

Trolling for Norms

The (De)politicising of Irony, Stigma, and Affect.

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Summary

Originally, internet trolls were tricksters who pretended to be sincere participants in discussions, but whose real intent was to provoke inexperienced users into pointless arguments and cause disruption for entertainment. More recently, however, trolling has become a catch-all term for almost any behaviour that is even vaguely humorous, deceptive, or disruptive. Through inductive analysis of *Reddit* discussions about trolling and of other documents interviewing trolls, this thesis draws into focus a trolling ideal type. This ideal type is shown to approximate a case study of political trolling involving the Twitter hashtag *#BoycottStarWarsVII*. The case study illuminates how trolls use an intentionally provocative bait to create a feedback loop of amplified visibility and intensified affect. By circulating affect, the feedback loop produces a stickiness and magnetism that draws faceless trolls together into a coherent whole. However, through the dramatic irony norm, trolls use that same affect to stigmatise and exclude the Other to the out-group. By policing feeling rules whilst performing a folk devil virtual identity, trolls generate a polarising resentment which depoliticises the revolutionary potential of anger. Through this process, political trolls seek to repel threats to the borders of their privileged identity and recalibrate political sentiment in their favour.

Statement of Originality

This work has not been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed on November 9th 2017.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'C. Beilby'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped 'C' and a stylized 'Beilby'.

Cooper Beilby.

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This thesis would not have been possible without my supervisor, Dr. Justine Lloyd.

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Introduction

Internet trolling first piqued my sociological curiosity after an October 2012 episode of the television program *Insight* (2012) which featured discussions with a number of self-described trolls, various community members who had been personally affected by trolling, and a digital media folklorist, Whitney Phillips, whose research (Phillips 2011, 2015) examines trolling subcultures. The *Insight* episode came off the back of a number of editorials, opinion pieces, and reports in the Australian news-media focussing on several high-profile Australian celebrities who had been harassed and verbally abused by anonymous and pseudonymous users on social media platforms such as Twitter. In particular, there was significant focus on television personality Charlotte Dawson's much publicised battle with these so-called "Twitter trolls" which culminated with Dawson being hospitalised in August 2012 due to a suicide attempt, and her eventual suicide in 2014 (ABC News 2014; Herald Sun 2012; Speers 2012; Whelan 2013). News-media representations in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada had presented similar stories linking trolling with suicide (Bishop 2014). At the time, the news-media placed considerable focus on *RIP trolling*, a new online phenomenon of seeking enjoyment from using fake accounts to post offensive content to social media tribute pages memorialising the recently deceased (Bishop 2014; Carey 2011; Connelly 2012; Phillips 2011).

Having been a regular internet user since the mid 1990s, the *Insight* program was not my first exposure to trolling. However, what interested me was that the trolling being discussed was very different from what I had previously understood trolling to be. To me, trolls were the pranksters of the internet – trolls were trickster figures who posted deliberately erroneous or naïve questions and statements on internet forums to bait other users into outraged reactions, angry corrections, or otherwise frivolous and irritated responses. Trolls skilfully used a ruse of faux sincerity to draw new users, called *newbies*, into an escalated and pointless conflict with one another. I had always thought of trolling as a bit of fairly harmless (albeit moderately disruptive and annoying) fun. Trolls trolled for the *lulz* – a corruption of *LOL*, the computer lingo acronym for *laugh out*

loud (Know Your Meme 2012: np). Trolls found it funny to highlight the inexperience of newbies and laugh at their failure to recognise that they were being taken for a ride; it was funny that newbies got upset at trolls because the online world felt a lot like a computer game compared to the “real” life of offline bodies. However, in the 2010s there appears to be far more slippage between the physical and the virtual, with online selves often acting as direct (albeit highly curated and staged) performative extensions of offline bodies. Charlotte Dawson’s death highlights the very real concern about the impact of online abuse, and it is certainly not difficult to empathise with the family of Amanda Cummings (a teenager who died by suicide from being hit by a bus) when RIP trolls inundated her online memorial pages with pictures of buses and other jokes about her death ‘for the lulz’ (Know Your Meme 2017c; Mackenzie 2012).

Nonetheless, many self-described trolls are now acknowledging the real impact of their actions and are subsequently turning their trolling towards political ends. Many journalists highlight the role trolls played in the 2016 United States presidential election of Donald Trump (Aiken 2016; Cogan 2016; Matthews 2017; Singal 2016). The anthropomorphic stoner frog, “Pepe”, said by its creator to represent peace, love and acceptance, formed one of the recurrent images used by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign (*see figure 1*) (Beran 2017; Novak 2017; Salvador Palau and Roozenbeek 2017). Since 2010, Pepe has been re-appropriated by members of /pol/ (the “politically incorrect” sub-forum of the anonymous image board 4chan) as their mascot, often being used in supposedly ironic jokes employing white nationalism and racism (*see figure 2*) (Salvador Palau and Roozenbeek 2017). Donald Trump’s use of Pepe was a direct nod to the strong support he had found amongst members of the so-called alt-right. In an editorial for white nationalist website *The Daily Stormer*, Anglin (2016) contends that the white nationalism of the alt-right arose directly from participation in the trolling culture which has existed on 4chan since the early 2000s. Anglin (2016: np) asserts that on /pol/, the sentiments behind the ironic racist tone in troll humour ‘slowly became serious, as people realized they were based on fact’. For Anglin (2016: np), trolling is a form of ‘culture jamming’ and ‘conscious social-engineering’ which makes promoting a political agenda ‘not only meaningful, but also extremely fun’.



Figure 1: Tweets by Donald Trump and his son Donald Trump Jr. involving Pepe images.
Source: Twitter.

Whether the statements made by Anglin are serious or simply part of a much larger and more elaborate troll is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by this idea of trolling as intentionally political. I thus formulated the following preliminary research question:

- *What are the norms by which trolls / trolling operate(s) politically?*

However, as is apparent above, the use of the term *troll* is highly variable, vague, and often contradictory. A question is thus raised about what it even means to be a troll, let alone to be trolling towards political ends. In the next section, I briefly outline the available literature on what constitutes trolling and how it impacts the public sphere. After reflecting on these central definitions and how they have changed in relation to trolling as an emerging political practice, I then revisit my research question to make adjustments and address some gaps in the literature.



*Figure 2: Collection of Pepes used by 4chan members.
Source: CBC News.*

Literature.

Despite emerging on Usenet during the 1980s (Donath 1999; Manivannan 2013), trolling did not garner much specific interest as an object of academic inquiry until the turn of the century. The *prototypical* definitions of trolling produced by this first wave of inquiry match with my own initial preconceptions about trolls. For these early researchers (Crystal 2004; Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Tepper 1997), trolls play a game of pretending to be legitimate participants who appear to make sincere statements or questions, but who really have hidden motives to cause disruption by provoking arguments amongst group members. However, in the decade leading up to 2010, trolling definitions began to change to include more directly malicious, spiteful, and antagonistic behaviours (Bishop 2014; Phillips 2015; Whelan 2013). Phillips (2015) argues that trolls have undergone an evolutionary shift towards a subculturally anchored definition which refers not so much to specific behaviour, but rather to a

self-identification of one's behaviours as having troll-ish intent. However, the subsequent moral panic about RIP and Twitter trolling in the mass-media brought trolling to mainstream attention, with trolling becoming a buzzword applied to various online behaviours ranging across practical jokes, personal insults, harassment, stalking, doxxing¹, cyberbullying, abuse, and death threats (Bishop 2014; Phillips 2015; Whelan 2013). As a result, the majority of the current academic literature focusses on those more directly malicious aspects of trolling which involve vituperative personal insults or antagonisms targeting others on the basis of core identity categories such as race and gender (Binns 2012; Fichman and Sanfilippo 2015; Hardaker and McGlashan 2016; Higgin 2013; Jane 2014, 2015, 2016a; Manivannan 2013; McCosker 2014; Milner 2013, 2016; Phillips 2015; Whelan 2013).

The available literature tends to discuss the political dimension of trolling in terms of how trolls impact various models of an ideal public sphere. The public sphere is the imaginary social space where private individuals come together as a public to discuss matters of common interest (Peters 2008). The first wave of trolling researchers argue that trolls foster distrust and disrespect within online spaces (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002). These early researchers assert deliberative models that emphasise establishing consensus on public matters of common interest through critical-rational debate. As trolls reduce the diversity of participation through a loss of trust and safety, and damage deliberative quality through creating disruption and disrespect, these early researchers argue that trolls can and ought to be legitimately removed from online discussion spaces. Following in this line of thinking, some of the current literature explores managing trolls via some administrative, legal, or community means (Binns 2012; Bishop 2013; Jane 2016b; Shaw 2013), whilst other literature examines technological approaches of automated identification and de-anonymisation of trolls (Galán-García et al. 2014). However, some later researchers have questioned the exclusion of trolls from discussion spaces, arguing that there is space (or even a necessity) in deliberative models for allowing impolite speech which contests, resists, or dissents against certain forms of exclusion,

1 Doxxing is the revealing of documents online which can be used to personally identify a person without their consent. For instance, exposing a person's home address, phone number, or place of work.

marginalisation, and oppression (Coleman 2012b, 2015; Dahlberg 2014; Dahlgren 2013; Papacharissi 2004; Sindorf 2013; Whelan 2013). Other researchers (Burroughs 2013; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013; Milner 2013, 2016) have taken up agonistic models which suggest that irreconcilable conflict is an irradicable and valuable component of pluralistic politics. These researchers tend to conclude that whilst trolling conflict is not always useful or valuable, it does, nonetheless, contribute an important vibrancy that ought not be removed.

Gaps, Aims, and Objectives.

It was here I noticed somewhat of a gap in the literature. In the more recent literature, the discussion tends to focus on how trolling practices almost inadvertently create a form of counterpublic contestation that propagates racist and misogynistic values (Higgin 2013; Manivannan 2013; McCosker 2014; Milner 2016, 2013). For these authors, it is by virtue of *participation* in an exclusionary subcultural identity that trolls become political. Additionally, in much of the literature there is a strong focus on how trolls are directly hostile, adversarial, and antagonistic towards individuals or social groups (Jane 2014; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013; Shaw 2013). In my preliminary research, however, I noticed many trolling cases more closely approximated by prototypical ideals. Rather than simply being about performing identity and/or abusing others, these trolls were intentionally presenting a façade of sincerity to troll others into an escalated conflict. Yet, unlike the early trolls who simply enjoyed disruption, these trolls appeared to have a deliberate political intent. This research thus aims to understand how these previously unexplored political trolling forms operate. Considering the relative paucity of research in this area, I do not aim to supply *the* definitive explanation of political trolling. Rather, I merely aim to contribute some clarity to the otherwise vague and murky depths surrounding political trolling practices.

Research Questions.

In reviewing the literature, it is apparent that there is a lack of consensus about what even constitutes *trolling* as a practice. Is trolling a disruptive identity deception game, or is trolling a spitefully antagonistic attack on social group identity? Is being a troll predicated on the effects of performing certain actions, or is being a troll a form of subcultural identity? These questions first require answers. Considering the vague ambiguity around trolling definitions, to research trolls requires drawing an ideal type into focus. As Weber (1949: 90) observes, ideal types are utopic fictions which ‘cannot be found empirically anywhere in reality’. Ideal types are not narrow prescriptions. Rather, an ideal type condenses essential features of a social phenomenon into an evaluative model. Importantly, ideal types are not about locating the statistical average sum of features that trolls *normally* have – norms here refer to *normative ideals* rather than the *socially normal*. Further, ideal types are not about asserting some moral standard about desired behaviour. Instead, ideal types are a type of comparative yardstick. Simply put, in the case of trolls, the ideal type outlines understandings about *how a troll ought to troll to be considered a troll*. By developing a trolling ideal type, a lens is thus provided through which various forms of trolling can be compared. This lens provides a way to explore the trolling norms that political trolls leverage towards specific ends. I thus split my research question into two questions:

1. *What are the ideal typical norms of trolling?*
2. *How do trolls leverage such norms towards political ends?*

Methodology.

Trolls are deceptive, deliberately disruptive, and often anonymous figures. As such, trolls are problematic research subjects. In particular, there are significant difficulties with locating trolls, verifying their identities, connecting them with specific actions, and determining the truth of what they say. Furthermore, as trolls, by definition, use deception to appear as sincere participants, they can be difficult to locate and identify real-time “in the wild”. Hence, for those

outside trolling subcultures, cases of trolling are often only identified after the fact. The research undertaken for this thesis would, therefore, ideally follow Phillips' (2015) ethnographic methodology of deep immersion within a trolling subculture. Through ethnographic participant observation and semi-structured interviews, a more detailed or "thick" understanding of trolling might be developed. However, considering the constraints of a 20,000 word thesis undertaken in eight months, such methodologies are not feasible without also sacrificing thickness². To address these concerns, this research follows in a methodological line of other short-form research projects on trolling that draw their primary data from existing discussions on publicly accessible internet forums. Some prominent examples include Hardaker's (2010, 2015) linguistic analysis of Usenet discussions on trolling; Milner's (2013, 2016) discourse analysis of the image macros³ that trolls use on *Reddit* and *4chan*; and Bergstrom's (2011) case study of the *Reddit* troll 'Grandpa Wrigley'. Likewise, other journal-length trolling studies have overcome similar constraints by drawing from the comment fields of social-media sites such as *Youtube* (McCosker 2014), *Facebook* (Paasonen 2015), and *Twitter* (Hardaker and McGlashan 2016).

To explicate the trolling ideal type, I use an inductive analysis of discussions about trolling supplied by self-described trolls and other internet users. Weberian ideal-type analysis involves a 'fundamental methodological commitment' to induction (Eliaeson 2000: 249). Punch (2005: 196) states that analytic induction is the central methodology for the systematic examination of the regularities and universals of the social world. According to Gerhardt (1994), the validity of a Weberian ideal-type is verified by its historical and empirical relevance. I ensure validity through comparison of the ideal type against both a political trolling case study and existing theoretical

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- 2 Furthermore, considering the malicious nature of many trolls, such in-depth and immersed research raises many ethical concerns that are difficult to address adequately in the time frame. For instance, it is possible that through the research process, one might come across trolling activity that transgresses laws, involves children, or targets highly vulnerable individuals. Yet, the researcher must also remain accountable to the research participants and maintain a trusting relationship with them. Hence, adequate protocols need to be developed which balance responsibilities to the research participants and concerns about the well-being of others. In this regard, the ethical concerns are complex. Additionally, there are a number of potential concerns regarding the researcher's own mental well-being when researching what can be highly toxic communities and practices.
 - 3 Image macros are an image with overlaying text. The images are frequently re-used and the accompanying text will usually follow a specific template related to that image. A particularly prominent example is the *Futurama* Fry Not Sure If image macro. This image macro features the character Fry from the television show *Futurama*. In the image Fry is squinting and the accompanying text follows the template "Not sure if X" at the top and "Or just Y" at the bottom. The juxtaposed text is typically used to express the difficulty understanding true intent in online spaces. For instance, a repeatedly reused version contains the text "Not sure if trolling, or just stupid".

accounts. Further, I use the case study to illuminate the ideal typical norms that trolls potentially leverage towards the propagation of a political agenda. I add further depth to this emerging image of political trolling processes by applying theory from existing academic literature on trolling. As this preliminary understanding of political trolling is developed partly through theory, future empirical studies will therefore be necessary for verification. This thesis thus aims to form the foundation for a larger and more in-depth future ethnographic research project.

Sampling.

I sampled from pre-existing discussions about trolling on the content-aggregation internet discussion forum *Reddit*. I used *Reddit*'s search tool to locate discussions from the past five years containing the terms *troll* or *trolling*⁴. Other research projects, such as those by Hardaker (2015) and Coles and West (2016a), have used similar sampling approaches that draw from internet discussion forums to gather an understanding of how self-described trolls and other internet users understand trolling behaviours. Holtz *et al.* (2012: 56) argue that internet discussion forums, such as *Reddit*, act as an 'unmoderated virtual focus group' where other users 'provoke new and often more detailed responses, which may clarify the thinking about an issue in groups'. I specifically selected *Reddit* for its large active user base and its representation of a wide range of interests organised into topical sub-forums (called *subreddits*)⁵. Despite demographics that skew towards college educated young white males⁶, the diversity of interests represented across various *subreddits* ensures better representation of how general internet users understand trolling practices than would be found on specific discussion forums focussed on

4 Whilst I sampled from a number of *Reddit* discussion threads, two stood out as providing particularly rich sources of data. The first thread, 'When did "trolling" change from subtly winding people up, to just being a dick?', was started on 06/07/2012 in the *r/AskReddit* subreddit by user "Atomicide" and gathered 551 comments. The second thread, a link to an article on the website *Vox* titled 'The reality of Trump's alt-right trolls: They'll put your 7-year-old's face on a gas chamber', was started on 28/10/2016 in the *r/Politics* subreddit by user "Rudiger" and gathered 345 comments. Due to the richness of these data sources, all the quotes from *Reddit* used in this thesis come from one of these two threads. As online text-based discussions lack physical expression, tone is, instead, often conveyed by idiosyncratic spelling and grammar. Hence, rather than correct spelling, I have presented comments verbatim and without markers such as *[sic]*.

5 *Reddit* is the 7th most visited site on the internet (Alexa 2017). In January 2017, *Reddit* had 274 million unique visitors that participated in 45,000 unique *subreddits* (Reddit 2017).

6 For instance, in the United States, *Reddit* users tend to be male (67%), between 18 and 29 years old (64%), white (70%), and have some college education (82%) (Barthel *et al.* 2016).

specific niche interests. Unlike other social media websites such as *Facebook*, the vast majority of user content on *Reddit* is publicly accessible without requiring any login details. However, despite the advantages of ease-of-access and a naturally occurring dataset, this sampling method loses much in the way of being able to probe phenomenological subjective understandings of both trolls and non-trolls alike. To address this issue, I also sampled data from interviews with self-identified trolls on the “trolling” episode of the television programme *Insight* (2012); and a 1996 website document, *The Troller’s FAQ*, written by self-described ‘career troller’ Andrew (1996: np), which touts that it is the ‘definitive document’ on effective trolling strategies. I have used the *Insight* interviews and the *Troller’s FAQ* to gain some further small degree of access to how some trolls subjectively understand their trolling practices⁷.

