elderly, sick, or disabled person in the country. "Such a system is downright evil," former vice presidential candidate and reality TV star Sarah Palin stated in a Facebook note,[19] and there were plenty of people who strongly agreed.

The Deathers' morbidity was on full display at Obama's August 11 town hall meeting in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Protesters waved a number of threatening signs, including "Abort Obama (care)," "Obama's Nazi

Death Care Plan," "Government 'Care'=Murder" and "Stop the Trojan Horse of Islam." One sign even featured the Obama as socialist Joker image, although in this particular version the caption merely read "Joker" and was accompanied by a separate printout compelling its audience to "cash this clunker."[20] Fortunately, only one town hall attendee remembered to bring his gun.[21]

A Poster for All Seasons

In other words, it was a particularly ugly summer. So, when the *Los Angeles Times* Obama as socialist Joker story hit in August, the blogosphere was primed for a strong reaction. Conservatives, who have sometimes uncomfortably (and, as evidenced in the U.S. 2010 midterm and 2012 general elections, against their better interests) aligned themselves with the Tea Party/Birther/Deather crowd, were more than happy to take credit. From their perspective, the poster confirmed precisely what they'd been saying for months: Obama was trying to destroy the country with socialism, just like the Joker tried to destroy Gotham City. Granted, the Joker failed, but that was beside the point—to a conservative hell-bent on discrediting the Obama administration, the image was perfect.

Furthermore, because the image was plastered all over Los Angeles, right-wing bloggers were quick to attribute the image to an organized, grassroots effort to contest Obama's allegedly socialist agenda. Conservative radio host Tammy Bruce, for example, tagged the photo with an almost audibly giddy caption that proclaimed "You know B. Hussein is in trouble when . . . ,"[22] while on the right-wing blog Atlas Shrugs, the photo was filed under "The Worm Turns," complete with smiley-face emoticon.[23] Despite the lack of supporting evidence, this was the narrative conservatives chose to adopt.

Similarly, after months of racially charged attacks against the president, liberals couldn't help but see racism in the Obama/Joker image. Philip Kennicott of the *Washington Post* argued that the poster equated Obama with everything that is dangerous and unpredictable within the urban landscape, and by extension, linked the president to all those dark bodies that threaten the purity of some Palin-approved "real" America. Forget the ghoulish whiteness of the Joker's makeup; forget the apparent claim that Obama is a socialist; forget the fact that the Heath Ledger's Joker was an avowed anarchist, making his association with or endorsement of socialism fairly unlikely. According to Kennicott, the take-away point was that, racially speaking, Obama is a wolf in sheep's clothing.[24] *LA Weekly*'s Stephen

Mikulan agreed, claiming that "the only thing missing is a noose,"[25] while Jonathan Jerald of *Bedlam* magazine highlighted its "sort of malicious, racist, Jim Crow quality."[26]

Fear and disgust were not the only emotions on display. Shepard Fairey, the artist responsible for the then-ubiquitous "Obama/Hope" poster, admitted that the Obama/Joker artwork quickly conveyed that Obama was up to something very bad, and in that sense was successful. Still, he explained to *Los Angeles Times* reporter Mark Milian, "I have my doubts about the [artist's] intelligence," since the underlying meaning of the image seemed to contradict the image itself, and suggested a less-than-thorough grasp of the issues.[27] This sentiment was echoed by David Ng at the *Los Angeles Times*, who wrote that the image is "especially disturbing because it is completely devoid of context—literary, political, or otherwise," though he still assumed that the image was borne of malicious, and likely conservative, intent.[28]

Then, on August 17, something unexpected happened: the Obama/Joker artist was revealed. Much to everyone's surprise, however, he wasn't a rabid conservative. In fact he wasn't a rabid anything. The harshest thing Firas Alkhateeb, a college senior at the University of Illinois, had to say about Obama was that "there wasn't much substance to him," and that he hadn't bothered to vote in the presidential election because, as he explained, his vote wouldn't have mattered. Indeed, this "breaking news" was shocking only in its banality. Seven months earlier, the story went, Alkhateeb decided to test out his Photoshop skills. Using what reporter Mark Milian described as a "tutorial he had found online to 'jokerize' portraits," Alkhateeb downloaded Obama's *Time* Magazine cover and spent half a day tinkering with the president's face. Once finished, he uploaded the image onto his Flickr page.[29]

And this was where things got fuzzy. At some point between January and August, someone saw Alkhateeb's work, downloaded it, and removed the *Time* Magazine typeface. From there, it's anyone's guess as to when the "socialism" tag was added, or who decided to transform the image into street art. "It really doesn't make any sense to me at all," Alkhateeb admitted to Milian. "To accuse [Obama] of being a socialist is really . . . immature. First of all, who said being a socialist is evil?"[30]

Over the next few days, a number of online newspapers and blogs published articles profiling Alkhateeb and his now-infamous image. As is the case with most high-profile stories, a series of talking points emerged: *Firas Alkhateeb, typical college student, didn't mean any harm. He avoided the press as long as he could, for fear of liberal backlash. He doesn't know who altered*

his file, and doesn't know who posted the posters. No matter how this information was organized (some started with the image, some started with Alkhateeb), no matter what angle the reporter might have taken (many explored Flickr's role in the controversy, which deleted Alkhateeb's file due to "copyright infringement," while others explored the human-interest angle), every last article mentioned and then brushed aside a major point—with the lone exception of Alkhateeb, everyone associated with the Obama Joker poster image remained anonymous.

This Article Is Part of a Series on Trolls

Remained anonymous. Or more likely, remained Anonymous. Indeed, it is possible to establish links between the nebulous trolling collective and the person or persons responsible for the Los Angeles posters, thereby impeaching the idea that the story began and ended with Alkhateeb.

The most tenuous connection between Anonymous and the Los Angeles poster spree is Alkhateeb himself. As previously discussed, the "Why so serious?" Joker meme was first popularized on 4chan's /b/ board. Consequently, even if Alkhateeb really did visit a how-to website devoted to "jokerizing" images (no one seems to know exactly which website he meant), his photoshopped image contained a trace of the original meme, and therefore gestured toward the culture out of which the urtext emerged. Whether or not Alkhateeb recognized the memetic trace is less important than the fact that there was a trace to recognize.

And this is precisely what trolls did. In fact the Obama/socialism image was so recognizable, and its deployment so characteristically trollish, that Encyclopedia Dramatica cross-linked its "Firas Alkhateeb" article with its long-running series on trolls.[31] This isn't to assert that Alkhateeb had been trolling, or that he ever even set foot on /b/; he could have encountered the Obama/Joker/socialism meme on any number of online forums. It is, however, worth noting that trolls posited this connection and embraced the Los Angeles poster controversy as a collective trolling success.

Alkhateeb wasn't the only link between the Obama/Joker image and Anonymous. As a commentator on *Bedlam Magazine*'s Obama/Joker discussion board explained a few days after the initial story broke, "I don't know about the original creators, but regarding the spread of the poster, I've seen chatter about it on /b/ as early as two weeks ago, with anons claiming to have posted many posters and encouraging others to do the same . . . Some there seem into it as an irreverent joke, others have discussed it as a prank to taunt liberal commentators into accusations of racism."[32]

Given the ephemerality of content on 4chan, it's not possible to verify the *Bedlam* poster's account, nor is it possible to sift through the edit history of Encyclopedia Dramatica (as previously mentioned, all pre-2011 edits to the site were lost). But given the history of the meme, and the fact that the final product fits so perfectly within Anonymous's ethos, it is highly likely that the people responsible for the Los Angeles posters were anons themselves or, at the very least, had a working knowledge of trolling subculture.

Of course, at some point in the evolution of the image, a right-wing activist could have stumbled upon Alkhateeb's file and could have added the word "socialism" as a protest against Obama's health care plan. If the image had been the work of right-wing grassroots activists, however, one would have expected the group to take credit, or at least take advantage of an entire summer's worth of free publicity. As it was, not a soul came forward, and even the furthest far-right blogs were unsure about the poster's origins. Additionally, and as many commentators have noted, the image/word combination is nonsensical at best, bolstering the claim that only someone familiar with the meme would have arrived at that particular message.