Data Analysis.

This thesis takes an *analytic induction* approach that follows what Punch (2005: 196–204) calls the ‘Miles and Huberman framework for qualitative analysis’. Similar in approach to grounded theory, this framework involves three main analytic activities: data reduction; data display; and drawing and verifying conclusions (Punch 2005: 198–199). This process, as outlined by Punch (2005), is as follows. The initial starting activity involved clustering and coding different understandings of trolling according to reoccurring thematic elements, thereby reducing the data down and then assembling it into a data display of organised and compressed information. As analysis continued, higher level abstracted codes were developed to demonstrate connections between different pieces of data. Throughout the analytic process, these emergent codes and conclusions were then compared and cross-referenced against existing understandings in the academic literature. The understandings developed through inductive analysis were then fed back into the ongoing data collection process. As data was collected, it either was organised according to existing codes and themes, thereby further verifying the conclusions being drawn; or produced

⁷ Nonetheless, as researcher-conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews are, by comparison, likely to produce richer data insights, such methods are recommended for a future longer-form research project that is capable of suitably accommodating them.

new codes which challenged those conclusions, thereby leading to the development of new thematic connections between data. When new codes were consistently no longer emerging, theoretical saturation was considered to have been reached and data collection stopped.

As the trolling ideal type emerged from the data, I compared it against a case study of apparently political trolling. The case study chosen was *#BoycottStarWarsVII*. In October 2015, *#BoycottStarWarsVII* started trending on social media platform *Twitter* and subsequently gained a significant media coverage (see Dickey 2015; Eordogh 2015; Kamen 2015; Koski 2015; Lachenal 2015; Lee 2015; McMillan 2015; O’Neil 2015; Rouner 2015). Considered by many journalists as the work of trolls, *#BoycottStarWarsVII* called for a boycott of the upcoming (at the time) *Star Wars* film, *The Force Awakens* (2015), because having a black lead character was supposedly promoting ‘white genocide’ (Koski 2015: np). The underlying white-nationalist political agenda illuminates this case as being representative of the type of political trolling discussed by Anglin (2016). Throughout the thesis, I examine how the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls were able to leverage ideal typical trolling norms towards a political ends. This political trolling process is then further illuminated by reference to a theoretical exploration of trolling which is drawn from existing trolling literature and other inductive theoretical connections that I had developed in memos taken during the analytic process.

Ethics.

On *Reddit*, creating an account requires nothing more than a pseudonymous user-name handle (even an email address is not required). Whilst anonymity (or pseudonymity) might appear problematic for authenticity, in many cases, anonymity can make users feel more comfortable about revealing their true thoughts (Holtz et al. 2012). Despite the low access requirements and pseudonymity providing *Reddit* users a great degree of control over what they reveal about their personal lives, ethical concerns may arise relating to beneficence. In particular, despite the

apparent protection to identity that pseudonyms provide, there are many ways that datasets can be de-anonymised when cross-referenced against other datasets (Vitak et al. 2016). Considering that user-names can easily be located via a simple internet search of the comment text, I have decided to retain original pseudonyms. Such pseudonym retention raises ethical issues regarding informed consent. However, gaining informed consent presents difficulties as many users might no longer be active or otherwise infrequently check their accounts. Vitak *et al.* (2016) note that whilst gaining informed consent for open online datasets is not always a reasonable requirement, researchers must nonetheless take care to observe the relevant norms of the particular internet community being observed. After seeking advice from a Macquarie University ethics advisor, I was informed that I would require neither informed consent nor specific ethics clearance as long as the data was publicly accessible and did not require some form of login or user account to access. *Reddit* meets the three criteria in Eysenbach and Till's (2001) heuristic for an expectation of public visibility in an online forum⁸: a large active user base; a clear statement of public access in its privacy policy; and a lack of registration requirements to view content.

Chapter Outline.

This thesis is split into five chapters.

Chapter One examines the shift in academic trolling definitions away from prototypical understandings (Crystal 2004; Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Tepper 1997) to that of a more subculturally anchored definition (Higgin 2013; Manivannan 2013; Milner 2016; Phillips 2015). I show that much of the prototypical trolling method persists in the ideal type. Through the dramatic irony norm, prototypical trolls are able to use an intentionally provocative bait to create an escalated conflict whilst simultaneously signalling the play-frame of the trolling game to a lurking audience. However, the subcultural turn towards trolls self-identifying with a

⁸ Nonetheless, care has been taken to ensure that no comments have been used in the thesis which might directly identify users or contain information a reasonable person might not wish to have published in a research thesis.

lulz-y aesthetic of troll-*ish* intent is also present in the ideal type. This aesthetic manifests as a subversive commitment to transgressively exploiting any and all normative constraints for the purpose of generating in-group kudos.

Chapter Two expands on some of the tensions in the debate about how trolling impacts the utopian promise that the internet will reinvigorate the public sphere. Whilst some researchers (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Jane 2014, 2016b; Shaw 2013) argue that trolls damage the trust, safety, and discursive structure necessary for equal participation and quality deliberation; other researchers (Burroughs 2013; Coleman 2012b, 2015; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013; Milner 2013, 2016; Sindorf 2013) stress the importance of conflict, dissent, and civil disobedience to challenge exclusions. Drawing on Phillips (2015), I explore how the ideal typical trolling norm of transgressive resistance and dissent manifests as a grotesque exaggeration of early-cyberlibertarian negative-liberty ideals. As a result, trolls, like colonialists, assert a privileged notion about their *freedom to* exploit any and all aspects of cyberspace. However, trolls fail to understand (or ignore) that less-privileged others might require *freedom from* certain types of speech. Nonetheless, despite trolling being a silencing tactic, administrative curbing of trolling behaviours is often an act of symbolic violence that eradicates avenues for the marginalised to challenge exclusion.

Chapter Three examines how, in linking the transgressive kudos norm with privileged cyberlibertarian ideals, the trolling ideal type reconfigures the exploitative nature of trolls as a satirical art which challenges the rigidity of pre-existing hegemonic structures. With reference to Cameron's (2012) work on verbal hygiene, I note how the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls prefigure their position as a justified challenge to what they see as an excess of political correctness threatening the *freedom to* speak. In considering themselves as speaking up to oppressive power structures, trolls ironically desire the *freedom from* certain types of speech necessary for the positive liberty which they effectively deny others. As a result, trolls occupy a contradictory superposition of subverting the oppressive exploitation that they produce. That is, trolls occupy

both subject and object of critique. The internal normative commitments to transgression built into the dramatic irony norm place the very borders of trolling identity under constant self-threat. In being nebulous shape-shifters, trolls thus require ways to anchor and fortify their privileged identity. Drawing on Goffman (1956, 1963), I argue that trolls police the borders of their status by relegating the Other to a stigmatised out-group. Trolls justify stigmatising others as a community service that outs hidden character vices of actual social identity, whilst any similar stigmatisation of the troll is discarded as part of a purely staged virtual social identity. That is, through the dramatic irony norm, trolls (re)define the framing lines between sincerity and play.

Chapter Four draws upon a number of theorists (Ahmed 2014; Coleman 2012a; Higgin 2013; Holmes 2004; Lyman 2004; Manivannan 2013; Miller 2012; Paasonen 2015; Phillips 2015) to explore how trolls maintain affective asymmetries which allow them to exploit the stickiness, magnetism, resonance, and intensification of affect. I argue that political trolls leverage the prototypical trolling method to create a feedback loop of amplified visibility and intensified affect. The magnetism of the spectacle draws others in, whilst the stickiness of the affect holds them there and compels them to react. The generated lulz produces an internal magnetism which helps draw out and bind together the disparate and fragmented network of trolls into a cohesive whole. Trolls leverage certain technological features to create an emotional firewall of impression management. The firewall provides a rubbery escape from the stickiness of the negative affect which trolls use to stigmatise the Other. Trolls then reassert their privileged white-masculine ideals about an unemotional rationality being necessary to navigate the public sphere. I contend that trolls police feeling rules whilst performing a folk devil virtual identity to generate a polarising resentment which depoliticises the revolutionary potential of anger.

Chapter Five summarises the previous chapters, thereby drawing together how trolls leverage trolling norms to repel threats to their privileged borders and subsequently recalibrate political sentiment in their favour. Questions are raised about how the contradictions of political trolling might reflect the structural contradictions found in the individualisation of risk society.

Chapter One:

Tricksters, Troublemakers, Tormentors, and Tyrants.

What does it mean to say that someone is an internet troll? Computer users are labelled trolls for participating in behaviours ranging from innocuous “joking around” similar to making prank phone calls, through to harassment, verbal abuse, misogynistic speech, racial epithets, and death threats. This chapter traces a line in the literature from the early prototypical understandings of trolling (Crystal 2004; Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Tepper 1997) to the subcultural turn towards trolls self-identifying their practices as trolling (Milner 2016; Phillips 2015). Complicating this linear progression, Bishop (2014, 2013) argues that the newer forms of trolling simply represent a split into a separate trolling *type*. By comparing the definitions in the literature with the understandings supplied by the exemplars in my data, I delineate a singular ideal type. That is, *how a troll ought to troll to be considered a troll*. Ideal typical trolls are shown to follow the prototypical method of using a *subtle bait* to create a feedback loop of *intentional provocation* whilst simultaneously signalling a play-frame to a lurking audience (Crystal 2004; Donath 1999; Paasonen 2015; Tepper 1997). Building on Milner’s (2016, 2013) argument that trolls leverage the irony built into Poe’s Law, I develop the concept that trolls use *dramatic irony* as a form of *in/out-group delineation*. By linking the *in-group kudos of dramatic irony* with the *transgressive lulz aesthetic*, I reconcile the emerging ideal type with Phillips’ (2015) *subcultural self-identification* norm, thereby bridging the two definitional camps.

The Prototypical Trolling Method.

The prototypical definitions produced by the first wave of inquiry present a particularly coherent, consistent, and clear image of what constitutes trolling as a practice. Donath (1999: 43) defines trolling as an identity deception game played without the consent of those being trolled. The aim of the game is ‘to embarrass, anger, and disrupt’ by posing as a legitimate participant within an

online discussion forum (Dahlberg 2001: np). Once accepted by the group, the troll deliberately posts subtly provocative messages which act as ‘bait’ intentionally designed to coax some form of emotional reaction from other users (Crystal 2004: 53). The “game” involves disguising the strategic intent of the provocations as a sincere attempt towards intersubjective communication, with an aim to derail the discussion into a series of frivolous circular arguments and increasingly off-topic replies (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002). Internet communities commonly advise *don’t feed the trolls* – that is, by ignoring trolling provocations, the trolls are denied what they desire and thus become bored and leave (Donath 1999).

However, it is not disruption which the troll finds amusing *per se*. Rather, the troll’s enjoyment comes from trolled users failing to heed (or being naïvely unaware of) this very advice of ignoring the troll and, instead, becoming emotionally invested in responding. The skill of the game is for the troll to signal their true intent to an in-group audience of experienced non-participating users called *lurkers*, whilst simultaneously convincing the trolled users to take the troll statements on face value (Crystal 2004; Tepper 1997). Trolled users are made to look foolish by their inability to interpret the troll signals correctly, thereby identifying the trolled users as part of the inexperienced out-group (Crystal 2004). In this way, trolling acts as a rite-of-passage, hazing ritual type role which helps acclimatise new users to the intricacies of in-group norms (Tepper 1997). According to Donath (1999), group members will often admire particularly clever trolls, whilst admonishing trolls whose provocative intent is too obvious. Hence, Donath suggests that the trolling game is not only about testing the astuteness of group members in identifying trolls, but also about the skill of the troll in walking the line between signalling and obscuring intent.

The Normative Guide to Fishing.

The prototypical trolling method persists in the understandings supplied by exemplars in my data. There is consensus across academics, self-described trolls, and redditors that trolling, at its

most basic, ought to involve *intentional provocation*. Paasonen (2015: 33) explicitly states that trolling involves an ‘intentional provocation of other users’, an understanding that is backed by other academics (Fichman and Sanfilippo 2015; Hardaker 2010; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013). In *The Troller’s FAQ*, Andrew (1996: np) writes that trolling involves a ‘provocative posting ... intended to produce a large volume of frivolous responses’. On *Reddit*, there were repeat mentions that trolls get a ‘rise’ out of others by getting them ‘riled up’. The most important aspect of this trolling norm, however, is that provocations are intentional. For instance, on the *r/AskReddit* (07/07/2012) thread, “Terr_” states that:

Trolling is always about triggering or goading victims into a reaction. Causing injury or offense to another person is not--on its own--trolling. If a pickpocket steals your wallet and runs away, he did not "troll" you, because he doesn't care about how you react, he just wants to escape with your cash.

Hence, rather than force involuntary reactions, trolls ought to use *bait* to entice reactions. As the troll Andrew (1996: np) points out, the term *trolling* came from what was originally fishing terminology for ‘[trailing] bait through a likely spot hoping for a bite’. This etymological origin story is backed by multiple researchers (Bishop 2013, 2014; Crystal 2004; Donath 1999; Hardaker 2010; Phillips 2015). Crystal (2004: 52) states that the bait is ‘an innocent-sounding question or statement, delivered deadpan’. Whilst the bait might be strategically constructed to target a particular individual (or *type* of individual), ultimately the trolled user self-selects (albeit unknowingly) by choosing to respond. For instance, one of the trolls interviewed on *Insight* (2012), Jaime Cochran, asserts that she trolls ‘whoever will take the bait’. Another of the trolls on *Insight*, Steven, states that ‘[the people he trolls] kind of put their hands up and volunteer ... you have to respond to me, you have to kind of pick yourself as a target’. Similar sentiments were expressed in the *r/AskReddit* (07/07/2012) discussion, with “Atomicide” arguing that:

... with correct trolling you cannot pick a target, they usually present themselves beforehand, or you leave bait for them ... the victim of trolling opens themselves up to being trolled.

Rather than generating a single reaction, the bait ought to provoke a feedback loop of reactive intensification. For instance, another troll interviewed on *Insight* (2012), “Weev”, takes pains to

assert that trolling is ‘a style of confrontational rhetoric’ which requires the other party to engage in a series of ‘back and forth’ exchanges. According to the troll Andrew (1996: np), efficient trolls are able to anticipate the responses of other users and set up conflicts between them. Ideally, personal viewpoints of users will clash so that their responses provoke further responses from other users. In an updated definition, Donath (2014: 354) argues that by maintaining a façade of legitimacy, trolls are able to derail discussions, not simply by provoking responses, but also by generating heated arguments questioning whether the actual troll is ‘ignorant but innocent, or deliberately malicious’. “Junkis” (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012) furthers this point, suggesting that ‘a good troll often has people questioning his legitimacy, but if he has done well enough other people will jump to his defense’. In this way, the troll creates a feedback loop of escalating reactions and thus minimises the need for further follow-up posts. Instead, the troll fades into the background audience of lurkers to enjoy the spoils of their disruption.

Whilst the first-wave identity deception focus seemingly implies that staging a detailed faux identity is the main component of trolling, in reality, identity deception is merely a means of access to the group. Instead, the troll game is about skilfully manipulating other users into reacting whilst *minimising* reliance on identity deception. As self-described troll “FreemanHagbardCeline” states:

Trolling used to be about being audacious, unorthodox and absolutely ludicrous. Basically you were supposed to write things that were silly and get a serious, often angry response. ... It's about getting the other party to make themselves look like an idiot (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

In this view, minimising the believability of staged identity makes the reactions of the trolled user appear more unreasonable, foolish, or extreme. Another redditor (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012) uses the metaphor of a matador’s cape to argue that identity deception allows trolls to position themselves as the bait which entices emotional responses from other users:

Trolling isn't about being crude, brutish, or confrontational- it's about leading people on, making yourself into a target. Trolling is about turning yourself into a waving red cape, not into a bull.

The red cape metaphor highlights a trolling norm of *dramatic irony*. Whilst the bull only sees red and charges; for the audience, the cape signifies the rules of a game intended for their amusement. The matador's skill in avoiding being gored by the provoked bull is a reward amplified by the audience's adulation. Likewise, the trolling game involves using dramatic irony which visibly signifies provocative intent to the audience whilst simultaneously ensuring that trolled users take troll statements purely on face value. As the troll Andrew (1996: np) argues:

Trolls are aimed at two audiences, the respondees and the lurkers. The best trolls reveal their true subject only to the lurkers. ... Outwardly you need to appear sincere, but at the same time you have to tell your **real** audience that this is blatant flamebait [his emphasis].

Here the norm about delineating an in-group from out-group on the basis of reading troll signifiers is clarified. Andrew (1996: np) emphasises that this insider humour comes from outsiders failing to read trolling signifiers, noting that 'if you don't fall for the joke, you get to be in on it'. Hence, trolls straddle a dramatic irony of (in)sincerity, (in)authenticity, and (in)visibility. It is in this liminal space where the lulz flow. As redditor "raskolnikov-" (r/AskReddit 07/07/2012) plainly states,

It's about saying something that is plausible enough to trick the idiots into responding seriously, but ridiculous enough that cleverer people can realize and be amused by what's going on.

Standing on the #BoycottStarWarsVII Bridge.

The #BoycottStarWarsVII case matches much of this prototypical method. Journalists (Dickey 2015; Kamen 2015; Koski 2015; Lachenal 2015; O'Neil 2015) state that the hashtag was started by two twitter users @DarklyEnlighten and @genophilia. Whilst provocative intent is not explicitly stated, the absurdity of the claim that *The Force Awakens* is 'anti-white propaganda' (see figure 3) is highlighted by fact that the *Star Wars* film franchise has always featured black characters⁹. Whilst any discussion about intent is speculative, the claim that it is anti-white propaganda for a singular black character to feature amongst an otherwise largely white cast

⁹ Most prominently, in the original film trilogy Billy Dee Williams plays Lando Calrissian and James Earl Jones voices Darth Vader, whilst in the prequel film trilogy Samuel L Jackson plays Mace Windu

appears as a highly ignorant or naïve claim. Appearing as a foolish yet legitimate participant for the purposes of creating a provocative bait is the exact *modus operandi* of the prototypical trolls.

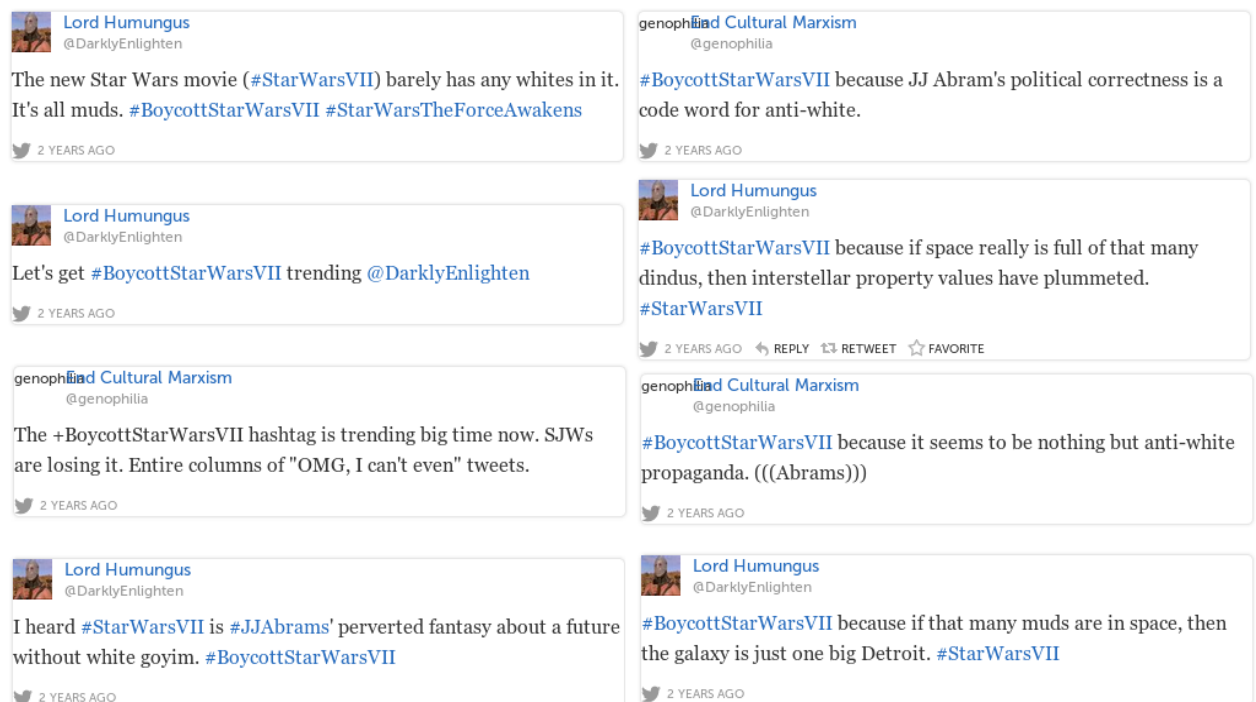


Figure 3: Collection of tweets by the two trolls who started the #BoycottStarWarsVII hashtag.
Source: Twitter.

The troll-ish intent to amplify visibility through a feedback loop of reactions is made clear in that the originator of the hashtag, @DarklyEnlighten, explicitly tweeted ‘Lets get #BoycottStarWarsVII trending’ (see figure 3). Whilst the trolls are targeting a specific *type* of person, there is nothing in the tweets that suggest that they are directed at any one *particular* person. Rather, the statements are put out in the open and the trolls wait to see who will respond. The use of a singular, unifying hashtag creates visibility for the bait by getting the hashtag to trend. In response, other twitter users started tweeting the hashtag with statements ridiculing the claims being made and, ultimately, multiple journalists reported on the story, thereby amplifying the visibility of the hashtag and prompting further responses (Kamen 2015; Lachenal 2015; Lee 2015; McMillan 2015; Silman 2015). Koski (2015) observes that the majority of the tweets using the hashtag were ridiculing, rebutting, or otherwise calling out the bigotry of the original claims. Dickey (2015: np) notes the existence of the feedback loop, citing research from social media

analytics firm *Fizziology* which indicates that 94 per cent of the tweets expressed outrage at the hashtag's existence, whilst only six per cent made anti-white propaganda claims.

The Subcultural Turn.

Around 2010, the news-media's increased focus on (and subsequent moral panic about) RIP and Twitter trolling coincided with a definitional shift in trolling to include more directly antagonistic behaviours (Bishop 2014; Phillips 2015; Whelan 2013). Phillips (2015) argues that such was an evolutionary subcultural turn towards trolls self-describing their behaviours as trolling. For Phillips in particular, trolling is not a practice understood on the basis of its effects. Rather than *troll* being a label which is applied by outsiders to describe the actions and behaviours of an individual or group, it is the troll subculture itself which determines its own definition. Phillips (2015: 17) states that such troll subcultures are 'marked by a set of unifying linguistic and behavioural practices' which act as expressions of a particular online identity. That is, trolls become trolls by participating as trolls with other trolls in the same way that punks are punk by being punk with other punks. Thus, whilst direct identity antagonisms and other hostilities might appear, *prima facie*, as failing to draw on dramatic irony norms, they can, nonetheless, be considered trolling by virtue of troll-ish performance in a self-described troll subculture.

Milner (2013, 2016) furthers this idea of trolling as a participatory collective whose shared identity is formed through unifying symbolic expressions and actions. For Milner, the *meme* forms one of the primary modes of communicative participation in trolling subcultures. Memes are shared communicative expressions of culture that circulate quickly and easily from person to person via repetitions and mimicry. Milner observes that the memes used by trolls tend to trade on imagery and language which directly antagonises marginalised groups on the basis of core identity categories such as gender and race. However, it is not necessarily the participation in asserting whiteness or maleness, *per se*, which makes trolling subcultures. Rather, Milner

suggests that it is the transgressively ironic play frame of trolling “for the lulz” which makes trolls troll-ish. That is, direct antagonisms clearly signalling provocative intent become troll-ish by virtue of participatory subcultural self-identification in an ironic lulz play frame of shared symbolic content. Drawing on Phillips (2015), Milner argues that the lulz play frame involves a nothing-is-sacred gallows-humour mentality which maintains a detached, unemotional distance to the circulated identity antagonisms. For Milner, the logic of lulz trades upon the ambivalent irony contained within the internet axiom of *Poe’s Law*. Poe’s Law states that without clear indication of intent, parody is almost impossible to differentiate from earnest antagonism in online spaces (Milner 2016). Trolls use this ambiguity to self-identify their actions as ironic play and “just joking”. However, outsiders may fail to read the play frame or consider it an insincere excuse for what are earnest antagonisms. Hence, despite subcultural trolls directly signalling provocative intent, the dramatic irony norm continues to exist.

Bishop (2013, 2014), on the other hand, maintains a prescriptive, externally applied definition of trolling based on its effects. For Bishop, the definitional shift is not so much an evolution of trolling as it is a split into two separate trolling types. Bishop argues that what differentiates these types is a question of intended audience – that is, where *kudos trolls* seek to entertain an external audience of experienced lurkers, *flame trolls* use more directly malicious practices for their own personal entertainment. Bishop goes on to argue that Phillips’ subcultural model mistakenly applies the troll label to actions intended as spiteful abuse rather than playful humour. According to Bishop, Phillips’ mistaken definition of trolls legitimised the moral panic use of the troll label to describe spiteful online behaviours and, therefore, cemented the new definition within the cultural lexicon. However, Phillips (2015: 18) argues that, by 2004, well before trolling gained mainstream attention, this self-identification debate about the ‘chicken-and-egg question of what comes first, the subculture or the name of the subculture, was already well under way’. For Phillips, the current subcultural troll incarnations were given shape in the anonymous, anything-goes space of 4chan during the 2000s.

Fishing with a Flame-Thrower.

Many of the exemplars in my data assert that trolling which transgresses into flaming lacks the required finesse and subtlety of bait. Akin to the driver who hurls insults at another driver for cutting them off in traffic, flaming is internet slang for heated vituperative personal attacks on another user (Paasonen 2015; Rowland 2006). Much like road rage, flaming acts as a direct emotional outlet for rage and frustration rather than a subtle means of intentional provocation for the lulz. Many redditors do note, however, a blurring of the flame/troll distinction. As one redditor states on the *r/AskReddit* (06/07/2012 – account since deleted) thread, ‘what people think is trolling nowadays is more like flaming’. Still, Coles and West (2016a) observe that internet users often express a fond nostalgia for a supposed golden age where trolling retained a sharp distinction from flaming. This nostalgic desire is highly evident in my data. As redditor “Bobide” states, ‘we need to bring back the word flaming to describe the hopelessly negative and hostile posts that people think constitute trolling’ (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

Whilst many redditors consider behaviours involving identity antagonisms to lack the subtle nuance of bait, other redditors suggest, however, that the lack of subtlety might perform a transgressive meta-trolling. For instance, “Havitech” asks rhetorically:

What if someone does that on purpose, with the knowledge that it will piss people off when they so blatantly misuse the word “troll”? Poe’s Law or meta-trolling if you will. (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

Likewise, “rocksteady” contends that ‘the guys who go full retard troll are only doing so 2 “troll” the people who think trolling should be discrete’ (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012). Another redditor (*r/Politics* 28/10/2016 – account since deleted) observes that trolling involves an escalating game of ‘shock humour’ one-upmanship, thereby positioning current trolling antagonisms as a ‘logical progression’ from prototypical trolling. Phillips (2015: 25) states that the *lulzy* aesthetic of this transgressive trolling norm rests on exploitability:

Trolls believe that nothing should be taken seriously, and therefore regard public displays of sentimentality, political conviction, and/or ideological rigidity as a call to trolling arms. In this way, lulz functions as a pushback against any and all forms of attachment, a highly ironic stance considering how attached trolls are to the pursuit of lulz.

Trolling thus involves a continual normative contradiction where trolls ought to transgress any normative commitment placed upon them. Any rigidly conformist normative prescription of trolling identity itself becomes an appropriately lulz-worthy object for trolling.

Still, Bishop (2013, 2014) asserts that many so-called trolls are driven by spite rather than humour, thereby implying such trolls are not truly trolling for the lulz. However, as “Terr_” argues, *all* troll humour is spiteful because ‘trolls are never laughing *with* their victims, they are always laughing *at* their victims’ (r/AskReddit 07/07/2012). As “protagonist01” points out:

[Trolls are] always motivated by a desire to expose someone else’s vulnerability, out of a need to feel superior or the joy of seeing that person suffer. ... it is always derailing, demeaning to the victim and servant to the audience’s delight to see somebody suffer (r/AskReddit 07/07/2012)

Poe’s Law muddies the flame/kudos distinction by masking the spiteful laughter of prototypical trolls. Even Bishop (2014: 9–10) recognises that ‘what may be grossly offensive to one person (i.e., a flame) may be entertaining to another (i.e., kudos)’. As self-described troll “RebelTactics” states, ‘being a dick is not bad in trolling because in the end its all for our sick laughs’ (r/AskReddit 07/07/2012). Phillips (2015: 24) argues that all trolls maintain this schadenfreude-esque normative commitment to amassing the ‘unsympathetic, ambiguous laughter’ of lulz. Trolling *generates* and *celebrates* lulz (Phillips 2015). That is, it does not matter from where or from whom the lulz come, only that the trolling be lulz-worthy and has a lulzy aesthetic. This amassing of lulz echoes the kudos given by the lurking audience. The transgressive pursuit of lulz thus merges kudos and flame into a unifying ideal type. That is, whilst the intentional provocation of trolling has become more directly antagonistic, such manifests as an evolution of a transgressive norm which continually tests the bounds of what constitutes trolling.

Boycotting Star Wars From Under the Bridge.

In the same way that playing punk music does not automatically make someone a punk, performing troll-ish behaviours does not automatically make someone a troll. Phillips

(2015) argues, however, that there are persistent markers which indicate troll-ish identity, first and foremost of which is that trolls ought to *self-identify* as trolls. According to Phillips (2015: 24), trolling ‘is something a self-identifying troll sets out to do, as an expression of his or her online identity’. In the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* case, whilst there is no direct statement of troll self-identification in the original tweets, journalists (Kamen 2015; Rouner 2015) and other internet users (*see figure 4*) connected the hashtag with 4chan, thereby implying a troll-ish intent. Whilst not all trolls are 4chan users, nor are all actions by 4chan users trolling, trolling does, nonetheless, form an explicit part of 4chan identity (Phillips 2015). Further, both @DarklyEnlighten and @genophilia have previously self-identified as trolls (Eordogh 2015).

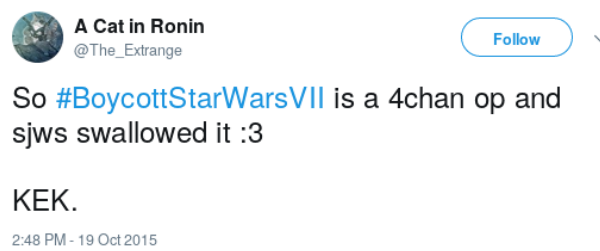


Figure 4: Tweet by @The_Extrange claiming 4chan created the hashtag. Source: Twitter.

The *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls perform signifiers that separate in-group from out-group in terms of how the ironic play frame of the lulzy aesthetic is interpreted. For instance, the name of *The Force Awakens* director, J.J. Abrams, is enclosed in triple parentheses as ‘(((Abrams)))’ (*see figure 3*), which is an anti-Semitic troll signifier called *echoes*. White nationalists on /pol/ use echoes to signify a Jewish person holding media influence, with the claim being that ‘all Jewish surnames echo throughout history’ (Know Your Meme 2017d). Other troll signifiers are also present, such as the racial slur ‘dindus’ (*see figure 3*). The slur *dindu* comes from the pejorative phrase *dindu nuffin*. *Know Your Meme* (2016c: np) states that ‘dindu nuffin is a pejorative term that originated on /pol/ to mock and criticise black people’. The term is a racist caricature of the pleas of innocence, “didn’t do nothing”, made by unarmed black men killed by police. Here there is a play on a meme where *Star Wars* character Mace Windu is referred to using the pejorative

“Mace Dindu” (see figure 5). Further, @The_Exchange, (see figure 4) asserts that the hashtag was a ‘4chan op’ (as in *trolling operation*) and signs off with “KEK” (a substitute term for lulz used by 4chan users), thereby signalling that @The_Exchange belongs to the experienced in-group.

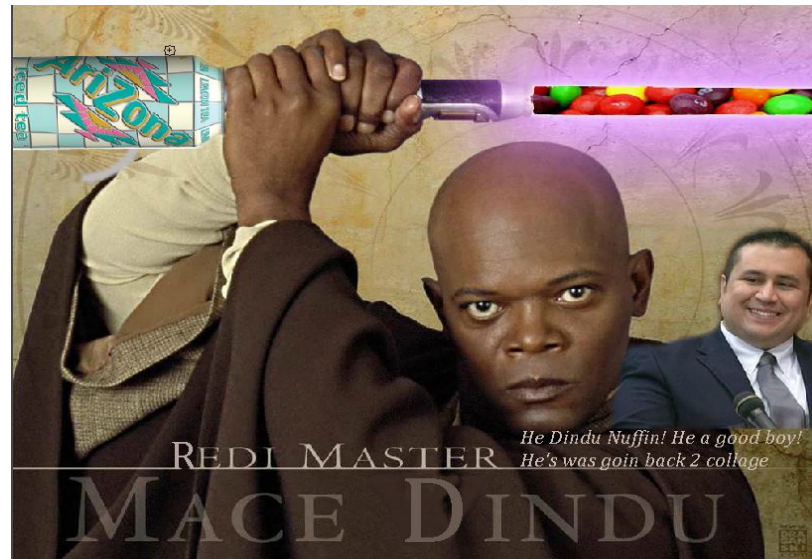


Figure 5: Racist meme of "Mace Dindu" circulated by 4chan users. Source: Know Your Meme.

Chapter Conclusion.

In the prototypical trolling method, trolls intentionally use subtle bait to provoke an escalating series of reactions. Dramatic irony signifies the ironic play frame to an experienced in-group audience and separates them from an out-group that are unable (or unwilling) to interpret such. These trolls seek in-group kudos by generating lulz for their lurking audience to celebrate. However, whilst the #BoycottStarWarsVII trolls present more finesse than directly yelling insults at others, the use of racist identity antagonisms makes it questionable whether such is in the trolling spirit of winding people up for audience kudos. Nonetheless, the lulzy aesthetic of the ironic trolling play frame always involves a degree of *schadenfreude*. The #BoycottStarWarsVII trolls embody this aesthetic by performing signifiers of their subcultural identity. In the next chapter, I explore how the troll commitment to transgression is situated within a debate about what constitutes legitimate forms of participation within the public sphere.

Chapter Two:

Vibrant Violence at the Frontiers of the Freedom to Troll.

Chapter One discussed how trolls contextualise the transgressive *schadenfreude* of the lulz aesthetic as a dramatic irony performed for the kudos of an in-group audience. However, for many researchers (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Jane 2016b, 2014; Shaw 2013) whose theoretical frameworks draw from deliberative public sphere models (see Habermas 1987, 1984, 1989; Peters 2008), trolling is a silencing tactic which excludes marginalised voices by damaging the trust, safety, and discursive structure necessary for equal participation and quality deliberation. In this chapter, I explore some of the tensions in the debate about the impact of trolling on the public sphere. I discuss how many alternative public sphere models valuing conflict, impoliteness, dissent, and civil disobedience (Dahlberg 2014; Dahlgren 2013; Fraser 1990, 1997, Mouffe 1999, 2005, 2000; Papacharissi 2004) often produce more ambivalent perspectives about the impact of trolling on the public sphere. That is, researchers (Burroughs 2013; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013; Milner 2016, 2013; Sindorf 2013; Whelan 2013) using these theoretical frameworks argue that trolls contribute a valuable vibrancy, thereby complicating the rhetoric calling for the removal of trolls. In particular, there is a concern that excluding trolling behaviours is a form of symbolic violence which shuts down avenues for marginalised groups to contest exclusions. Drawing on Phillips (2015), I note how trolls further justify the transgressive, silencing, oppressive, and dehumanising actions of their colonialist-esque privilege via an appeal to cyberlibertarian ideals valuing negative liberty above all else.