But even if rightwing activists had intervened—and I have every reason to believe that the Obama/Joker poster was at the very least amplified by trolls—there would be much more to the story than the Photoshop tinkerings of an apolitical college student. But that was the story the media chose to report. As soon as the basic question was answered—namely, "who did this?"—the conversation stopped. No one knew who modified Alkhateeb's original file, no one knew who posted the posters, no one knew why they may have done so. In fact, the media knew *less* after Alkhateeb's outing than before he came forward. That, however, was only details. It was Firas Alkhateeb, in the computer lab, with his Adobe creative suite.

Ultimately, this was a fortuitous choice—for members of the media, anyway. After all, by attributing authorship to a single, and highly oversimplified, source, the media wouldn't need to examine the ways in which their own coverage fed into and proliferated precisely the sort of racist discourse the poster inspired. They wouldn't need to grapple with the fact that, during this period, there was almost no discernable difference between racist trolling content and racist corporate media content. Alkhateeb's outing shut that conversation down before it could begin.

Outfoxed or Out-Trolled?

Had this conversation not been quashed, Fox News would have proven to be the most consistent, and consistently unapologetic, offender. This is not to assert that individual pundits at Fox or anywhere else are themselves racist. Just as the contents of the trolls' hearts are impossible to verify, so too are the contents of pundits' hearts. I will therefore make no attempt to determine whose racism is real and whose is an act ("I'm not a racist, I just play one on TV"). Not only is this information unverifiable, it's unimportant; regardless of whether or not a person really means the racist things he or she says, the fact that he or she says them has a real and measurable affect on those forced to listen. My argument, then, isn't that the racism deployed by Fox News—again, or anywhere else—is more earnest than racism expressed by trolls. My argument is that it is more toxic.

That caveat writ loud and clear, consider Fox's coverage of the Birther controversy, which first emerged during the 2008 presidential election. In May, a month after Hawaii's Department of Health spokesperson confirmed the authenticity of Obama's Hawaii birth certificate, Fox News' morning show *Fox & Friends* invited right-wing author Jerome Corsi onto the program to discuss the alleged controversy. Corsi proclaimed that online analyses of Obama's birth certificate revealed that the document had Photoshop watermarks—which according to Corsi proved that the document was fake.[33]

Nearly a year later, Fox was still peddling the same nonstory. As Media Matters reporter Eric Hananoki noted,[34] one particularly telling Fox Nation headline read "Should Obama Release Birth Certificate? Or Is This Old News?" Of course, by that point the story *was* old news—this story ran a full nine months after Obama had released all the necessary documents. And yet some people remained unconvinced, a point White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs was forced to address during a May 2008 briefing, and which Fox Nation subsequently posted under the headline "Gibbs Finally Fields Birth Certificate Question." "This question in many ways continues to astound me," Gibbs said, before once again confirming what had already been confirmed. "I certainly hope, by the fourth year of our administration, that we'll have dealt with this burgeoning birth controversy."[35]

As it turned out, Gibbs's timeline wasn't that farfetched. Fox continued spinning throughout the summer, and in July descended upon a story of a U.S. soldier who—under the counsel of Dentist-at-Law Orly Taitz—refused

the de-factification of news,
(§ PP show)

orders to go to Afghanistan on the grounds that Obama wasn't a "real" American. During his July 14 show, Fox newscaster Bret Baier suggested that the story was one of dozens of legal challenges to the president's citizenship, a statement he failed to qualify with the apparently unimportant detail that none of the challenges had any legal merit. Sean Hannity presented the same story in similar fashion, and described the soldier's claims as merely "controversial" (as opposed to "baseless"). Not only did Hannity not question the soldier's accusations, he failed to indicate that by the time of his broadcast, Georgia's *Ledger-Inquirer* (the source that initially broke the story) had already reported that the Army had revoked the soldier's deployment for unspecified reasons.[36]

Even this wasn't the end of the Fox-fueled Birther craze. That same week, Fox Nation ran an image of Obama wearing traditional Somali clothing alongside an article questioning his citizenship. On July 14, the image was captioned with the headline "Obama Birth Certificate Challenge Wins Small Victory" (without mentioning that the "victory" was in fact part of normal procedural process, i.e., the case had yet to be thrown out). Six days later, on July 20, the same image was re-captioned "Retired Two-Star General Joins Obama Birth Status Suit."[37]

A week later, FoxNews.com published an article claiming that the entire dustup was Obama's fault—for not releasing his birth certificate. "You have to admit," Fox News writer Tommy De Sano mused, "even if you are a devout Obama-bot, Obama's refusal to release any original documents makes for a newsworthy story by itself."[38] Then in August, *Fox & Friends* invited Mark Williams, a professed Birther and organizer of the Tea Party Express (which was funded by the Republican PAC Our Country Deserves Better), onto their program. In the segment teaser, co-host Brian Kilmeade framed the Tea Party Express as an opportunity for citizens to voice their health care concerns, and promised information on how viewers could sign up.[39]

Although Fox never came right out and said that Obama was a dangerous brown foreigner, that was the implied talking point. In addition to cherry-picking evidence (for example in the "Should Obama Release His Birth Certificate" article) and providing the Birthers with a sympathetic platform, Fox unabashedly gave equal face time to unequal positions. Namely, paranoid speculation was not equivalent to the fact that Obama was born in the United States. By placing unfounded assertions alongside verifiable facts, as if one were just as credible as the next, Fox legitimized—and therefore implicitly endorsed—the Birthers' expressly xenophobic and racist concerns.

The Birther controversy—which was controversial only in so far as the story was amplified by conservative media outlets—wasn't the first time Fox's coverage of Obama engaged with and amplified existing racist discourse. In the lead-up to the 2008 election, Fox sounded a number of racist alarms, including concern over Obama's name, particularly his middle name ("Barack *Hussein* Obama" was a common Fox soundbite during this time),[40] as well as his alleged Muslim leanings. Despite the fact that Obama had been very public about his Christian faith, Fox pounced on the possibility that Obama was a "secret Muslim," and when news broke that Obama had attended a madrassa (translation: school) while living in Indonesia as a child, Fox went into overdrive. *Fox & Friends* co-host Steve Doocy reiterated the fact that Barack Obama's father (a foreigner!) had given his son the middle name "Hussein"; that young Obama had attended a madrassa; that madrassas were financed by Saudis and were aligned with the Wahhabism, an ultraconservative sect of Islam; that Wahhabism teachings probably weren't on the curriculum back them but could have been; that Obama reportedly attends a Christian church in Chicago, but was raised as a Muslim; and in case viewers missed it the first time, that Obama attended a madrassa.[41]

Doocy repeated the sentiment during a later broadcast, twice asserting that Barack Obama had been raised as a Muslim, and intimating that this revelation was (or should be) a game-changer.[42] When the Obama camp pushed back against the erroneous claim that he had attended an extremist school, Doocy countered not by correcting his original statement, but by saying that the Obama camp had *said* Obama hadn't attended an extremist school.[43]

Speculation over Obama's rumored Muslim roots and brown skin generally reached a fever pitch in June of 2008, when Obama clenched the Democratic presidential nomination. Following his victory speech, he and his wife Michelle celebrated with a gesture Fox News contributor E. D. Hill flippantly described as a "terrorist fist jab."[44] Hill's comment received a great deal of blowback, and later that week Fox replaced her show with another (though Hill was not fired from the network). Specifically, Hill was replaced by conservative pundit Laura Ingraham, who two months later would tell Bill O'Reilly that there was something sinister and off-putting about Michelle Obama.[45] One year later, Glenn Beck echoed that very point when he speculated that Obama might hate white people or white culture, he wasn't sure which. When pressed, Beck backpeddled (somewhat) and explained that he wasn't suggesting that Obama didn't *like* white people, just that he believed Obama was a racist.[46]
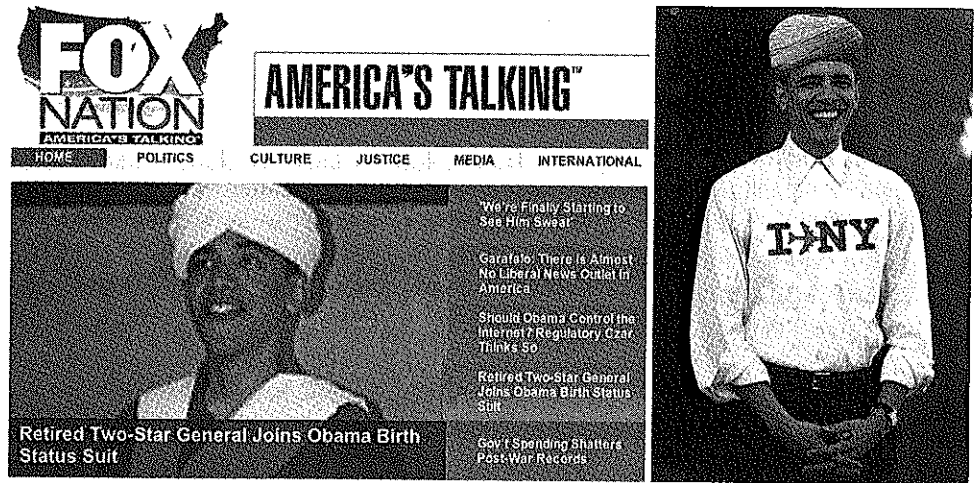
Fox News image   Troll image

Figure 6.3
Comparison of two racist images, one troll-made and another Fox-made, formatted
by the author. Screencap from The Fox Nation taken and posted to Media Matters on
July 20, 2009; troll-made image posted to Encyclopedia Dramatica on November 7,
2009 (site since deleted). Image creator(s) and date(s) of creation unknown.

During this same period, trolls on 4chan/b/ and elsewhere latched onto
and eagerly *détourned* the most outrageous pages in Fox's campaign play-
book, resulting in troll-made content that was at times almost identical to
Fox's content. For a striking example, consider the following comparison
between two contemporaneous images: one that was featured in the afore-
mentioned Fox Nation Birther articles, and one that circulated the /b/
board before being posted to Encyclopedia Dramatica (figure 6.3).

The turban featured in both images was hardly the only visual, political,
or rhetorical point of overlap between troll-made and mainstream content.
During this time, participating trolls fixated on Obama's middle name,
eagerly amplified concerns over his secret Kenyan and/or Muslim
and/or Socialist roots, and decried his alleged anti-white leanings. They
photoshopped Obama's head onto the bodies of black men with exagger-
ated genitalia, many of whom were having sex with white women. They
placed the president alongside watermelon, buckets of fried chicken and
food stamps, and created a slew of images likening him to Stalin, Hitler,
and, of course, the Joker.

Troll-made content may have been extreme, but its underlying themes—Obama is other, dangerous, un-American, inferior—echoed the spirit not just of Fox's coverage, but of coverage on more ostensibly neutral outlets. Indeed, longtime CNN anchor Lou Dobbs, who in 2007 weathered criticism for his anti-immigration rants and willingness to host white supremacist leaders on his program,[47] spent the summer of 2009 fretting about Obama's "missing" long-form birth certificate. Dobbs's coverage was so persistent and so egregious that it prompted Phil Griffin, resident of rival news network MSNBC, to state bluntly: "It's racist. Just call it for what it is."[48] Then-President of CNN/U.S. Jon Klein disagreed, insisting that Dobbs's coverage of the story was "legitimate" (although he himself acknowledged that the story was "dead").[49]

But even those outlets and programs that avoided forwarding overtly racist content were guilty, at the very least, of providing bigots a national audience, and for further normalizing racist discourse and stereotypes (a criticism from which Phil Griffin isn't immune, as his network was a longtime employer of lightning rod conservative Pat Buchanan, who was ultimately suspended from the network for the racist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic undertones of his 2012 book *Suicide of a Superpower: Will American Survive to 2025?*).[50] Again, this is not to say that network employees, even those most complicit in perpetuating racist coverage, were themselves racist. That information is unverifiable and beside the point. The point is that racist hysterics over Obama's birthplace, middle name, religion, and brown skin had indeed become "legitimate" news, to borrow Klein's framing—not because any of it really was legitimate, but because racism directed at Obama was *profitable,* and was therefore regarded by corporate media outlets as being worth repeating, and repeating, and repeating, perhaps to further a white supremacist agenda, perhaps to further a capitalist agenda, perhaps some combination of both. Whatever the motivations might have been, the outcome—namely, grotesque racist caricature—remained the same.

Why So Serious, Indeed

Given the swirl of direct and inferential racism surrounding the early years of President Obama's first term, it is therefore unsurprising that the Obama as socialist Joker image would be taken seriously (and in many instances, actively embraced) both within the troll space and by sensationalist media outlets. This sort of racist expression was par for the trolling course. It was just as common in mainstream media circles, with dishonorable mention going to Fox News.

The following example further illustrates just how fuzzy the line between racist trolling humor and "legitimate" punditry could be. Directly following Obama's presidential victory, an unflattering image of rapper Lil Wayne began circulating the /b/ board. His face covered in tattoos and his teeth studded with diamonds, Lil Wayne can't seem to focus on whatever it is he's attempting to observe. "WE PRESIDENT NOW," the caption reads.[51]

Though clearly and unabashedly racist, the WE PRESIDENT NOW macro echoes a public statement made by Tammy Bruce, the archconservative blogger who first adopted the Obama as socialist Joker image for the Republican cause. Laura Ingraham, the Fox News correspondent who replaced Hill following the "terrorist fist jab" controversy, and current official guest host of *The O'Reilly Factor*, asked friend-of-the-show Bruce to guest-host her March 23 radio program. "You know what we've got?" Bruce stated on-air. "We've got trash in the White House." She quickly backpedaled—again, as only political pundit can—and insisted that "trash" was "color blind" because it crosses all "eco . . . ecosocionomic [*sic*] kind of categories . . . Trash are people who use other people to get things, who patronize others, and who consider you bitter and clingy."[52]

Using this logic (to the extent that it can be described as such), the Obamas are "trash" because they haven't earned what they have; they are successful only because they've taken resources and opportunities away from those who truly deserve them; and because they are condescending toward others. Put more explicitly, the Obamas are affirmative action hires, are uppity, and look down on "bitter and clingy" white folk—an accusation that only makes sense in the context of a 2008 speech made by then-candidate Obama, in which Obama suggested that people from small, economically devastated areas of the country "get bitter [and] cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations."[53]

Rather than tempering her statement, then, Bruce's somewhat bizarre qualification belies its ugly racial implications. Her basic argument is that the current occupants of the White House are fundamentally unfit for the job—because they are different from, and inherently less than, what she implicitly refers to as "us"—namely, "real" Americans, namely, white people.

I would argue that ultimately, Bruce's statement is no less offensive, and no less racist, than WE PRESIDENT NOW. The difference is that Bruce—like so many conservative media figures, particularly those affiliated with Fox

News—was engaging in inferential racism, while the trolls were trafficking in unambiguous, unapologetic, and undeniably *overt* racism. Whatever their real-life political affiliations, whatever their true attitudes toward Barack Obama's candidacy or people of color generally, trolls were shouting from the rooftops precisely the attitudes that were being communicated via dog whistle in more ostensibly "civilized" forums. So condemn the trolls' behavior, absolutely. But don't forget that trolls are not the only guilty parties. In fact their actions are merely the tip of the cultural iceberg—the full depth of which is the focus of the following chapter.

One of the 1980s' most recognizable anti-drug public service announce-
ments features a heated confrontation between a father and his teenaged
son. The father brandishes a box of drug paraphernalia, apparently discov-
ered in his son's closet, and demands an explanation. "Who taught you
how to do this?" the father asks, his voice shaking. The son looks up. "You,
alright?" he admits. "I learned it by watching *you*." The camera lingers on
the father's stunned face. "Parents who use drugs have children who use
drugs," the announcer warns.[1]

Despite the ad's melodramatic tone and questionable assumptions, the
argument that parents should consider the repercussions of their own
actions (thereby impugning the hypocritical "do as I say, not as I do"
parental imperative) is directly applicable to analyses of trolls. Specifically,
knee-jerk condemnation of trolling does not and cannot account for the
fact that trolling behaviors run parallel to a host of culturally accepted
logics. Trolls may push these logics to their furthest and most grotesque
extremes, but ultimately trolls' actions are imbricated in the same cultural
systems that constitute the norm—a point that casts as much aspersion
on the systems themselves as it does on the trolls who harness and
exploit them.