Distrust and Disrespect in Deliberative Democracy.

As Papacharissi (2002) observes, the last decades of the twentieth century saw many theorists championing an almost utopian technological determinism about the emerging Internet. These theorists believed that the Internet would reinvigorate critical-rational political deliberation

within a declining public sphere. Increased connectivity would erode many access barriers such as distance and disability, whilst anonymity would provide marginalised groups the safety to express controversial ideas without fear of stigma or persecution (Rowland 2006). Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) note that these cyber-utopians believed that the decentralised non-hierarchical information flows of cyberspace would allow for the autonomous formation of political associations amongst individual citizens. Importantly, association formation would no longer require the assistance of the traditional broadcast mass-media which had become controlled by monolithic, globalised, mega-corporations driven by neoliberal economic imperatives (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Further, the demassification and decentralisation of cyberspace meant less reliance on the major political parties which were increasingly viewed as corrupt, self-serving, and catering to powerful corporate interests (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Thus, these new potentials for free, equal, and autonomous political participation were considered to herald a radically democratic new-age where citizens would have a more direct influence on government.

Many of these utopian visions are grounded in deliberative democratic models where interlocutors locate common ground between practical matters of public interest through critical-rational argumentation. Peters (2008) suggests that such deliberations work by following a particular discursive structure where arguments are presented one at a time in a logically consistent form and each other participant has the opportunity to respond in kind. Importantly, all interlocutors ought to take an authentic, open, reflexive, respectful, equal, reciprocal, non-discriminatory, and critical-rational stance towards one another (Peters 2008). Habermas (1984, 1987, 1989) argues that by approximating these ideal conditions, interlocutors are able to assess the validity of each claim on its own merit and subsequently arrive at intersubjective agreement where the force of the better argument prevails. However, deliberative arguments are not instrumental means towards strategically “winning” some rationally self-interested *homo economicus* type of predetermined end. Rather, such communicative rationality involves taking an empathic second-person perspective which allows the creation of new, mutually shared ends (Habermas 1984, 1987). That is, such intersubjective communicative processes modify and

imprint upon the *lifeworld* of understandings and logic that form the worldview horizons by which individuals ‘prereflectively conceptually organize their perceptions of everyday life’ (Fincher 2007: 2651). In this way, even small everyday interactions can have a considerable knock-on effect that modifies the perspectives of others, thereby building consensually formed public opinion which influences policy decisions.

The first wave of researchers (Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002) consider trolling in terms of being costly overall for the group. For Donath (1999), trolling involves a category deception which damages trust within the group. That is, the existence of trolling elicits debate within the group about whether seemingly clueless users belong to the category of ignorant yet legitimate participants or deliberately malicious trolls. The troll game involves derailing discussion by creating debate about motives. Hence, groups previously disrupted by trolls will often become highly suspicious of (and thus increasingly closed off to) new users (Donath 1999). Dahlberg (2001) contends that this distrust causes group participants to become unwilling to disclose authentic aspects of self or to believe such revelations from others. Herring *et al.* (2002) further this view, asserting that trolling infiltrations damage the sense of protection and safety which is necessary within many groups to foster the type of supportive and trusting environment that their members require to participate. In particular, this loss of safety harms groups which discuss sensitive topics (such as rape and abuse), and whose members, therefore, might feel vulnerable disclosing authentic aspects of self (particularly if the authenticity of that self-disclosure might be interrogated) (Herring et al. 2002). Dahlberg (2001) argues that as trolls create distrust and disrespect, they thus fail to meet deliberative normative standards and, therefore, can and ought to be legitimately excluded from online discussion spaces.

In the intervening years since Dahlberg (2001) was writing, many of the same concerns about trolling damaging deliberative potentials have persisted. More so than ever, the online space now seemingly appears filled with disruptive and malicious users who leverage valuable elements of anonymity and connectivity to target individuals and social groups with racist, misogynistic, or

otherwise hurtful speech (Jane 2014; Milner 2016). Milner (2016: 148) states that even when presented as ironic jokes, the ‘ceaseless antagonisms are serious objectifications and dehumanizations’ which symbolically injure already marginalised social groups. Jane (2014: 536) argues that such antagonisms create a ‘tyranny of silence’ because the targets fear that speaking out ‘risks accusations that they lack humour, are weak or thin-skinned, or are opposed to the principles of free speech’. Other reasons include fears about safety, concerns about repeat or intensified targeting, and a desire to appear emotionally unaffected (Jane 2014). Milner (2013: 89) thus observes that the ironic “only joking” tacitly expressed in the troll logic of lulz ‘can be used to “whitewash” exclusion and silence countering perspectives’. Shaw (2013: 94) states that such ‘silencing practices can be defined as actions that aim to diminish the space for others in public debate’. That is, trolls crowd out other perspectives by saturating the public space with the symbolic violence of identity antagonisms. Moreover, the advice to ignore trolls – *don’t feed the trolls* – denies the right of reply and thus bolsters trolling as a silencing tactic.

The mainstream news-media tends to further this critique of trolling being symbolically violent. This view often takes a relatively neutral view of technology where the majority of internet users are considered capable of working towards deliberative consensus by using technology to unburden the physical demands of communication (Whelan 2013). Here the critical norm is that online communication can and ought to be polite, civil, and reasoned. Trolls, on the other hand, are considered pathologically deviant, anti-social, amoral folk-devils who intentionally use connectivity to harass and abuse others whilst deliberately using the anonymous environs as a way to escape accountability (Bishop 2014; Phillips 2015; Whelan 2013). To support their position, the news-media (see Chamorro-Premuzic 2014; Chayka 2014; Dodgson 2017; Ehlinger 2017; Mooney 2014) often reference a singular study by Buckels *et al.* (2014) which connects trolling with Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and everyday sadism. Hence, in the mainstream news-media view, whilst particular technological features are seen to facilitate trolling, ultimately the harms trolls inflict upon individuals and public discourse are considered as a product of an individually pathological psyche. Trolls are viewed as ‘defiled selves’ who

chaotically and uncontrollably enjoy the excesses of exaggerated and extreme character vices that can only come from complete objectification and dehumanisation of others (Whelan 2013: 45). Whelan (2013: 38) argues that the news-media thus view trolling as: (1) a threat to deliberative democracy; (2) 'grounds for moral panic'; and, therefore, (3) 'a risk to (be managed by) those who engage in online media'. Whelan (2013: 44–45) asserts that news-media organisations condemn, yet secretly crave, the impunity that anonymity affords trolls.

Vibrant Antagonism and Violent Dissent.

The mainstream news-media present an almost cut-and-dry understanding that trolling is an illegitimate form of deliberately malicious speech which, therefore, ought to be excluded from communicative spaces. Whelan (2013: 38) argues, however, that the mainstream news-media moral panic is, more accurately, 'a moral panic the media has about itself'. The demassified space of the internet provides a multiplicity of user-driven opportunities for grassroots, de-commercialised, and decentralised networks of news content, public opinion, and political debate, thereby disrupting the reliance citizens have traditionally had on broadcast mass-media to filter, distil, and disseminate public matters of common interest (Dahlberg and Siaperä 2007). The combination of increased competition, fragmentation, and specialisation has disrupted advertising revenues and prompted the downsizing and closure of many traditional news-media outlets (Fenton et al. 2010). Hence, Sindorf (2013: 198) argues that the primary focus of corporate news organisations is generating revenue, with such economic imperatives overriding any publicly expressed ideals about contributing to a 'thriving democracy'. Ambiguous behavioural labels such as 'trolling' become powerful tools for silencing undesirable perspectives when used as normative standards of illegitimate speech. There are thus apprehensions that the mainstream news-media trolling moral panic exists not so much out of concern for public interest, but rather is motivated by a desire to trade on spectacle to drive up advertising revenue through increased page-views (Phillips 2015; Sindorf 2013; Whelan 2013).

According to Sindorf (2013), corporate news-media leverage trolling moral panic as justification for increasing administrative control over online comment fields attached to news articles. Sindorf (2013: 198) states that ‘despite the appearance of democratic participation in corporate-owned interactive online spaces, users’ attention and voices are easily shaped and dominated by corporate interests and discourses’. Sindorf argues that moderation and closure of comment fields is a symbolically violent way for those in the dominant position (that is, news organisation owners) to reorganise the distribution of cultural capital for their own benefit. News corporations use trolling moral panic to legitimise moderation techniques that can subtly alter the frame and tone of political discussions to serve economic imperatives rather than the expressed intent of fostering healthier deliberative debate (Sindorf 2013). That is, for news corporations, comment spaces exist primarily to derive additional advertising revenue by increasing user engagement, generating free additional content, and incentivising repeat page-views. Trolling moral panic reasserts norms about legitimate speech that service the dominant order, and thus helps ensure that commenting users internalise those norms; as a result, users re-enact symbolic violence towards themselves (through self discipline) and each other (by reporting or challenging “unacceptable” comments) (Sindorf 2013). Phillips (2015) notes the contradictory approach of the news-media, observing that there are long histories of news organisations using tactics, such as click-bait headlines and inflammatory stories, which approximate those very trolling behaviours that they condemn. For Phillips, trolls manifest as a grotesque echo of a pre-existing pathology deeply embedded within media culture.

Nevertheless, trolls often situate themselves as resisting the sanitisation of speech (Coleman 2012a; Phillips 2015). In this view, an excessive emphasis on civic politeness acts as a political ‘straightjacket’ (Dahlgren 2013: 75) which ‘stifles’ deliberative discourse and ‘reinforce[s] existing arrangements of power’ (Sindorf 2013: 195). Fraser (1997: 76) argues that deliberative norms draw from ‘bourgeois, masculinist, white-supremacist’ ideals about speech which privilege certain social groups (middle-class white males) over subaltern others. That is, the norms about the form deliberation ought to take are more naturally approximated by the habitus

which is built through a life of certain privileges. As a simple example, the middle-class privilege of access to quality education teaches how to develop critical-rational thought and present such in the “correct” deliberative form. However, Fraser is not arguing that we do away with the deliberative model, only that it be opened up to contestation and alternate forms of deliberation. Similarly, Papacharissi (2004: 260) argues that speech not conforming to social etiquette norms can still provide ‘respect for the collective traditions of democracy’. That is, robust, lively, spontaneous, and passionate discussion lacking in social niceties can still hold democratic merit in terms of working towards the common good. In Papacharissi’s view, personal insult and injury, whilst unpleasant, do not necessarily negatively impact achieving consensus.

Many deliberative theorists, in recognising that hegemonic discourses can result in illegitimate exclusions, assert the importance of non-deliberative interactions, such as civil disobedience, to ‘contest exclusions from political participation’ (Dahlberg 2014: 33). Trolls are often viewed as challenging the limited opportunity for participation in vibrant political debate online. For instance, there is a popular concern that social media become insular echo chambers which narrowly reflect the ideas, values, and perspectives of users’ own world-views, thereby producing a tendency for different views to be met with suspicion, hostility, or derision (El-Bermawy 2016; Griffith 2017; Saxena 2017)¹⁰. Further, Dahlberg and Siaperä (2007) observe that the increasing privatisation of cyberspace has led to a liberal-consumerist mode of online politics where citizens are re-imagined as consumers whose preferences ought to be aggregated from a series of pre-selected choices rather than be empowered as producers of their own political critiques. Coles and West (2016a) thus observe that internet users often consider trolling to perform a productive *devil’s advocacy* which prompts debate and challenges the otherwise homogeneous status-quo of online discussion spaces. Moreover, Coleman (2012b) argues that trolling can act as a subversive subcultural resistance to the privatisation of the traditionally free and open communicative spaces of the Internet. Phillips (2015) furthers this position, observing

10 As Duggan and Smith (2016: 2) find, of social media users in the United States, 59 per cent find divergent political perspectives ‘stressful and frustrating’, with 37 per cent feeling ‘worn out’ by experiencing such, and only 20 per cent reporting that they enjoy being exposed to a variety of political discussions. Moreover, Massaro and Stryker (2012) observe that Internet users, in experiencing divergent perspectives as threatening, often attempt to simplify their exposure to unfamiliar positions rather than expend energy navigating the tangle of validity claims required to verify the strength and authenticity of the better argument.

that trolls often frame their actions as critiquing a media culture which capitalises on disasters and superficial affective expressions to manipulate public opinion and manufacture consensus.

On the other hand, post-structuralist conceptions of radically democratic models *directly* emphasise conflict as an invaluable component of the public sphere. Post-structuralist theorists such as Mouffe (1999, 2000, 2005) argue that pluralistic politics are irradicably conflictual and carry unreconcilable antagonisms between collectivities of differing identities. For Mouffe, the dynamics of conflictual antagonism are positively valued when such provides potential to be transformed into *agonism* – that is, into a type of gladiatorial deep respect and mutual admiration between opponents. Here the goal is not to destroy opposing views, nor to locate a completely consensual common ground between fundamentally different positions. Instead, opposing views are fought with vigour, but the legitimacy of their existence and the right to defend themselves is never questioned. However, Mouffe does not suggest consensus is bad. Rather, Mouffe’s position employs a Foucauldian acknowledgement that all knowledge (and thus speech) inherently contains structured formations of pre-existing hegemonic power that the deliberative ideal cannot escape (and thus any so-called “consensus” will reproduce). The agonistic contest that takes place in the democratic battlefield is one where opposing publics compete in a continual struggle to reconfigure existing discursive formations in ways that match their desired social order.

Agonism-based troll studies tend to argue that whilst trolling antagonisms do not always successfully translate into a productive agonism, trolling does, nonetheless, represent a valuable vibrancy within the public sphere (Burroughs 2013; McCosker 2014; McCosker and Johns 2013; Milner 2013, 2016). For instance, Milner (2013: 61) concludes that whilst trolling logic ‘ambiguously balance[s] agonism and antagonism’, the contestation of ideas in the process of conflict nevertheless ‘provide[s] sharper engagement than repression’. That is, to remove trolling would limit potentials for agonistic engagement¹¹. However, Milner is ambivalent towards trolling as agonism because: (1) whilst trolling acts as a silencing tactic which crowds out public

¹¹ Milner (2013, 2016) argues that trolling produces a reactive fight back against such trolling antagonisms that acts as the counterpublic contestation which is necessary for well-functioning agonistic political models.

space, re-inflicts old injuries that dehumanise and objectify the subaltern other, and removes the safety necessary for marginalised voices to enter the political arena; at the same time, (2) trolling is not an assertion that countering views lack the right to defend themselves, but rather is a rhetorical device to contest other perspectives through ridicule, irony, and humour. Still, Jane (2015: 76) argues that researchers tend to focus on the ‘innocuous, productive, or celebratory elements [of trolling] arguably at the expense of other, more ethically pressing dimensions’.

The Founding Fathers Fought at the Frontiers for our Freedom of Lulz.

Ultimately, trolling is predicated on a negative liberty ideal that the *freedom to* voice an opinion is of utmost democratic importance. Phillips (2015: 129) argues that such trolling attitudes echo (albeit coalescing as a ‘dark underbelly’ of) the early 1990s utopian cyberlibertarian rhetoric. For cyberlibertarians, the Internet, when unimpeded by external interference, is (or was) considered to contain inherent conditions for the natural development of a supposedly perfect marketplace of ideas (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). Cyberlibertarians argue that the (mythologically) non-hierarchical, decentralised, and free-flowing space of the unimpeded online agora perfectly balances rights of equality and liberty, and thus provides the ideal means for individuals to negotiate their own social contracts in a fair, free, equitable, and autonomous manner (Dahlberg and Siapera 2007). That is, early cyberlibertarians understood cyberspace as providing a pure market ideal unblemished by socio-political contingencies. Dahlberg and Siapera (2007) observe that cyberlibertarians, in considering the arbitration of the cyber-marketplace as sacrosanct, remain zealously steadfast in their resistance to any regulatory control or corporate ownership of cyberspace. For cyberlibertarians, the individual’s *freedom to* speak is thus valued above all else.

Phillips (2015: 129) asserts that like the early cyberlibertarians who asserted that cyberspace ought to remain free from ‘the tyrannies of corporate and governmental encroachment’, trolls will meet any attempt to constrain their actions or censor their speech (whether by lawmakers,

the media, or the internet community) with a fierce resistance. Trolls, particularly American trolls, champion freedom of speech rights as protecting their *freedom to troll* in what they consider their ‘personal playground and birthright’ (that is, the Internet) (Phillips 2015: 129). Of course, such is a gross misinterpretation of free speech rights. Freedom of speech only protects public speech from state interference. Privately owned discussion spaces are well within rights to deny a platform to certain views, ideas, and behaviours. However, Bell (2004) notes that cyberlibertarians argue for a radical individualism only possible in a demassified cyberspace where neither the state nor the private sector are able to restrict freedom of expression. In this cyberlibertarian view, any and all regulatory controls on speech ought to be resisted as such controls artificially manipulate the price signals which determine the best available ideas. Hence, any restrictions or regulations that are claimed to increase participatory diversity or enhance deliberative quality are met with suspicion, with cyberlibertarians arguing that the public interest is an amorphous concept often used to cloak the intentions of powerful elites.