The Mask of Trolling, Revisited

Building upon my previous discussion of the mask of trolling, this section
will consider the cultural circumstances by and through which the mask
of trolling was forged. It will also explicate the ways in which trolling
behaviors mirror—and therefore shine an uncomfortable spotlight on—
conventional behaviors and attitudes. Three discrete factors will be con-
sidered: the relationship between mass mediation, emotional distance, and
off-color laughter; the ways in which trolling behaviors replicate the logic

of social media, particularly its celebration of the end user; and the behavioral implications of political upheaval.

Rubbish Rubbish Everywhere

The first factor undergirding the mask of trolling is the relationship between mass mediation and dissociative humor. Christie Davies posits this connection in his essay "Jokes That Follow Mass Mediated Disaster in a Global Electronic Age." Davies argues that, rather than merely expressing callousness, laughter in the face of violent or otherwise tragic events bespeaks a particular set of historical and technological conditions.[2] As Davies explains, "sick" humor has been around since people began writing down jokes. But even the sickest jokes did not, as far as anyone can tell, take the form of the modern disaster joke. Moreover, while people certainly commented upon gruesome news, this commentary never evolved into traceable joke cycles (clusters of jokes that emerge, evolve, and eventually plateau in response to specific tragedies). Significant historical events have inspired quite a bit of retroactive joking—for example, the sinking of the Titanic or the assassination of Abraham Lincoln—but Davies contends that this humor didn't become prominent until after the events were widely theatricalized.[3]

As Davies explains, the first major disaster joke cycle followed President Kennedy's assassination and coincided with what he describes as the "total triumph of television."[4] Davies presents three causes for this connection. First, he argues, disasters in the television age are followed and preceded by "rubbish," creating an incongruous package to respond to, therefore complicating or outright undermining normal expressions of human empathy. Second, television blurs the line between reality and fantasy, fact and fiction. Live disasters are thus conflated with fictional representations of disasters, precluding the viewer from truly believing that the event has taken place, and mitigating the impact of real tragedy when it really strikes. Finally, the experience of watching a televised tragedy is mediated by space, time, and geography, facilitating and sometimes even necessitating emotional detachment, and therefore cynical or comedic responses.[5]

Although Davies's analysis is focused on the ways in which television spurs disaster joke cycles—he does address the Internet, but writing in the early 2000s sees the web more as an infinite bulletin board than an actively generative social space[6]—his underlying argument is directly applicable to the contemporary Internet. In fact, I would argue that today's Internet, which is more incongruous then the most scattered variety show, which collapses the boundaries of reality and fantasy even further, and which

posits ever-greater distance between viewer and that which is viewed, handily outmediates television.

Of course I want to avoid the assumptions, with which Davies seems to flirt, that technological advances singlehandedly bring about the emergence of novel behaviors, and furthermore that consumers of mass-mediated content are so gullible and so devoid of agency that in response to the slightest corporate prodding they lose the ability to distinguish fiction from reality. But Davies's basic point, that mass mediation engenders emotional distance, and that emotional distance lends itself to detached, fetishistic humor, is extremely illuminating, especially in the context of trolling.

Consider trolls' highly fetishized engagement with the attacks of September 11, 2001. The most popular photoshopped images and GIFs include World Wrestling Federation wrestlers smashing the towers to bits; Will Smith as the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air tap dancing as the first tower falls; Kanye West scolding both towers ("Yo al Qaeda, I'm a really happy for you, and I'mma let you finish . . .but the war of 1812 was the best attack on US soil of all time!"); Nyan Cat at the moment of impact ("Nyan 11: Nevar Forget"); Where's Waldo careening out of the dust clouds wearing a troll mask; the Kool-Aid man emerging from the rubble; Obi-Wan Kenobi making racist jokes about "sand people"; the just-stricken towers crudely animated to look like two stick figures smoking a joint, the list goes on. In other images, actual news stills are superimposed with all kinds of bizarre captions, including vague memetic references (of the planes themselves: "no you are a plane, you can't work in an office, you don't even fit"; "do a barrel roll"), deliberately bad wordplay ("9/11 jokes are just 'plane' wrong"; "9/11 Americans won't understand this joke"), and assertions of ironic detachment (of a jumper: "Maybe that was a little dramatic").

Although the trolls' engagement with 9/11 might seem particularly callous, it provides a striking example of the complimentary relationship between trolling humor and mass—and in this case, digitally—mediated disaster coverage. After all, once uploaded onto the Internet, clips and images of the attacks were cast into a whirlpool of incongruity, from animated movie stills to videos of cute cats to hardcore pornography. And then there are the advertisements. A single webpage may host a dozen ads, some of which flash, some of which are embedded with audio, and all of which both frame and detract from whatever it is the viewer thinks he or she is focusing on. If television broadcasts of the attacks would have been emotionally alienating—thus courting detached comedic responses, as

folklorist Bill Ellis chronicled in his study of joke cycles directly following the September 11, 2001, attacks[7]—then digitized reposts of the attacks would have been infinitely more so.

Trolls' ability to transform existing artifacts into visual jokes further widens this affective gap. Unlike viewers who watched live analog coverage of the attacks, trolls have had nearly fifteen years to manipulate facsimiles of the attacks to suit their particular needs, most notably their impulse to juxtapose death and destruction with pop-cultural iconography. As Davies would have predicted, the more decontextualized these images became, and the more cluttered their audience's field of vision (figuratively and literally), the more likely it was that these images would become fodder for further memetic variation, further affective distance, and further troll-ish engagement.

That trolls have harnessed the September 11 attacks for their own troll-ish ends isn't just unsurprising, then; it may be the direct result of the kind of clutter and emotional splitting necessitated by the present media land-scape—what might be described as the "total triumph of the Internet." From this perspective, trollish play with tragedy is what happens when current events become *content*, a term frequently (and cynically) used in the blogosphere to describe the various bits of digital stuff that may be shared, remixed, and of course monetized through advertisements.

Trolling for Filter Bubbles

Incessant disjointed multimediation isn't the only condition out of which the mask of trolling emerges. The mask is also forged from the cultural logic of social media, which values, and in many cases directly commodi-fies, transparency, connectedness, and sentimentality. Trolls don't just reject these values; they deliberately target their most conspicuous propo-nents. That said, and simultaneously, trolls embody and in fact are the grimacing poster children for the more ambivalent aspects of socially mediated web culture, namely objectification, selective attachment, and pervasive self-involvement, all of which fuel the desire for and amassment of lulz *and* constitute "proper" engagement with social networking technologies.

Consider the difficulty of establishing and maintaining context online, and the ways in which context, or lack thereof, feeds into detached emo-tional responses (and therefore detached unemotional laughter, echoing the previous section). As Henry Jenkins argues, online content, whether in the form of home-brewed videos or family photos or remixed sound bites ripped from the local news—really anything that can be uploaded—is

always one hotlink away from becoming unmoored from its original context.[8] If one looks hard enough, it is usually possible to trace most artifacts back to their original source. After all, everything online comes from somewhere, whether or not a particular viewer has the ability or inclination to conduct such a genealogy. That said, online content is rarely presented in full political, material, and/or historical context. More often than not, content functions as the visual equivalent of a sound bite—a few interesting seconds clipped from a much longer conversation.

Just as offline sound bites can present a skewed picture of what was actually said (as if one sentence could ever capture the spirit and nuance of an hour-long speech), problems arise when the things people do, share, and create are appropriated by an unintended and often unwanted audience. See Star Wars Kid (a chubby high school student who recorded himself clumsily reenacting a scene from the latest *Star Wars* film, the video of which was uploaded by a classmate and began amassing tens of millions of views), Scumbag Steve (a Boston-based rapper whose image was posted to reddit and quickly became the meme de jour), Goatse (whose gaping asshole has become a cultural icon, at least within certain Internet circles[9]), Rebecca Black (whose unintentionally funny 2011 vanity music video catapulted the teenager into the national spotlight), Antoine Dodson (who was featured in a local news report responding to the "bed intruder" who attempted to rape his sister), and so on. All found themselves thrust under the online microscope, and all made the often uncomfortable, and necessarily objectifying, transition from person to meme.

Despite the fact that each story represents a very real person navigating a very real set of social circumstances, the people behind the memes were immediately reduced to grotesque caricatures—a transformation that is perfectly in line with the logic of social media. Because content is so easily severed from creator, and because information spreads so quickly online, often in reverse-snowball form (in that contextualizing information is lost over time, not accrued), it is inevitable that real people would be reduced to fictionalized things. Not in spite of or incidental to the architecture of the web, but as a direct result of the ways in which its constituent content is created, spread, and engaged.

Specifically, Internet users are free, if not actively encouraged, to engage only the content he or she chooses, and to avoid the content he or she might find objectionable or otherwise uninteresting. Rather than functioning as the ultimate democratizing and pluralizing force, then, the web is, and is designed to be, a portal for what Eli Pariser calls "online filter bubbles"—personalized monads fortified not just by individual choice

(frequeñting only those blogs you agree with, hiding the posts of Facebook friends you hate, blocking undesirable followers on Twitter or Tumblr) but also by algorithmic interventions by superplatforms such as Google and Facebook, whose robots note the things you seem to like and the things you seem to avoid, and quietly begin stacking the deck with the former.[10]

According to Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, such bubbles are a blessing to the user. As he once noted, "a squirrel dying in front of your house may be more relevant to your interests right now than people dying in Africa."[11] In other words, if you don't want to engage with certain content, you shouldn't have to. Outside Facebook and Google's walled gardens, users even have the option to preempt offending content, a concept Greg Leuch has explored through his numerous self-censorship plug-ins—for example, his "Shaved Bieber" project, which blocks all references to the ubiquitous Canadian teen,[12] and his "Olwimpics browser blocker," which does the same for any and all references to the 2012 Olympics.[13]

It should go without saying that picking and choosing online, not to mention being picked and chosen for, is an enormous privilege, one that risks normalizing selective emotional attachment. Trolls take this privilege to the extreme, choosing to engage with only the content they find amusing and ignoring everything they deem irrelevant to their interests (e.g., their target's feelings). Their resulting lulz fetishism may appear foreign to average Internet users, but they are in fact subsumed by the same cultural logic that undergirds "normal" online engagement.

"Now Watch This Drive"

In August 2002, just before teeing off for his morning game of golf, President George W. Bush held an impromptu press conference. He'd just gotten word that a Palestinian suicide bomber had killed several Israeli citizens, and he wanted to send an unequivocal message to terrorists around the world. His eyes steely, Bush looked directly into the camera. "We must stop the terror," he urged. "I call upon all nations to do everything they can to stop these terrorist killers. Thank you. Now watch this drive."[14]

Bush's comments did not go unnoticed. On *The Daily Show*, Jon Stewart featured the clip in the closing "Your Moment of Zen" segment,[15] and Michael Moore included it in a pivotal scene of *Fahrenheit 9/11*.[16] In both cases, the clip was used to highlight the Bush administration's heavy-handed and often dizzyingly inconsistent post-9/11 tone. On the one hand, Americans were told to remain vigilant against further terrorist attacks. On the other hand, Osama bin Laden was dismissed as a nobody

by the very president who vowed to capture him dead or alive. This was an era in which citizens were urged by the Department of Homeland Security to prepare for possible anthrax attacks by stocking up on plastic wrap and duct tape, and were told by the president that the best way to fight terrorism was to relax, have fun, and take a family vacation to Disneyland.[17]

America was at war, and then wars, and the justification for the larger of these two wars kept changing, and at a certain point the talking heads stopped bothering to offer any reason, and the looming terrorist apocalypse was assigned a color-coded alert system, which miraculously would be raised whenever an election or important congressional vote loomed, and torture was deemed A-OK so long as it was conducted for democracy's sake, and patriotism trumped rule of law, and the president made jokes about looking for weapons of mass destruction under his Oval Office desk,[18] and the Geneva Conventions were suddenly "quaint" (at least according to then-White House Chief Council Alberto Gonzales),[19] and sometimes the only thing you could do to keep from crying was to laugh.

It was in this political climate that subcultural trolling and its constituent mask first emerged, a statement reflected in the following Encyclopedia Dramatica entry on lulz: "Lulz is engaged by internet users who have witnessed one major economic/environmental/political disaster too many," the entry reads, "and who thus view a state of voluntary, gleeful sociopathy over the world's current apoplectic state, as being superior to being continually emo."[20] This attitude was common among many of the trolls I worked with, who argued that it was better to have a trollfest than a bawwfest (in trolling parlance, bawwing means crying, and is often used alongside or in the context of the term "butthurt"; for example, the accusation that a person expressing a strong negative emotion is a "butthurt bawwfag").

Let me be clear: I am not implying that the September 11 attacks—including fallout from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—caused trolling subculture to coalesce, or caused the mask of trolling to fall pre-forged from the heavens. As discussed in earlier chapters, geeks and hackers had been causing mischief online for years, decades in some circles, and the term "troll" had long been in circulation on Usenet. Trolling was not, in other words, the sole creation of 4chan's platform, nor could it be.

Henry Jenkins explores a similar point in his analysis of YouTube's cultural ascendency, in which he argues that successful platforms rarely if ever engender entirely new categories of behavior. Rather, these platforms provide users with more efficient ways of doing the things they were

already doing. YouTube's success, for example, wasn't derived from its ability to spur participatory/remix culture(s), but from its ability to court and provide a forum for existing communities and participatory remix culture(s). Without a built-in audience for home-brewed content, YouTube would not and could not have been such an overwhelming success.[21]

The same basic argument could be made about 4chan. The message board didn't and couldn't *create* the impulse to engage in trolling behaviors as much as tap into and provide a forum—and later, point of amplification—for existing energies. And there was plenty of energy to go around. The young web was swirling with mischief, pranks, and what would become known as "ultra-coordinated motherfuckery," to borrow a term from Coleman.[22] The difference between these behaviors and subcultural trolling behaviors was that early proto-trollish energies were for the most part confined to early adopters, primarily hackers and geeks. 4chan changed all that; 4chan, particularly the /b/ board, brought a very particular understanding of the term "trolling" to the wider Internet. Not because there was anything inherently new or even all that special about these particular behaviors. It was simply the right time and right place for something like 4chan/b/—and something like subcultural trolling—to reach critical mass.

The fact that it was *this* place and *this* time matters, and must be taken into account when considering not just how and when trolling subculture emerged, but why it caught on with so many people. Of particular importance is the fact that, during this period, Americans were unmoored, and were encouraged by the mainstream media and the Bush administration to remain unmoored—from history, from war, from the suffering of others, from the suffering of fellow citizens.

Of course, for New Yorkers and those who lost friends or family members in the attacks, September 11 was and remains a flesh-and-blood nightmare. The same holds true for returning veterans, as well as the loved ones of those deployed. For the vast majority of Americans, though, 9/11 was experienced as an endless loop of the same forty-five seconds of film, particularly the horrific spectacle of the second plane crashing into the South Tower. Similarly, for millions of Americans, both wars were only ever experienced remotely (i.e., via the news or online), making them no less real and no less upsetting but eerily removed from day-to-day life—a disconnect compounded by the Bush administration's insistence that unless Americans went about their daily lives as if nothing was wrong, the terrorists would win.

In short, Americans were asked to dissociate. They were asked not to dwell on the consequences of the wars, of torture, of the resulting

economic bloodletting. They were asked to go on vacations, and to shop, and not to ask too many tough questions. Is it any surprise, then, that trolls—who essentially function as cultural dung beetles—would choose to hold the tragedy of others at arm's length? Is it any surprise that trolling, which crystallized into a discrete subculture immediately following a series of massively mediated tragedies, would be explicitly and unapologetically fetishistic? Furthermore, is it any surprise that instead of crying, these trolls would have chosen to laugh, not just *with* other self-identifying trolls, but *at* those who fail to keep their emotions similarly in check?