According to Phillips (2015: 129), trolls take up cyberlibertarian ideals about the Internet being a new-world frontier filled with ‘endless opportunity’ and thus view cyberspace as something to harness, explore, and claim. Phillips (2015: 129) argues that where the ‘early cyber-utopians’ held ‘starry-eyed idealizations’ about the new (cyber)world, the attitudes of trolls, on the other hand, more closely mirror the stark and violent realities of colonialism. Colonists declare land their own regardless of those who might currently inhabit and/or own it – whose land it currently is ‘[is] just details, and is nothing a musket or ten can’t fix’ (Phillips 2015: 129). These ideals manifest as a sense of entitlement where trolls recontextualise their opportunities for playing with technology into a normative commitment that they *ought* to exploit such – that is, ‘do *what* you can *because* you can’ or, in the case of trolls, ‘I am able to troll this person ... therefore it is my right to do so’ (Phillips 2015: 132). Through the prism of cyberlibertarian ideals, trolling thus becomes a practice of claiming terrain and marking borders. Like colonialists, trolls believe it is their right to claim and exploit the cyber-terrain because they can. However, the cyber-terrain is not a geography constituted by physical plains and streams. Rather, the homesteading of

cyberspace becomes about staking claim to the visibility and spread of ideas amongst networked information flows. Still, as Phillips asserts, free speech is a poor justification for malicious trolling practices which intimidate, humiliate, abuse, or silence others. Moreover, whilst Papacharissi (2004) champions impoliteness as important to democracy, she does, nonetheless, point out that speech employed as a maligned exercise in power designed to denigrate, stereotype, offend, or otherwise harm social *groups* (not individuals) *does* constitute incivility.

The myopic championing of *freedom to speak* comes from a privileged position which fails to grasp (or conveniently ignores) that for marginalised voices the safety of *freedom from* certain forms of speech is often far more important to their participation. Nonetheless, the cyberlibertarian position has always been a myopic perspective obscured by the blinders of privilege. A significant digital divide existed at the height of cyberlibertarian rhetoric during the mid 1990s. A number of factors contributed to this digital divide along lines of gender, ethnicity, and class. As Murphy and Roser (2017) note, the typical internet user of the mid 1990s was a white, tertiary educated, middle-class male mid way through their career. Offline inequalities in status, wealth, and education coupled with the traditionally masculine language and symbolism of technology to position cyberspace as the domain of white men (Travers 2003; Wajcman 1991). Warf (2010) states that barriers of cost and expertise put home Internet access out of reach for many. For those that could afford access, the quality and duration of such was organised hierarchically according to price. The generally lower socioeconomic status of both women and non-whites relative to white males ensured reduced access rates across those groups (Murphy and Roser 2017; Warf 2010)¹². Hence, those early cyberlibertarian frontiersmen laying claim to cyberspace and asserting their negative liberty ideals as foundational principles were those individuals who occupied the social groups with the most privilege. That *freedom to speak* forms the central principle of cyberlibertarianism is hardly surprising when it comes from those in the least need of protecting positive liberty via safe spaces of *freedom from* certain forms of speech.

¹² In the United States in 1995, the proportion of men with Internet access was almost double the proportion of women with Internet access (18% versus 10%), and the proportion of Caucasians with Internet access was more than double the proportion of Latinos/Hispanics with Internet access (37.7% versus 16.6%) and approximately double the proportion of African-Americans with Internet access (37.7% versus 19%) (Warf 2010).

Chapter Conclusion.

Shaw (2013: 95) observes that much of the debate around trolling involves a ‘tension’ between needing ‘free spaces’ and ‘safe spaces’ for political discourse online. That trolls are able to re-frame their understandings as civil disobedience and dissent does not excuse trolling behaviours which reinforce existing arrangements of power along core identity lines such as race and gender (Jane 2015; Milner 2013). Phillips (2015) argues that such symbolically violent antagonisms ought not be labelled trolling because doing so normalises and obscures the degree of symbolic violence that the utterances contain. Where early cyberlibertarians staked a claim on cyberspace that was perhaps unintentionally built upon ideals which maintain the privileged status-quo, trolls vehemently defend these spaces, unwillingly to cede the privileged territory. Trolling manifests as a sense of pure imperialist privilege where trolls not only believe that they *can* do and say whatever they please, but also that such privilege implies that they *ought* to exploit any and all opportunities. By exploiting such, trolls reinforce the colonial borders of their cyberlibertarian conquests over the cyber-terrain.

When trolls embody such exploitative privilege they represent a significant risk to democratic deliberation. Trolls create distrust, disruption, disrespect, and deception. Moreover, trolling acts as a silencing tactic which allows trolls to flood the public space with identity antagonisms. Such antagonisms open old wounds that exploit, oppress, dehumanise, and objectify marginalised others, thereby creating a tyranny of silence where the other is transformed into the subaltern who is unable to speak. Still, there is much validity to warnings about attempting to erase or otherwise eradicate any and all confronting or impolite speech. Through such erasure, the very mode of dissent and civil disobedience by which the subaltern might challenge their exclusion is eradicated. Asserting the *freedom* to voice an opinion that silences opposing positions is a highly effective political tactic for trolls who are only committed to winning their claim to privileged territory rather than locating common ground. In the next chapter, I discuss how trolls justify their use of identity antagonisms as a satirical art which exposes inauthentic identity performances and challenges the hegemonic power of a politically correct regime.

Chapter Three:

Punching Up! Trolling and the Art of Stigma Maintenance.

Chapter One emphasised that the *transgressive kudos* norm found in the trolling ideal type drives trolls to consider any normative constraint an appropriately lulz-worthy object that ought to be exploited for the kudos of an in-group audience. Chapter Two argued that this *transgressive kudos* norm is built upon a grotesque exaggeration of privileged cyberlibertarian ideals about negative liberty. In further developing the trolling ideal type, this chapter explores how trolls attempt to justify their exploitative nature as a satirical art which challenges hegemonic power structures. However, I argue that as trolling is an oppressive exertion of power, trolls thus occupy a contradictory superposition whereby they occupy both subject and object of their own critique. With reference to Cameron's (2012) work on verbal hygiene, this contradictory superposition is highlighted through a discussion of how the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls attempt to resist what they see as an excess of political correctness threatening their cyberlibertarian privilege of *freedom to speak*. As the borders of trolling identity are under constant threat from their own internal commitment to transgression, trolls thus seek ways to fortify and anchor their identities. Drawing on Goffman (1956, 1963), I contend that trolls police the borders of their status by relegating the Other to a stigmatised out-group. I argue that trolls are rubbery figures who, by leveraging dramatic irony, are able to define the framing lines between sincerity and play.

Trolling is a Art (of Pugilism).

The idea of an ethically productive trolling done for the benefit (and thus kudos) of the wider community is frequently connected with the oft used troll phrase *trolling is a art*¹³. For many of the exemplars in my data, there has only ever been one static trolling ideal type – it is the loss of appreciation for the nuances of the trolling “art” as a result of gaining mainstream attention that

¹³ The phrase *trolling is a art* itself contains bait demanding a grammar correction for using the incorrect indefinite article of “a” rather than “an”.

has produced ambiguity in trolling definitions. For instance, in the *r/AskReddit* (07/07/2012) discussion, “xcake” states that ‘[trolling] never changed, but rather more people try it and suck at it, being unable to distinguish the necessary subtleties of the art’. Many redditors suggest that due to the increased attention, the etymological root of trolling as fishing terminology became conflated with the Scandinavian folk-lore of the ugly creature waiting under a bridge to ensnare its victims. For instance, “Moofyman” notes that ‘now people have become “Trolls”, not “Trollers” – they are the monsters, not the fisherman’ (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012). New users thus come to think of trolling as something which is ugly, brutish, and directly malicious. Phillips (2015) gives weight to this position, arguing that which etymological root occupies the imagination is related to how directly spiteful and malicious one understands trolling to be.

So what exactly constitutes this art of trolling which transforms low-status flammers lurking beneath bridges into high-status trolls who skilfully (and supposedly ethically) troll as part of their subcultural identity? As with all art, anyone can profess an artistic identity and thus deem their practices as art. However, whether such is deemed good art requires meeting a certain qualitative threshold through evaluation and critique. “Terr_” once again offers insight here:

When people troll badly, I prefer not to call them trolls. This is sort of like how someone who burned a meal isn’t “a cook”. Sure, they technically did the “act of cooking”, but it seems like calling them “a cook” wrongly implies that they are good at it. (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

Nonetheless, popular understandings of art will often conflate artistic quality with technical craft¹⁴. Likewise, what may appear, *prima facie*, as crude identity antagonisms may contain a certain artfully troll-ish nuance which eludes understanding by the common internet user. This artful nuance connects with norms about using humour as satire. For instance, one redditor (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/20112) states that like satire, good trolling requires a mastery of the art:

I find trolling to be pretty similar to satire, and as always there are emulators who are nowhere near as good as the masters, except there are more emulators than masters so trolling takes on the meaning of what the emulators have made it, which isn't trolling at all but just being an idiot.

¹⁴ Art movements such as dada, abstract expressionism, and suprematism are sometimes derided in popular culture because they supposedly lack technique, yet they are usually considered by art historians and critics as important movements within the modern art canon.

This notion of trolling mastery once again reasserts a trolling norm of subtle nuance where the provocative intent of the bait is obscured by dramatic irony. Kudos is given when trolls demonstrate mastery of the art. Many redditors connect trolling with satire, suggesting that trolls deserve kudos when trolling critiques hegemonic power. That is, the political satire trolling norm asserts that *good* trolls ought to challenge structures of oppression and exploitation. For instance, in the *r/Politics* (28/10/2016) discussion, redditor “SortaVeg” states that ethical trolling targets ‘society rather than individuals’, with “julia-seta” going on to link this notion with the ‘comedy ideal of “punching up” versus “punching down”’. “kurburux” makes this ethical ideal more explicit, stating that ‘satire is always supposed to question and criticise the powerful, if it’s mainly targeting the weak ones it becomes a tool of the powerful’ (*r/Politics* 28/10/2016). Likewise, on the *Insight* (2012) programme, the troll “Asher Wolf”, argues that trolling can act as ‘a format of talking back to people who are in positions of power or who are abusing others’. Amongst the exemplars in my data, these satirical norms connect with a code about trolling for *justice*. That is, trolling is framed as providing justice by only trolling users that *deserve* to be trolled. For instance, “Atomicide” plainly states that ‘a good troll is about targeting someone who deserves it’ (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012). Many academics (Coles and West 2016a; Paasonen 2015; Phillips 2015) also observe that trolls justify their trolling in this way.

Troll justice is frequently discussed as *outing* authentic character vices that the trolled user obscures behind an insincere façade of virtuous traits. For instance, one of the trolls interviewed on *Insight* (2012), Steven, asserts that his trolling is about ‘about exposing somebody for who they are’ rather than ‘deliberately trying to upset people’. Similarly, on *Insight*, the troll Jaime Cochran insists that her trolling exposes ‘the banality of the things that [her targets] hold dear’. For Jaime Cochran, the lulz are driven by coaxing an extreme response to what she considers a ‘super trivial’ topic such as music taste. Trolls, in being hyper aware of the potentials for staging inauthentic identity performances, leverage those very potentials as means of stripping back the virtual façade of others. As the troll “Borbygoymos” states in the *r/AskReddit* (07/07/2012) discussion, ‘trolling is supposed to be a clever way to get some sort of true emotional response

from someone'. The lulz of relegating trolled users to the out-group goes beyond highlighting inexperience in interpreting in-group social norms. Rather, trolls use dramatic irony to out the authentically real amongst the virtual hall of mirrors. For instance, "protagonist01" suggests that '[trolling] is always a lie to at least the effect of creating a false sense of security in the victim, to pretend that he/she is (at least) free to speak her mind' (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

This trolling "justice" reasserts the kudos norm of providing an altruistic service to the in-group community. For instance, on *Insight* (2012), the troll Steven gives an example of how he trolls discussion boards where knowledgeable users assist other users with building new computers:

This guy's ... supposed to be a nice guy helping you with your problems when in actual fact he's just an ass that wants to kind of lord superiority over people. My enjoyment comes from stringing these people along and showing people how nasty others can be if you know what I mean.

Hence, outing the character deficiencies of others is not about simply laughing at strangeness. Rather, lulz are (re)framed as challenging rigidity or otherwise exposing character traits that might threaten in-group solidarity. As one redditor reiterates on *r/AskReddit* (07/07/2012):

Most humor just comes out and denigrates people for being dumb or weird. Trolling takes the fact that they're actually petty, small, or ignorant, and easily angered/doesn't deal well with challenge, and lures them into exposing themselves.

Here in-group kudos connects with the transgressive norm about breaking down rigidity. For instance, the troll "Borbygoymos" (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012) argues that trolls target 'hivemind grouping[s]' which dogmatically conform to a rigid understanding of social order.

For Unhygienic Trolls, All Lulz Matter.

Higgin (2013) observes that there is a running theme amongst trolls about challenging dogmatic conformity to political correctness. As an example of this commitment, Higgin (2013: 138) cites a troll who states that he trolls because 'people who are overly earnest and serious online deserve and need a corrective'. Higgin (2013: 139) argues that "'overly serious" is often code for

“politically correct” which in turn is code for anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-racist’. That /pol/ is named the “politically incorrect” board explicitly signifies this trolling commitment to speaking up against political correctness. The *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls clearly state their anti political correctness intent, as made clear in @genophilia’s tweet that ‘JJ Abram’s political correctness is a code word for anti-white’ (see figure 3). The implication of this statement is that the casting of a black co-lead actor is driven by virtue signalling¹⁵ rather than as part of the film’s narrative demands. The use of the (((echoes))) signifier links the troll statements with /pol/ conspiracy theorist claims, such as those put forward by Anglin (2016), that there is secret Jewish plot to use political correctness as a form of Cultural Marxism¹⁶ designed to instil an anti-white and gynocentric hegemony. The *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls imply that left unchecked, political correctness will supposedly run rampant and soon there will be no white representation in film at all – or, as @genophilia tweets, ‘#whitegenocide’ (see figure 6).



Figure 6: *#BoycottStarWarsVII* troll @genophilia tweets about #whitegenocide. Source: Twitter

Such “political correctness gone mad” concerns are certainly not new. Cameron (1995: 116) observes that in the 1990s, many political commentators considered verbal hygiene¹⁷ ‘as a worrying manifestation’ of the politically correct ‘1990s *zeitgeist*’. Relevant here, Cameron notes that many of these commentators deployed *reductio ad absurdum* arguments about political

15 Bartholomew (2015) coined the term *virtue signalling* to describe actions, behaviours, or practices which are performed primarily to signal to an audience that the actor has good moral character and thus improve their standing within the group. Bartholomew uses the term in a derogatory way that implies that such expressions are inauthentic and driven purely by a desire to appear as a good person rather than having to actually embody such characteristics in more tangible ways.

16 *Know Your Meme* (2016b: np) states that /pol/ users use the term *Cultural Marxism* to imply that the Frankfurt School of critical theory is, in reality, ‘a Marxist plot to destroy the capitalist West from within by indoctrinating students to despise individualism and personal liberties in favor of political correctness and multiculturalism’.

17 Cameron (2012: vii) calls verbal hygiene the ‘... motley collection of discourses and practices through which people attempt to ‘clean up’ language and make its structure or its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility’.

correctness – for instance, that verbal hygiene would eventually force all black coffee to be called *African American* coffee. Cameron (1995: 123) argues that the rhetoric around political (in)correctness is really a ‘politics of definition’ about who ought to hold the power to prescribe the use of language within society. The rhetoric of the politically incorrect contextualises themselves as the victims of a far more powerful hegemonic “PC culture” which, in their eyes, unfairly blames them for all of society’s ills (Cameron 1995). Hence, the politically incorrect re-frame themselves as bravely speaking up to an existing power structure (brave because by virtue of speaking up they might be “unfairly” ostracised as bigots), rather than speaking down to those who are already marginalised and oppressed. Trolls thus consider themselves as martyrs who are willingly ostracised into a defiled outer class for the greater good of preserving the borders of *freedom to speak*.

Ironically (though perhaps unsurprisingly), the arguments behind the troll resistance to political correctness manifest as a desire for safe spaces where trolls can enjoy *freedom from* certain types of speech (in this case, films with racial diversity), so that they might continue to say what they please with impunity – a right which trolls, in their vehement and steadfast championing of the “right” to troll, effectively deny others. Of course, troll statements can never be taken purely on face value. The very notion that trolling outs authentic character vices rests upon the asymmetry built into the dramatic irony of Poe’s Law as discussed in Chapter One. Rigidity, dogmatic conformity, and other character traits trolls consider to be negative are exposed through trolled users reacting to what the trolls position as “obvious” expressions of the play frame. That is, the troll argument is designed to appear absurd in order to make counterargument positions also appear absurd by virtue of their reaction to such “obviously” staged hyperbole. The *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls were celebrated on /pol/ as successfully ‘triggering SJWs’¹⁸ into over-blown reactions, with the enjoyment of the resulting lulz implied in the statement that ‘the tears are unreal hahahahah’ (see figure 7). Similarly, @genophilia tweeted that ‘this morning a handful of alt-right people started the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* hashtag, by midday the SJWs are

¹⁸ 4chan users frequently use SJW (initialism for Social Justice Warrior) as a term of derision for left-leaning individuals who loudly champion so-called politically correct causes related to intersectional identity politics.

going apeshit #winning' (Koski 2015: np). Through Poe's Law, the troll thus occupies both subject and object of critique. That is, the troll stages performances which play on the types of naïve, gullible, exaggerated, and emotional behaviours that the troll seeks to lambaste.



Figure 7: Posts on 4chan celebrating #BoycottStarWarsVII as 'triggering SJWs'. Source: 4chan.