Whether or not there exists an alternative explanation or nest of explanations for the development of trolls' dissociative behaviors, the uncomfortable truth is that trolls weren't the only group to disengage from social or political consequences, nor were they the most likely to harness tragedy for personal gain. This is particularly true during the period of subcultural origin, roughly between 2003 and 2007, during which time September 11 became its own sort of fetish—at least for the politicians who mined the attacks for votes (I am reminded of then-presidential candidate Joe Biden's assertion that former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's presidential campaign platform could be summarized as "a noun and a verb and 9/11"[23]).

To summarize, regardless of how aberrant (and/or abhorrent) it may appear, trolling makes a great deal of sense within the context of contemporary American media. Trolls make expert use of the creative tools provided by the Internet. Their attitudes toward and use of social media is often in direct alignment with the interests of platform marketers, CEOs, and their corporate shareholders. They harness the contours of the historical and political landscape, and the corporate media systems therein. In a lot of ways, trolls do everything right. But that is hardly the extent of the connection between trolls and dominant cultural logics.

Dicks Everywhere

In addition to operating within mainstream media logics, trolls and trolling behaviors replicate and are animated by a number of pervasive cultural logics. Not only is trolling predicated on the "adversary method," Western philosophy's dominant paradigm,[24] it is characterized by a profound sense of technological entitlement born of normalized expansionist and colonialist ideologies. Furthermore, trolling behaviors are undergirded by precisely the values that are said to make America the greatest and most powerful nation on earth. In other words, there is ample cultural precedent

Trolls as western philosophy / debate club.

for trolling; that anyone is subsequently surprised by the ubiquity of trolls is itself surprising.

Your Resistance Only Makes My Penis Harder

First, trolls' privileging of cool rationality over emotionalism, coupled with their emphasis on "winning," that is, successfully exerting dominance over a given adversary, represents a logical extension of androcentrism, what cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu describes as the "continuous, silent, invisible injunctions" that naturalize a phallocentric (male-focused) worldview. Though androcentrism may manifest itself as violent sexism or misogyny, it is in fact most potent when its effects are taken to be natural and necessary, something that could not be otherwise.[25]

Trolls' alignment with androcentrism is most conspicuously apparent in their replication of the adversary method, described by feminist philosopher Janice Moulton as the defining feature of the Western philosophical canon. As Moulton explains, the goal of this method is to be cool, calm, and unflinchingly rational; to forward specific claims; and to check those claims against potential counterarguments, all in the service of defeating or otherwise outmaneuvering one's opponent(s).[26] Although seemingly unassailable (how else might we hope to argue things, one might ask), the adversary method provides a textbook example of androcentrism and in the process exemplifies the subtle ways in which male-focused thinking is naturalized. Specifically, in addition to establishing the ground rules for "proper" argumentation, the adversary method presupposes the superiority of male-gendered traits (rationality, assertiveness, dominance) over female-gendered traits (sentimentality, cooperation, conciliation). In the process, it privileges and in fact reifies an explicitly androcentric worldview while simultaneously delegitimizing less confrontational discursive modes.[27]

Arthur Schopenhauer's *The Art of Controversy*, also translated as *The Art of Being Right*, perfectly embodies the adversary method.[28] Though by no means the only example one could cite (Schopenhauer's arguments pull from and expand upon a well-established rhetorical tradition, most notably Aristotelian logic), *The Art of Controversy* is unique in that many trolls regard it as a blueprint for modern trolling. In fact this text was recommended to me by one of my troll collaborators, with the promise that I would find in Schopenhauer a kindred spirit for trolls.

And indeed I did, particularly Schopenhauer's understanding of the Controversial Dialectic, "the art of disputing, and of disputing in such a way as to hold one's own, whether one is in the right or the wrong."[29] As

Schopenhauer explains, what something really means, and more importantly, what someone really feels, is less important than one's ability to win a particular argument. In other words, truth is nice, but victory is better; to help ensure the latter, Schopenhauer offers thirty-eight axioms essentially designed to hack the Dialectic.

For example, in order to win an argument, or perhaps more appropriately phrased, in order to defeat one's opponent, one strategy is to carry his or her opponent's claim "beyond its natural limits,"[30] thereby forcing the opponent to accept responsibility for a straw man, which may then be refuted by a series of counterarguments. Another is to deliberately court the anger of an opponent "by doing him repeated injustice, or practicing some kind of chicanery, and being generally insolent,"[31] since an angry opponent is often a frazzled and therefore sloppy opponent. Other tips include replacing the language used by an opponent to describe his or her position with terminology that exaggerates or casts aspersions upon that position and, consequently, its proponents (i.e., referring to abortion as baby killing), or personalizing arguments by demanding that the opponent practice what he preaches (i.e., during a discussion of assisted suicide, encouraging one's opponent to go kill himself if he thinks it's such a good idea).

Most trollishly, Schopenhauer urges his readers to push against any and all resistance, since anger almost always indicates insecurity and therefore argumentative weakness. The goal is to aim for the lowest possible personal blows, not just in relation to an opponent's argument but in relation to his person, family, friends, income, race, or anything that might appeal to what Schopenhauer calls the "virtues of the body, or to mere animalism."[32] Regarding this last tip, perhaps the sharpest tool in the rhetorician's arsenal, Schopenhauer warns that an opponent is likely to respond in kind and begin hurling his own insults. If and when that happens, one must remind one's opponent that personal insults have no place in a rational discussion and request that he or she consider the issue at hand—at which point one may return to one's own insults and prevarications.[33]

Trolls take a similar approach, explicitly eschewing the pursuit of truth—typically by bracketing "real life" from the adversarial play space—in favor of victory, and more importantly, dominance. Furthermore, trolls take active, gleeful measures against rhetorical others—namely, "soft," feminized thinkers. For trolls, softness implies anything emotive, anything less than perfectly rational; they see strong negative emotions like sadness, frustration, or distress (referred to collectively as "butthurt") as flashing neon target signs. Ironically, trolls court the very modes of thinking they

subsequently attack. They poke and prod their targets until they draw metaphorical blood—note the popular trolling declaration and current section header "your resistance only makes my penis harder"—then point to this blood as proof of the troll's inherent superiority, and the target's inherent weakness.

Not only does "knowing how to rhetoric" (as I've heard many trolls describe their discursive methods) serve as a point of pride for trolls, it provides a built-in justification for their antagonistic behaviors. After all, if cool rationality is in fact superior to "softer" modes of thinking, then denigrating and attempting to silence the feminized other isn't just warranted, it is the trolls' cultural duty (in response to their target's distress, "you're welcome" was an attitude frequently expressed by the trolls I worked with). Ultimately, then, the primary difference between "normal" manifestations of the adversary method and modern subcultural trolling is that participating trolls make absolutely no attempt to sugarcoat the ideological implications and inherent sexism of their behaviors.

Trolls' eagerness to align themselves with adversarial rhetoric—and by extension, the Western tradition—is further exemplified by their obsession with and adoption of the figure of Socrates. As the editor(s) of the "Socrates" entry on Encyclopedia Dramatica explain, "Socrates was a famous IRL troll of pre-internets [sic] Greece credited with inventing the first recorded trolling technique and otherwise laying the foundation of the science of lulz. He is widely considered to be the most irritating man in history."[34] Accompanying this statement is a quotation from *The Apology* in which Socrates proclaims, "I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you," and that is captioned with the statement "Socrates explains trolling." Later in the article, the editor(s) explains "the famous Socratic Method of Trolling," which replicates the well-known trolling meme template discussed in chapter 4:

*Ask a bunch of questions about shit nobody cares about
*Be blatantly condescending while pretending to agree
*Raep your victim with logic
*Pretend to be objective and ignorant
*Put forth a batshit insane position for lulz
*???
*Profit

In a final flourish of reclamation, the author(s) of the post claim that Socrates's last words were "I did it for the lulz," and the entry itself is tagged as part of a series on trolls.[35]

In a 2012 segment filmed for Huffington Post live, notorious troll weev—the once-president of the trolling and hacking collective known as the GNAA ("Gay Nigger Association of America"), who was sent to prison in 2013 for his role in Goatse Security's AT&T data breach before being released in 2014 after the conviction was overturned on a venue technicality—elaborated on this sentiment. "Socrates would be a troll," weev argued. "He was confrontational. He was specifically trying to provoke a reaction and was trying to undermine the existing establishment."[36] In short, Socrates "raeped" with logic—"raep" being the preferred misspelling for "rape," which according to many trolls is the best of all possible trolling outcomes.