The troll justice norm suggests that trolling only ought to expose rigid, conformist, exaggerated, unreasonable, or otherwise negative character traits. That is, trolls ought not lambaste what are considered reasonable and well-structured concerns and counterarguments. As redditior "Atomicide" observes, 'if you leave bait and some guy politely corrects you and you light up on him, you will come off as a dick, and you have done it wrong' (r/AskReddit 07/07/2012). However, the very nature of antagonising specific social groups on the basis of core identity categories (in this case race) differentiates in-group audience from out-group not (solely) on the basis of experience in identifying trolls, but (also) on the basis of identity and values. Responding to such trolling does not necessarily indicate a failure to read trolling signifiers. Instead, responses might be driven, in many cases, by a desire to call out racist identity antagonisms rather than permitting trolling to be a silencing technique which crowds out public space. The very ideals of free speech that trolls champion, exist, in part, to provide an equal right

to voice opinions on the common interest; a desire to not be injured or silenced on the basis of group identity is certainly in the spirit of the twin imaginaries of equality and liberty. How then can trolls claim to be ‘#winning’ if the counter-claims being made are reasonable?

Phillips (2015) states that trolls justify trolling as critiquing media culture. Binns (2012) argues that because journalists are seen to occupy positions of power, trolls consider them appropriate targets. *#BoycottStarWarsVII* certainly garnered a significant amount of interest from journalists and other online media commentators (Eordogh 2015; Kamen 2015; Koski 2015; Lachenal 2015; Lee 2015; McMillan 2015; O’Neil 2015; Silman 2015). In fact, the bait in *#BoycottStarWarsVII* appears intentional designed to provoke media interest by linking with a number of topical news stories. Firstly, *#BoycottStarWarsVII* occurred at a time when a number of protests against police brutality of African Americans were taking place under the banner of the *Black Lives Matter* movement (see Doanvo 2015; Frosch and Calvert 2015). Furthermore, 2015 saw a number of debates about racial identity politics in the media which were triggered by a rise in the counter-protest slogans of *All Lives Matter* and *Blue Lives Matter* (see Adams 2015; Logan 2015; Summers 2015). Secondly, the trolls piggy-backed on the excitement surrounding *The Force Awakens* (2015) as the first new Star Wars film in a decade. These factors couple with the long running media fascination with (and moral panic about) trolling to produce an irresistible low-journalistic-effort story. In reporting on the story (and thus falling for the bait), the media are exposed as lacking moral substance because they amplify the visibility of identity antagonisms by eschewing the advice to not feed the trolls in favour of a headline that can drive up page-views (and thus advertising revenue). The underlying critique supplied by the trolls is that the media reinforce political correctness in an uncritical way.

Despite clear evidence to the contrary, trolls claim that they are non-discriminatory regarding what is lulz-worthy and, therefore, lulz are ‘equal opportunity laughter’ (Phillips 2015: 25). That is, whilst one trolling operation might target a particular social group, trolls argue that the sum of all trolling operations evens out as othering *all* social groups equally. Hence, a *meta* form of

dramatic irony comes into play. Those who correctly identify trolls but call out their identity antagonisms are still outed as trolled because they fail to understand that all lulz are created equal. As Cameron (1995: 124) argues, the definition of *politically correct* is always supplied by its critics as a way to discredit those who might identify with its basic principles (that is, that imbalanced structures of power operating in language along intersectional identity lines ought to be deconstructed), whilst those openly in support of ‘affirmative action, non-discriminatory language and multi-cultural curricula do not refer to these positions collectively as “political correctness”’. Hence, critics of political correctness use it as an umbrella term to imply that all left leaning political perspectives involve some type of Orwellian newspeak thought-policing. In the same rubbery way, trolls redefine the terms of engagement. The irony built into trolling practices provides trolls a rubbery escape where they avoid all responsibility under the banner of playful “joking”. That is, as Poe’s Law prevents others from distinguishing satire from extremism, it is the troll (and the kudos giving in-group troll audience) who defines the framing lines between sincerity and play. Such is a double bind where those who call out trolls are considered rigidly unreasonable politically correct kill-joys who cannot take a joke (or have secret motives to instil a Cultural Marxist regime), whilst a lack of response allows trolls to fill public space with injurious and silencing identity antagonisms.

The Boundary Work of (In)visible Stigma.

Any notion of an in-group rests upon some form of exclusion of others into an out-group. Trolls gain their subcultural identity by self-identifying as trolls, participating in lulz-worthy trolling, and embodying a lulzy aesthetic. Trolls (ironically) hold a normative commitment to transgression of normative commitments. However, the transgressive norm is not merely an ideal, but rather is built directly into the dramatic irony of actual trolling practices. That is, the identity of trolling as a practice is that it intentionally provokes others by transgressing some community norm about appropriate behaviours. The transgression is done in such a way where trolling signifiers are read by the in-group as ironic play, whilst the out-group reads such as

earnestly antagonistic, naïve, or ignorant. Part of the very essence of trolling as a practice is as a means towards outing supposedly authentic character vices for the purpose of generating lulz. Remove transgression and dramatic irony, and trolling practices lose their essence and are thus destroyed. The behaviour may still remain, but will lack the identity of trolling. As trolls are trolls by virtue of trolling, then trolls also lose their identity. As an expression of subcultural identity, the very existence of trolling thus relies upon exclusion. Hence, trolls must police their boundaries to maintain the integrity of their identity.

Paasonen (2015: 34) contends that ‘trolls render such boundary work visible’. In the case of *#BoycottStarWarsVII* such boundary work is highly visible. Trolls police the lines of the *freedom to troll* in their resistance to what they consider the scourge of political correctness. Paasonen argues that trolls, by transgressing expected norms of behaviour and challenging dogmatically shared assumptions, thus also help to articulate the conventions and norms of the community that they disrupt. I would argue, however, that the way in which trolls articulate those borders is tactical (even if done subconsciously). The very notion of political correctness is deliberately constructed as a rubbery construct so that trolls (and other privileged individuals who benefit by maintaining the status-quo) might continually reconfigure and redefine the borders around the play frame of their game. The elusive figure of the troll is, in the troll’s mind, always ‘#winning’ regardless of circumstance or how erudite, coherent, and composed those who counter them are. However, it is not merely that trolls define the terms of the game out of a desire to win. Rather, trolls *have* to be nebulous shape-shifters in order to deal with being normatively attached to the transgression of all normative attachments. The transgressive nature of trolls mean that trolls are also constantly attacking their own borders and thus those borders must always be fluid. Like Schrödinger’s famous cat, trolls exist in an absurd superposition of two contradictory states.

The lulz of outing others works to police borders by stigmatising the trolled user. Erving Goffman provides one of the most enduring theoretical accounts of stigma. Goffman (1956) views social life through the lens of dramturgical metaphor, arguing that social actors

perform their social identities (and interpret those performances of others) through *presentations of self*. These presentations occur through the intersection of mannerisms, appearance, and setting. Goffman (1963) states that when an individual encounters a stranger, the individual ascribes to the stranger a *virtual social identity* which is composed of the assumptions individual makes about the stranger's category and attributes. Contained within these assumptions are normative expectations about how the stranger ought to perform the characteristics they ought to possess. However, Goffman contends that as the individual interprets the front-stage performances of the stranger, the individual begins to gather insight into the hidden back-stage areas of social identity and an image starts to form of the stranger's *actual social identity*. When actual and virtual social identity mismatch, it may become apparent that particular attributes cast the stranger into a category of a less desirable kind than first imagined (Goffman 1963). By attempting to out inauthentic performances and expose underlying "authentic" character deficiencies, trolls seek ways to draw back the curtain and expose any discrepancies between actual and virtual social identity of trolled users. That is, trolls leverage dramatic irony to change how other social actors understand the frame of interaction, thereby creating a space in which stigmatising marks might be more easily revealed.

The application of stigma is compounded by the failure of the trolled user to correctly identify trolling signifiers, thereby casting them into the undesirable (and thus stigmatised) out-group category. Trolls consider such stigmatisation lulz-worthy and thus justified because the stigma is the result of some supposedly voluntary character deficiency rather than an involuntary physical, psychological, or status-based mark. The trolled users are stigmatised as inexperienced, unintelligent, emotional, unreasonable, incoherent, gullible, egotistical, superficial, narcissistic, sociopathic and so on. The exposing of these traits is framed as a trolling vigilante justice that benefits the security, safety, and integrity of the community. Of course, the irony of it all is that stigmatisation is about ensuring that the community can eject and thus retain the *freedom from* these undesirable personality types. As noted, trolling often relies upon antagonisms that cast aspersions on the basis of core identity categories. Trolls use language which silences and injures

by opening old wounds steeped in racist, sexist, and homophobic stigma. The stigmatisation that trolls apply thus involves linking core identity categories with undesirable personality traits. This stigmatisation of race is clearly visible in how *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls link race (both black and Jewish) with a secret agenda of political correctness that will sap all the fun from life.

Chapter Conclusion.

The idea that *trolling is a art* demands of us that we become connoisseurs of trolling lest we be trolled. As with modern art practices, trolling continually challenges its own borders. Trolling is stripped back to the formal elements of its ideal type whilst simultaneously reinventing itself through play within the exposed liminality of its aesthetic margins. Trolls reassert belonging to an in-group of elevated status and privilege whilst simultaneously attempting to tear down any rigid notion of what might constitute such. Trolls stand on a liminal line of dramatic irony which reconfigures and plays with rubbery, slippery, and elusive notions of (in)authenticity, (in)sincerity, and (in)visibility. The very essence of subcultural troll identity is constituted by the rubbery borders that trolls draw around their trolling practices. Those in the trolling in-group believe that, by virtue of being able to interpret the trolling art, they alone possess some exclusive experienced ability to see and extract authentic performances of actual social identity. By provoking others into reactions which supposedly expose dogmatic conformity, the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls seek to resist the scourge of political correctness which threatens to reconfigure and encroach upon their frontier borders of free speech. The outing of supposedly authentic character vices acts to stigmatise other users and thus cast them into the undesirable out-group. Through status-based exclusions, trolls maintain (at least in their own minds) a privileged position which protects their birth-right to troll across the cyber-terrain. In the next chapter, I explore how trolls leverage the intensification and asymmetry of sticky affect to protect their borders against the threat of diversification.

Chapter Four:

“U Mad Bro?” The Sticky Visibility of Affective Asymmetries.

Chapter One discussed how the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls intentionally created a reactive feedback loop to amplify the visibility of their provocations. Chapter Three explored how trolls stigmatise others to reassert trolling privilege. This chapter more closely examines how the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls (and trolls in general) exploit the intensification of affect to amplify visibility. Paasonen (2015: 27) uses the metaphoric imagery of a midsummer’s night bonfire to illustrate how trolling provokes a ‘short-lived yet heated’ dynamic which, by virtue of its affective intensity, stickiness, and resonance, generates a highly conspicuous, albeit very brief, peak of interest that is able to cut through the din of the public sphere. Drawing on Ahmed (2014), Paasonen (2015), and Coleman (2012a), I explore how trolls use this dynamic to create a feedback loop of self-generating magnetic spectacle and sticky affect. The feedback loop provides trolls a low-effort way to propagate the stigmatising identity antagonisms that fortify, police, and expand their privileged borders whilst simultaneously drawing together a fragmented network of trolls into a cohesive whole. With reference to Phillips (2015), Miller (2012) and Feenberg (2005), I discuss how the reification of social relationships and deferral of feedback found in technically mediated actions affords trolls an emotional firewall. Through the emotional firewall, trolls undertake an impression management whereby they evade any sense of personal culpability for their actions. Drawing on Lyman (2004) and Milner (2016), I argue that this impression management allows trolls to reassert feeling rules about cyberspace as being the domain of a disaffected, dissociative, and disembodied rationality. Yet, simultaneously, the ironic rubberiness of trolls allows them to perform an exaggerated folk-devil identity. By embodying evil, trolls create a polarising resentment that depoliticises the revolutionary potential of anger.

The Intensification of Sticky Affect.

Trolls intentionally seek to intensify affect within groups. Across the literature, trolls are seen to provoke ‘emotional distress’ for the lulz (Higgin 2013; Jane 2014; Miller 2012: 265; Paasonen 2015; Phillips 2015). Many redditors also note this intent. For instance, “Terr_” (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012) states that ‘99% of the time the troll is seeking a reaction with an emotional component ... rage, frustration, or annoyance are especially common’. Similarly, “tomblifter” (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012) observes that trolling is about ‘trying to incite negative emotions in people’ rather than ‘just fishing for replies’. This view is shared by the trolls interviewed on *Insight* (2012). For instance, Jaime Cochran states that ‘trolling is basically emotion or invoking emotional reaction from someone’. Likewise, Steven asserts that trolling is ‘a wind up, it’s about leading someone down the garden path, spinning them a story and getting them maybe angry about something and at times making people look stupid ...’. With this notion of an unfolding narrative, trolling is shown to involve more than provoking singular reactions. As noted in Chapter One, to maximise their impact, trolls use a subtle bait designed to draw in users and get them emotionally invested in responding.

Lulz hold an *external magnetism* that draws in other users (both trolls and non-trolls alike) (Phillips 2015: 32). Paasonen (2015: 30) observes that the movements of internet users are ‘largely driven by a search for intensity’ and a desire for an ‘affective jolt’ which might momentarily capture their attention. The ‘spectacular, shocking, and humorous events and images’ generated by trolling thus radiate a powerful magnetism (Coleman 2012a: np). According to Paasonen, however, affective intensification not only magnetically draws users towards the bait, it also creates a stickiness which holds attention so that other users will stay and contribute to that intensification. This position draws on Ahmed’s (2014) argument that objects and signs accumulate affect through histories of repetition and circulation. For Ahmed, affect is sticky and thus circulation causes it (and what it signifies) to adhere to the bodies and objects it comes into contact with. Not only does the stickiness *bind* the negative affect of the sign to bodies, it also *blocks* the sign from taking on different meanings (Ahmed 2014: 91–93). Thus,

through circulation, racial slurs such as ‘mud’ and ‘dindu’ accumulate the sticky affect that makes them provocative. Paasonen argues that those who are drawn in become stuck amidst the negative affect and thus feel compelled to react, thereby further intensifying the accumulation of affect in the group. By creating an escalating feedback loop that intensifies affect, two *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls were able to leverage the magnetism of lulzy spectacle to amplify their visibility and reach significantly. The troll fire briefly blazes brightly, then the novelty wears off and users move on to the next thing.

Lulz also hold an *internal magnetism* that provides cohesion and solidarity for the trolling in-group (Coleman 2012a; Phillips 2015). As Phillips (2015) argues, lulz act as an anchor point around which an otherwise faceless collective of anonymous trolls might come into focus and unite. Despite *#BoycottStarWarsVII* not starting on 4chan, the external magnetism of the lulz drew in 4chan users who assumed it was a ‘4chan op’ (see p.30 figure 4) and began asking ‘which one of you is this, its brilliant’ (see p.50 figure 7). Once the lulz magnetically drew in 4chan users, the affective stickiness binds the disparate and fragmented network of trolls into a cohesive collective whole. That is, the stickiness of lulz is how trolls (re)propagate the borders of an otherwise highly nebulous subcultural identity. ‘Trolls laugh themselves into existence and sustain this existence through further laughter’ (Phillips 2015: 31). Phillips asserts that all jokes have an audience of those whom it is for (or those whom it is against). As Paasonen (2015: 34) states, ‘users not identifying as trolls ... can take pleasure in the affective intensities that trolls engender’. That is, lulz can be enjoyed vicariously without direct participation. Phillips states that those who laugh thus recognise and appreciate the lulz, and, therefore, become (unwittingly) complicit in the fortification of trolling identity. Hence, laughter imbues lulz with sticky affect. As Phillips (2015: 31) argues, ‘within the community play frame, all reading is writing, and all reception is creation; to recognise an in-joke is to participate in community formation, and to participate in community formation is to ensure community growth’.

For Phillips (2015), the lulz also hold a generative and self-replicating magnetism. Phillips argues that by successfully producing lulz, trolls generate memetic content which enters into the trolling lexicon. The lulz are celebrated for replicating and reproducing traces of such memetic content (Phillips 2015). Lulz-worthy trolling thus involves an artful semantic web of meta-references to any and all previous lulz. As noted in Chapter Three, trolls receive kudos from the trolling in-group by demonstrating mastery of trolling art. Such a semantic web is visible in the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls use of terms such as ‘dindus’ – as noted in Chapter One, the slur ‘dindu’ links with the Star Wars *Mace Dindu* image macro meme. The lulz are thus enjoyed on multiple levels. As the layers of ironic play are read, the lifeworld storehouse of trolling references is rewritten in subtle ways. ‘Whatever its form, and however obliquely, the reference ... gestures towards and/or taps into a previously shared experience and is subsequently integrated into the collective subcultural fabric’ (Phillips 2015: 31). That is, the (re)use of memetic content affectively stuck within the fabric of lulz (re)fortifies the solidarity and sense of belonging to the subculture. Through circulation, redistribution, and re-appropriation, the lulz maintain the stickiness of their affect. For Phillips (2015: 32), as lulz live on through permutations and additions, the generation of lulz ‘predicts, if not outright necessitates, the emergence of more’. The sticky affect of lulz is a burning ember which promises some future exploitation that might once again ignite an intensification of that affect.

The Aestheticised Fetishism of Affective Asymmetry.

Whilst trolls seek to intensify negative affect amongst others, the trolls themselves attempt to remain disaffected, disinterested, and disassociated (Paasonen 2015; Phillips 2015). Phillips (2015: 29) argues that for trolls, ‘emotions are seen as a trap, something to exploit in others and ignore or switch off in yourself’. As noted in Chapter Three, trolls stigmatise others by exposing a negative mismatch between actual and virtual social identity. By provoking a supposedly authentic performance of character vices, trolls stick negative affect to the body of the trolled user. However, by remaining disaffected and detached, the trolls themselves are able to avoid the

stickiness of any negative affect. The only affect trolls perform is the detached laughter of lulz. In this way, only positive affect sticks to trolls (and sticks trolls together), thereby bolstering their sense of privilege to exploit the *freedom to troll*. Moreover, because negative affect (of denigration and disgust) sticks to the bodies of the stigmatised, the affective asymmetry thus inflates the troll's sense of status. The trolling is lulz-worthy because the trolled user has an emotional reaction to a supposedly insincere, inconsequential, and ironic joke. The affective asymmetry thus joins with the dramatic irony norm to form the lulz punch line. The *#BoycottStarWarsVII* trolls are '#winning' because, despite the trolls signalling an ironic play frame, the trolled users still react to the bait.