For an example of why trolls would be so inclined to adopt Socrates for the trolling cause, consider Socrates's comportment throughout *Meno*, which begins with an examination of the nature of virtue.[37] Meno, Socrates's interlocutor, asserts knowledge; Socrates professes ignorance; Meno forwards an explanation; Socrates proceeds to beat Meno over the head with his own words, stopping only to berate Meno for rhetorical chicanery and to lob strange, backhanded compliments. Midway through the onslaught, Meno seeks a reprieve. "I think you are bewitching and beguiling me, simply putting me under a spell, so that I am quite perplexed . . . my mind and my tongue are numb, and I have no answer to give you."[38] Meno has, in other words, given up. But Socrates isn't finished. He calls Meno a rascal and accuses him of deception, propelling the conversation forward despite Meno's objections, and despite having already proven his point—a point he immediately undermines by pivoting to divine intervention, a move many classicists read as ironic.[39]

Socrates might not assert a singular answer to the question of virtue, or any question for that matter. But by policing the borders of "correct" philosophical engagement, Socrates reifies a particular discursive mode—namely the Socratic method (not that he would have called it that himself), which isn't a position as much as it is an attitude toward the pursuit of answers. In their efforts to extract the greatest number of lulz from the most "deserving" online targets, trolls take this approach to its most antagonistic conclusions. Furthermore, while both camps refuse to forward a particular politics, and in fact target those who appear too emotionally invested in their ideals, both impose and are subsumed by a rigid rhetorical model, one that privileges and universalizes a male-focused worldview. In others, such rigidity would be unacceptable. But as long as they're the ones tossing off the philosophical or emotional imperatives, the problem of attachment is apparently moot.

It is therefore no surprise that trolls would be inclined to adopt Socrates as one of their own. But even for those resistant to the idea that Socrates was indeed "a famous IRL troll of pre-internets Greece," the fact that trolls have chosen as their intellectual mascot one of the most venerated and fetishized figures in the Western tradition, whose rhetorical method is taught to every college undergraduate in the United States, is significant in itself. Also of significance is the fact that, while trolls and trolling behaviors are condemned as aberrational, similarly antagonistic—and highly gendered—rhetorical methods are presumed to be something to which every eighteen-year-old should aspire. This is, to say the very least, a curious double standard. Trolling might be more conspicuously outrageous, offensive, and damaging than traditional discursive modes, but what does it say about the cloth if misogyny can so easily be cut from it?

Go Forth and Conquer

In addition to embodying the adversary method, trolling is animated by the same cultural logic that normalizes the drive for discovery and progress. To go further, to go faster, to go where no one (well, no one deemed important enough to count) has gone before—this is, at least is said to be, the defining feature of Western culture, a point Robert Nisbet iterates in his expansive *History of the Idea of Progress*.[40] Indeed, the assumption that one should go where one can, regardless of precedent or apparently minor details such as who currently occupies a given territory, undergirds everything from the myth of the American West to the desire to put a man on the moon.

It is also often cited—though much more indirectly—in early conversations about the Internet. Once the brainchild of the United States Department of Defense, the Internet generally, and later the World Wide Web specifically, was embraced and subsequently reclaimed by a wave of what early Internet researcher Howard Rheingold described as "digital homesteaders," users eager to stake their claim within the emerging world of cyberspace.[41] The landless land grab that swept the early web even inspired John Perry Barlow, an early Internet activist, cofounder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, and later a research fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet and Society to write "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,"[42] which asserted the political and moral sovereignty of "the new home of Mind." "I declare the global social space we are building to be naturally independent of the tyrannies you seek to impose on us," Barlow wrote. "We believe that from ethics, enlightened self-interest, and the commonwealth, our governance will emerge."[43]

progress, colonialism, and the web

Regarding the emerging encroachment of terrestrial law within cyber-space, Barlow attested the following: "These increasingly hostile and colonial measures place us in the same position as those previous lovers of freedom and self-determination who had to reject the authorities of distant, uninformed powers [i.e. American Revolutionaries]. We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts."[44] Barlow's utopian and decidedly libertarian message thus functioned not just as a Declaration of Independence, but also as Manifest Destiny version 2.0. To these early adopters—the vast majority of whom were white males—the Internet was a land of endless opportunity, something to harness and explore, something to *claim.*

Trolls' attitudes toward the web echo Barlow's utopian vision—albeit its dark underbelly. Just as Barlow declares independence from the tyrannies of corporate and governmental encroachment, trolls regard the Internet as their personal playground and birthright; as such, no one, not lawmakers, not the media, and certainly not other Internet users, should be able to dictate their behavior. Trolls are, at least according to trolls, wholly sovereign to everything but their own will.

It's not just a strong libertarian streak that connects trolls and early Netizens (at least, early Netizens as conceived by Barlow). It's also their entitled attitude toward the virtual space. Recall Howard Rheingold's afore-mentioned framing of the "digital homesteader," which harkens to those rough and tumble, bootstrappy American frontiersmen who chose to stake their claim westward. But instead of heading west, digital homesteaders are on a virtual course. Trolls take this concept to its furthest and most grotesque extreme, which in fact is closer in spirit to "real" homesteading than early cyber-utopians' starry-eyed idealizations. Homesteading, after all, is the act of declaring that this plot of land is now *my* plot of land, regardless of whose land it might be currently. Whose plot of land it might be currently doesn't matter. That's just details, and is nothing a musket or ten can't fix. And that is precisely what trolls do. They homestead.

Take for example the infamous Habbo Hotel raids of 2006, in which trolls from /b/, goons from Something Awful, and several other motley trolling crews planned and executed the first of several massive raids against the eponymous Habbo Hotel, a strictly moderated social media platform catering to tweens and teenagers. After creating an army of identical avatars—black men in black suits with huge afros—nearly two hundred trolls, each operating multiple avatars, swarmed the American hotel (Habbo

is an international chain, boasting virtual branches in thirty-two countries). The troll army immediately began spamming public chats with various obscenities, essentially shutting down the hotel's public spaces. Simultaneously, a few dozen trolls formed a human blockade in front of the hotel pool. "Pool's closed due to AIDS," they insisted, a line that immediately entered the trolling lexicon.[45]

Habbo Hotel was hardly the first and hardly the last time trolls set forth and conquered. Trolls have applied the same basic model—show up, turn a website's social networking platform and community against itself, lol—to countless online spaces, as if lulz were a natural resource to be extracted. Encyclopedia Dramatica, for example, began as an archive for LiveJournal drama (hence the name), but was soon overrun by trolls—much to the chagrin of its founder Sherrod DeGrippo.

As discussed in chapter 5, trolls' largest land grab came in 2010, when trolls harnessed Facebook's social networking platform for their own trollish ends, making the site an unwitting and unwilling pawn in subcultural formation. Unsurprisingly, Facebook was not amused, and their admins did everything they could to repel the trolling onslaught. Trolls took this resistance as a call to arms, and began devising increasingly clever workaround strategies. This was *their* space, and no one was going to take it away from them; just as Barlow had done twenty years earlier, trolls declared their virtual selves immune to Facebook's sovereignty, and vowed to spread the lulz across the Planet so that no one could arrest their thoughts. And for these self-evident truths, they were more than willing to fight.

In short, through raids, forum hijacking, and platform repurposing, trolls tease out the trace of violence and exploitation that is so often effaced from discussions of progress and expansion, particularly within an American context. Again, though, while trolling behaviors are regarded as inherently problematic, the cultural tropes with which trolls' behaviors are aligned are either celebrated or, more frequently, rendered invisible, as if expansionism were as natural as the air Americans breathe.