That the 'tears are unreal' (see p.50 figure 7) indicates the dissociative disaffection of the trolls. The lulzy enjoyment of affective asymmetry relies upon the trolls lacking any empathetic response to the injury that they inflict. However, Phillips (2015) observes that to troll effectively, trolls must empathise with their targets. The intentional provocation of trolling requires that trolls have detailed knowledge of exactly what "triggers" an affective response in their targets. It is hardly surprising that the identity antagonisms in the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* case might cause other users to react angrily. As Lyman (2004: 140) states, 'anger is speech about a perceived injustice'. Chapter Two discussed how trolling can silence vulnerable social groups. Holmes (2004: 214) notes, however, that 'being angry is not simply a calculated attack but usually felt as a sensation that engulfs body and mind'. When injustice is perceived, the resulting anger produces a force which compels the actor to act upon it in some way. It is this provocation of *unruly* emotion that trolls find lulz-worthy. Trolls thus internalise an affective asymmetry of empathetically understanding how symbolic injuries provoke affective reactions whilst simultaneously remaining dissociated from such.

So how do trolls maintain such a contradictory superposition? There is a popular conception that anonymity produces particular psychological effects – namely, deindividuation (Kiesler et al. 1984; Siegel et al. 1986) and the online disinhibition effect (Suler 2004) – which cause the

detached disaffection and empathic loss found in trolls (Binns 2012; Coles and West 2016a; Fichman and Sanfilippo 2015; Hardaker 2010; Hardaker and McGlashan 2016). Deindividuation theories assert that the anonymity experienced within the seemingly homogeneous mass of a large crowd creates a temporary dissociation from individual identity. Deindividuated persons experience an anomic sense of reduced commitments to social norms which leads to disinhibition. Manivannan (2013: 113) states that 4chan users assert a 'zero identity mandate' of 'deindividuating collectivism'. For Phillips (2015), trolls use anonymity to compartmentalise their online actions as separate and without consequence to their physical (and thus seemingly more real) offline identity. However, deindividuation removes the sense of subjectivity by which trolls might understand (and thus empathise with) someone else's subjective experience. Whilst a disinhibited mob mentality might explain away impulsive flaming, it does, nonetheless, lack the calculated nuance of trolling. Moreover, Miller (2012) observes that not all anonymous online spaces produce trolls, nor are all trolls anonymous. For Manivannan, the 4chan desire to maintain anonymity is, instead, about an absolute disdain towards any narcissistic attachment to identity. Manivannan argues that, by enforcing zero identity anonymity, trolls obscure the visibility of online diversity and thus maintain the invisibility of white male troll privilege

Such deterministic anonymity-as-cause arguments imply that trolls are merely psychologically dysfunctional individuals waiting for the opportunity to gratify their base impulses with impunity. Miller (2012) argues, however, that it is not anonymity, *per se*, but rather other inherent features of technology which produce the possibilities for affective asymmetries. As Miller points out, when one goes online one does so intentionally to seek out the means to some specific end. Furthermore, what is encountered online is rarely ever purely by chance, but rather is likely to be in some way algorithmically targeted and tailored to the individual as potentially useful (Miller 2012). Hence, internet technologies are configured (both by design and by use) as desire satiating instruments. Moreover, Miller notes that the physicality of the online space is far less immediately tangible and thus is more conducive to creating a sense of disembodiment than offline. For Miller, these effects combine as a Heideggerian mode of enframing and revealing the

world through the technical lens. That is, the online space heavily emphasises a disembodied, subjective based orientation where others inhabiting the surround environs become objectified in rationalised instrumental terms.

Miller (2012) states that when confronted with the concrete representation of a physical stranger before oneself, one is faced with a decision of immediate and tangible consequence about how to interact. In the stranger's eyes the actor experiences the looking glass reflection of the self – that is, the physical immediacy of the stranger gives a substantial (rather than abstracted) cosmopolitan sense of being embedded amidst a world of different Others (Miller 2012). Strangers on the screen, on the other hand, are experienced as 'mere disembodied, aestheticised surfaces' which may be freely enjoyed as objects (Miller 2012: 279). For Miller (2012), the disembodied instrumental enframing of the technical lens couples with the loss of immediacy and proximity online to produce a reduced sense of ethical and moral responsibility to others. As Feenberg (2005) observes, technically mediated actions defer and dissipate the reciprocal feedback of their force, thereby providing a transcendental illusion of acting upon the world as if a god. Hence, it is not that online strangers are only encountered distally as purely abstracted surfaces, but rather that the immediate consequence of their proximity and their categorical belonging as ends in themselves is deferred. Such deferral is visible in the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* case. The asynchronous nature of Twitter communication means that the trolls make an action of placing the trolling provocations as bait, but the reciprocity of that action is not felt till later. As there is no immediacy, the reactions may appear as if coming from game objects on the aestheticised surface of the screen.

It is in this space where one might make sense of Phillips' (2015) assertion that lulz are fetishistic (in the Marxist sense). That is, the exploitative power disparities in social conditions and relationships are rendered invisible via a reification where all that is seen is the product (lulz) itself. As Phillips (2015: 30) states, 'through the magic of trolling, all that remains are the absurd, exploitable details'. However, as trolls are hyper aware that the online space reifies

individuals as fetishised objects, trolls thus require a way to prevent injury to the identity of their own bodies behind keyboards. Phillips (2015: 29–35) argues that a Goffman-esque ‘front’ provides an ‘emotional firewall’ which interleaves distance between the troll and the consequences of their actions. Through deferral of reciprocity, the emotional firewall allows for impression management where online identity is always a staged performance of the virtual and never a revealing of the actual. Through this virtual identity norm, trolls are able to fuel the intensification of affect (and thus generate peak visibility for their identity antagonisms) whilst simultaneously ensuring that their actual social identities remain unstuck. The lulzy glue that bind trolls together is generated by others not being savvy enough to ensure that only their virtual social identities become stuck within the sticky web of memetic trolling references.

Stop Being Dramatic! Feeling Out the Rules of Emotional Irony.

Chapter Two noted that the *freedom to troll* is located in a privileged cyberlibertarian understanding of free speech. Transgressions of the virtual identity norm highlight that cyberspace is not one homogeneous deindividuated mass, but rather is constituted by diverse Otherness. By drawing into focus ethical responsibility to others, visible diversity challenges the negative-liberty of the *freedom to troll*. That is, diversity renders visible the contradictions in the twin liberal imaginaries of equality and liberty where, for less privileged social groups, *freedom from* certain types of speech is often more important to ensuring their participation. Hence, Higgin (2013: 138) argues that trolls target core identity categories ‘not only for the lulz or because of its controversy’, but also as part ‘of a larger effort to preserve the internet as a space free of politics and thus free of challenge to white masculine heterosexual hegemony’. Manivannan (2013: 127) states that identity antagonisms thus function as a ‘desire for subcultural preservation’. Higgin (2013: 138) contends that when troll spaces are challenged, their members will anxiously prod the sensitivities most acutely felt by the Other. That is, trolls supply identity antagonisms to fortify their borders against the threat of diversification.

Phillips (2015) argues, however, that trolling relies upon an asymmetry in the performative revealing of identity where, to be able to troll effectively (and thus come into being), trolls require outsiders to expose authentic aspects of self. Hence, to remain in existence, trolls ironically require the constant threat of destruction that the Other represents¹⁹. However, a question is raised about why trolls would feel that maintaining identity is even important considering their ironic dedication to remaining unattached (including to their virtual social identity). Manivannan (2013) argues that despite the diffuse nature of trolling communities, by removing all markers of actual social identity, trolls gain a sense of communal belonging to a history of shared experience. Further, I would argue that trolls find trolling provides a sense of belonging to an experienced in-group of a special high status. As self-identified troll “raskolnikov-” states, trolling is enjoyable ‘because it’s like an inside joke. It’s elitist’ (*r/AskReddit* 07/07/2012).

So how do trolls maintain these contradictory asymmetries? Milner (2016: 136) states that trolling invokes ‘a cold and brutal brand’ of white-male rationality ‘that is encoded with marginalising values’. By drawing on (and exaggerating) deliberative ideals that rational civil speech ought to be unemotional, trolls critique (through denigration) any sign of what they consider a ‘weak and soft’ “emotionalism” (Milner 2016: 136–137). By conflating symbolic violence with impolite civility, trolls further this idea that to deal with the rigours of public debate, one ought to possess a cold and hard rationality. Such pitting of emotion against reason is certainly not new. Lyman (2004) argues that through processes of rationalisation, modern Western societies in the capitalist mode have come to associate reason with the professionalised order of technical rationality. Such instrumental reason seeks to break society down into calculable rules that can be administered as procedures and systems. For professional middle-class knowledge workers, proficiency at administering rational technique thus becomes a marker of their status (Lyman 2004). The seemingly unpredictable and unquantifiable nature of emotion becomes a threat to order and the middle-class thus carry an anxiety that affective

¹⁹ With no external norms to transgress and no external Other to provoke, trolling identities cease to exist (and as troll identities disappear, therefore, so does the in-group audience which laughs them into being).

expression in the public space will inflict status injuries upon them (Lyman 2004). It is this anxiety that trolls play into when they denigrate affective expressions of injustice.

It is hardly controversial to suggest that a coldly rational society devoid of any affect is an uncomfortable proposition. Affect is often considered to be what gives us our humanity. Even trolls show disdain for the overly serious who are unable to enjoy lulzy exploits. Still, affect threatens the technical order of the capitalist productive mode that supposedly supplies freedom through material abundance²⁰. To protect the system from the threat of affect, society institutes subtle *feeling rules* which provide scripts about the appropriate places, objects, and expressions of affect (Hochschild 1983; Lyman 2004). Feeling rules tell us how we *ought to* feel, and, in the process, help to maintain a more easily rationalised order. Essentially, by laughing at the performance of affect, trolls police transgressions of their own subcultural feeling rules (which is ironic considering that trolls despise rigid conformity to norms). Holmes (2004) states, however, that the idea that social actors merely *perform* anger in accordance with a normative script does not capture anger's unruly nature. Rather, for Holmes, anger contains a political, albeit ambivalent, mobilising force. As Lyman (2004) argues, anger is a perception of injustice that draws attention to subordination injuries and, therefore, assists in locating a supportive community of like-minded sufferers. In the Marxist view, the estrangement from recognition caused by subordination 'implies a loss of an ability to identify the source of oppression ... [which is] hidden behind the domination of things (reification)' (Lyman 2004: 141). In locating community, subordinated social groups gain recognition in solidarity, and can begin to organise. For Lyman, anger can thus ignite a revolutionary spirit that challenges the dominant order.

Lyman (2004) argues that feeling rules are symbolically (and sometimes physically) policed not to remove affect from public spaces, but rather to task individuals with sublimating their emotions into depoliticised forms that service the dominant order. For Lyman, one of the primary ways anger is depoliticised is through sublimation into silence. As noted in Chapter Two, trolls

20 For Marcuse (1964), however, such freedom is a false-consciousness masking a one-dimensional society that restricts choice in service of rationalising systems

perpetuate a tyranny of silence. Lyman argues that status involves an expectation that one might speak and be heard; when angry appeals for justice are *not* actively listened to, a status injury occurs which transforms anger into rage. That anger can transform into rage is what creates the common charge against angry speech as ‘a prelude to aggression and perhaps to violence’ (Lyman 2004: 139–140). A feedback loop is created where angry speech is not listened to because it threatens aggression, yet what generates such aggression is the rage from claims of injustice not being heard. In being prevented from entering a dialogue, the subordinate is denied deliberative avenues to redress injustice. As the subordinate experiences more injustice, they are more likely to be angry, and thus more likely to be considered aggressive and potentially violent. That is, affect signifying threat sticks and accumulates on the body of the subordinate, thereby stigmatising them. As the dominant order legitimises force to minimise the violent threat that the subordinate represents, the subordinate thus learns to sublimate their anger into silence rather than risk further sanctions against them (both formal and informal). Anger sublimated into silence thus depoliticises its revolutionary potential.

Nonetheless, for trolls, the aim is not to annihilate affect completely. Complete silence means that trolls are not fed the affect which generates the lulz that sustain them. Lyman (2004: 138) argues that the absence of angry speech ‘by the victim of injustice is a kind of political neurosis’ which ‘suggests acceptance of the injuries of domination’. However, trolls do not actively prevent angry speech; instead, angry speech about injustice is considered an appropriately lulz-worthy object. The subordinate, when faced with the injustice of their concerns being derided, will often express a non-conscious anger that Nietzsche (cited in Lyman 2004: 142) calls *ressentiment*. Ressentiment creates a moralistic worldview that splits politics into polarised notions of good and evil (Lyman 2004). As a result, the continuum of good and bad no longer exists and thus no middle ground can be located. Hence, by laughing at anger, trolls shut down deliberative avenues for substantive justice, thereby forcing the victim into a neurotic acceptance of their injuries. Lyman states that ressentiment is rigid and confrontational – those very aspects which trolls seek out. Trolls are thus incentivised in performing those very

same folk devil identities that, as discussed in Chapter Two, the news-media moral panic casts upon them. By becoming this defiled self-embodiment of evil which creates a polarising ressentiment, trolls are able to reproduce ideal conditions for more trolling whilst simultaneously depoliticising the angry speech that moves towards substantive justice for the subordinated.

Chapter Conclusion.

Trolls wholly embody the collapsed geographies of cyberspace, not only in the physical sense, but also in terms of remaining simultaneously near and far from affect. The intensification of affect not only generates a magnetic visibility that draws others in, it also circulates objects and signs in ways that accumulate sticky affect. The stickiness of affect is the glue that binds trolls together as a coherent whole despite their nebulous bounds. That is, the magnetism of lulz draws trolls into focus, and the stickiness keeps them there. By exploiting technology, trolls can remain dissociatively detached whilst being simultaneously empathic enough to know exactly what makes others tick. Trolls maintain a virtual identity norm that asserts a zero (actual) identity policy. Through ridicule of injury claims, trolls stick stigmatising affect to others. However, trolls also require others to expose aspects of identity to ensure that this stigmatisation process can occur (and trolls can thus continue to exist). By only ever performing virtual social identity and never revealing the actual, trolls can play at being defiled selves and folk devils whilst the sticky affect of such slides off their backs like ducks in water. In doing so, trolls create the ideal conditions for the ressentiment that they so dearly crave. Through this process, trolls depoliticise affective force in ways that minimise its threat to the borders of the *freedom to troll* whilst maximising its potential to fortify the lines of subcultural trolling identity. Troll embody affective asymmetries to ensure that negative affect sticks to the actual social identities of others whilst only positive affect of lulz circulates amongst trolls. Hence, the trolling motto might be accurately summed as *Trolololo! I'm rubber and you're glue*²¹.

21 As in the playground rhyme: 'I'm rubber and you're glue, whatever you say bounces off me and sticks to you'.

Chapter Five:

Becoming Unstuck?

In the news-media, the *troll* label acts as an umbrella buzzword for almost any behaviour that even vaguely involves deception and/or humour²². I noted in Chapter One that even amongst academics the terms *troll* and *trolling* are hotly contested²³. Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to bring some clarity to the murky, vague, and nebulous definitional depths by drawing into focus a trolling ideal type. That is, *how a troll ought to troll to be considered a troll*. I observed that, at its core, trolling involves *intentional provocation* of other users by using some form of bait. The bait is built upon a *dramatic irony* which signals true intent to an audience whilst ensuring that outsiders take the provocations on face value. Dramatic irony works by virtue of the internet axiom Poe's Law – that is, without an actor clearly signalling intent, the relative paucity of identity markers and other performative cues online makes it almost impossible to distinguish earnest antagonisms from ironic play. Dramatic irony is used to delineate an in-group audience who “gets” the trolling joke from an out-group of excluded others. Trolls are intentionally transgressive and show great disdain for any rigidly dogmatic adherence to social norms, beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, rituals, or values. All trolls do it for the lulz. Lulz are both the *generation* of a schadenfreude-esque laughter at outsiders, and the

22 For example, in August 2015, news media reported that the Facebook profile “Ask ForHelp” was ‘trolling’ Target customers by posing as an official Target representative (Berenson 2015; Nichols 2015). On Target’s Facebook page, the “Ask ForHelp” profile was humorously replying to Target customers who were expressing outrage at Target’s gender neutral approach to displaying children’s toys and clothing. In September 2015, media reports labelled a 20 year-old Jewish American man, Joshua Goldberg, a ‘troll’; in the lead up to his arrest, Goldberg posed online as an Islamic State jihadi and used the pseudonym “Australi Witness” to liaise with other jihadis, make bomb threats on Australian synagogues, and attempt to incite terrorist attacks in the United States (Potaka and McMahon 2015). In October 2017, soon after the release of clown killer film *IT*, news outlets reported that *Burger King* ‘trolled’ *McDonalds* with an advertisement using the tag-lines ‘I’m loving IT’ (a play on *McDonalds* slogan “I’m loving it”) and ‘never trust a clown’ (a reference to *McDonalds* mascot Ronald) (Hoffman 2017; Moran 2017).

23 For instance, the first wave of researchers (Crystal 2004; Dahlberg 2001; Donath 1999; Herring et al. 2002; Tepper 1997) view trolling as a lie about identity that is intended to disrupt discussion spaces for the amusement of the troll and a lurking audience. In the 2010s, despite conceding that trolling has shifted away from its identity deception origins, many researchers continue to discuss trolling in terms of its effects (Binns 2012; Bishop 2014, 2013, Coles and West 2016a, 2016b; Hardaker 2010; Hardaker and McGlashan 2016). In particular, Bishop (2014, 2013) contends that trolling ought to be split into two main types based upon whether the trolling is intended to be spiteful or humorous. For feminist researchers, trolling is simply a subset of misogynistic, racist, or otherwise injurious online silencing practices designed ‘to diminish space for others in public debate’, and is only demarcated from harassment ‘by degree and violence’ (Jane 2014, 2015; Shaw 2013: 94). However, other academics argue that trolling is not any one behaviour predicated on its effects, but rather is a performative expression of a troll-ish subcultural identity (Higgin 2013; Manivannan 2013; Milner 2016; Phillips 2015).

celebration of a transgressive memetic aesthetic. Through the generation and celebration of lulz, a troll-ish subcultural identity is brought into focus.

At the beginning of this thesis, I discussed how white-nationalist troll Anglin (2016) considers trolling as a low effort and enjoyable way for internet users to participate, on their own terms and to their own desired degree, in a form of culture jamming which disseminates far-right propaganda. I specifically chose to explore the *#BoycottStarWarsVII* case because it illuminates such superficially benign yet deeply political trolling; is closely approximated by the ideal type; and is representative of many similar trolling cases²⁴. In moving towards a conclusion, I wish to draw upon a recent example of trolling from October 2017, when /pol/ users launched an offline trolling op called “It’s okay to be white” (IOTBW) (*see figure 8*). The trolling op involved printing large font plain text on a plain A4 page with the words “It’s okay to be white” and placing the signs around universities (*see figure 8*). As with *#BoycottStarWarsVII*, *IOTBW* draws upon the sticky affect of racial identity antagonism to provide the affective force of its intentional provocation. In Chapter Four, I argued that by maintaining the invisibility of a white-male virtual social identity, trolls ensure that the circulation of negative affect is deflected away from trolls and onto the bodies of the Other where it sticks and accumulates. Through the exclusionary out-group delineation provided by dramatic irony, trolls stigmatise the Other whose representation of diversity threatens trolling borders of identity and privilege. Whilst *#BoycotStarWarsVII* trolls maintain the affective asymmetry of dramatic irony with an absurdly hyperbolic bait, the *IOTBW* trolls do so with bait that appears superficially benign. As stated

24 For instance, in February 2013, a 4chan user posted to /pol/ stating a desire to ‘piss off some feminists’ and called on other 4chan users to ‘fire up the troll twitter accounts’ and get *#INeedMasculismBecause* trending by posting seemingly ignorant (and at times absurd) claims about a need for a Men’s Rights movement similar to feminism. Just as with *#BoycottStarWarsVII*, the hashtag traded on topical news stories discussing the rise of Men’s Rights Activist (MRA) groups and the recent (at the time) media coverage of the *#INeedFeminismBecause* hashtag (which was being used by women to highlight why feminism remained highly relevant to their lives) (Rogers 2013; Romano 2013; West 2013). The resulting intensification of affect generated a magnetism that drew in feminists. These feminists began re-appropriating the *#INeedMasculismBecause* hashtag to highlight the absurdity of many MRA claims. In response, MRA groups also began tweeting the hashtag earnestly (Romano 2013). Every group considered themselves *#winning* – trolls got their lulzy exploits, feminists restated the importance of feminism, and MRA blogs (*see Taylor 2013*) asserted that the feminist re-appropriation was evidence of how men are badly treated by society and feminists are bigoted, biased, hyperbolic, irrational, and reactionary. The bonfire burned brightly and the public space was temporarily filled with the sticky affect of identity antagonisms; then the interest waned and users moved onto the next thing. Similar cases occurred with other hashtags from 4chan such as *#EndFathersDay* (because father’s day is misogynistic), *#DumpStarWars* (because *Star Wars* film *Rogue One* was supposedly re-shot to add an anti-Trump agenda), and *#HeterosexualPrideDay* (because if LGBTQ groups get a pride day so should cisgendered heterosexuals) (Know Your Meme 2017b, 2017a, 2016a).

on /pol/, the aim of *IOTBW* is to get ‘the left going apeshit over something so trivial’ and thus ‘wake up normies/lemmings’ to ‘just how anti white the political climate is’ (see figure 8).

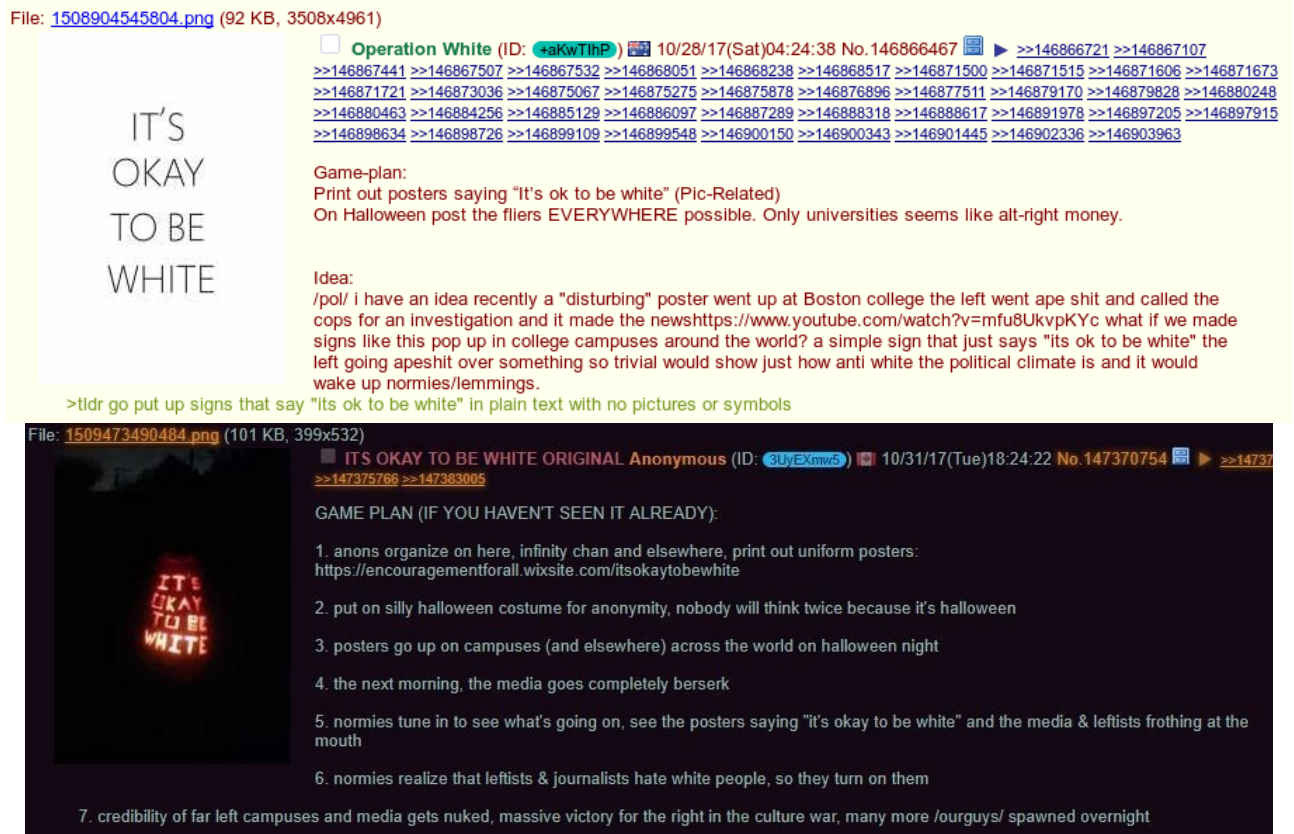


Figure 8: Posts on /pol/ organising the "It's okay to be white" trolling op.
 Source: 4chan.

Considering the current polarised and divisive state of racial politics in the United States²⁵, the racially charged subtext of the *IOTBW* statement has much deeper implications than the face value of the words on the page. In this context, it is hardly surprising that many Americans would view the posters as highly divisive and have strong reactions to them. However, through manipulations of Poe's Law, trolls re-frame any outsider response to troll statements as tilting at windmills and shouting at cave wall shadows. In Chapter Four, I discussed how the technical lens reifies social relationships in ways that dehumanise the Other as a fetishised object to be

25 As a prominent example, on 11th of August 2017, white-nationalist groups marched on Charlottesville carrying burning tiki torches and chanting Nazi slogans such as 'blood and soil' and "Sieg heil" whilst giving the Nazi salute (Epstein 2017; Wagner 2017). When the white-nationalists violently engaged with counter-protesters the following day, one white-nationalist drove a car through the crowd, killing one counter-protester and injuring 19 others (Astor et al. 2017; Epstein 2017). President Donald Trump was initially hesitant to condemn the white-nationalists explicitly, and, instead, stated that there was 'hatred, bigotry and violence on many sides' (Astor et al. 2017: np).

exploited. However, for trolls, this reification cuts both ways where the troll is also a dehumanised object lacking subjectivity. Hence, as trolls exist in an imaginary unreality of zero (actual) identity, any counterargument is recontextualised as attacking an imaginary foe. By laughing at affective expression in the public space, trolls reassert the symbolic violence of feeling rules which task the dominated with sublimating angry speech into silence. Hence, as noted in Chapter Two, by reasserting their colonialist cyberlibertarian *duty* to exploit the cyber-terrain (and its aesthetic surface representations of virtual social identity objects), trolls perpetuate a tyranny of silence where the dominated is transformed into subaltern who fears speaking out. As I indicated in Chapter Four, a lack of angry speech about injury creates a neurotic acceptance of injustice. Therefore, by reasserting norms that public speech ought to be cold and unemotional, trolls shut down substantive avenues of deliberative justice. As a result, dialogue is transformed into a procedural matter that fails to provide the dominated the recognition needed to heal their subordination injuries.

Nonetheless, despite the diversity represented by the Other challenging trolling borders, trolls also require the reaction of the Other to ensure that the troll-ish subcultural identity continues to exist (and trolls can continue to experience belonging to a privileged sense of status). Trolls use the affective force of the Other's anger to intensify affect and thus amplify the visibility and reach of their political agenda. I argued in Chapter Four that reason and emotion are often opposed in the capitalist mode because emotion represents a threat to technical order. As their status is built upon mastery of professionalised technique, middle-class knowledge workers (such as journalists) hold an anxiety about status injury through loss of order (Lyman 2004). As discussed in Chapter Two, that corporate news organisations use moral panic about trolling as a symbolically violent way to reorganise cultural capital is, therefore, a reflection of the anxiety corporate news organisations hold about their own continued economic and social relevancy. Trolls leverage these anxieties to manipulate news-media into creating a feedback loop that boosts the visibility, magnetism, and stickiness of the lulz. For instance, one post on /pol/ states that the aim of *IOTBW* is to get a reaction from the media, then when 'normies' see the news,

they will realise that ‘leftists & journalists hate white people’ (*see figure 8*). Unsurprisingly, *IOTBW* gained a significant amount of media coverage (Blazina and Meyers 2017; St. George 2017; Harlow 2017; James 2017; Parton 2017). However, intensification and amplification is perhaps not merely about fortifying subcultural trolling identity by stigmatising the Other through the circulation of negative affect; but potentially also about drawing other users into re-propagating trolling identity through participation. Chapter Four argued that the magnetism of lulz draws trolls into focus from an otherwise faceless and fragmented constellation of individuals. The stickiness of lulz then binds together the trolling identity. In celebrating lulz, non-trolls participate in the creation of memetic histories. These histories form the semantically sticky web of lulzy meta-references that trolls draw on to bring themselves into being.

Hence, rather than seeking to silence the Other completely, trolls instead seemingly aim to depoliticise the revolutionary potential of angry speech. To do so, trolls appear to lean into news-media representations and intentionally perform the folk-devil identity. As Manivannan (2013: 115) argues, ‘4channers embrace their alienation from mainstream culture and take pride in their collective shame’. Stigmatisation of the troll identity apparently does not matter to trolls because such identity is virtual and can be shed and subsequently reconstituted from the primordial sticky web of collective memetic histories at any time. By becoming the image of evil, trolls are thus able to create ideal conditions for a polarising resentment that splits the continuum of good and bad into an irreconcilable political opposition. Under such conditions, substantive justice through deliberation becomes impossible. Instead, politics must be reconfigured into agonistic struggle between the radical contingency of identity difference. Resentment is, however, an unspoken anger that manifests in a rigidly confrontational persona that is unable to properly address the nature of subordination injuries. Revolutionary potentials of anger are thus depoliticised whilst retaining the affective force that produces the confrontation that trolls crave.

As noted in Chapter Three, trolls perform a type of detached victim blaming where those who are trolled deserved to be trolled because they were obviously asking for it. Through this process,

trolls believe that they are peeling back the inauthentic virtue signalling of virtual social identity performances and revealing the underlying authentic character vices of their target's actual social identity. As Manivannan (2013: 117–118) argues, the trolling logic of disruption is borne out of a long history of offline disruptive practices that seek to resist the hegemony of the dominant paradigm. From this perspective, many internet users consider trolling a *satirical art* where *good* or *ethical* trolling ought to speak “up” to oppressive forms of hegemonic power rather than speaking “down” to the already dominated. Hence, trolls will often frame themselves as fighting back against rigidly dogmatic assertions of political correctness. That is, for trolls, political correctness is a hegemonic power structure intended to oppress others by removing the *freedom to speak* rather than being a way to ensure *freedom from* certain forms of injurious speech. By performing the folk devil identity, trolls appear to become martyrs for their cause. However, the virtual identity norm means nothing much is likely lost for the troll in protecting their privilege.

Yet, as argued throughout this thesis, asymmetries in the ironic play frame of “just joking” reconstitute the troll as benign, harmless, and something to be laughed off and subsequently ignored. The troll appears to exist in an ironic superposition where they are the embodiment of evil and nothing-much-at-all. Trolls are thus able to shift and re-frame the terms of engagement in rubbery ways. Those who react to trolls are stigmatised as reactionaries and discredited via association with histories of sticky negative affect; whilst those who do not speak up are forced into neurotic acceptance of the injustice of a public space saturated with symbolically violent, objectifying, and dehumanising identity antagonisms. Nevertheless, as argued in Chapter Three, trolls are both subject and object of their own critique. However, there is an asymmetry in that only the very extreme troll position is discredited whilst the whole of the counter-position accumulates sticky negative affect. As one 4chan user asserts on /pol/, the purpose of the *IOTBW* trolling op is to damage the credibility of left leaning institutions in a ‘massive victory for the right in the culture war’, and thus recruit ‘normies’ into /pol/ ideologies (see figure 8). Hence, such political trolling appears to be an act of subterfuge designed to recalibrate the centre position of the political scales and shift it to the right.

Massaro and Stryker (2012: 418) assert that ‘selective exposure to ideologically extreme positions can, in fact, *produce* extremism’. From this perspective, there certainly seems to be something to the claims that trolling is a form of far-right recruitment. Considering how the magnetism and stickiness of lulz works, it would appear that seemingly benign and rather innocuous participation in ironic racist jokes has the potential to be substantially effective at drawing out far-right extremism from networked fragments and binding it together into a cohesive counterpublic whole. Nevertheless, whilst the line of argument developed in this thesis has been backed by empirical data and theoretical work, at this stage the argument very much exists as a preliminary hypothesis. In particular, further empirical work is necessary to develop, test, and verify the largely theoretical claims that have been made about trolls performing a folk-devil identity to create a polarising resentment that depoliticises the revolutionary potentials of anger. Moreover, more involved ethnographic participant observation and in-depth interviews are required to develop a more coherent picture of how trolls subjectively understand their actions. To what degree are trolls intentionally employing these tactics towards political ends? To what extent do political trolls understand the workings of what they are participating in?

The far-right troll Anglin (2016: np) argues that, as a result of the jaded ‘nihilism’ in ‘our post-modern milieu’, the loss of stable meaning makes it necessary to couch idealism in irony as those who present themselves seriously ‘will immediately be viewed as the opposite’. There is perhaps something to Anglin’s claim that trolling is a necessity for the citizen to have a public voice in the late-modern era. Many sociologists observe that the late-modern period produces an accelerated sense of contingency, liquidity, and risk (Bauman 2001, 1999; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Rosa 2003). These sociologists argue that late-modern individuals are tasked with autonomously locating wholly biographical solutions (where there are none) to what are fundamentally structural contradictions. In this view, neoliberalism pushes for a liquidity of conditions that remain highly flexible and adaptable to the demands of a chaotic and unpredictable market: the creation of more liquidity is touted as the solution to the risk that such liquidity creates (Bauman 2001, 1999; Harvey 2005, 2007). It is hardly surprising that a fluid,

rubbery, ironic, and elusive form of (in)authentically (de)politicised action, such as is found in trolling, might be touted as the only effective means to cut through and impact upon what are the contradictory shifting sands of the late-modern public sphere.

Nietzsche (1967: 60) contends that art is our only saving grace which might transform nauseous nihilistic thoughts into ‘the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity’. Lulz are certainly comedic discharge, but is trolling really *a art* that tames the horrible? Rather than being any sort of true artistic taming, the lulz appear more as an absurd, extreme, and grotesque manifestation of late-modern liquid horrors. Either way, trolls do say something about how power operates in the current socio-political environment. Trolls are certainly not the only ones who are adept at leveraging the sticky magnetism of intensified affect towards their desired ends. Such is a fairly standard tactic of current right-wing populists – trolls are perhaps just the atomised and grass-roots form. Trolls are certainly great mimics (and grotesque exaggerations) of right-wing news-media rhetoric about political correctness.

Nonetheless, many questions remain. Is trolling really an effective (and perhaps necessary) political tactic considering the current political climate, or are trolls merely an aesthetic surface echo of a much deeper pathology? Trolls are often argued to be produced by certain features of technology or as the manifestation of a pathological media culture. I wonder if, instead, the anxiety that trolls carry with them about the state of society is a reflection of much deeper structural contradictions inherent in late-modernity. Neoliberalism emphasises that autonomous individuals ought to maintain a flexible biographical adaptability to what is, in essence, a chaotic and unpredictable market logic (Harvey 2007, 2005). Under the atomising individualisation of liquid risk society, anxiety about risk thus becomes something to sublimate into productivity. Is it any wonder that trolls neurotically dissociate from such dehumanising injustices by performing nihilistically anomic identities? Whilst I have only briefly touched on these issues, hopefully I have illuminated that this is an important site for further research.

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