I Can, Therefore I Should Be Able To

Not only do trolls' acts of entitlement mimic expansionist ideology, they also, and simultaneously, exhibit a culturally proscribed relationship to technology. Internet historian Jason Scott provides a framework for understanding this relationship in his 2008 ROFLcon talk "Before the LOL." As Scott argues, tinkering, playing, and otherwise hacking existing systems for one's own edification or amusement is simply what people will do

[handwritten marginalia: play (appropriation as privilege — of Sandvig? "app. tends equity"]

when confronted with new technologies, a point he illustrates through an examination of the nineteenth-century telegraph network, the HAM radio network in the 1960s, and copy machines in the 1950s and 1960s, each of which generated a great deal of (often transgressive) play.[46]

Although seemingly simple, if not outright commonsensical, the assumption-cum-conclusion that "this is what people will do" with emergent technologies is far more ideologically loaded than one might expect. First, the claim teeters at the edge of Hume's Law, also known as the is-ought fallacy. People can play with technology, and so they do, and so they *should*, or at the very least one mustn't be surprised when the inevitable comes to pass. The "is" of ludic engagement, in other words, is reframed to an "ought," thus naturalizing and universalizing the impulse to play with new technologies. The problem with this framing is that, while the ludic impulse may be strong in some, it is not, and cannot be, strong in everyone, for the simple reason that not all people have access to the technologies in question, the time to devote to learning the ins and outs of specific systems, or the energy to play with the tools they've been given.

Consequently, Scott's claim warrants reassessment. A much more accurate claim would be that "this is what privileged people will do" with technology, since those in positions of privilege—whether derived from racial, gender, and/or class position—have the inclination, access, and most importantly, the internalized sense of entitlement that it isn't just acceptable to play with whatever toys one has been given, but in fact is one's right to do so.

This issue of rights echoes the tone and overall spirit of the hacker ethic, which was first articulated by Steven Levy in his foundational 1984 account of early hackers.[47] According to Levy, the hacker ethic consists of the following interrelated axioms: access to computers should be unlimited, one should always yield to the hands-on imperative, all information should be free, authority should be mistrusted and routed around if necessary, hacking skill matters more than "bogus" real-world criteria like race, gender, or degrees, and computers can change the world for the better.[48]

One particularly relevant outcrop of the hacker ethic, and which undergirds Scott's assertion that "this is what people will do" with new technologies, is hackers' celebration of creative appropriation. To hackers, technologies were *made* to be played with (hence the hands-on imperative). Consequently, attempts to block or restrict hackers' perceived right to do what they want with the technologies in front of them is met with profound umbrage.[49]

While it would be a mistake to lump all hackers under the same banner—in her study of free and open software production, Gabriella Coleman is careful to highlight the often-conflicting branches in the hacking family tree[50]—Levy's formulation of the hacker ethic, particularly his emphasis on the impulse, and some hackers might even argue, the obligation, to unlock closed doors and to reappropriate available technologies, has endured as a behavioral ideal for nearly three decades. And not just in hacking circles—the impulse to push existing technologies to their limits, in short to do *what* you can *because* you can, is explicitly celebrated by the tech industry (whose best and brightest, it is worth noting, were raised on the hacker ethic, the most notable examples being Microsoft's Bill Gates and Apple cofounder Steve Wozniak).

The technologically privileged assertion that one can play with technologies and therefore should be able to provides yet another example of the ways in which trolling behaviors run parallel to dominant tropes. Trolls, after all, are champions of the idea that the practical ability to accomplish some goal ("I am able to troll this person") justifies, if not necessitates, its pursuit ("therefore it is my right to do so"). Nontrolls are quick to reject this line of reasoning on the grounds that it is callous, solipsistic, and exploitative. In other contexts, however, "I can, therefore I should be able to" is taken for granted, and in some circles is explicitly fetishized. It certainly has made a lot of white men a whole lot of money.

Land of the Free, Home of the Trolls

The logic of privilege that undergirds trolls' relationship to technology is itself undergirded by the ideals Americans are taught to hold most dear: namely, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among them Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, and furthermore, that Congress shall make no law abridging the freedom of speech. American trolls in particular embrace these ideals, and when pressed on the ethics of their behavior, often cite what they presume to be their constitutionally protected right to irritate strangers on the Internet. For these trolls, the iconic line from the Declaration of Independence might be revised thusly: "All trolls are endowed by their Internet with certain unalienable Rights, among them Anonymity, Impunity, and the Pursuit of Lulz." On this view, and gesturing toward hackers' general abhorrence of locked doors, American trolls regard any form of online censorship, including on-site moderation policies, as a basic infringement on the their civil liberties.

"free speech"

During the aforementioned Huffington Post segment, weev—who was framed by the host as both godfather of trolling and free speech warrior—echoes this position. As he explains, he has "the right, and perhaps even the moral obligation, to drop your dox." For weev, doxing someone (i.e., publicizing the target's personal identifying and/or financial information) is a "consequence of pissing off the community," essentially imbuing trolling behaviors with a kind of implicit pedagogy. "That's the great thing about free speech, about the First Amendment," he continues. "Not only does Violentacrez [an infamous reddit moderator responsible for creating and moderating "jailbait" and "creepshot" subreddits[51]] have a right to be a prick on the Internet, we have the right to punish him! That's beautiful. Our Constitution is beautiful."[52]

Initially, the impulse to wrap trolling in the American flag might seem counterintuitive, particularly when one considers its most destructive forms. In response to coordinated attacks against the parents of recent teenage suicides, say, I can't think of a less convincing justification than "free speech." Nor can I think of a more myopic framing of behaviors designed to humiliate, frighten, or intimidate, a particular and well-publicized specialty of weev's. In a 2008 *New York Times* profile, for example, weev boasted about doxxing and libeling technology writer Kathy Sierra,[53] who felt so threatened by the resulting onslaught that she was forced to retreat from the Internet entirely.[54] In another more recent example, weev's bullying and attempted extortion of a slander victim was presented during his 2013 AT&T sentencing hearing.[55] In these types of cases, particularly cases where the behaviors in question meet the legal definition of harassment (which, for the record, is *not* protected by the First Amendment), the idea that what trolls are actually doing by tormenting strangers is "fighting for free speech" is absurd, and might itself be an act of trolling.

Regardless of how unlikely the connection between trolling and free speech might appear, however, and regardless of what message they intend to send by embracing such a cherished American ideal, trolls' more extreme actions call attention to the ugly side of free speech, which so often is cited by people whose speech has always been the most free—namely straight white cisgendered men (i.e., men whose gender identity aligns with cultural expectations for their biological sex)—to justify hateful behavior towards marginalized groups. In these cases, claims to protected speech are often less about the legal parameters of the First Amendment and more about not wanting to be told what to do, particularly by individuals whose perspective one doesn't respect.

Just as it places assumptions about free speech in a new and perhaps uncomfortable light, trolling also reveals the destructive implications of freedom and liberty, which, when taken to their selfish extreme, can best be understood as "freedom for *me*," liberty for *me*," with little to no concern about how these actions might infringe on others' freedoms. American history is littered with moments in which freedom, liberty, self-determination, and of course the push for westward expansion—everything that is said to make America great—have been deployed with positive consequences for some and absolutely devastating consequences for others. The idea that a person has a right, and perhaps an obligation, to take advantage of others for their own personal gain is the American dream at its ugliest—and is exactly the dynamic the most offensive forms of trolling replicate.

As this chapter, and in fact the entire second section of this book illustrates, trolls are hardly anomalous. They fit comfortably within the contemporary American media landscape, and they effortlessly replicate the most pervasive, and in many cases outright venerated, tropes in the Western tradition. In that sense, trolls are model ideological subjects. The question is, then, what exactly are people criticizing when they criticize trolls? I would suggest that criticisms of trolling behaviors are indirect (if inadvertent) criticisms of the culture that spawns them, immediately widening the scope and significance of the so-called troll problem. I will expand upon this basic, if somewhat disturbing, point in the conclusion. First, however, we must consider just how far trolling has come, and where it might be going.